

Forged in Crisis:

The Impact of the Syrian Civil War on Kurdish Identity



"Serekaniye-or-Ras-al-Ayn-truce". Jeffery Ruigendijk (12-4- 2013)

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1.0 Introduction:

The recent political mobilization in the Middle East widely known as the Arab Spring has brought new relevance to the Kurdish Question in Syria; where the spring initially manifested as peacefully conducted protests in March 2011. Over the past two years the situation in Syria has devolved into something more aptly described as civil war. In the process submerged tensions have been brought to the surface of Syrian society. Despite the desire of many of its founders, Syria's population is not made of one homogeneous ethnic identity. Syria's official name: *The Syrian Arab Republic* may seem appropriate to the majority of Syrians, as Arabs; however it does not reflect the full diversity of the country. There are several religious as well as non-Arab ethnic minorities who have lived and continue to live on the lands that are currently confined within the national borders of Syria. The largest of these minority groups is the Kurds.¹ Alongside other ethnic and religious based tensions, the concerns and aspirations of Syria's Kurds have become an element that needs to be dealt with if the multifaceted violence of the civil war is to be brought under control and ended in a lasting way.

At the time of writing, two years into the civil unrest turned civil war, there are no clear signs of resolution of the conflict anytime soon. Unfortunately the violence and indiscriminate use of force seems to be increasing. A recent United Nations News Centre report states that around 5,000 killings are documented each month, making the estimated number of victims as of June 2013 over 92,000. It is likely that the death toll has since surpassed 100,000 as reported by the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.² The international community is still largely divided over if and what action to take regarding the Syrian Crisis. The regional implications of the crisis have intensified over the first half of 2013. Threats of the conflict expanding across Syria's borders appear to be increasing as neighbours Israel and Lebanon have been pushed to intervene and retaliate. Israel has conducted airstrikes to prevent

¹ Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Books, 2003)3-5.; Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (London: Hurst, 2012),34.

² "Nearly 93,000 People Killed in 'vicious' Syria Conflict – UN Human Rights Chief." UN News Centre, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45162&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.Ub8Ck5z9U-A> (accessed June 17, 2013); . *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts* (Brussels: International Crisis Group,[2013z]), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/143-syrias-metastasising-conflicts.pdf> (accessed June 27 2013); Dominic Evans and Oliver Holmes, "Syrian Death Toll Tops 100,000, Rebels Lose Border Town," Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/26/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE95OOLQ20130626> (accessed June 27, 2013).

weapons shipments, while Hezbollah recently joined the Assad's forces to capture the strategic city of Qusair.³

While regional governments particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have made active efforts to support opposition forces, G8 countries have been fairly divided on their approach to dealing with Syria. In this group Russia has been the lone supporter of the Assad regime while other members are divided over the extent that they are willing to support the opposition forces. Until late May and June of 2013 the efforts of Countries like the United States, France, Great Britain and Germany have been limited to more or less symbolic political support such as the recognition of *National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces*.⁴ Some aid has been offered along with expressions of fear that Syria will disintegrate further into sectarian violence as Iraq did shortly after the 2003 invasion or as another neighbour, Lebanon did during the 1975-1990 civil war.⁵ At the end of May more concrete steps have been taken, France and Great Britain who have been pushing to arm the opposition forces for months were successful in removing the arms embargo. This development was followed with more concrete developments at the recent G8 summit on the 17 of June. The summit saw the member countries discuss more proactive measures towards a peace process for Syria. The members agreed, with the exception of Russia, to move towards arming the rebels. Russia who desires peace remains resistant to arming the rebels.⁶

³ The Associated Press and Haaretz, "In First Comments since Alleged Strikes, Assad Says Syria is Capable of Facing Israel Syria's President Bashar Assad Said the Recent Raids Reveal the Extent of Israel's Involvement in the Crisis Tearing His Country Apart, According to Lebanese Media." *Haaretz*, sec. Diplomacy and Defence, 7 May 2013, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/in-first-comments-since-alleged-strikes-assad-says-syria-is-capable-of-facing-israel-1.519818> (accessed 7 May 2013); Lyse Doucet, "Qusair the Syrian City that Died," BBC news, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22817561> (accessed June 8, 2013); . *Too Close for Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon* (Brussels: International Crisis Group,[2013aa]), [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/141-too-close-for-comfort-syrians-in-lebanon](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/141-too-close-for-comfort-syrians-in-lebanon); *Save our Spring Talk show. A Discussion between: Wael Aleji, Zonke Majodina, Elyes Baccar Dutch MP Désirée Bonis Moderated by Sophie Roborgh. 23 March 2013. Den Hague, 2013.*

⁴ This is a coalition of opposition representatives seeking to provide a unified and internationally recognized alternative to the Assad regime. "Syrian Coalition Goals." Syrian National Coalition Of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, <http://www.etilaf.org/en/about/goals.html> (accessed May 2, 2013); "Syrian Coalition Principles." Syrian National Coalition Of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, <http://www.etilaf.org/en/about/principles.html> (accessed May 2, 2013).

⁵ Fighting that took place between in Northern Syria between the Al-Nusra Front and Kurds in northern Syria, early January 2013 is just one manifestation of sectarian violence. "Kurd-Jihadist Firefights Rage in Syria," The Daily Star Lebanon, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jan-18/202794-kurd-jihadist-firefights-rage-in-northern-syria.ashx#axzz2IKaRlFOR> (accessed January 19, 2013).

⁶ Kate Holton and Jeff Mason, "Putin Faces Isolation Over Syria as G8 Ratchets Up Pressure," Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/17/us-g-idUSBRE95F0JK20130617> (accessed June 22, 2013); Andrew

1.2 Relevance of Research:

At first glance the Kurdish element of the Syrian Crisis appears to be primarily a domestic issue; however there are numerous aspects relating to the Kurds that have implications for regional and international stability. The situation in Syria has become more complex and destructive, as the sides have become entrenched and regional and international interests have become involved. While being sidelined historically Syria's Kurds are not an insignificant minority group. They make up approximately ten percent of the population and have been a part of Syrian history before cities like Damascus and Aleppo were united under the banner of the Syrian Arab Republic. Since the French Mandate period Kurdish ties to the country have been questioned by those suspicious of separatist aspirations.⁷ These suspicions have continued and even been amplified during the current struggle. Mutual mistrust has fueled these suspicions as Kurdish groups fear the Turkish influence, and elements within the main opposition who in turn suspect connections to Kurdish separatist movements, or even collaboration with the Assad government. Both sets of concerns have a valid basis; the external ties of the 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA) and of Kurdish groups naturally have an impact on the groups they support.

To understand suspicions held by, and against the Kurds it is important to look at their position in Syria within the larger context of the struggle for an independent Kurdistan - particularly its more contemporary manifestations. The modern history of Kurds in Syria has been molded to a large extent by Arab nationalism and, as a consequence of this, suppression of cultural and civil rights. Kurds in Syria have for a long time been struggling for increased rights and to be accepted as legitimate members of Syrian society. At the same time Kurds in neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Iraq have for decades been engaged in struggles to establish an independent Kurdish state. Turkey and the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), have been fighting for control of Kurdish populated land that came under Turkish control after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. A similar struggle for

Osborn, "UK's Cameron Wants Syria Peace Plan, with Or without Russia," Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/17/us-g8-cameron-idUSBRE95G13U20130617> (accessed June 22, 2013); Silvia Colombo, "Syria: Neither Spring, nor Peace" *Still awake: The Beginnings of Arab Democratic Change*, (Warsaw: Polish institute of International Affairs and the Finnish Institute of International Affairs,[2012]); Reuters, "Friends of Syria Will Arm Rebels for Fight Against Assad and Hezbollah," The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/22/us-arms-syria-rebels-assad-hezbollah?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT3487> (accessed June 27, 2013).

⁷ Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011),108-115; Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, trans. Emily Welle and Jane Welle (London: Routledge, 2009),12.

existence, although more one-sided, had been conducted in response to the oppressive campaigns ordered by Saddam Hussein in Iraq. With the Syrian government's encouragement Kurds from Syria have participated in both of these struggles most prominently in Turkey. In light of these geopolitical factors the Kurdish element of the Syrian Crisis becomes a very interesting and pressing topic for study especially when the issues historical roots, which date back to the modern Syrian States foundation, are considered.⁸

Propaganda, the manipulation of truth and emotion for specific, usually political goals, often materializes during conflict as the different belligerents attempt to win and maintain supporters and discredit their enemies. As the Crisis in Syria becomes more reflective of a civil war, propaganda and image management have become important features. In order to examine the validity of these perceptions and the realities behind them, I have conducted research to explore the history of Kurdish activism and the implications of the current crisis on the Kurdish Question in Syria and analysed concerns held by Kurds and against them. Several questions helped to guide this research: What impact has the Syrian Crisis had on the way Kurdish identity is expressed, presented and viewed? What kind of *image* do Kurds in Syria have and how is this affecting the likelihood of a favorable solution to the Kurdish Question in Syria? In light of the Crisis have cross border connections of Syrian Kurds influenced how they approach the potential opportunities? What impacts have Kurdish groups in neighbouring countries had on the way that Syrian Kurds express their identity, and have these connections strengthened? Have Kurds in Syria shifted their aims from acceptance and rights to a normal life toward establishing independence? And more generally to what extent are these impacts and realities new phenomena's in the Syrian context and how much are they continuations of past activity amongst Kurds in Syria?

Kurdish issues are seen as secondary or peripheral human interest stories in much of the news coverage and analysis of the crisis in Syria. The fact that Syria's Kurds are a minority group that is largely concentrated in the north east of the country, where fighting is less intense, may contribute to the perception that potential Kurdish aspirations for statehood or autonomy are issues that can be dealt with after the civil war is over.⁹ This notion is mistaken for several reasons. Firstly ignoring Kurdish issues lays the foundation for further conflict and division amongst the opposition forces thus weakening their ability to resist government forces. The lack

⁸ MM Gunter, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, Vol. 15 (OXFORD: BLACKWELL PUBLISHING, 2008), 172-175; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd. ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 515.

⁹ "Syrian Coalition Goals," 1; "Syrian Coalition Principles," 1.

of overt concern for Kurdish issue by opposition forces such as the *National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces* contributes to negative perceptions of the opposition by the Kurds prompting them to consolidate their territory potentially weakening the prospects for a unified Syria. Such an action would likely have dramatic regional consequences, drawing in Kurdish groups in Iraq and Turkey. For these reasons the Kurdish Question needs to be dealt with alongside the wider concerns in Syria; if it continues to be ignored it will likely become a larger complication later.¹⁰ The recent dialogue that has opened between Turkey and Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers Party PKK, suggests that Turkey may have come to this realization. Additionally, and importantly, Kurds have legitimate human rights concerns and aspirations. For numerous decades they have been discriminated against and deprived of citizenship rights. Many Kurds have basic human desires: the ability to feed their families, live a normal life free of discrimination based on their ethnicity, and to be able to freely practice and express their culture.

While the Kurdish population of Syria were not the instigators of the civil unrest that began in March of 2011, Kurds were involved early on. One such demonstration was organized by Kurdish university students in Damascus. It was quickly dealt with by the security apparatus with beatings, and arrests which were followed by tight supervision of the campus.¹¹ The experience of Kurds in Syria can be seen as an intensified version of what the average Syrian endures. In addition to the day to day repression experienced by many Syrians, since independence sequential Syrian governments have refused to recognize Kurdish ethnic identity and persecuted them for attempts at cultural expression, portraying them as enemies of stability in Syria. Moreover, a large number of Kurds in Syria enjoy no civil rights, being denied Syrian citizenship.¹²

The plight of the Kurds can be seen as a magnification of the pressures the Syrian regime has placed upon its people. Almost since the beginnings of the Syrian State Kurds have had limitations placed on their culture, use of language and for many their citizenship. If one traces the Kurdish relationship with the Syrian state over the years they can see changes in the amount of control Syria's leaders have, when their domestic control feels less sure there is an

¹⁰ Jonathan MacBurnie and Rosh Abdelfatah, Interview conducted by author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013.

¹¹ Starr, *Revolt in Syria : Eye-Witness to the Uprising*,15.

¹² Internal displacement monitoring centre, *Syria a Full-Scale Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis with no Solutions in Sight* Norwegian Refugee Council,[2012]), [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/%28httpInfoFiles%29/8474B2AE5164B7DAC1257A4C004B6634/\\$file/syria-overview-july2012.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/%28httpInfoFiles%29/8474B2AE5164B7DAC1257A4C004B6634/$file/syria-overview-july2012.pdf) (accessed December 18 2012).

increase in persecution of internal enemies. By examining the Kurdish situation we can notice changes in Syrian society such as periods of tolerance and state repression and moments of societal change. Views such as this have not been present in historiography of Syria or Kurds for very long. In historiography of the Kurdish people the Syrian Kurds have essentially been a peripheral topic. The main focus of these histories when looking at Kurds is their struggle for independent statehood and the seeming futility of that struggle.¹³

1.3 Sources and research structure:

Reflecting the nature of this topic, the research for this paper has been conducted primarily using a qualitative method. In order to conduct a proper examination of how Kurdish identity, is presented and viewed, how they attempt to manage their image, it is important to use many different types of sources. Naturally where more quantitative data exists they have been used in my efforts to understand and analyse the situation. I have used a wide variety of sources as a basis for this research. In recent years the limited amount of historical writing specifically on the topic of Kurdish history within Syria has begun to change. This began with the books by Kerim Yildiz (*The Kurds In Syria*, 2005), Harriet Montgomery (*The Kurds of Syria*, 2005) and Jordie Tejel (*Syria's Kurds*, 2009). Additionally numerous books dealing with Kurdish history and culture are now including chapters dealing specifically with Syrian Kurdish concerns. While these and other shorter works provide comprehensive overviews of Kurdish history within Syria the focus is primarily around the relationship to the government, documenting the level of oppression and hardships faced by the Kurds living in Syria. The present work seeks to use the groundwork provided by these works in order to examine what trends can be seen around Kurdish nationalism in Syria by analysing how identity is expressed, or more specifically examining the various images of Kurdish identity that are presented to the world by different Kurdish organizations in particular the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its related organisations.

As a result of their need to justify and defend their existence, as a minority group Kurdish cultural identity has become rather politicised. This is not a new development, and can be traced back to at least the Mandate period with groups like The Khouybun League, an organisation seeking to promote politically and culturally based mobilization. Recognizing the

¹³ MICHAEL M. GUNTER, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective," *World Affairs* 166, no. 4 (2004)197-205; MM Gunter, "Why Kurdish Statehood is Unlikely," *Middle East Policy* 11, no. 1 (2004b),106-110; Christopher Houston, "'Set Aside from the Pen and Cut Off from the Foot': Imagining the Ottoman Empire and Kurdistan," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 2 (2007),397-411.

politicisation of Kurdish identity and culture does not mean that today's Kurdish cultural identity is not authentic; rather it is the recognition that political organization based around cultural identity has elements that are consciously, and unconsciously, steering cultural development. It can be difficult to determine which aspects have recently been introduced by political parties or agendas and what existed previously. An example of an area where that has been particularly affected is Kurdish history. In an article, "*Set aside from the pen and cut off from the foot: Imagining the Ottoman Empire and Kurdistan (2007)*", Christopher Houston discusses there have been ongoing competing efforts by Kurdish and Turkish scholars over who is the original inhabitants of the land. In a process that is described in depth by Eviatar Zerubavel in *Time Maps (2003)* each side interprets history in their own favor.¹⁴

The politics surrounding the topic have presented another difficulty while researching it. The topic of Kurdish cultural rights was already a politicised issue prior to the Arab Spring. However with the disintegration of stability in Syria the biases and entrenched positions have become more pronounced. A propaganda war, which is particularly fierce online, is a significant source of bias that I have had to pay attention to while examining the various sources. Elements of the sources may have been written in order to gain favor or discredit other groups. There is potential for the intentional misrepresentation, exaggeration or downplaying of facts in effort to gain a favorable impression or stimulate action from their audience. In some instances particularly, with online material, the way the information is presented becomes as interesting, and can provide useful insights into perceptions of identity. Thus the propaganda and online marketing of causes has become part of the topic.¹⁵

1.4 What is Identity? Image and Perception:

The anthropological term Liminality is a useful concept to describe the status of Kurds in Syria and its neighbours. When anthropologist Victor Turner introduced the term in the 1960s it had a very specific meaning. It was used for analysing rites of passage. Building upon the work of Arnold van Gennep, Turner used liminality to refer to the middle stage of rituals. It was the stage after separation when an individual is on the cusp of transition, in its first published usage in the description of the Ndembu circumcision ritual to refer to participants before they had

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart, *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online* (London: Sage Publications LTD, 2002),59-62,198-214.

become incorporated into manhood.¹⁶ After Turner's initial usage the terms meaning began to develop and evolve gaining further usage outside of the field of anthropology.¹⁷ As the term has developed its meaning has expanded from a definition relating solely to stages in rituals or ceremonies to describing "a position of ambiguity and uncertainty: being betwixt and between". In "Liminality and the Practices of Identity Reconstruction" Nic Beech attempts to create a composite understanding of liminality by combining old understandings of it with newer uses. He combines the anthropological understanding of the word with organizational literature usage where it is often used to describe temporary workers or the shift to contract based employment where individuals are employed by companies but are not employees. In this sense the individuals involved often remain in a state of ambiguity as to whether they are really part of the corporate environment of that company or are they a tolerated outsider.¹⁸

Utilizing a more developed understanding of the concept, it can be said that since 1962 many of the Kurdish people of Syria have existed in an official state of liminality. Kurds have lived in a liminal state since the division of the region however after 1962 the state of limbo became more explicit. In this year the Syrian Government executed an unprecedented one day census of the Kurdish regions in Hasaka. As a result the Syrian Government revoked the citizenship rights of many Kurds adding permanence to the state of liminality caused by the initial division of Kurdish lands at the end of the Ottoman Empire.

The census targeted those who could not, or chose not to in the misguided effort to avoid the draft, prove that they had lived in the area prior to the 1925 influx of Kurds from Turkey following the failed Shaykh Sa'id Rebellion. After the census the Kurds were divided into three groups: those who were registered, and two other similar categories: *ajanib* (foreigners) and *maktum al-qaid* (lack of registration). The main difference between the later categories is the *ajanib* were present but unable to prove their citizenship and the *maktum* were not present at the time and were not registered. While all Kurds with in Syria live in a liminal state; the last two categories of Kurds are most liminal as they, particularly the *maktum* Kurds, have no official citizenship and are not registered. The census initially resulted in 120,000 Kurds losing citizenship. By 2009 this had more than doubled as the children of these stateless Kurds are also not granted citizenship; meaning that at least 300,000 Kurds remain stateless to this day.

¹⁶ B. A. Babcock "Liminality" in *International Encyclopedia of Social & Behavioral Sciences* ed. N. J. Smelser James Wright, P. B. Baltes, (Pergamon: University of Central Florida 2001), 8862.

¹⁷ Babcock, 8862-8864. Nic Beech, "Liminality and the Practices of Identity Reconstruction," *Human Relations* 64.2 (2011), 288.

¹⁸ Beech, 287, 285-302.

They are seen as Turkish refugees by the Syrian government but are not recognized as such by the Turkish and without a passport they do not have the ability to leave. As such Kurds have lived on the periphery of Syrian society and in a state of limbo since the census and other efforts by the Syrian government.¹⁹ At the beginning of the crisis, nearly fifty years after the fact, President Bashar al-Assad unsuccessfully made a token effort to win favor with the Kurds by granting 150,000 stateless Kurds citizenship.²⁰ This effort highlights the longevity of the issue and the low priority of Kurdish issues in Syria.

The traditional area that Kurdish people inhabited currently falls primarily within the national boundary of four countries - Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The border means that they have an additional adjective added to identity i.e. Syrian Kurd etc. However for their own nationalist reasons or those of governments like that of Syria this new identity as X country Kurd is often not as simple as adding a word. Governments may not see them as full citizens or recognize their ethnicity. Thus the Kurds exist on the periphery in a state of liminality they are not members of an autonomous Kurdish nation but they are not seen as really Syrian or Turkish, etc. - providing they would want to be in the first place. The existence of national borders also changes the way governments of these countries relate to different groups of Kurds. It has not been uncommon for regional governments with Kurdish populations to have better relations with Kurds on the other side of the border than their own.

National Borders create issues for minority groups that previously existed on both sides of the new border: do they accept new identities? Just add another adjective to their ethnic group's name? Do they adopt different names depending on which side of the border they live on? (as is the case with the Blackfeet and Blackfoot in the United States of America and Canada) or do they fight to regain independence? Or as some governments would prefer, give up on what makes them different, and choose assimilation. Obviously this decision is not one

¹⁹ Ziadah Radwan, *The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report,[2009]); *Report: Kurds in Syria:Group at Risk and Reactions Against Political Activists*, (Oslo: Landinfo Country of Origin Information Centre,[2010a]) (accessed 14 December 2012); Harriet Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied* (Berlin: Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005),77-81; Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (London: Pluto Press in association with Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2005),33; *Stateless Kurds in Syria; Illegal Invaders Or Victims of a Nationalistic Policy?* (Berlin: Kurdwatch,[2010b]), http://www.kurdwatch.org/pdf/kurdwatch_staatenlose_en.pdf (accessed January 15 2013).

²⁰ Carsten Wieland, *Syria A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*, (Seattle: Cune Press, 2012),31-32.

that can be made independently; it often depends on how others view them. A key aspect to the original use of the term liminality is the final step of the process - aggregation.

Kurds have completed the first phase separation; many Kurds in Syria are stateless and not recognized as member or complete members of the new countries they find themselves a part of. For Kurds actively involved in liberation movements in countries such as Turkey they may be recognized as citizens but they do not accept this identity and thus still remain in the state of liminality, albeit a self-imposed state. This will continue unless and until aggregation occurs. Aggregation for the Kurds could mean the countries they find themselves in fully recognizes them as citizens, they give up their own identity or as some desire the different groups of Kurds are untied into one Kurdish nation. In Turkey and Iraq various stages of aggregation have occurred; Turkey has been relaxing official restraints on cultural expression, tolerating wider use of Kurdish language in books, and on television, however the PKK problem still negatively impacts the relationship between the government and the Kurds. In Iraq the creation of the Kurdish Autonomous Region and the recognition of the Kurdish Regional Government in the Iraqi constitution, has meant that on paper at least the Kurds of Iraq are recognized as citizens in the wider country.²¹

Identity can be very personal or be a public expression; additionally the way that it is understood alters in different contexts. For example group identity is different from individual identity. Ethnic identity is the most relevant kind of identity for the subject at hand. J.S. Phinney defines Ethnic identity as "a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity, or sense of self, as a member of an ethnic group."²² In different contexts people will emphasise other aspects of their identity Ethnicity is an aspect of identity that reflects dual realities of identity: it is at once a chosen characteristic and something that is imposed. What is meant by this is that the development of ethnic identity is a process combining social factors, such as parents and the community, and internal identification with the wider group as an individual's image of themselves develops. Identity particularly that of a minority group is imposed by external sources both by others who belong to the imposing group and those who belong to the category of the 'other' in relation to the group; i.e. a child can be told by their family, the in group, that

²¹ "Full Text of Iraqi Constitution," The Associated Press, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html> (accessed May 15, 2013).

²² J. S. Phinney, "Ethnic Identity, Psychology Of," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Editors-in-Chief: Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon, 2001), 4821.

they are Kurdish but the child can also be told this by a member of the 'other' such as an Arab teacher or government official.²³

Even with identity being ascribed and assigned to individuals the extent to which one embraces or self-identifies as a member of a particular group is to some degree a conscious choice. For example ethnic Kurds whose families have been in Damascus for generations and who have adopted Arabic as their mother tongue can choose how or if they express their Kurdish identity, or see themselves as more Arab or Syrian. Of course it is up to the 'other' to accept or tolerate this choice. Expression of identity is not completely a one way transfer of meaning; it is the result of the mingling of intention and perception. Ethnicity and identity only exist in relation to an 'other'. In this way ethnicity defines cultural difference just as borders define who belongs and who does not in a political - geographical manner. With the rise of ethnic nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century the two ways of defining the 'other' combined. Countries like Turkey and Syria defined their populations on ethnic terms, Turks and Arabs respectively. This may have avoided issues provided by religious difference. However this solution created other problems; how do you relate to ethnic minorities who hold on to their cultural particularities as the Kurds tend to.²⁴

The example of former Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighter Mohamed Has illustrates the complexity of identity and the ability of individuals to emphasise or deemphasise aspects of their identity. Mohamed left Damascus to join the armed struggle against the Assad Government in his home town. Initially he was a member of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who he joined when he returned to Ra's al-'Ayn (or in Kurdish: Sarî Kaniyê), his hometown Sarî Kaniyê. Has' relationship with the FSA soured after they attacked a YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or Popular Protection Units) checkpoint. During the battle an FSA sniper killed a Kurdish politician Abed Khalil, the president of the local PYD council, who had attempted to negotiate peace. This incident contributed to Has changing allegiances.²⁵

In a conversation with photographer Jeff Ruigendijk, Mohamed described the experience: "I asked my friends 'Why do you kill my people. This man was a civilian.' He [sic]

²³ Ibid; Raymond Grew, "Introduction," in *The Construction of Minorities. Cases for Comparison Across Time and Around the World*, eds. André Burguière and Raymond Grew (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001),1,3-4,7.

²⁴ Åsa Lundgren, "Defending through Violation: Ankara's Contradictory Strategies Over the Turkish-Iraqi Border," in *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East*, ed. Inga Brandell (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2006),101,102,105.

²⁵ Jeff Ruigendijk, "YPG," ruigphotography, <http://www.ruigphotography.com/YPG-Syria-War-Kurdistan> (accessed April 19, 2013).

answered: 'The Turkish told us we can't trust them'. After this I switched sides to the YPG, even though I am only half Kurdish, and a Sunni Muslim.” This statement contains multiple layers of potentially competing identities: that of a son of Sarî Kaniyê; someone fighting to free Syria from the Assad Government; a half Kurdish individual, which implies that he is half Arab; and finally as a Sunni Muslim. After the explanation by his friends Has invoked another facet of his identity - that of being half Kurdish to support his human and moral decision to switch allegiances joining the YPG.²⁶

1.5 Kurdish Identity:

One obvious challenge when approaching this topic is the ongoing and constant developments in Syria. The situation on the ground changes on a weekly if not daily basis. I have made efforts to keep up to date with the all of the latest information however it is not possible to include or verify everything. Language presents another complication; unfortunately the source material has been limited to English material and translations. One of the larger challenges in this project is situating the current developments and contemporary history of the Kurdish living in Syria into a larger historical context. The grievances being presented today have deep roots that Kurds are very conscious of.²⁷ This is the reason for the long length of time I strived to cover being nearly one hundred year time period from the end of World War I to June 2013.

The establishment of the states of Iraq, Turkey and Syria and the politicisation of Kurdish culture in effort to defend and justify Kurdish identity has had a homogenizing effect on Kurdish identity. The large geographical area where Kurds traditionally lived meant that differences existed between them such as different language dialects and traditions. Political organizations tend to utilize cultural identities both as justification of and source for mobilization along nationalist lines.²⁸ By actively defining identity for nationalist purposes Kurdish groups have emphasised the similarities between Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. They have a common struggle and their identity as members of the wider Kurdish ethnicity makes them more connected than the older divisions. The existence of a large diaspora in countries such as Germany has also contributed to this sense of connection. Kurds originating from various countries come together in the diaspora community and participate in cultural activities such as

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ This statement is based upon personal interviews as well as information from NGO reports, Kurdish webpages, and interviews conducted by other historians or researchers.

²⁸ Montserrat Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996)139-143; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*,87.

the *Newroz* concert festivals.²⁹ Naturally this is at a cultural level however when it comes to political organization the regional realities and tribal traditions are still present as can be seen in the number of Kurdish political parties in Syria and the long lasting tensions between Iraq's two Kurdish parties.

The international and regional implications of the Syrian Crisis and Civil War makes primary source information available in English very interesting because there has been a conscious effort to translate it. Most of the historiography on Kurds focuses on the larger populations of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran with brief mentions of Kurds in Syria. After the 2004 this began to change after an uprising occurred in Kurdish areas of Syria following the government's response to a fight at a football match in Qamishli that caused scholars, governments and organisations monitoring human rights to pay closer attention to plight of Syria's Kurds.³⁰ These reports have been invaluable sources of information as they contain information gathered in Syria and from interviews that would not have been possible for me to conduct on my own. Of course it is necessary to pay attention to particular objectives of the organizations or departments producing these reports and possible biases that may be the result from their approach.

The potential lack of objectivity becomes a particular issue when examining webpages of political organizations; as there was a conscious decision to translate or include this information in English. It is also interesting to compare the difference between different versions of the webpages, in some cases the English version of a webpage is not a mere translation, the type of information and the way it is presented often differs reflecting the type of audience the information is intended for. A lot can go into the design of webpages, at a basic level the designer has to decide what kind of material they want to put out on the web for everyone to

²⁹ Vera Eccarius-Kelly, "Nationalism, Ethnic Rap, and the Kurdish Diaspora," *Peace Review (Palo Alto, Calif.)* 22, no. 4 (-10-01, 2010): 423; *German Newroz Concert Promotional Poster*, 2013d); *Newroz 2013 Trailer*, Home Video, directed by madebyDilnasTV (youtube: 2011), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXeIQ8Jm65A> (accessed June 18 2013).

³⁰ Radwan, *The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?; Report: Kurds in Syria: Group at Risk and Reactions Against Political Activists*, 1-22; . *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria* (New York: Human Rights Watch,[2009]); Robert Lowe, *Chatam House, Middle Eastern Programme Breifing Paper: The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered*, Chatam House,[2006]), <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/bpsyriankurds.pdf> (accessed January15 2013); *Stateless Kurds in Syria; Illegal Invaders Or Victims of a Nationalistic Policy?*, 4-26; GUNTER, *The Kurdish Question in Perspective*, 197-205.

see. Different webpages have different purposes; some are basically tributes to certain causes, while other pages have more developed objectives and purposes.³¹

When I am examining webpages I look at what type of information is on them, and how it is presented. Webpages of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Yekîtî Party <http://www.pydrojava.net/>, and <http://yekiti-media.org/indexLa.php?z=en>, are primary platforms for the marketing of political parties' brand of Kurdishness to a wide audience. Through the use of photographs, news releases, manifestos and other textual content the producer of the webpage attempts to frame how visitors to the page view the subject of the webpage - the political party's vision for Kurdish relations. The primary audience for the party webpages, particularly the English pages, is not likely to be Kurds living in the region where the party operates. In these areas exposure to the party usually takes place in person; through public gatherings, posters or flyers. In order to gain insight on this type of interaction photographs and interviews with people who have been to Syria are more useful and have been sought out and analyzed. I was also able to interview a photographer who had recently spent time in North Eastern Syria.³²

Increased accesses to relatively inexpensive video cameras and smartphones that combine multimedia capabilities with internet connectivity have opened new spheres of communication in our everyday lives. While the business and recreational applications for these devices are quite obvious, the potential for their use in protest and demonstrations is still being explored and perfected.³³ The protests in Iran following disputed election results in 2009 can be seen as one of the early test cases for the use of this new technology in social protest. Through the combined use of images captured with cellphone cameras and social media the

³¹ "Main Page, English," <http://www.hawarnews.com/english/> (accessed February 13, 2013); "Main Page, English" Kurdpress, <http://kurdpress.com/en/> (accessed January 1, 2013); "Main Page," Réseau d'informations libres de la Mésopotamie, <http://www.actukurde.fr/kategori.php?page=kurdistanmoyen-orient&offset=0&id=7> (accessed January 15, 2013); "Info on Kurds: Who are the Kurds?" Alliance for Kurdish Rights, <http://kurdishrights.org/info-on-kurds/> (accessed April 25, 2013); "Yekitit Media: Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria," Yekiti Party, <http://www.yekiti-party.org/english/> (accessed December 20, 2013).

³² "Democratic Union Party. Home," PYD, <http://www.pydrojava.net/en/> (accessed January 25, 2013); "Yekitit Media: Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria," Yekiti Party, <http://www.yekiti-party.org/english/> (accessed December 20, 2013).

³³ Maple John Razza, "Beyond 'Riot Porn': Protest Video and the Production of Unruly Subjects," *Ethnos* (04/08; 2013/07, 2013), 1-29, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2013.778309>; Sam Gregory, "Cameras Everywhere: Ubiquitous Video Documentation of Human Rights, New Forms of Video Advocacy, and Considerations of Safety, Security, Dignity and Consent," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2, no. 2 (July 01, 2010), 191-207.

protesters in Iran demonstrated the potential ability of these technologies to circumvent state media.³⁴

The potential to transmit strong images to wide audience, both within their country and in the rest of the world, has made social media an attractive medium for activists. While social media assisted in the ongoing organisation of the Egyptian revolution, it was not the central instigating force behind the action on the street. Observers including Historian James Gelvin highlight the debate between cyberphiles and cyberskeptics over the actual role played by social media during the Arab Spring.³⁵ The perceived effectiveness of spreading amateur videos on social media has led to their prevalent use by activists during the 'Arab Spring' particularly in Egypt and Syria. According to a report by Al-Jazeera that came out early in the protest in Syria, when they were predominantly conducted peacefully, the knowledge that others were watching and knew about the protest provided a form of comfort to those taking part and encouraged their actions.³⁶ Due to the Syrian government's initial ban on foreign media the internet was for a while the only source of information from within Syria. Even now with increased media access the internet remains a key source of information about what is taking place in Syria. However as the battle for Syria increased on the ground, it has simultaneously grown in the online sphere.

News coverage of the Arab Spring emphasised the role of social media in the efforts of the activists involved; however the overall impact of it has been exaggerated, the real change happened on the streets.³⁷ Indeed recent examples of the attempted use of social media for political mobilization such as the Kony 2012 campaign have shown that awareness does not guarantee action, especially of the meaningful kind. Footage of the Syrian regimes atrocities may have initially prompted wide scale sympathy and attention from world citizens but the flood of grisly and heart wrenching images has largely blended into the netscape and no longer grabs

³⁴ Al Jazeera English, "Iran Election Dispute Fans Unrest," <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009614135353845916.html> (accessed December 17, 2012); Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics : How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic : Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Roel Meijer, "Citizenship Rights and the Arab Spring: The Historical Dimension" (Lecture, 2013).

³⁵ James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 50-52.

³⁶ People and Power, "Songs of Defiance," Al Jazeera, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/03/201231213549186607.html> (accessed January 14, 2013).

³⁷ Aneela Rashid, "The Role of Social Media Sites in the Egyptian Uprising of 2011" (Erasmus University Rotterdam), 86,88.

as much attention.³⁸ As the situation drags on content showing atrocities committed by the opposition forces has also appeared. Echoing difficulties faced by UN Peace Keepers during the Siege of Sarajevo both sides of the conflict trade accusations of being framed by their adversaries for atrocious actions.

This oversaturation of content has not deterred the uploading of videos. Indeed most groups involved in the fighting, actively as observers or victims still document daily events. These videos can be very useful artifacts of the crisis; for example who uploaded them, who comments and of course what the actual contents of the videos are. The biggest challenge when examining such videos is authenticating them and when translations are provided there is of course the issue of accuracy. Another issue is the sheer volume of information, as it becomes important to prioritize and be selective. In addition to the primary content the comments section on video sharing and news webpages can provide candid insights into beliefs and perceptions surrounding the conflict. These pages and discussion forms are places where identity is expressed therefore they can provide useful insight into the perceptions of those involved. New coverage itself is not as neutral as it may appear, there are often underlying objectives and opinions that shape how the news is framed and presented.³⁹

1.6 Methodology:

In order to gain an understanding of the issues faced by the Kurds of Syria my research began by reading numerous NGO and Government reports about human rights and the position of Kurds with in Syria. These allowed me to gain an understanding of the situation at a rapid pace. Additionally the reports and briefings also provided insight into how the international community views the situation in Syria, and when this attention and focus came to the region. Historical books on the subject provide more detailed analysis of the longer trends and occurrences and are useful for background knowledge. By comparing these narratives to Kurdish natives of their own history such as Kurdish politician Dr Jawad Mella's *Kurdistan and The Kurds A Divided Homeland and a Nation without State* [sic] (2005) or from interviews, one

³⁸ Jennifer Earl, Katrina Kimport and et al., "Changing the World One Webpage at a Time: Conceptualizing and Explaining Internet Activism," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (December 4 2010, 2010), 425-446.

³⁹ *The Lebanonization of Syria, Report on the Actors of the Syrian Crisis* (Paris: French Center for Intelligence Research,[2012b]), www.scribd.com/doc/82131328/The-Lebanonization-of-Syria (accessed 28 December 2012); "Youtube Search Results for War in Syria." http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=war+in+syria&oq=war+in+syria&gs_l=youtube.3..0l10.16026.22586.0.23355.16.13.0.3.3.0.89.707.13.13.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.FEtlfC1S4gl (accessed July 3, 2013).

can look for differences in how Kurds are perceived and how they perceive themselves.⁴⁰ Aside from books, journal articles and reports I also conducted personal interviews and email exchanges. The internet has been an irreplaceable resource providing access to photos, videos and the webpages of activists, parties, newspapers, and personal blogs. With the assistance of Google translations I have able to use webpages in various languages. Each of these sources comes with limitations and challenges.⁴¹

Considering that Kurdish culture and identity has been repressed in Syria, and much of the Middle East for decades it is difficult to see if there has been any changes over the long term. One aspect of identity that is possible to examine is image. Not only is image one of the more accessible facets of identity, it and how it is perceived are perhaps more important to analyse in the present circumstance. Speaking in general terms, I would argue that: image is a visual representation of identity that is presented to the world and is how identity interacts with the outside world. Ideally image is controlled by those whose identity is represented by it. These identity groups strive to control how they are perceived by adjusting the way that they present their image. The way image is presented depends on who the intended target audience is. Often there are competing representations of identity that produce different images, and are based off of outsiders, often a dominant cultures, perceptions. What others see can have an effect on an individual's identity while at the same time an individual can attempt shape the way that they are seen thus altering their own identity. As John Osborne and Michael Wintle note in the introduction to *Image into Identity* (2006) Examining image is useful in the analysis of identity politics, strengthening the legitimacy for this paper's focus on image; how the Kurds present themselves to different audiences and how they are perceived.⁴²

⁴⁰ Jawad Mella, *Kurdistan and the Kurds: A Divided Homeland and a Nation without State* (London: Western Kurdistan Association Publications, 2005), 286.

⁴¹ Philip Schlesinger, "From Production to Propaganda?" *Media, Culture & Society* 11, no. 3 (July 1 1989, 1989), 283-306, <http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/11/3/283>.

⁴² Anthropology and sociology examine identity as an aspect of culture that defines who individuals or groups are. Individuals act in a certain manner in response to social settings and their status. Sociology deals with identity as it relates to roles that people play in society. "Identity." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. William A. Darity Jr., 2nd ed. ed., Vol. 3 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008b), 551-555, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3045301074&v=2.1&u=erasmus&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w>; "Identity, Social." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. William A. Darity Jr., 2nd ed. ed., Vol. 3 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008c), 555-556, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3045301075&v=2.1&u=erasmus&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w>; John Osborne and Michael Wintle, "The Construction and Allocation of Identity through Images and Imagery: And Introduction," in *Image into Identity: Constructing and Assigning Identity in a Culture of Modernity*, ed. Michael Wintle (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006),30.

Since the mandate period and the awakening of nationalism that came with it, many Kurds have felt the necessity to defend the legitimacy and validity of their identity and their rights as they found they became stateless minorities amongst several emerging nation-states, namely Iraq, Syria and Turkey where Arab and Turkish identities were the basis of belonging.⁴³ In a cultural struggle such as this or during a civil war the way identity is perceived becomes extremely important; i.e. is the desire to express a distinct identity an inherent threat to other group? In this type of climate different or opposing identities often turn to the use of propaganda and other information campaigns in an attempt to define their own identity, in doing so they attempt to control or influence how identities are perceived.⁴⁴ While anthropology and sociology provide insight into the relationship between individuals, identity and culture, a field of study that specializes in examining the ability to manipulate perceptions of identity is that of marketing.

The Marketing concept of *Branding* pays particular attention to the presentation of image and the process of managing identity. Marketers strive to be conscious of how their brand is being perceived, the desires of their audience and attempt to manipulate and shape how the image of their brand is received.⁴⁵ Initially the idea of examining cultural or ethnic identity from a marketing perspective may seem inappropriate; however I would argue that it is an appropriate area to draw upon. Ethnic and cultural identity is more complex and important than that of a corporation, however as Tim Calkins explains in the introduction to *Kellogg on Branding* (2005) "Non-profit organizations are brands, religious groups are brands, and every person is a brand."⁴⁶ If we examine the prevalence of Facebook groups or other social media and how people and countries manage or should manage their online persona it is clear that perceptions

⁴³ The process of attempting to unite their nations around Turkish or Arab identities is an example of the typical simplification, and homogenisation of identity that is characteristic of nation-states. "Nation State," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. William A. Darity Jr., 2nd ed. ed., Vol. 5 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008d), 420-423, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3045301703&v=2.1&u=erasmus&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w>.

⁴⁴ CAMILLA ORJUELA, "Building Peace in Sri Lanka: A Role for Civil Society?" *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 2 (March 01, 2003)202-204.; Sverker Finnström, "Living with Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland, Northern Uganda" (Doctor of Philosophy, Uppsala), 363 (accessed 2013).

⁴⁵ John F. Sherry, "Brand Meaning," in *Kellogg on Branding*, eds. Alice M. Tybout and Tim Calkins (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 40-69; Brian Sternthal and Angela Y. Lee, "Building Brands through Effective Advertising," in *Kellogg on Branding*, eds. Alice M. Tybout and Tim Calkins (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 129-149.

⁴⁶ Tim Calkins, "Introduction: The Challenge of Branding," in *Kellogg on Branding: The Marketing Faculty of the Kellogg School of Management*, eds. Alice M. Tybout and Tim Calkins (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005),2.

of one's image are increasing becoming important particularly as marketing ideas spread around the world and affect the way things are understood and valued.⁴⁷

The role of *Branding* is to create and maintain a unique and positive identity for companies. This is achieved through a focus on and the careful management of image and perception. Borrowing terms and concepts that are used to describe the techniques of Branding can be useful for interpreting how expressions of Kurdish identity have changed and react to the changing environment and circumstances in Syria. This statement is not meant to give the impression that Kurdish groups have taken courses in marketing or are somehow hoping to profit economically from the 'Kurdish Brand'. Rather it is an observation that the controlled expression of identity by different Kurdish Political Parties such as the PYD, through the extensive use of symbols, colours, slogans and selective public interaction is similar to the activities of companies who strive to be "living the brand".⁴⁸

In *Competitive Identity, The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (2007) Simon Anholt explores the increasing prevalence of branding in everyday life as it makes the transition from the advertising departments of corporations into the realm of government. In this new context Anholt refers to branding as *competitive identity*. This "is the term [Anholt] uses to describe the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion." His book is designed to remove the stigma associated with branding and promote a more effective approach the promotion and management of image and identity in this new wider context.⁴⁹ I use the term *branding* with a similar understanding. My approach to the topic will attempt to combine multiple approaches to the study of identity and representations of it. By examining the way identity is expressed on webpages and at rallies from a marketing perspective and looking at what these representations mean using a more traditional cultural study approach a more complete analysis can be made. In doing so it becomes possible to examine more public shifts in Kurdish identity. These shifts impact the way that the Kurdish Question is perceived and dealt with. It is also a way to evaluate the strength of Kurdish unity within Syria; are the cultural symbols being used generic Kurdish ones or are they specific to a particular party. In other words what form of Kurdish Nationalism is being represented by the symbols such as flags and banners?⁵⁰ The online

⁴⁷ Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2007),1.

⁴⁸ Calkins, *Introduction: The Challenge of Branding*,2.

⁴⁹ Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*,3,1-21,25-59.

⁵⁰ Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*,80-84.

propaganda war that is so tightly connected to the Syrian Crisis is a prime example of how the government, the protesters, the various opposition groups and foreign governments are consciously or subconsciously marketing their brand and managing their image. At a basic level this process can be seen as groups like the PYD portray themselves as the true representatives of the Kurds or as Assad's constant rhetoric attempts to portray the opposition forces as outside terrorists.⁵¹

All of the sides involved in the Syrian Crisis are engaged in a physical as well as a psychological battle to control how they are perceived. From a marketing viewpoint perception is what that matters the most. If people perceive a brand positively it does not really matter what is actually behind it, this also works in the opposite way, negative perceptions mean also mask positive realities.⁵² If concepts around branding are applied to the current situation in Syria the parallels should become clearer. For example if the Kurds are perceived as a threat, they become one, if the Kurdish Question is perceived as unimportant or a secondary issue that is how it will be treated until those in charge are persuaded otherwise. Consciously or not, those participating in the dissemination of information about what is going on in Syria are in essence marketing a brand - their cause. To market their brand effectively it is important to control the framing of the Kurdish Question and other Kurdish concerns.

The goal of branding is to establish positive perceptions in the public's mind about particular brands. This is done in a variety of ways; traditional advertising campaigns, product placement public spectacles, and through experiences potential customers have in stores or digitally on webpages.⁵³ The parallels between branding/ image management and the attempts of different Kurdish Groups to define their identity to the public has prompted me to incorporate aspects of marketing theory in my examination of Kurdish identity as an effective way to examine more intricate or effective methods of expression. The content of these expressions can then be analyzed using more traditional historical methods.

Thinking along these lines the image of Kurds is what is being marketed, different Kurdish groups are the different 'brands' offering their own version of this 'product', that is Kurdishness. For decades the Syrian Government has portrayed Kurds in a relatively negative

⁵¹ Ian Black, "Assad's Call for Talks Dismisses as 'a Waste of Time' by Syrian Opposition," The Guardian UK, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/06/syrian-opposition-bashar-al-assad (accessed January 10, 2013).

⁵² Calkins, *Introduction: The Challenge of Branding*, 2.

⁵³ Hank Darlington, "Creating Your Brand- Part 2," *Supply House Times*, June 2005, 2005, 166 (accessed May 13 2013).

way; as illegitimate immigrants from Turkey, threats to national integrity or as integrated into Syrian society and therefore non-existent. These portrayals have been fairly successful and have complicated Kurdish efforts to persuade the main opposition groups to address the Kurdish Question. The other opposition groups find it hard to shake these perceptions of the Kurds.⁵⁴ An additional challenge for Syria's Kurds is that the larger populations of Kurds in Iraq and especially in Turkey have solidified the image of who Kurds are in the minds of the general public thus inhibiting their ability to represent their own local issues. Efforts of different Syrian Kurdish groups to establish their image as the legitimate one of Syria's Kurds will be examined later in this paper.

⁵⁴ Carnegie Middle East Center, "The Syrian National Council," Carnegie Middle East Center, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48334> (accessed 3/10, 2013).

2.0 Historical context: The lens of observation and understanding:

In order to appropriately analyse developments amongst the Kurds in Syria in addition to providing a historical context to the current Crisis in Syria several concepts need to be used. This chapter will provide this historical and conceptual foundation. In later chapters Syrian, or Western, Kurdish history will be examined in further detail as will regional and international developments that have impacted and shaped Kurdish opportunities to and the way in which they express their identity.

2.1 The Syrian Crisis:

A number of euphemisms have been used to describe the situation in Syria since the beginning of the Arab Spring. The predominant descriptor used in the media had been the 'Syrian Crisis' or the 'Crisis in Syria'. This label has become a convenient catch all descriptor for the events taking place in Syria. The label of crisis provides a sense of urgency while simultaneously masking the reality of the situation - an authoritarian government attempting to silence dissent permanently by murdering its citizens. It still reflects the current situation where civilians are stuck between their government on one hand and various other armed groups on the other. For more than a year the situation in Syria can more accurately be described as a civil war. There are multiple definitions for what a civil war entails; many observers are divided over whether the situation in Syria is a true civil war and when that occurred. The basic understanding of what a civil war is an internal conflict waged between government forces of a sovereign state and at least one organized armed group fighting with specific aims. Further distinctions can be made between the types of civil war, secessionist where the rebel forces are fighting for independence, and revolutions where the rebels are fighting to usurp control of the country. Scholars such as James D. Fearon use further criteria focusing on the number of casualties in order to differentiate civil war for other small scale disturbances, and as such the conflict needs to have 1000 or more casualties.⁵⁵

As the situation deteriorated over the summer of 2012 the nonviolent protests have been replaced by people fighting back with weapons and it began the transition into a zero-sum

⁵⁵ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (Feb., 2003),76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3118222>.; "Civil Wars," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. William A. Darity Jr., 2nd ed. ed., Vol. 1 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008),555, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3045300347&v=2.1&u=erasmus&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w>.

where neither side is willing to accept a compromise.⁵⁶ Initially some of these groups were attempting to provide a defended space for the protests to continue unmolested, but the situation has intensified. The situation has begun to meet criteria for being called a civil war however the opposition are still too divided. It is true that there are armed Syrians fighting other armed Syrians, however; the Syrian National Coalition recognized by many in the in the world community as the official alternative government are not really in control of the opposition forces who are fighting on the ground. The fighting in Syria has also attracted many fighters from outside of the country as it has become a new place to fight Jihad.⁵⁷ In the Kurdish area in the North East of Syria and other areas of Syria groups have stepped in to serve local municipal roles and in some cases this includes policing and military roles. There has been an effort to coordinate and organize the different opposition factions by the internationally recognized National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, however; there are still too many different factions on the ground to be a truly coherent and united alternative government force.⁵⁸

Conflict would be another term that could be used however it focuses attention more towards the fighting; I feel that the more general and ambiguous term crisis is more appropriate for general references to the situation in Syria. Obviously a conflict or warzone is an area full of crisis, but the word *crisis* can also be used to describe less dire situations and those leading up to a state of war. An additional reason for opting to use the generic label of crisis to describe the period of time post 2011 is that the beginning of the Arab Spring will likely be seen as a watershed moment in Syrian history. Therefore the rupture between pre-crisis Syria will be larger and more easily defined, than developments since March 2011. It is not easy to pick an exact date for the start of the civil war status in Syria but what month the crisis began is much

⁵⁶ Colombo, "Syria: Neither Spring, nor Peace" *Still Wawke: The Beginnings of Aram Democratic Change*,30.

⁵⁷ Jonathan MacBurnie and Jeff Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*, 2013); Brown Moses, "Boy Killed for Blasphemy, Foreign Jihadis Participate in Beheading, Attack on Shi'ite Village," Landis, Joshua, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/> (accessed June 18, 2013); *Syria's Mutating Conflict* International Crisis Group,[2012f]); MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*

⁵⁸ *Obstacles to a Syrian Regime Victory in Aleppo*, Stratfor,[2013q]), http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/obstacles-syrian-regime-victory-aleppo?utm_source=free-list-f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20130620&utm_term=FreeReport&utm_content=readmore&elq=7abdf9b3fe3845de9020376be48fc833 (accessed June 21 2013); "National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces," National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, <http://www.etilaf.org/en/> (accessed May 2, 2013); "Opposition Spokesman Won't Commit to Syria Peace Talks: Interview between Celeste Headlee of NPR and Khalid Saleh Spokesman for the Syrian National Coalition," National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=189521153> (accessed May 21, 2013).

easier to establish. In this sense the civil war can be seen as an evolution that grew out of the initial break as both sides picked up weapons.⁵⁹ Due to this continuity between periods and the ambiguous nature of the term *crisis*, except in specific cases I will refer to the situation in Syria as the *crisis*.

2.2 The Kurdish Question and Kurdistan:

The term “Kurdish Question”, is convenient shorthand for a series of politically sensitive and geopolitically uncomfortable questions. Put simply the Kurdish Question is this: Can a Kurdish Nation-State be created? It is much easier to ask or reword this question than it is to answer; it is not a simple yes or no question. Since the Mandate Period the Kurdish Question has played a central role in relations between Syria and its neighbours. From International Relations perspective Nation-State is a term often used to describe states, or countries that unite their populations through the emphasis, or creation, of a homogeneous national identity based on a single ethnic identity. In the strictest interpretation of this term Nation-States are very rare if existent at all. Minority populations of other ethnicities are present in most if not all states. Never the less many states around the world present themselves as being a nation-state and attempt to cultivate this identity through symbols, sets of values and a common culture. While countries like Syria present themselves as Nation-States they are, in the strictest sense not Nation-States.⁶⁰ Using a looser interpretation of the term, the Nation- State refers to sense of national unity, tied to the idea of nationalism and is thus as a manufactured metaphorical tool used to promote unity of a country. In the field of history this is the more common usage. The Nation-State is a label that can be used to differentiate between the structure of states before the rise of nationalism in the late 1800s and those that emerged afterwards.⁶¹ If a Kurdish state were to be created its borders would undoubtedly contain more than one ethnicity. Presently in the Kurdish region of Syria the Kurdish political party that has the most control of the Hasaka Governate; The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its government organization TEV DEM are attempting to proactively address the concerns of non-Kurdish ethnicities in the area by insisting

⁵⁹ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004),82-94.

⁶⁰ "Nation-State." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. William A. Darity Jr., 2nd ed. ed., Vol. 3 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008e), 551-555, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3045301074&v=2.1&u=erasmus&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w>.

⁶¹ Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*,47-59,115.

that they would appropriately address the concerns of every group. Even so Arab families living here have some concerns.⁶²

In 1920 The Treaty of Sérvés was proposed and negotiated. The Treaty determined what the new states that would be supervised by Great Britain and France would look like and ultimately what they would be. It was out of these negotiations that the states that make up the modern Middle East had their borders drawn. The treaty of Sérvés was superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne which did not include any provisions for a Kurdistan.⁶³ The Kurdish Question has long been an issue in the region, most noticeably in Turkey. After initial efforts during the Mandate period the question has largely remained dormant within Syria. The establishment of the Kurdish administered area in Northern Iraq following the 2003 invasion can be seen as one of the most significant developments for Kurdish autonomy in recent years. This development was made possible in part by the 5 April 1991 UN resolution 688, which came out of the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Resolution 688 effectively created a safe haven in Northern Iraq for the Kurds who lived there.⁶⁴ Another factor was the setting of differences between the rival PUK and the PDK. Prior to the 2003 invasion the two major Kurdish parties in Iraq had settled political differences. This meant when Saddam Hussein and the government structure of Iraq were removed the Kurds were able to utilize the political disorder in order to develop and to create a semi-autonomous Kurdish administered region in Iraq.

The earlier existence of an alternative government, what became the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), mean that the Kurdish region was able to avoid most of the ensuing chaos allowing the *de facto* Kurdish State to become one the most stable places in Iraq. The development of this state provided concerns and opportunities for Syria and Turkey. The concerns held by both countries regarding the example this semi-autonomous region could provide for their own Kurds was offset by its stability and, particularly in the case of Turkey, the region's economic opportunities. Importantly the KRG orients itself towards Iraq and is not recognized by the west as an autonomous entity. None the less, Turkey and Syria tightened up on their Kurdish populations, in an attempt to nip any issues in the bud.⁶⁵

⁶² MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*.

⁶³ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 14.

⁶⁴ UN Security Council Resolution 688, Iraq, 688, 2982nd sess., (April 5 1991, 1991), <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/596/24/IMG/NR059624.pdf?OpenElement>; "UN Security Council Resolution 688, Iraq," Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/un/un-security-council-resolution-688-iraq/p11206> (accessed June 19, 2013); Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied*, 140.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*; Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 57, 59.

For those well versed on the subject whether they are Kurdish, activists, academics or interested observers the word Kurdistan is used without a second thought or lot of explanation. The meaning of the term seems pretty straightforward; The land of the Kurds, however as is often the case with simple terms there is more baggage attached to it than one might suspect. Precisely what the term refers to has changed over the years. Although referring to a geographically different area from what it is generally meant when the term is used today, Kurdistan was first used by the Seljuk Turks at the beginning of the twelfth century. At that time they were referring” to an area extending from Azarbaijan to Luristan [present day Lorestan a western province of Iran].”⁶⁶

When used today, in its wider sense, Kurdistan on a political map consists of the area at the convergence of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.(See map on page 77) In this area the majority of the population are, or were, ethnically Kurdish. But this is not the only place where Kurds reside, they can also be found in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Israel, Egypt and a diaspora population can be found across the Western Countries particularly in Germany, France and Sweden.⁶⁷ In geographic terms the area most people refer to when they use Kurdistan is an area that straddles the Taurus and Ararat Mountain ranges and extending south into the plane of Mesopotamia.⁶⁸ To be specific, this territory covers regions in North East Syria, much of Eastern Turkey, northern Iraq portions of Western Iran and extending into Armenia. Recently the term has also been used to refer to the Kurdish region in Iraq.

In his book *Time Maps (2004)* Eviatar Zerubavel explores how societies and cultures deal with and relate to the past. One of the processes he discusses is that of mnemonic bridging; various ways that groups connect the present to the past. This process is evident within the Kurdish nationalist movement. Some activists engage in activities that enforce the *constancy of place* that is “a formidable basis for establishing a strong sense of sameness,”⁶⁹ that can be used to historically justify political aims. In the Kurdish context this is done through the use of language that emphasises unity by alluding to a past unified Kurdish entity. In this way the Kurdish areas are not referred to as Kurdish Iraq or Kurdish Turkey but as portions of

⁶⁶ Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2012),2.

⁶⁷ Michael M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2004),xxv-xxvi.

⁶⁸ Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State*,2.

⁶⁹ Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*,40,41.

Kurdistan. They use compass designations to differentiate between the areas instead of using a country as a prefix or suffix; thus the Kurdish area of Turkey is Northern Kurdistan, Iran is Eastern, Iraq makes up Southern Kurdistan and Syria is referred to as Western Kurdistan. The use of these designations emphasises the unity of the Kurdish and the illegitimacy of the currently recognized borders.

2.3 Kurdish “Minorities” and land:

In *The Emergence of Minorities in The Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (2011) academic Benjamin Thomas White explores the role and development of the concepts of minority and majority. He argues that: “minorities emerged in Syria during the mandate period, as a result of the development of the nation-state form.” This observation can also be applied to many regions of the world. It can be argued, and all too often demonstrated, that the implications of these by-products of nationalism are a major handicap to the stable development of the wider Middle East. As part of his examination White highlights the rapid emergence of the use of the term minority. In the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910-1911) there was no mention of minority but three editions later in 1929 the entry on minority was eleven pages long.⁷⁰

The connection ‘minority’ groups such as the Kurds feel with their identity might sometimes be difficult for those coming from a western background, particularly those belonging to the ‘majority’ or the dominant culture, to understand or fully appreciate. This is due to differences in the way groups understand and view the world. Unlike those coming from a ‘minority’ segment of society, the identity of those from the dominant segment is more or less implicit. This is because their identity is not really threatened or challenged in a way that forces awareness or a more explicit expression of culture. In *Peace By Design* (2009) Dawn Brancati explores different approaches to dealing with ethnic, and regional tensions within countries. Decentralization is the central focus of this book as Brancati explores how it is perceived both as a tool for creating peaceful stability and by others as destructive force. In a European context the examples of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia demonstrate potential repercussions of separatism and ethnic division. In the case of Czechoslovakia the country broke into two peacefully through an act of parliament while the disintegration of Yugoslavia resulted in the bloodiest conflicts in Europe since the Second World War with repercussions still being felt and

⁷⁰ White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, 209, 21; Grew, *Introduction*, 1-14.

with complications to still be worked out.⁷¹ As sectarian and other divisions such as those supporting the government, Kurdish groups, Salafists etc. emerge and strengthen during the civil war the potential for a violent decentralisation becomes a realistic possibility.

The desire to maintain national integrity is a key issue that is preventing the Kurdish question from being dealt with. The National Coalition holds national integrity as one of its principles.⁷² When minority groups express the desire to have freedom or autonomy from mainstream society it can be hard for the dominant culture to understand their desires. When a territory has been firmly affixed as being part of a country it is difficult to think of this area not being part of the country. For example if the French Canadian Province of Quebec had separated from the rest of Canada in the early 1990s it likely would not have affected the day to day lives of most Canadians, yet the idea of it happening would offend many, for this reason numerous government have invested a lot of efforts to encourage Quebec to remain within Canada. In this example Brancati notes that the use of decentralisation, allowing Quebec autonomy and acknowledging historical differences, has been successful in preserving the national integrity of Canada.⁷³

When resources such as oil are added things become even more complicated. The presence of oil in Kurdish areas is at once a blessing and a curse. The Kurdish regional government in Iraq has benefited from access to oil revenues however the presence of oil in al-Jazira as well as fertile soil provides a major disincentive to the Syrian government, or perspective replacements, from allowing autonomy.⁷⁴ Aside from the potential aspirations of the Kurds, Syria already has a couple of territorial losses that first occurred in 1939. As a result of a referendum, that was questionable by Syria, Hatay province was ceded to Turkey. The other loss came as a result of the Six Day War of 1967. During this war Israel occupied the Golan Heights and has done so to this day. This has been a source of political tensions and was often used as a nationalist rallying point by the Governments of Hafiz Assad and his son and

⁷¹ Dawn Brancati, *Peace by Design: Managing Intrastate Conflict through Decentralization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*,109.

⁷² "Syrian Coalition Principles," 1.

⁷³ Brancati, *Peace by Design: Managing Intrastate Conflict through Decentralization*,2-3; Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*,109.

⁷⁴ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*,7.

successor Bashar.⁷⁵ In light of the reaction to these territorial losses it is unlikely that a loss of the Kurdish region would be tolerated.

National integrity is a concern for many, there is something pleasing about large nations. Members of the majority who accept a certain national identity feel a sense of belonging, and are shocked or scared by those expressing desires for not being a part of the group - why do these people want to disrupt the status-quo. Many stable countries such as Belgium, Canada and the United Kingdom have been confronted with these issues. Underlying each of these examples are linguistic and historic differences. Despite its age nationalism is a very strong concept. Even if nationalism and the idea of countries are creations and in a constant state of change as factors like immigration and emigration and new generations alter national realities, people have a connection to a fixed idealized image of their country.⁷⁶

Looking at decentralisation in a Kurdish context when asked about the future of Syria in light of the civil war Rosh Abdelfata, a Kurdish Film Maker and activist who now lives in Rotterdam, responded in a way that reflected the strength of Kurdish nationalist sentiments. In response to the question: are Kurds in Syria more interested in remaining a part of Syria and gaining more rights or are they looking for independence? He responded that to be Syrian is not as important; Syria is maybe 100 years old while Kurdish identity goes back 6000 years. Naturally Rosh was referring to historical cultural traditions of Kurdistan and not in the modern nationalistic sense. Rosh then stated that if people are happier separated that might be the best solution so why not. For Rosh having a Kurdish state might be ideal but it is more important to have work, rights, security, and safety basically a normal life being accepted for who you are.⁷⁷

2.4 Historiography of the Kurds:

David McDowall's *A Modern History of the Kurds* (revised third edition 2007) is one of the most comprehensive monographs on Kurdish history. In this book McDowall primarily focuses on Turkish and Iraqi Kurds. He particularly pays attention to the period between the First and the Second World Wars, the formative period of nationalism in the Middle East. This was also the greatest opportunity for the Kurds to have achieved statehood. While for practical

⁷⁵ Roberta Micallef, "Hatay Joins the Motherland," in *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East*, ed. Inga Brandell (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006), 141-158.

⁷⁶ Mario Carretero, "Historical Representations and Conflicts about Indigenous People as National Identities," *Culture & Psychology* 17, no. 2 (June 23 2011, 2011): 177-195, <http://cap.sagepub.com/content/17/2/177> (accessed December 11 2012).

⁷⁷ MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*.

reasons McDowall largely focused on Turkish and Iraqi Kurds, as they have larger populations and were the most active, he also includes an appendix section on Syrian Kurds.⁷⁸

Recent monographs emerging in the first decade of the 2000s by Kerim Yildiz, Jordi Tejel, and Harriet Montgomery have attempted to address the gaps in the historiography and are among the first major efforts to examine Syrian Kurds. Each of these monographs begin with the historical context of the Syrian Kurds then address more recent concerns and issues facing them, as well as regional interactions and influences. The historiography of the Syrian Kurds does not seem to have any explicit or glaring arguments between the recent historiography of the Syrian Kurds. The works tend to complement each other and only contradict each other in minor ways relating to the number of Kurdish political parties or demographic figures that may change depending upon how up to date and which data is used. The underlying debates revolve around the extent that different Kurdish groups aspire to creating an autonomous Kurdish state in Syria or if they are still focused to movements abroad, in particular in Turkey and Iraq.

Additionally, by focusing on Syrian Kurds Harriet Montgomery, Jordi Tejel and Kerim Yildiz are challenging the notion that the Syrian Kurds have not played a large role in general Kurdish history or have a history of their own. The notion of their marginality has been prevalent in historiography of the Kurds and amongst the rulers of Syria and even Kurdish leaders.⁷⁹ The population of Syrian Kurds, around 1.5 to 2 million is seen as fairly insignificant when one considers that as of 2007 around 24-27 million Kurds live in the middle east mostly in Turkey and Iraq.⁸⁰ While it would be naïve to think that the role the Syrian Kurds played in the struggles in these countries made the difference or that their plight within Syria was somehow worse, but their small population should not exempt them from study and condemn them merely to the role of the supporting cast in the appendix section of larger monographs. Moreover, Kurds constitute a majority in the province of Hassake and sizable minorities in adjacent areas. Two issues have hampered more in depth writings on the Syrian Kurds. The first is the difficulty in accessing the information and the second is the urgency and attention of the conflicts between the

⁷⁸ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, xi.

⁷⁹ Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied*, 134, 135.

⁸⁰ *Report: Kurds in Syria: Group at Risk and Reactions Against Political Activists*, 5; "Kurds, Profile." Minority Rights Group, www.minorityrights.org/5270/syria/kurds.html (accessed January 3, 2013); David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3.

governments of Turkish and Iraqi and their respective Kurdish groups. That has meant these populations attract more attention.⁸¹

In their recent monographs on Syrian Kurds historians Jordi Tejel, Kerim Yildiz and Harriet Montgomery utilize similar timelines, beginning with the mandate period, or briefly before, and advancing in time through the Arab nationalist period of instability and the manufacture of Syrian Identity through the decades of Hafiz al –Assad’s rule and the transition to that of his son Bashar. By analyzing these three monographs one can distil five major events for the development of a popular opposition in Syria prior to the Arab Spring: The mandate and foundation period; Islamist revolt of the late 1970s and early 1980s; Hafiz’s death and the Damascus Spring in 2000-2001; the 2003 American Invasion of Iraq; and the Qamishli Revolt of 2004.

A similar timeline can be made by focusing on the important factors that affected the Kurdish relationship with progressive Syrian governments: The Mandate period; Independence; the United Arab Republic, an Arabist Union between Syria and Egypt lasting from 1958 to 1961 that saw a major de-legitimization of Kurdish identity; the 1962 Hasakah Census; the process Arabization and Arab belt project which were designed to dilute the Kurdish population in the al Jazira region; Hafiz al- Assad’s rule which saw the externalization and utilization of Kurdish nationalism against Syria’s neighbours by supporting the Partiya Karkari Kurdistan (PKK) in Turkey and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq;⁸² Hama Uprising where Kurdish soldiers were used which further sullied their reputation in Syria⁸³; the Damascus Spring; the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, the inspiration that came out of the creation of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq and the role Kurds are playing in the future of that state; and the 2004 Qamishli incident, which helped solidify active Kurdish resistance seeing Kurdish parties actively demonstrating for the Kurdish rights on an ongoing basis. Tejel and the others suggest that the incident was sized upon by the Yekîfî and the PYD as a turning point.

⁸¹ Ibid.; Mustafa Nazdar, "The Kurds in Syria," in *People without a Country*, ed. Gerard Chaliand, trans. Michael Pallis (London: Zed Press, 1980),211-219.

⁸² Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied*,138-139; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*,73-75; Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*,58-59.

⁸³ Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*,67.

3.0 Western Kurds before the Crisis:

3.1 Kurdish distribution in Syria:

In the public imagination Kurds are often associated with mountainous regions, while this is especially true in the Kurdish region in Turkey it is not the case in Syria. The area where they live in Syria is more open. When describing the Kurdish community in Syria, Rosh Abdelfatah, a Kurd from a village near Hasaka in northern Syria described one of the defining differences between Kurds of Syria and the other Kurds is that the landscape is much flatter and there are no mountains for them to hide in or to retreat into in times of war. In Rosh's opinion this contributed to the more non-violent approach taken in their struggle. Instead of guns and RPGs their primary weapons were culture, singing and language. In Turkey and Iraq where open warfare has been fought in efforts to secure or defend their existence the mountains have become a necessary shelter and an integral part of their identity and military strategy. The lack of mountains to retreat to may be one factor that has kept Syria's Kurds from pursuing a violent struggle.⁸⁴

In Syria, Kurdish populations are generally dispersed in the countryside near the Turkish border and the northern Iraqi border. The main populated area is the northern governate of al-Hasaka. It is in this area, often referred to as al-Jazira that the cities of Qamishli, Hasaka and Ras al Ayn (Sarî Kaniyê) are to be found. Qamishli and Hasaka have figured in the Kurdish struggle in Syria since the mandate period and Sarî Kaniyê was the geographic starting point of the Arab Belt that would stretch from there to the Iraqi border in the west. The Arab belt was a project by the Syrian government to create an Arab buffer between the Turkish and Syrian Kurdish populations. In spite of the potential for protests suggested by the region's recent history such as: tentative mobilization during Damascus Spring and the 2004 Qamishli incident, the region has remained fairly orderly and calm during early days of the Arab Spring. Violence did not really come to the area until the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013 when Sarî Kaniyê was the scene of fighting between Kurdish and FSA that have militias with Jihadist overtones.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*.

⁸⁵ "Assault on Ras Al-Ayn." http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Assault_on_Ras_Al-Ayn (accessed May 13, 2013); MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*; Omar and Kinda Kanbar Hossino, "How Michel Kilo Negotiated a Tenuous Truce in

The legacy of the Arab Belt policy is still felt within the Kurdish area in North Eastern Syria and is likely to be a major hurdle to overcome in the consolidation of Kurdish territory that could lead to very ugly violence. In 1965 plans were drawn up to create a buffer zone between the Kurds of Syria and the Kurds of Turkey. This area would be filled with Arab settlers. Prior to this project the region was not solely populated by Kurds, there were Bedouin Arabs as well as Arab Christians. The interwar period saw more diversity come to the region as more Kurds fled Turkey after 1925 and were followed by ethnic Armenians, and in 1933 Assyrians arrived from Iraq. With its fertile soil the region became fairly attractive as the previously nomadic Bedouins and Kurds were encouraged to shift towards a sedentary lifestyle during the mandate period.⁸⁶

The initial plan sought to create a strip of settlement starting from the North East corner of Syria to the city of Ras al- Ayn (Sarî Kaniyê). It was to be 375 km long and 10 to 15km wide. If the Arab cordon had been completed it would have disposed 140,000 Kurds from 332 villages. The project was not implemented until 1973 when the construction of the Tabqa Dam project began to create Lake Assad. 40 villages were built in the Arab belt to house the Arab families who were displaced as a result of the flooding. The new villages were mainly constructed "between the two Kurdish cities of Amuda and Derik. Initially seven thousand Arab were moved in, but they were later followed by more. Even though Assad ended the policy in 1976 a total of 30,000 Kurds were displaced losing their homes and their lands. The Arab families were allowed to remain."⁸⁷

This is now an area of concern in Syria as the PYD and other Kurdish groups consolidate control over the area. There is the question of what to do about the Arab residents; and more concerning how will the former owners of the houses react. When asked about this issue Jeff Ruigendijk, a photographer who recently spent time in the affected Kurdish area says that the PYD and TEV DEM, a social movement based around PKK philosophy, forces who are in control of the area have come up with a solution to the problem where the Arab owners keep the majority of the property while the displaced and newly returned Kurds would be returned only a small percentage of their former property. While Ruigendijk is not convinced if that

Ras Al Ayn," Syria Deeply, beta, <http://beta.syriadeeply.org/2013/03/michel-kilo-negotiated-tenuous-truce-ras-al-ayn/#.UT4cxFe6yTL> (accessed 3/10, 2013); Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied*, 90.

⁸⁶ Norman N. Lewis, "The Frontier of Settlement in Syria, 1800-1950," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 31, no. 1 (January 1955, 1955),59-60.

⁸⁷ Jamal Jalal Abdulla, *The Kurds: A Nation on the Way to Statehood* (Bloomington: Author House, 2012),290.

proposal would work-out he said that there was no talk of violence or plans to kick out the Arabs. Never the less numerous Arab families have left just due to that potential.⁸⁸

Kurdish populations are not restricted to Syria's northern cities, and rural areas. For centuries Damascus and Aleppo have had Kurdish districts. Prior to the crisis older Kurdish populations here have been supplemented in recent decades by Kurds leaving al Jazira and the areas north of Aleppo, around Efrin, in search of further education and importantly employment opportunities, for this reason there are Kurdish forces fighting to protect Aleppo.⁸⁹ In addition to the restrictions on citizenship, legal status and rights of Kurds, Kurdish areas tend to be underdeveloped. They lack universities or technical schools. This has resulted in Kurds leaving Kurdish areas for the cities or leaving Syria all together. Un-employment and lack of opportunities has meant that in order to survive, some of the more restricted members of the Kurdish society have turned to smuggling and other quasi legal activities in the border region.⁹⁰ Virtually the only decent paying job Kurds can get is in the Syrian Military, they are however generally restricted to the lower ranks.⁹¹

The martial heritage of the Kurds dates back to at least the crusades when the first communities of Kurds established themselves in Aleppo and Damascus. Kurdish employment in the military comes with its own set of problems. Depending on who they cooperate with, the Kurds risk tarnishing their image as they have worked for the occupying French mandate forces in the 1920s and the large amount of Kurds serving in the Syrian army can be interpreted as support for the regime. This perception does not take employment issues faced by the Kurds into account. Due to legal restrictions on their citizenship Kurds have to seize the employment opportunities they can. Kurdish units and other minority units have been used in operations to quell uprising as was the case during the Great Revolt of 1925 when Kurds from western Syria,

⁸⁸ MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*; Jeff Ruigendijk, "TEV- DEM," ruigphotography, <http://www.ruigphotography.com/TEV-DEM-Syrian-Kurdistan-PYD> (accessed April 19, 2013); *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle* (Brussels: International Crisis Group,[2013y]), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/13-6-syrias-kurds-a-struggle-within-a-struggle.pdf>.

⁸⁹ "Search Results for Aleppo: Various News Stories," Kurdpress, <http://www.kurdpress.com/En/NSite/Information/?Info=5&Search=7e3ee389ba735ce4> (accessed June 25, 2013).

⁹⁰ Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*10,11,68; MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*; MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*.

⁹¹ Starr, *Revolt in Syria : Eye-Witness to the Uprising*,35; Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*,104.

Kurd Dagh area, assisted the French forces to regain stability. More recently Kurdish units were used during Hafiz Assad's campaign to silence the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in the 1980s.⁹²

3.2 Western Kurdish Nationalism in Mandate Period Syria:

Kurds in Syria have historic ties to Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, as do many of the region's minorities. Prior to the modern borders of the Middle East being drawn up during the interwar period there was more freedom to move between different regions within Kurdistan, (the land of the Kurds within the Ottoman Empire, not an independent state). The Kurds like some other ethnic groups in the Middle East were organized along tribal and clan lines with some living nomadic or semi nomadic lifestyles. As nation states began to emerge in the Middle East Kurdish Nationalism developed in response. Kurdish nationalism served as a counter to restrictions placed upon their own expressions of identity and political rights as a 'nation'. The potential for a Kurdish state that the Treaty of Sèvres indicated solidified in the hearts and minds of many Kurds.⁹³

Through a series of treaties including the Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916) , The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) the First World War changed the makeup of the region, not only what it looked like on a map but the demographic and economic realities on the ground.⁹⁴ As the Mandate powers and the new state of Turkey began to enforce borders the way of life for the Kurds changed. Under Ottoman rule there was hardly any border between Kurdish regions, the creation of the border contributed to making Kurds give up their semi nomadic life style. With the enforcement of the border between mandate Syria and Kemalist Turkey, Kurdish enclaves on the Syrian side were isolated from areas where seasonal migration had traditionally occurred. The creation of the border primarily affected the North East al-Jaseria region of Syria. It cut off the Jarablus region from, the now Turkish, Umar, Mardin, Nusaybin and Urfa regions. (See map on page 80)

Along with these changes the French administration during the mandate period encouraged the Kurds to switch to a sedentary lifestyle, encouraging the agricultural redevelopment of Jazira. As part of these efforts they established Qamishli and Hasaka as the main economic and administrative hubs. These cities also served as replacement markets for

⁹² Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 12.

⁹³ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*.

⁹⁴ James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 2nd ed. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

those rendered inaccessible because of the border.⁹⁵ The city of Qamishli is a bisected city as the international border between Syria and Turkey cuts through it. There are numerous towns in Northern Syria that are divided by the Turkish Border including Sarî Kaniyê.

When discussing the mandate period Benjamin Thomas White argues that the French merely institutionalized difference. The dynamics of minority and majority had developed through the structure of the state system and efforts of Syrians to control their territory creating their identity. The French used this fruit of nationalism in order to justify their presence as the only thing keeping order in Syria and presenting themselves as the protectors of the Christian minorities. With this justification they used the concerns of the Christian and Kurdish minorities who were the main inhabitants of the al Jazira as a way to strengthen their hold, and appealing to their concerns. This does not mean that the French supported Kurdish separatism or that the region was stable.⁹⁶

A number of factors have led to a slower development of a political Kurdish identity in Syria. These factors include repressive government policies and demographic pressures such as the rural urban split and tribal differences. Robert Lowe argues that these factors contributed to a weaker presence of ethno-political thinking in the Kurdish areas of Syria compared to what was going on in Turkey or the British Mandate in Iraq.⁹⁷ These pre-existing divisions and barriers to Kurdish unity were exacerbated by developments following the Mandate period and during the early years of Syrian independence. As a result of nationalistic activities in Syria and in Turkey the Kurds were identified as a threat to national unity or integrity. This perception resulted in a number of restrictive laws against cultural expression being implemented.⁹⁸

Since the Mandate Period those ruling Syria have used Kurdish interests in order to further their own aims. The impact of the manipulation of Kurdish desires can be seen to this day. During the Current Crisis many Kurdish groups are highly skeptical of the intentions and sincerity of opposition groups desires to incorporate Kurds in their vision for a new Syria. The French used the Kurds as a counterforce and to some extent a buffer against Turkish nationalism. The carving up of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of new borders resulted in

⁹⁵ Nelida Fuccaro, "Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture and Identity," in *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, ed. Abbas Vali (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers Inc, 2003),193-194.

⁹⁶ White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East : The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*,210,43,76,107.

⁹⁷ Robert Lowe, "Kurdish Nationalism in Syria," in *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, eds. Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publisher, 2007),289.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

the creation of new countries. Kurdish history in Syria was impacted by nationalist movement in Turkey; Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey; the independence movement in Syria and their relationship with the French mandate authorities. In this climate Syria's Kurds began to become conscious of their own identity that was developing in response to the realities around them. The French rulers saw the Kurds location in between as a useful buffer for the border region.⁹⁹

An interesting relationship developed between French Mandate authorities and the Kurds of Syria. The nationalistic aspirations of the Kurds in Syria were seen as potentially threatening but potentially valuable if managed properly. The French sought to capitalize on Kurdish opposition to the Turkish nationalism. Despite official French policy favored the national integrity of Mandate Syria, French officials encouraged the development of Kurdish national Identity. Two officials: Pierre Rondot and Roger Lescot in an early effort of image management took great interest in Kurdish affairs and worked on the western media to tame the image of Kurds. They attempted to frame Kurdish identity in a way that made them more palatable to a westernized audience. Another official Captain Pierre Terrier fostered the idea of a Kurdish State by encouraging Kurds to increase their population in al Jazira.¹⁰⁰

Captain Terrier, an attaché to the Political cabinet of the High Commission and a French Intelligence Service officer encouraged Kurds to concentrate on the area of Jazira suggesting that if they were to consolidate and strengthen the Kurdish presence in this region the establishment of an autonomous region would become a more likely option. This encouraged some Kurds in the North East of Syria to pursue plans of autonomy until the 1930s. At this time the collaboration between the Kurds was winding down in favor of a closer relationship with Syrian nationalists. The 1936 Franco-Syrian Treaty would end the cooperation between the Kurds and the French.¹⁰¹

Kurdish Nationalist efforts in Syria were largely pursued in non-violent fashion. These efforts were typically oriented towards increasing the sense of a unified Kurdish identity, often through cultural means, and oriented outside of Syria. One of the Turkish influenced and oriented movements that became active in Syria was the Khoybun (be yourself) league. In 1932 the Khoybun League along with the Badir Khan Brothers consciously attempted to develop a

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East : The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*,107; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*,23-30.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.; Fuccaro, *Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture and Identity*, 191-192.

Kurdish culture in Syria. This was to be done by informing the community of language and history through *The Hawar*, (*The Calling* 1932-1943) and *The Roja Nû*, (*New Day*, 1943-1946). The monthly publication of *The Hawar* contributed greatly to the standardization and modernization of the Kurdish language.¹⁰²

The cultural impact of *Hawar* was not a coincidence; it was intentionally designed to provide a space for the exploration of cultural, linguistic and social issues. It was a highbrow cultural exercise intended to stir an awakening in Kurdish written culture. This would be achieved by producing teaching material in Kurdish. In *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism* Nelida Fuccaro states that among the greatest achievements of the *Hawar* was the transliteration efforts that resulted in the Kurmanji dialect, in the Latin script.¹⁰³

By providing a platform for expression, uniform language and presenting shared cultural memories the promoters of *Hawar*, including its owner Jeladet Bedir Khan, hoped to decrease the differences between urban and rural Kurds as well as the tribalism that was holding back greater unity.¹⁰⁴ The *Hawar* provided a space for a national identity to develop. This written expression allowed a greater engagement with identity and a contemplation of what being Kurdish means. When thoughts are written instead of merely being spoken they can develop further, there is greater cognitive activity in the production and consumption of such material. Written expressions have another advantage; providing enough people are literate, magazines are an inexpensive way to transmit messages and ideas to a wide audience. Official language laws inhibited these efforts as French and Arabic were the only languages taught in schools.¹⁰⁵

The internet provides similar opportunities today and has largely taken over this role. Websites like *Alliance for Kurdish Rights* and *Rudaw* provide platforms where Trans-Kurdish, reflecting the wider unity that stretches across regional borders and includes the diaspora communities around the globe, identity can be explored, promoted and discussed. Books written in Kurdish are still very important tools of cultural identity that contribute to the sense of a unified identity amongst the Kurds. The books may be set in a part of Kurdistan that the reader

¹⁰² Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 22-23; White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East : The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, 115.

¹⁰³ Fuccaro, *Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture and Identity*, 207; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 22-23.

¹⁰⁴ Fuccaro, *Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture and Identity*, 208.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 26, 27

may never get to but they feel connected to it as if they have been there, which stokes the hope for an opportunity to visit these places someday.¹⁰⁶

Despite efforts such as those by the Bedir Khan Brothers and their publication the *Hawar*, the Kurds in Syrian still remained fairly divided. After the *Hawar* ceased publication in 1943 the Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria became more sedated and placed more focus on daily struggles. Beginning in this period the Kurds increasingly became subjects of suspicion and persecution. Kurdish expressions of a separate identity were interpreted as their having an anti-Arab stance. Government efforts to counter this threat such as banning the use of Kurdish language were able to successfully limit the ability of Kurds to develop wider ethno-political connections throughout Syria.¹⁰⁷

3.3 The impact of Syrian Nationalism after Gaining Independence:

Syria as a new entity, upon gaining independence from French Mandate rule in 1946, initially had no Syrian national history to draw upon as no state with the same borders had previously existed. This issue was soon corrected through efforts to weaken autonomous identities of the different communities in Syria and build a unified Syrian identity. Such an identity had begun to develop during the mandate period however the new Syrian government was fairly unstable and experienced numerous changes of leadership including the short lived union with Egypt known as the United Arab Republic.¹⁰⁸ This new political entity was populated by many religious minorities which would likely be the source of tensions if the new countries identity was to be based upon any particular religious affiliation. Part of the efforts to stabilize the new nation was to unite it around a common identity. Syria's religious diversity could produces tensions if the unifying identity was based around religion. The majority of the population did have one thing in common, an Arab ethnicity. This common factor offered the leaders of this new country with the highest potential for the integration of the different communities. The Arab identity had the possibility to transcended religious differences and to offer a common non problematic focal point. Similar to the way Turkey's population was united through a supposed Turkish identity, the leaders sought to unite Syrian under a 'common' Arab

¹⁰⁶ MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*.

¹⁰⁷ Fuccaro, *Kurds and Kurdish Nationalism in Mandatory Syria: Politics, Culture and Identity*, 207; Nazdar, *The Kurds in Syria*, 215,216.

¹⁰⁸ Tetz Rooke, "Tracing the Boundaries: From Colonial Dream to National Propaganda in State Frontiers," in *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East*, ed. Inga Brandell (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006),129; Moshe Ma'oz, "The Emergence of Modern Syria," in *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, eds. Moshe Ma'oz and Avner Yaniv (Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986),10-21.

identity as citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic. Unfortunately for the Kurds this did not reflect their identity which was in fact seen as a threat particularly by individuals like Hasaka Police Lieutenant Muhammad Talab Hilal.¹⁰⁹

Increased marginalization of the Kurds began 1963 with the Ba'ath party publication written by Mohamed Talib Hilal. In it he stated that the Kurds were a people with no history. In this publication Police Lieutenant Hilal went so far as to outline a twelve point plan to deal with the "Kurdish threat". When Hilal drew up a plan for dealing with the Kurds there was the perception at the time that the majority of Kurds were of Turkish origin due to an influx of Turkish Kurds who fled the country following the failed 1925 Shaykh Sa'id Rebellion.¹¹⁰ In his twelve points Hilal encouraged the government to make the Kurds an insecure, at risk group by excluding the Kurds from society and depriving them language rights, education, employment opportunities and their land. The fifth point of his plan was to launch an anti-Kurdish propaganda campaign in order to negatively brand them amongst the Arab people. While not officially enacted, elements of his twelve-point plan can be seen in policies that were later implemented by governments and can be seen as inspiration for various policies of Hafiz Assad's Government, most noticeably the 1973 implementation of the Arab Belt plan which saw Kurds having their farms and houses confiscated and given to Arab settlers displaced by the Tabqa Dam project. The lack of post-secondary education, limited job opportunities, and the inability of Kurds to buy, sell or own property as a result of the 1962 census can trace back to Hilal's twelve- point plan for inspiration.¹¹¹

3.4 Western Kurdish Parties: Barriers to Kurdish Unity in Syria:

A long term issue for the Kurds of Syria has been their tendency towards division. This has roots prior to the mandate period when the Kurds of Syria were split between rural and urban populations as well as along tribal lines. Pressures on the community by Syrian government policies likely contributed to the underlying potential for division. Even in countries with developed open civil societies, party politics can be messy affairs. Leadership struggles,

¹⁰⁹ Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied* 37,39; Lundgren, *Defending through Violation: Ankara's Contradictory Strategies Over the Turkish-Iraqi Border*,105; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*,60-62.

¹¹⁰ Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 196-197; Nazdar, *The Kurds in Syria*,216-217.

¹¹¹ Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied*,45-46; Internal displacement monitoring centre, *Syria a Full-Scale Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis with no Solutions in Sight*,5-6.

internal cliques and differences of opinion can be found in parties all over the world from, Julia Gillard plotting to usurp the Prime Minister position from Kevin Rudd, and vice versa, in Australia to the impact of the Tea Party movement on the Republican Party in the United States; these clefs go hand in hand with politics.¹¹² Kurdish politics in Syria are not distinct in this sense, where they differ is the outcome of these differences of opinion. When there are disagreements a new party is formed, the parties lack depth instead of having room for a variety of opinions in a party new parties are formed. Despite being illegal, and representatives of an oppressed minority group, there are an extraordinary number of Kurdish political parties in Syria. Differences of opinion have often resulted in the creation of new parties. According to Jordie Tejel, in 2007 there were thirteen parties as a result of this process. This is an incredible number of parties when one considers that the Kurdish population in Syria is around 1.5 million. At that time the political parties had organized into three blocs according to their affiliations, the only party to remain completely separate was the Democratic Union Party or the PYD.¹¹³

The geographical position of Syria's Kurdish area between Turkey and Iraq is also reflected in their politics. Since the 1980s and 1990s the presence of the Kurdish nationalist movements from Turkey and Iraq has divided the approach to the Kurdish question in Syria. The divisions amongst the parties have prevented a constructive and organized response to the various discriminatory actions against the Kurds. As many observers have noted, the rivalry between different Kurdish parties has been their own enemy preventing them from making gains that could have been achieved if their efforts were not split between competing with each other as well as the government.¹¹⁴ Syrian Kurds tendency towards fragmentation has handicapped initial efforts to organize a political identity and has been a hindrance to political parties since the 1957 creation of the Kurdish Democratic Party. Kurdish nationalism is both repressed and created in response to Arab nationalism.¹¹⁵ "The main spur to the creation of the Kurdish cultural and political movement" was in response to the Arab nationalism during the UAR period. Following in the tracks of the Kurds in Iraq the Syrian Kurds formed the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria in 1957. With this party the Kurds of Syria attempted to participate in

¹¹² The Associated Press, "Kevin Rudd Becomes Australian PM After Gillard Resigns," CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2013/06/26/australia-julia-gillard-party-vote-ousted.html> (accessed June 27, 2013).

¹¹³ Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 87.

¹¹⁴ Fred H. Lawson, *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi [etc.], 2009), 105-106; Bradost Azizi, "Divisions Plague Kurdish Opposition Groups in Syria," Rudaw, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/08052013?keyword=aleppo> (accessed May 8, 2013).

¹¹⁵ Lowe, *Kurdish Nationalism in Syria*, 288.

domestic politics such as striving for cultural rights but nationalistic efforts were not really developed and more focused externally.¹¹⁶

Robert Lowe observes that Syrian Kurds do not have a unique identity of their own; he argues that instead they have taken on Kurdish identities from other parts of Kurdistan. Or as the Syrian government would interpret, their weak national identity is a proof they have been accepted within Syrian society and been integrated. This is partly true but for many other Kurds it is most definitely not the case. It is more likely that as Jordie Tejel suggests in Syria's *Kurds* (2009) that most Syrian Kurds have opted for a "strategy of 'dissimulation', cultivating internally the forms of identity that challenge the official ideology." In this way they are not merely passive victims of the regime they are secretly rebelling while doing what is necessary to exist in Syrian society.¹¹⁷

While the factors described earlier, and cited by Lowe may have hindered mobilization and awareness of a Western Kurdish identity it would be incorrect to say these factors prevented the establishment of one altogether. A unified Western Kurdish identity may have been weakened by demographic factors such as: policies of the Syrian government, regional and tribal differences and the strong identity of their neighbours, however I would argue that their identity is still existent. For Western Kurds the issue prior to the 2000s has been the lack of efforts to present or represent this version of Kurdishness. Kurds here were more focused on gaining rights and recognition. Most of the discourse surrounding the issue of a Kurdish nation has focused on the efforts in Turkey and Iraq.

Radwan Ziadeh's analysis of the Kurdish opposition within Syria in an April 2009 report for the United States Institute of Peace, reflects these realities. Ziadeh examined the extent of Western Kurd's regional ties and the general ambitions of this divided group. He suggests that "strikingly, given more than half a century of marginalization and deprivation of civic rights," a majority of respondents to a question regarding Kurdish secession rejected the idea. Some may be tempted to criticise the validity of this analysis due to the small number of participants in the survey. But many of the active Kurdish parties including the Yekîfî party had not been pursuing secessionist goals, rather they had been focused on recognition of their national identity within the Syrian state. While this may be the case, article VII of *The Political*

¹¹⁶ Robert Lowe, "The Serhildan and the Kurdish National Story in Syria," in *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, eds. Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (London: Chatham House, 2010),164.

¹¹⁷ Lowe, *Kurdish Nationalism in Syria*, 288; Lowe, *The Serhildan and the Kurdish National Story in Syria*,162; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*,82-84.

Programme 2009 references Yekîti's allegiances with the wider Kurdish Liberation Movement, the party may be operating within the domain of a Syrian party but it still supports the wider struggle of Kurds. In light of this article it is not surprising that the actions Yekîti are viewed with some suspicion by other, not specifically Kurdish, Syrian opposition groups.¹¹⁸

3.5 The Impact of Qamishli:

Since the Qamishli incident two parties have dominated Kurdish political landscape; The United Party of Kurdistan or Yekiti Party was the first of these dominant parties to be founded. It was founded in 1999. Reflecting its cultural rights focus one of its main objectives early on was to have Kurdish established as the official language in areas that were populated mostly by Kurds. Yekiti like The Democratic Union Party (PYD) party founded in 2003 were oriented a lot more towards activism than previous Kurdish parties, which signalled a gradual shift from background pushes for change to a more visible form of political interaction. The emergence of this type of party signalled a renewal of Kurdish political activity within Syria. As Syrian society became more open in the later years of Hafiz Al Assad's rule the Kurdish struggle for liberation, recognition or autonomy has recently been re-ignited after fizzling out after losing the intensity that early movements had during the mandate period and after Syria gained independence. For example in 2002 Yekiti organized a sit-in in front of the Syrian parliament calling for the recognition of the Kurdish minority in Syria and the removal of the ban on the use of the Kurdish language.¹¹⁹ With the development of the Yekiti party and others in the 1990s Syrian Kurds started to promote their identity, picking up on key events in their history and commemorating them thus enforcing a sense of identity.¹²⁰

A few years after the PKK official relationship with the Syrian government ended a new Kurdish party was founded, The Democratic Union Party or PYD. The Lineage of the PYD can be traced back to the PKK; the party emerged on to the Western Kurd political scene in 2003 joining the numerous previously existing parties. Many of the members of the PYD had previously been members of the PKK or supported it prior to its expulsion in 1998. Despite its

¹¹⁸ Radwan, *The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?*; Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria, "'Article VII : Functions of the Party at the General National Level :'" *The Political Programme 2009*, trans. Yekiti-Party "Ahmed Ali"; Yekiti-Party, www.yekiti-party.org/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=37&Itemid=54 (accessed January, 2013).

¹¹⁹ Abdulla, *The Kurds: A Nation on the Way to Statehood*, 293-295.

¹²⁰ Julie Gauthier, "The 2004 Events in Al- Qamishli: Has the Kurdish Question Erupted in Syria?" in *Demystifying Syria*, ed. Fred H. Lawson, trans. Diana V. Galbraith (London: London Middle East Institute at SOAS, 2009), 106.

recent emergence and the illegal nature of political parties outside of the Ba'ath structure, let alone Kurdish parties, it soon became quite powerful.¹²¹

The PYD along with the Yekiti Party were the main parties involved in organizing further and sustained symbolic demonstrations following Qamishli. The protests and demonstrations that occurred in the months after the initial Qamishli incident were part of a growing effort by the Kurdish parties to use symbolic days such as United Nations Children's Day and anniversaries of tragedies like the Halabja massacre in Iraq or the 1960 Amude movie theater fire that killed at least 300 Kurds - many children, as rallying points to amass large numbers of people and draw attention to the Kurdish issue. Days such as International Children's Day or other internationally recognized human rights related days were selected as they allowed the call for rights by Kurds to be contextualized within a larger international framework of human rights and thus diffusing the potential perceived threat of Kurds calling for rights.¹²²

For historical reasons the main Kurdish opposition in Syria have a lot of connections to Kurds in Turkey (Northern Kurdistan) and Iraq (Southern Kurdistan). These connections remain from the years of Syrian government tolerated support, and from the wider sense of Kurdish solidarity. The alignment of Kurdish parties is reflective of these influences. The International Crisis Group's report titled *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within A Struggle* (2013) documents this ideological breakdown of Syria Kurdish Parties and analyses the tensions between the two spheres of influence namely between the Kurdish National Council (KNC) gaining its influence from Masoud Barzani in Iraq and the Abdullah Öcalan inspired PYD models. The territorial status within the country is developing similarly to the way the Kurdish autonomous region developed in Iraq and with political organization very much along the Öcalan's ideological lines.¹²³

Since the crisis in Syria the various Kurdish parties have organized into different coalitions, some have formed an alliance in order to offset the more powerful and more organized PYD. Other Kurdish parties have been struggling to catch up and on a number of occasions have expressed concerns about the PYD. There have been numerous reports of arrest of other Kurds by the PYD and some of these groups see it as bad as Assad's forces. Since the beginning of the crisis Al Jaziera has come increasingly under the control of the PYD who have implemented their Öcalan influenced system of government organization. Any

¹²¹ *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, 1-42.

¹²² Lowe, *The Serhildan and the Kurdish National Story in Syria*, 165.

¹²³ *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, 1-42.

chances of distinctly Syrian Kurdish voice developing and being heard have largely been strangled by the propaganda machine of the PYD. ¹²⁴

¹²⁴ MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam.*

4.0 A regional shift:

Inevitably the history of Syria's Kurds has been intertwined with that of the Syrian Arab Republic and the wider Kurdish struggle. Without including aspects of Syrian history and its relations with the countries around it is not possible to understand the issues faced by Syria's Kurds. Initially the connections between the Kurds who found themselves divided between the new states of Turkey, Iraq and Syria were weakened by the enforcement of these new national borders, and the attempt by the states to consolidate national identities that excluded Kurds. Interestingly in later years, the Syrian government would encourage Kurds in Syria to participate in Kurdish nationalist activities in Turkey and later in Iraq. As a result Syrian Kurds trans-border ties were promoted and encouraged. This chapter will examine the development of Syrian, or Western Kurdish identity and the direct ties between Syria's Kurds and those in the neighbouring countries. The aim of this exercise is to analyse what impact developments amongst these groups had on the Kurds of Syria. For this reason the history of Kurds in Turkey or Iraq will not be comprehensively presented here, merely the developments that have a direct impact on Syria's Kurds.

4.1 The Damascus Spring: Hafiz's Death:

The current situation in Syria may not have been inevitable, however, with an examination of the last decade of the country's history it is possible to see, with the assistance of hindsight, events that brought the country to the point it is at today. This is why Carsten Wieland titled his recent book *Syria a Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring* (2012). In this book Wieland notes the numerous squandered opportunities that the regime had to reform Syria which may have avoided the situation that exists today.¹²⁵ The 2011 protests were not the first expressions of opposition Bashar al Assad had to deal with. The death of his father, Hafiz, prompted another period of political mobilization and renewal known as the Damascus Spring, which can be looked at as a prototype of the current protests. Prior to his inauguration in 2000, opposition forces seized the opportunity

¹²⁵ Wieland, *Syria A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*.

presented by Bashar's image and reputation as a reform minded individual. This transition period provided the opportunity for intellectuals and activists to bring their desires that had been shared privately for years into the public sphere.¹²⁶

The activists who attempted to establish a working civil society during The Damascus Spring produced two key documents; the 27 of September *Statement of 99* and *The Statement of 1,000* released a few months later. Both of these documents highlighted the desires for political and social reform of the country. These documents called for reforms such as the repeal of the Emergency Law, democratization and opening up of society by releasing political prisoners and the removal of restrictive censorship laws and the Spector of state control. These demands were presented within the frame work of modernisation and National Unity. Key to their desires was the Syrian people actively taking part in society through open elections, freedom of the press and respect.¹²⁷

Initially Bashar al Assad had sought to implement reforms to Syrian society and politics. His efforts were restrained by hardliners in the government and by 2001 the opposition had been arrested and suppressed. Once again these groups retreated from public life. Bashar dealt with these challenges in a restrained manner when compared to the way his father dealt with previous challenges or the way he would in 2011. In 1982 Hafiz ordered the razing of Hama in order to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood. Bashar's less violent approach in 2001 successfully derailed civil society movement. This was achieved through arrests and the implementation of restrictive bureaucratic procedures such as the order requiring forums to gain permission from the Ministry of Social Affairs. This resulted in the closing of the civil society forum where ideas had previously been shared.¹²⁸

A decade after the Damascus Spring the root causes of the current crisis are the same as those that motivated the earlier protests that began a decade earlier. As part of the wider regional political mobilization one can see similar desires amongst the activists as well as the initial response of the government. The issues raised by the civil society activists were not addressed in meaningful ways by the Assad Government. For example the states of emergency laws have remained in place and the Mukhabarat (intelligence services) have remained prevalent in society. During the Damascus Spring the civil society movements were presented as foreign influenced and seen by some officials as treasonous. The same tactic of dismissing

¹²⁶ George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*,30-35.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

the Damascus Spring Activists as foreign instigators or having foreign ties and orientation has been used to discredit the Arab Spring protests and their motives.¹²⁹

4.2 International Pressure:

Aside from the internal pressure the Assad government was being engaged by the European Union. In 1995 the European Union sought further interaction between countries in the Mediterranean region under the banner of the Barcelona Process. It began in November 1995 at a conference held in Barcelona with the intention of creating improved relations and safe conditions for economic and cultural exchanges between Mediterranean Countries and Europe. This meeting marked the beginning of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED) that was to be implemented through the Barcelona Process which was rebranded in 2008 as the Union for the Mediterranean. The partnership between European Union countries and 16 south Mediterranean, African and Middle Eastern Countries has three main objectives organized into chapters: Political and Security Chapter, Economic and Financial Chapter and Social, Cultural and Human Chapter.¹³⁰

In order to promote and achieve these goals the EU carries out bilateral and multilateral activities with the involved parties. Essentially the EU states attempt to mentor their southern partners and provide support in the modernization and assist with integrating their economies while engaging in cultural exchanges to promote understanding and encourage the development of civil societies. As part of the mentorship process EU members develop country strategy papers where the issues that are seen to hold back southern partners are identified and addressed. In the case of Syria the EU focused on five areas: institution building, industrial modernisation, human resource development, trade enhancement and human rights/ civil society issues.¹³¹ Alan George notes in *Syria Neither Bread nor Freedom* (2003) Syria's engagement in this process was likely to result in a compromise as the EU desire for a liberalized economy in Syria does not easily integrate well with the regime's centralized

¹²⁹ Ministry of Information, "A Message on the Events Going on in Syria," Syrian Ministry of Information, <http://www.sana-syria.com/servers/gallery/201210/20121024-154241.pdf> (accessed 2/19, 2013); Internal displacement monitoring centre, *Syria a Full-Scale Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis with no Solutions in Sight*, 3-5; Meijer, *Citizenship Rights and the Arab Spring: The Historical Dimension*

¹³⁰ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 78,79; "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership," EUROMED, eeas.europa.eu/euromed/index_en.htm (accessed January, 1, 2013).

¹³¹ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 78,79.

tendencies which is an additional source of friction to Europe's focus on human rights issues. Despite these potential problems by 2006 The EU was Syria's biggest Trading partner.¹³²

Harriet Montgomery's *The Kurds of Syria: an Existence Denied* (2005) came out of this politicised evaluation of human right in Syria. It was produced in association with the Barcelona Process. One consequence of this is that it has more overt political motivations behind it. This is not completely unique to Montgomery's work as a lot of the publications directly focusing on Syrian Kurds are produced by or connected to human rights groups or institutions related to the development of policy. With this engagement as a background it should be noted that individual governments of European Union members have shown interest in Syrian and specifically Syrian Kurd human rights issues, at least in terms of how the refugee and immigration concerns impact their nations. This interest manifested itself in the form of special reports such as *Human rights issues concerning Kurds in Syria* a joint report by the Danish Immigration Service and the Austrian Red Cross to Syria that was published in 2010. This report was stimulated by the increased number of Kurds coming to Europe in an effort to examine the cause of this increase.

There is a possibility that the criticisms lodged by these groups, may have feed the regime's paranoia, and playing to the rhetoric style of the al Assad regime which is to present Syria as under threat by outside actors namely Israel and the West. This tendency has certainly continued since the Crisis began and is visible in the response to the current uprising as Bashar al Assad has attempted to cast the current crisis in numerous interviews presenting the protestors as outside supported threats. In his most recent speech, on the 6 of January 2013, Assad simultaneously blamed criminal gangs and 'western puppets' while raising the spectre of al-Qaida's involvement in a potential effort to play to the strategic concerns of United States.¹³³

The United States reaction to the September 11 attacks provided more challenges for Bashar al-Assad. America's renewed vow to fight terrorism resulted in increased pressure on state sponsors of terrorism and other pariah states. By 2002 Syria appeared amongst the revised list of states on the 'axis of evil'. A year later the United States opening the second front in the War on Terror invaded Syria's neighbour Iraq. The war prompted fears of Western

¹³² Annika Rabo, "Trade Across Borders: Views from Aleppo," in *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East*, ed. Inga Brandell (London: I.B. Tauris & Co LTD, 2006),57; George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*,172-174.

¹³³ Black, *Assad's Call for Talks Dismisses as 'a Waste of Time' by Syrian Opposition*.

intervention in Syria. Further developments within Iraq's Kurdish region fed paranoia and lead to increasing repression of Syria's Kurds.¹³⁴

The initiatives by the EU and the United States were not the only external factors that impacted the actions of Bashar al Assad's government. Over the decade of the 1990s the relationship between Syria and Turkey began to improve as a dialogue was opened in effort to resolve the dispute over water rights related to Turkey's dam project. At the end of the decade tensions over Syria's support for the PKK brought the situation to a head. Before a war broke out, Syria and Turkey signed the Adana Agreement on the 20th of October 1998. As part of the agreement Syria expelled the PKK. Developments in Iraq following the 1990-1991 Gulf War also contributed to changes in the Syrian Governments approach to Iraq and the Kurds in the north.¹³⁵ They were seen a potential threat due to their increased autonomy.

Naturally the developments in Northern Iraq did not go unnoticed in other Kurdish regions. One of the regions to feel the effects was Al-Jazira region in North Eastern Syria. In 2004 the predominantly Kurdish city of Qamishli, was the scene of a violent altercation between rival football fans from different ethnic backgrounds. The incident at the football stadium ended when security forces intervened. They used live fire to disperse the crowd killing several Kurds which resulted in numerous protests. The Qamishli incident is seen by many observers as a turning point in nationalist sentiments amongst Syria's Kurds. This incident was not the first time the city has been the source of concern. Its location on the Turkish border meant that during the mandate period the city was also the scene of mixed allegiances.¹³⁶

4.3 Externalisation of Syrian Kurdish Nationalism:

The Kurdish struggle that has had the most impact on Syria's Kurds is the struggle in Turkey. Prior to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the Turkish nation state Kurds freely traveled between the two regions and interacting with each other. During the mandate period the Khoybun League became active on both sides of the newly created border

¹³⁴ Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied*,143.

¹³⁵ Aaron T. Wolf and Joshua T. Newton, "Case Study of Transboundary Dispute Resolution: The Tigris-Euphrates Basin," Oregon State University, http://www.transboundarywaters.orst.edu/research/case_studies/Tigris-Euphrates_New.htm (accessed May 23, 2013); Emma Jørum, "The October 1998 Turkish-Syrian Crisis in Arab Media," in *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East*, ed. Inga Brandell (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2006)166-183.; "Relations between Turkey and Syria," Rep. of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey%E2%80%93syria.en.mfa> (accessed May 21, 2013); Gauthier, *The 2004 Events in Al- Qamishli: Has the Kurdish Question Erupted in Syria?* 106.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

and maintained these ties. The Khoybun League advocated for Kurdish rights in Turkey with the aim of realizing Kurdish statehood as the Treaty of Sèvres had indicated would occur. While the Khoybun had an active presence in Syria there was never an explicitly Syrian oriented movement. Early nationalist movements like Khoybun League mostly focused efforts towards Turkey, and later Kurdish political activity focused on Iraq as well. However Turkey has occupied the main focal point for the Kurdish movement.¹³⁷ The influence of Northern or Turkish Kurds on nationalist movements in Syria during the Mandate period has already been addressed in a previous chapter, thus this section will address the effect of more modern movements.

Perhaps the most well-known Kurdish liberation movements: the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was founded in Ankara, Turkey on the 27 of November 1978. Since then the organization lead by Abdullah Öcalan and its armed offshoot the People's Defense Force (HPG) has been a thorn in the side of Turkey as the PKK has been waging a guerilla war against Syria's northern neighbour for the past forty years. The roots of the PKK's grievances date to fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the rise of exclusionary Turkish nationalism that downplayed or denied the existence of minorities in favor of a Turkish identity. To the eyes of Turkish authorities the Kurds were merely mountain Turks.¹³⁸

Coinciding with the rise of the PKK, relations between Syria and Turkey were souring. Hafiz Assad was a skilled political tactician in the region. He was adept at reading and responding to threats as well as seizing upon opportunities when they arose. This ability allowed him to secure his rule and Syria's position of influence in the region. In this manner the senior Assad had managed to influence and control Lebanese politics, contribute to destabilization in Iraq, and for a number of years stand up to the superior military power of Turkey.¹³⁹ There were several reasons for the Syrian government's support of the PKK but access to water was likely the main one. A pressing issue between Syria and Turkey is the withholding of water from the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, as well as the 1939 loss of Iskanderuna/Hatay region. The pressing issue of water relations between Syria and Turkey was one of the reasons the Syrian government supported the PKK. Turkey's Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi (GAP) or Southeast Anatolia Project is a massive hydroelectric dam project that would provide large amounts of

¹³⁷ Lowe, *The Serhildan and the Kurdish National Story in Syria*,163.

¹³⁸ "Info on Kurds: Who are the Kurds?"

¹³⁹ George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*17; William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 3rd ed. ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004),398-401.

electricity and water for domestic use. For countries downstream from the project such as Syria and Iraq the project was seen as a threat to their water supply.¹⁴⁰

Support of PKK actions in this area arose because initially diplomatic efforts by Syria were not producing desired outcome and a direct military campaign was not feasible. For one thing the Turkish military was larger and better equipped and secondly the political cost of such a gamble would have been too high. By supporting the PKK in their struggle against Turkey, Syria was able to hamper and delay the GAP project while not being directly responsible.¹⁴¹ The PKK may have caused security to become a larger concern, increasing the cost; however their actions did not have drastic impact on the project. The main objective of the PKK has been to establish an independent Kurdistan along Öcalan's ideological lines. In 1999 following his arrest Öcalan's role shifted from a direct leadership role to a more indirect form of leadership and inspiration.

Under Hafiz Assad the PKK were allowed to operate within Syria and areas controlled by Syria in Lebanon using them for training camps and locations from which to launch attacks. The PKK was even provided access to the Mazlum Kormaz camp in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.¹⁴² The presence of the PKK in Syria was damaging for a locally oriented Kurdish national movement. This is because pan Kurdism is at the heart of the PKKs focus. The aims of Kurds seeking full citizenship and equal rights and opportunities with other members of Syria's society clash with the efforts PKK who focused on establishing a Kurdish state. Besides the destabilizing effect on Turkey the relationship with the PKK provided the additional benefit of an outlet for nationalist aspirations of Syrian Kurds who might have otherwise pursued their own nationalist cause in Syria. It is reported that encouragement by the government went so far as to make Kurds who participated in PKK's struggle exempt from mandatory military service.¹⁴³

Those who are peripherally aware of Middle Eastern politics will be aware that both Syrian and Iraqi politics were dominated by the Ba'ath Party. Despite the potential connection provided by Ba'athist ideology both states were rivals and the relationship between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Hafiz Assad's Syria was characterized by tensions and mistrust. These tensions developed for several reasons including slight ideological differences, political fears

¹⁴⁰ Jørum, *The October 1998 Turkish-Syrian Crisis in Arab Media*162; Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 197.

¹⁴¹ Jørum, *The October 1998 Turkish-Syrian Crisis in Arab Media*162; Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 197.

¹⁴² Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*,75.

¹⁴³ Lowe, *The Serhildan and the Kurdish National Story in Syria*,163-164.

and especially Iraq's initial desire to not be associated with Syria's military rule. In later periods after Saddam Hussein became the leader the rivalry between Ba'athist ideologies was primarily based around each side seeing their version as the true form of Ba'athism. The relationship between the two countries was very complicated as there were aspects of cooperation such as mutual support for Palestine, and mutual economic goals. Even in these areas of cooperation the relationship fluctuated from periods of cooperation to mistrust.¹⁴⁴ As was the case with Turkey, Assad saw the potential to utilize the Kurdish of Iraq as an indirect way to apply pressure on Iraq's Government. The struggle in Iraq became another tolerated outlet for nationalist aspirations on the condition that groups operating in Syria remained externally focused.¹⁴⁵

Syrian commitment to Iraqi Kurds was not as intense as it was in Turkey, there were no spaces provided for military training camps as had been the case with the PKK. However the two major Kurdish parties of Iraq - the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and The Kurdish Democratic Party KDP were able to have offices in Damascus and Qamishli, on the condition that they did not agitate the local Kurds with separatist ideas in Syria.¹⁴⁶ After the two Kurdish parties in Iraq - the KDP and the PUK had a falling out and were battling each other for control and influence, Hafiz Assad played a role in getting the two to set aside their differences and his effort paid off by 1987. The united front of the KDP and PUK took on the role of government and Damascus provided valuable connections for them until 2003. The active Syrian government connection to Iraqi Kurds, particularly Massoud Barizani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), was a way to control how Syrian Kurds were participating. By allowing the two parties to maintain offices in Damascus and Qamishli Assad's government created a quid pro quo paradigm; they could keep these offices and their recruiting of Syrian Kurds into the Peshmerga (combatants) forces would be tolerated providing they ensured that the nationalist efforts were focused on Iraq and local concerns were ignored.¹⁴⁷

After the first Gulf War the KDP and the PUK took on the role of government in the 'safe' environment provided by the no-fly zone and resulting retreat from the area by Baghdad.

¹⁴⁴ Amazia Baram, "Ideology and Power Politics in Syrian and Iraqi Relations, 1968-1984," in *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, eds. Moshe Ma'oz and Avner Yaniv (Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986), 125-139.

¹⁴⁵ Montgomery, *The Kurds of Syria : An Existence Denied* 138-142; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 74, 77-78.

¹⁴⁶ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 61-63.

¹⁴⁷ Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 73-75; Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 61-63.

But infighting between the KDP and the PUK remerged as the territory was split between the two. By 1998 these tensions between the two groups were again resolved. This meant that they were able to fully take advantage of the opportunity provided by the 2003 invasion. As a result of their success, stability and development of a semi-autonomous territory the relationship between the Syrian regime and the Iraqi Kurds ended in 2003. While support had been provided to Kurds in Iraq during earlier periods it was never the intention of the Syrian government to support the Kurds of Iraq or Turkey to the point of a Kurdish state being established. The desired gains of the Syrian's were to be another element of influence and deniable interference into its neighbour's politics. In the government's mind the relationship was a one-way street that managed correctly would only result in gains. ¹⁴⁸

The Kurdish Question is not a simple riddle to unravel. It is not only an ethnic matter but also has geopolitical connotations. As described in earlier chapters Kurdistan straddles the borders of four countries. Within each of these countries the relationship between the Kurds and the government who control their land has developed differently. Each independence movement has their own vision for autonomy or independent Kurdistan. However the parties often have a presence in each region, for example the ideological influence of Öcalan is present in all four countries, in Turkey and Iraq they are under the banner of the PKK while in Syria the associated groups are the PYD and the PJAK (The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) in Iran. The most prominent groups in this struggle, and the most relevant when looking at Syria, have been the Kurds of Turkey and the Kurds of Iraq. Adding further complications to the competing ideological visions between the Iraqi based Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the PKK is the KRG's tolerance of Turkish raids on PKK located in Northern Iraq. The presence of both parties seeking to gain influence within Syria, means that Syria is a potential ideological battle ground for the "Iraqi" and "Turkish" visions for Kurdistan. A long term difficulty for the Kurds of Syria has been the issue of political divisions. This has been complicated by long term externalization of nationalist efforts. The limitation placed on domestic Western Kurdish nationalistic activities has resulted in a disjointed identity and organization amongst the Kurdish parties there. ¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 73-74, 77-78.

¹⁴⁹ *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, 1-42.

4.4 Blow Back:

Regional politics would eventually catch up to Syria. After years of tolerating if not encouraging Syria's Kurds to participate in struggles against the Turkish and Iraqi Governments, Syria experienced its first major incident of blowback in March 2004, as the Kurds of Syria began to embrace their own identity. The potential for blowback should have been fairly evident to the Assad government. With a Kurdish nationalist struggle taking place in two neighbouring countries it seems naïve of them to think that Kurdish aspirations could be kept indefinitely focused externally. The Assad Government was successful at balancing the potential unintended adverse results of their support of groups such as the PKK with the need to retard the efforts of their own Kurds through oppression and externalising their aspirations.

After cutting official links with the PKK and expelling them in 1998 and the Iraqi Kurdish groups in 2003 the Assad government lost the influence over these groups that they had wielded. Without the official sanction to operate in Syria, these groups no longer had a reason to avoid interfering in domestic affairs of Syria. Additionally Kurds who had worked with these groups and who had returned home were free to apply their skills, knowledge and ideology at home. There had been a tradition of demonstrations marking important anniversary's however after 2000 this increased.¹⁵⁰

Since 2003, wider regional Kurdish politics have been at an interesting crossroad. In the 1990s the United States encouraged the Kurds to revolt against Saddam Hussein. The Kurds did attempt to rise up against the Iraqi government however the United States did not end up supporting them due to the end of the Gulf War and this had dire consequences for the Kurds who without wider support were put down. The Iraqi government reaction to this attempted revolt lead to the establishment of the no fly zone. In 2003 the United States sought to invade Iraq. In order to complete the invasion as planned they needed to invade Iraq from the south and the north. Initially Turkey was against the war and against providing access to Iraq through its territory. This meant that the Kurds in northern Iraq were the only option. After some assurances they agreed to help and the United States followed through this time and dismembered the Iraqi government. As a result of the invasion the Kurds were able to

¹⁵⁰ *Report: Kurds in Syria: Group at Risk and Reactions Against Political Activists*, 1-22; PYD, *Campaign for the International Recognition of Human Rights of Half a Million Kurds "Buried Alive" In*, 2008?, 1-3; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 113-120; Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 106-110.

consolidate their control.¹⁵¹ The Autonomous Kurdish region emerged as a new hope and possibility for a Kurdish homeland or the next best thing - an autonomous region within the national borders of a weak state. The Iraqi model was the first to gain effective territorial success, while the PKK had been ousted from Syria and had their inspirational leader taken into custody were still engaged in skirmishes within Turkey but did not really have the degree of territorial success.

Turkey's relationship with the KRG is another example of the complex relationship governments affected by the Kurdish Question has with Kurds in different countries. By supporting the KRG Turkey benefits economically and supports an alternative Kurdish group and ideological model from that proposed by the PKK. This support has the potential to become counterintuitive as it might provide legitimacy for an independent Kurdish state.¹⁵² However the political gamble seems to have paid off for Turkey as the KRG had tolerated Turkish incursions into their territory in pursuit of the PKK. As of May 2013 the KRG who have expressed their desire to remain with Iraq have also played a supportive role in the peace negotiations taking place between the PKK and Turkey.¹⁵³

4.5 Qamishli, Serhildan comes to Syria:

Due to its explosiveness the Qamishli incident of 2004 is often seen as the catalyst or beginning of wide spread Kurdish mobilization in Syria. The events that occurred in March and in the following months of 2004 would be the announcement that the Kurds of Syria exist and have their own concerns. As the Syrian government began cutting ties with Kurdish groups outside of Syria, Kurds from within Syria's borders who had been exposed to those movements began to bring home the struggle. Visible political mobilization albeit on a relatively small scale had occurred earlier during the months before the Qamishi incident. Kurdish parties such as the

¹⁵¹ Robert Olson, "Denied a State, Winning a Region: Comparing Kurdish Nationalism After 1918 and 2003," in *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, eds. Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (London: Chatham House, 2010),36,40; Gareth Stansfield, "From Civil War to Calculated Compromise: The Unification of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq," in *The Kurdish Policy Imperative*, eds. Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (London: Chatham House, 2010),135.

¹⁵² Lundgren, *Defending through Violation: Ankara's Contradictory Strategies Over the Turkish-Iraqi Border*,112.

¹⁵³ "Maliki and Barzani Stress on Iraq's Unity," Kurdpress, <http://kurdpress.com/En/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=4392#Title=%0A%09%09%09%09%09%09%09%09Maliki%20and%20Barzani%20stress%20on%20Iraq%E2%80%99s%20unity%0A%09%09%09%09%09%09> (accessed May 8, 2013).

Yekiti Party had organized several demonstrations since 2002 in an effort to revive the opposition movement that went dormant after the end of the Damascus Spring. The Damascus Spring had demonstrated that the political environment in Syria was changing, due in part to increased international pressure and opportunities provided by the government through more openness and Syrians were becoming more willing to push back on their government.¹⁵⁴

In the 1980s there had been an opposition movement against the Syrian government however the government's response to this Muslim Brotherhood inspired movement was bloody and resulted in the destruction of Hama, the city at the protest movement's epicenter. Prior to the Damascus Spring, Kurds had been mobilized to demonstrate against Syrian government policies. In 1986 Kurdish protested the legacy of the Arab Belt with this protest ended in clashes between Kurds and Arabs that resulted in the death of a young Kurdish girl and the arrest of several Kurdish protesters.¹⁵⁵

The real awakening amongst Syrian Kurds came a year after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In March 2004 the Kurdish movement became mobilized following the Qamishli incident. Seven years before the waves of protest spread across North Africa and the predominantly Arab countries of the Middle East, the most visible expression of a distinct Kurdish identity in Syria since the Mandate Period spread from the northern city of Qamishli. The short lived uprising affected Kurdish areas around Syria. Despite its potential, at the time, it succeeded in little more than bringing visibility to the Kurdish issues and prompting empty promises from Bashar al Assad's government. Occurring in the modified political environment resulting from the American invasion of Iraq the Qamishli incident had the potential to restart the opposition movement by resuming calls for human rights and a more respectful security apparatus. The predominantly Kurdish demonstrations and in some areas riots, were not allowed to blossom into a wider movement. The security forces clamped down on Kurdish organizers and the nationalistic tendencies of the major Kurdish parties curbed the wider appeal of the initial incident.¹⁵⁶

On 12 of March 2004 the local Qamishli football team played against a team from Deir ez-Zor Syria. The mainly Sunni supporters of the away team drove around the city agitating local Kurds by carrying posters of the hated, and recently deposed, Saddam Hussein and

¹⁵⁴ Gauthier, *The 2004 Events in Al- Qamishli: Has the Kurdish Question Erupted in Syria?* 107-109.

¹⁵⁵ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*,37.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.; Wieland, *Syria A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*, 114.

chanting slogans directed against Iraqi Kurdish leaders Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talibani and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) made up of the two leader's parties. The Kurdish fans that were inspired by and enthusiastic about the gains Barzani, Talibani and the KRG had made in Iraq were angered and enraged by these provocations. During the actual match, inside the stadium, tensions between the two groups of supporters erupted into a violent confrontation that spilled out of the arena and onto the streets.¹⁵⁷

Sometime after the fighting had spilled onto the streets security forces arrived to quell the violence that had seen the Kurdish fans being attacked with sticks, stones and knives. In a move that would spur weeks of demonstrations against the government in favor of Kurdish rights, the security forces opened fire on the crowd killing six Kurdish people including three children.¹⁵⁸ The actions of Syrian security forces would trigger wider Kurdish mobilisation that was described by some as an attempted revolution. The series of protests, demonstrations and riots that took place in the months after the Qamishli Massacre, like the Damascus Spring, had the potential to turn in to a much larger threat to the status quo in Syria. The underlying frustration, anger based on the lack of opportunities and rights for the Kurds lead to the burning of the Ba'ath Party office and the destruction of a statue of Hafiz Assad in a similar fashion to Saddam's statue.¹⁵⁹ In a cycle that would be repeated eleven years later, the funerals for the victims of the security forces intervention became demonstrations for the victims and would in turn attract further attention for the Security forces and result in further victims of arrest and police violence stimulating further demonstrations. In this vicious cycle the demonstrations self-perpetuated several weeks.

Initially the protests and riotous actions took place independently of the Kurdish parties. They were genuine expressions of Kurd's fed up with the state of their affairs, desiring acceptance, rights, respect and a normal life. There were numerous factors that worked against the potential of this mobilization fueled by outrage. These factors can be divided into two categories: domestic and international. At the time Kurds in Turkey and Iraq were largely unable to provide much support as the borders were closed and the war in Iraq was still in its infancy. Activists such as Rosh Abdelfatah attempted to draw wider European attention to the Kurdish uprising while it was happening, which possibly would have offered a level of protection and legitimacy; however the movement was overshadowed by the 11 March al-Qaeda bombing of

¹⁵⁷ Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History Politics and Society*, 114-117.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Mella, *Kurdistan and the Kurds: A Divided Homeland and a Nation without State*, 285.

Madrid's commuter train network. As a result the Massacre and following demonstrations did not gain a lot of international media attention and remained largely a Syrian Kurdish issue. Domestically the issue suffered due to the ability of the state to play off of sectarian fears. The government was successfully framing the incident in a negative light and the Kurdish parties played into this narrative by framing the issue in a Kurdish nationalist light thus removing the broader appeal the state violence had provided.¹⁶⁰

The reaction to the Qamishli demonstrations from wider Syrian society was initially somewhat sympathetic. Other Civil Society opposition groups participated in some of the initial demonstrations. Mainstream opposition and civil society groups who had organized during the Damascus spring initially participated in demonstrations showing solidarity. This initial wider support began to erode as the demonstrations became more controlled and organized by the PYD and Yekiti who raised their flags and brought explicit Kurdish nationalist tones to the demonstrations. The Kurdish nationalist tone taken by the PYD and the Yekiti parties provided legitimacy to the fears presented by the government.¹⁶¹ Immediately following the shooting in Qamishli there was a wider base of support for their plight. However as the PYD and Yekiti began to make concerns more explicitly Kurdish, support from these demonstrations evaporated. As wider support waned the moment ran its course, but not before Bashar acknowledged the problems faced by the Kurds, such as the 'undocumented' Kurds, implying an intention to address Kurdish issues in Syria.¹⁶²

In the months and years following, the event had the effect of stimulating an interest in Syria's Kurds amongst academics and western government agencies. More importantly it pushed Kurds to advocate for better conditions and increased rights. The demonstrations and riots combined with an increased nationalist tone startled the Syrian government and forced the Kurdish question into the mind of Syrians.¹⁶³ Even though the movement did not produce solid changes from the regime the long term value of the incident was twofold. Internationally it spurred a renewed interest in Kurds in Syria and secondly it became a historic point of reference in the Kurdish canon joining events like the Halabja massacre, adding a specifically Syrian incident to the canon of Kurdish history. The incident secured the feeling of identity, increased self-confidence and this increased the willingness of Kurds to participate in

¹⁶⁰ MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*.

¹⁶¹ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, 42.

¹⁶² Gauthier, *The 2004 Events in Al- Qamishli: Has the Kurdish Question Erupted in Syria?* 113.

¹⁶³ Lowe, *Kurdish Nationalism in Syria*, 287.

demonstrations in the following years. “It was the moment when a distinct group of people finally stood up to their oppressors. The extent of the disturbances of 2004 surprised Kurds: they felt elated because so many of them risked their personal safety to challenge the Syrian state.”¹⁶⁴

The impact that the Qamishli incident had on the Kurds is seen as psychologically similar or comparable to the Palestinian intifada and for this reason Robert Lowe notes the use the Kurdish term *serhildan* to describe the Qamishli incident. *Serhildan* is a compound kurmanji word meaning rebellion, revolt or insurrection, to describe it. *Serhildan* had been used previously to describe the struggles in Iraq and Turkey; however the term had not really been used in a Syrian context before 2004. As Lowe notes the Kurds preferred translation of *serhildan* ‘uprising’ “suggests a genuinely popular movement of an oppressed people.” The Qamishli incident changed the relatively sedated nationalist struggle in Syria into something more. The aftermath of the Qamishli incident forced many Kurds past the threshold of fear. This liberation experienced by many from Tunisia to Syria during the Arab Spring meant that they were now more inclined to participate in future demonstrations as having risked personal safety once it is no longer as scary to do it a second time.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Lowe, *The Serhildan and the Kurdish National Story in Syria*,169-170.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.; Lowe, *Chatam House, Middle Eastern Programme Briefing Paper: The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered*, 1-8.

5.0 The Arab Spring, a Syrian Crisis:

The following section is based upon information gathered from numerous webpages and online news sources including: the PYD's webpage, Alliance for Kurdish Rights Kurd Watch, Kurdpres, Rudaw, and a number of English language media from many countries. In addition to these constantly updating sources information has also been gathered from a recent International Crisis Watch report, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within A Struggle* (2013), and personal interviews and communications with individuals who have recently been to Syria or are actively involved in Kurdish activism. Due to the volume of sources with overlapping information individual citations will be limited to more specific instances.

5.1 initial reactions:

Shortly after the crisis began Basahar al Assad made an announcement directed at the Kurds saying that he would finally address the issue of the lack of Kurdish rights finally granting citizenship to the Kurds who, along with their descendants, had it removed following the 1962 Hassaka census. Assad lost credibility as he was not in a strong position, it was obvious that his desire to solve the Kurdish issue was merely in effort to gain support from another segment of Syrian society. The Kurds had heard messages like this from Assad and his government before. In 2004 following the violent outbursts in Hassaka that spread from Qamishi and started to look like a viable protest movement or even revolution, Assad promised to address the Kurdish issue. Seven years later the same message had even less credibility for them. The Kurds response to this was that these rights were not something for someone to grant.¹⁶⁶

The actions taken by Kurdish parties during the Arab Spring have been rather calculated. The various parties under the Kurdish banner have sought to maximise their benefits while hedging their potential losses. The Kurds had more to lose than other parts of Syrian society. The main Kurdish parties were fairly hesitant to support the initial demonstrations, as they still remembered the political repercussions of the Qamishli Massacre. An additional factor

¹⁶⁶ "Syria: Assad Grants Citizenship to Kurds in Attempt to Ease Unrest," Human Security Report Project, <http://www.hsrgroup.org/our-work/e-newsletters/archive/archivepost.aspx?storyid=323c244a-3495-4d24-b1bb-ac81ba0e6bfc2012>).

that caused the Kurdish parties not to participate was progress that had been made in getting the government to address Kurdish issues. Prior to the crisis turning into a civil war, which made it clear that there was the possibility for the ousting of the Assad Government, the major political parties sought political solutions in the long run. As was the case during the uprisings following the shooting in Qamishli, there was a split between the aspirations of younger Kurds and older generations belonging to the political parties. The youth, and other likeminded older Kurds, sought immediate change. The split between strategies was not a just an age gap, another factor was the difference between more Arabized Kurds living in Damascus and Aleppo and those still remaining in al Jazira.¹⁶⁷

The hesitance to participate in the anti-government demonstrations in the Kurdish areas ended up to be tactically beneficial for the Kurds. With the shift of the Syrian Crisis toward a state of Civil War the Kurdish area in the North East of Syria was largely able to avoid intensive fighting. While the western part of Syria was been torn apart and flattened by heavy fighting, al Jazira remained a low priority for government forces. By not uprising the Kurds were able to avoid the attention of major Syrian army campaigns. Initially this provided them with the opportunity to establish a safe haven in the north similar to the area Iraqi Kurds created following the invasion of Iraq. However this opportunity did come at a cost; the level that the Kurds were tolerated by Government forces fueled suspicions of their allegiance to the revolution. The Kurds are trapped in a paradigm where every time they do something that benefits their aims they are perceived as being anti-Arab or traitors to their Middle Eastern cousins. That is they are seen as going against general Arab causes or going against the best interests of the country they live in.

5.2 Defending al Jazira:

At the time of writing conflict in Syria is still ongoing and developing, the most intense fighting has been occurring in the Western half of the country. As of June 2013 fighting in the Al Jazira Region continues to be less intense as the government forces are putting most efforts in the areas around Syria's major cities Aleppo and Damascus and borders with Lebanon and Israel. The North East of Syria remains in the hands of the opposition forces including both Kurdish and Free Syrian Army. However after government success in Qusair, with the

¹⁶⁷ Bradost Azizi, "Kurdish Youth Groups in Syria Blame Opposition Parties for Divisions," RUDAW, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/17052013> (accessed May 20, 2013).; Wieland, *Syria A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revoluiton from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*, 32, 187; MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*.

assistance of Hezbollah fighters, it may be a matter of time before the intensity of fighting increases in the East if opposition forces are forced to retreat to areas under their control.¹⁶⁸

The Kurds around Efrin in the Kurd Dagh area, north of Aleppo in the north west of Syria, have been involved in heavier fighting, due to the denser population and government institutions in the area and out of necessity they have joined forces with the FSA in fighting the government in this part of the country where the war is more active. That being said there are still tensions between the two groups. In the east the role of the YPG forces is more defensive, they are attempting to hold onto Kurdish territory. Echoing the Perrier Terrier's plan for Kurds to focus efforts on the al Jazira region of Syria for its potential to ability to become a separate Kurdish territory, the YPG and TEV DEM have focused on consolidating their holdings here and keeping the Islamists out; as Rosh Abdelfatah articulated: "once they are in your area it is hard to get rid of them, the only solution is to keep them out."¹⁶⁹ In order to maintain a Kurdish presence in Syria on April 2013 the Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC) went so far as issuing a ban on Kurds fleeing to the Kurdish region in Iraq.¹⁷⁰

Currently the control of al Jazira is contested between Kurds, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Government forces. Most of the actual combat that is taking place in this region of Syria involves the FSA. The presence of these opposition forces attracts Syrian Government forces. The initial stance of the Kurdish forces mainly focused on consolidating power instead of ousting or killing the government forces. If the government forces did not try to assert their authority the YPG avoided fighting them only doing so when it was necessary. The co-existence of the PYD and the YPG militia's with government forces was perceived by some as collusion. While it seems rather suspicious for either group to tolerate the others presence, for strategic reasons it may be the best option. From the government's perspective the Kurds are the lesser of two evils, and for the Kurds it is likely seen as better to delay larger battles until they have firmly consolidated their control.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Doucet, *Qusair the Syrian City that Died*.

¹⁶⁹ MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*.

¹⁷⁰ Adib Abdulmanjid, "Kurdish Council in Syria Bans War Refugees from Fleeing to Iraqi Kurdistan," Rudaw, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/02042013> (accessed April 2, 2013).

¹⁷¹ MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013*; MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*; Adib Namir Salamah, Air Force Intelligence Service protocol on contacts between the Syrian government and the PYD, November 3 2011, 2011, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?cid=185&z=en> (accessed March 2013).

In November of 2012 the suspicions and tensions between the FSA and the Kurdish forces came to a head in the city of Ras al Ayn/Sarî Kaniyê. The FSA attacked a YPG – Peoples Defense Units check point. Since this battle the Kurdish forces and the FSA, amongst which are many Al Nusra and other foreign fighters, have been engaged in further skirmishes. These skirmishes are broken by periods of cooperation or truce. Dutch Photographer Jeff Ruigendijk, who has visited the region several times since the beginning of the Arab Spring and interviewed members from both sides, has provided some insight into how both sides view each other. The history of conflict between the PKK and Turkey is tainting the main Syrian opposition's image amongst the Kurds particularly those under PYD influence who fear the large role that Turkey has been attempting to play.¹⁷²

While he was with the Kurdish forces they asserted that the FSA had been in close contact with Turkish forces saying that the FSA had been instructed to take care of Assad's forces and Kurdish 'Terrorists'. Initially Ruigendijk was suspicious of these assertions taking them as paranoid or exaggerated claims. However when he was with the FSA some low level troops confirmed the Kurdish claims saying that they were told to fight the Kurds. Naturally the higher level commanders avoided the subject of a Turkish connection. As is often the case during combat, both the FSA and YPG forces have simplified their understanding of their enemy in an effort to dehumanize them making it easier to kill them. For the Kurds everyone that they are fighting are called al Nusra Islamists. In reality the FSA are a mixture of fighters: locals, former soldiers, foreign Jihadists and want to be al Nusra fighters. The FSA fighters in turn see themselves as fighting PKK terrorists.¹⁷³

Ruigendijk states that while he was visiting the YPG forces he was initially skeptical of claims by them that the FSA had been advised by Turkey to attack the Kurds. However these claims were later confirmed during conversations with the FSA. The simplification of the enemy's identities is just that, a simplification the YPG and the PYD may have ideological ties to the PKK but they are local Kurds. Similarly the FSA ranks are not completely made up of Islamist Al Nusra fighters; although they do have an increasing presence and influence. Reflecting on patterns of fighting in al Jazira, Jeff Ruigendijk mentioned that at times the pattern of fighting appears as if the Kurds and the government use each other to save face. It sometimes seemed as if the Kurds told the government to start a brief battle, kill three of their

¹⁷² "Assault on Ras Al-Ayn."

¹⁷³ MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam.*

fighters and allow them to have a revenge battle where they would capture a building that the government was going to evacuate anyway. This would allow the Kurds to prove to the FSA that they are against the government, and make it possible for the government to redeploy troops to other areas with more pressing concerns. If it is possible for an outside observer to have this kind of impression, than it is not surprising that those in the FSA would suspect PYD collusion with the government.¹⁷⁴

On his most recent trip to Northern Syria, Ruigendijk noticed a couple of changes amongst the Kurds. Their defence forces had become more proficient and professional, evidently hardened by months of fighting. A particularly interesting change that he noticed was the way that Kurds were expressing a Muslim aspect to their identity. While Islam or Yazidi religions are not particularly new to the area most Kurds were more secular in orientation. In reaction to fighting the Islamist Al Nusra and the increasing Islamic overtones arising in Syria the Kurds appear to be emphasising an aspect of their identity that could provide another way for them to be included in the new face of Syria.¹⁷⁵ Despite these challenges the Syrian Crisis and accompanying regional instability have created the conditions for increased Kurdish autonomy and appears to be forcing the Kurdish Question to be addressed.¹⁷⁶

5.3 Damaging perceptions: image in war:

The Kurdish political party that is the most organized has been the PYD lead by Salih Muslim. As the government presence and influence in al Jazira waned, the PYD and its armed wing the Peoples Defence Units (YPG) increased their presence and began filling government, policing, and defence roles. The purpose of these actions is to protect the area and to foster the possibility of a stable Kurdish ruled area in this portion of Syria. They are the most powerful and best organized however they are not the only Kurdish political party that is active in Syria. Tensions and separations between Kurdish parties have made for complicated relations with the main Syrian opposition.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ David Hirst, "This could be the Birth of an Independent Kurdish State," The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/09/birth-kurdish-state-ottoman-syria-arab-spring> (accessed January 10, 2013).

¹⁷⁷ *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, 1-42; Azizi, *Divisions Plague Kurdish Opposition Groups in Syria*; MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam*.

When evaluating the situation in Syria at the moment it is easy to see parallels to the developments in Iraq following the removal of Saddam. The Kurds located in the north have been able to avoid most of the violence that has engulfed the rest of Syria. As a result the power vacuum that is developing as the central government loses control over the country side, the most organized Kurdish Party has been able to implement its own system of government. The PYD controls much of the territory in North Eastern Syrian around the City of Qamishli through their political organization called TEV DEM. Through this organisation that provides government functions the PYD has been able to firmly secure itself in the al Jazira. As the Syrian Crisis progressed the Kurds have taken the opportunity provided by Assad forces being occupied in south and central regions of Syria to establish their own more or less autonomous region. It is important to keep in mind that the war is not over and these gains are not guaranteed. At the moment the Kurds in Syria have a situation similar to the Kurds of Iraq in that they largely control the territory, politically it is more in line with the aspirations of Öcalan.

To return to the concept of branding, the identity based mobilization resulting from the Qamishli incident signalled the emergence of a Western Kurdish 'brand'. Along with The Amude Cinema Fire, the 1962 census and the Arab Belt project, Western Kurds had a new traumatic grievance around which they could frame their own national plight. A number of factors prevented a Syrian or Western Kurdish nationalist movement developing sooner. The process of establishing and controlling the image of a distinct Western Kurdish identity that intensified after 2004 has gained more importance and a quicker pace during the Arab Spring and Syrian Crisis. Image management has become vital to their security, and in order for them to maximize the potential gains the instability in Syria has created.

The Kurdish groups in Syria who are attempting to establish a distinct identity and balance long term aspirations with immediate security concerns, face the problem of finding room for their distinct identity to flourish amongst the clutter of already existing images of what and who the Kurds are. Tim Calkins describes *Brands* as sets "of associations linked to a name or mark associated with a product or service." For the purposes of this paper the focus is on the product which is Kurdish culture and ethnic identity. Obviously all factors associated with the process of branding and marketing do not apply to an ethnicity however the principles that relate to the perceptions held by consumers, in this case primarily the government and non-Kurdish members of society, do apply. A negative association with or perception of Kurds does not bode well for the Kurdish Question being successfully addressed in Syria. Lack of wider public support following the Qamishli incident and animosity towards them during the current crisis

The PKK's violent methods pose obvious concerns, however in terms of National integrity the physical holdings of the KRG are potentially more concerning. The autonomous Kurdish region has the potential to be used as a launching platform for an independent Kurdistan. This would be more likely if the schism between PKK and KRG ideologies could be quelled. With the poor relationship between Barzani and the PKK in mind Turkey's recent peace agreement with the PKK that has seen their forces retreat into Northern Iraq could be a calculated effort at destabilizing the KRG's hold on Northern Iraq, disrupting any potential of Syria's Kurdish territory splitting off and joining it.

The PYD as the most organized and dominant Kurdish party is often perceived as one in the same as the PKK by other Kurdish groups and opposition forces alike. In the crisis this reputation has placed the Kurds in Al-Jazira in a precarious position. The PYD has been fairly successful in consolidating its control of the territory and associating itself with Kurdishness. In the short term the stability created by these efforts is a positive development; however the association with the PKK and perceived collaboration with the government is causing problems for them. Since the beginning of the Crisis Turkey has sought to play a key role in resolving Syria's problems.¹⁸¹ Turkish perceptions of Kurds are particularly important in light of the increasing regional role that Turkey under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been taking. The history between Syria's Kurds and Turkey has no doubt had an impact on these perceptions.

A major source of friction between the Kurdish opposition parties is the unwillingness of the mainstream opposition groups to appreciate and deal with Kurdish issues. The current dominant umbrella organisation that is widely recognized by the international community is the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces - or the Syrian National Coalition. Unlike its predecessor the Syrian National Council, The SNC, the Syrian National Coalition does not openly address Kurdish issues or concerns. Its Kurdish members come from the Kurdish National Council who are the non-dominant Kurdish representatives.¹⁸²

PKK," Syria Deeply, <http://beta.syriadeeply.org/2013/01/kurds-caught-islamists-pkk/#.UbrZY5z9U-B> (accessed February 12, 2013).

¹⁸¹ *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*.20.

¹⁸² Carnegie Middle East Center, "National Coordination Body for Democratic Change," Carnegie Middle East Center, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48369> (accessed 3/10, 2013); Carnegie Middle East Center, *The Syrian National Council*; "Syrian Coalition Principles," 1; "Syrian Coalition Goals," 1; "About SNC." Syrian National Council, <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/about.html> (accessed April 20, 2013).; "National Charter: The Kurdish Issue in Syria" Syrian National Council, <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/issues/item/620-national-charter-the-kurdish-issue-in-syria.html> (accessed April 20, 2013); "National Covenant for a New Syria," Syrian National

5.4 Image Management- Interpretation of online activity:

Webpages created by Kurdish Parties and activists or news webpages from a Kurdish perspective are a good source of information on Kurdish self-identity. These webpages show the image they are attempting to portray or 'market'. A critical examination of these sources teases out their biases and perceptions of others. Webpages by other organisations, parties and news webpages from different perspectives, reflect the perceptions of the Kurds, providing a measure for how effective Kurdish branding efforts have been. When examining these online representations it is important to examine what type of material is contained on these pages: what is included, what languages are available, how often are they updated, etc. There are specific phrases that need to be said in effort to reassure others. By comparing pages with each other we can see which elements tow the party line and present the pages' ideology in the right light. The effectiveness of these messages requires a high level of credibility of the group or "brand" presenting them.

If we look at social media or webpages like *Alliance for Kurdish Rights* there is an effort to market the cause. Unlike many of the webpages the *Alliance for Kurdish Rights* is created by young Kurdish activists as part of a wider Middle Eastern youth activist group. They seek to promote Kurdish causes and raise awareness of the plight of the Kurds. Their target audience is fairly clear. The page is designed to be eye catching and appealing to teenage or university students. There is definitely a 'cool' factor to this page; it is not presented like a typical dry news source or an army propaganda poster. The page approaches iconography in a playful ironic artistic sort of way. It has a certain revolutionary chic reflective of the way every student dormitory has a Che Guevera poster. The webpage provides information on Kurds and a forum for debates and discussions. In this 'revolutionary chic' style the Kurdish cause becomes romanticised and less threatening. The artwork of stylized cartoons contributes to this feeling, particularly the group of average Kurds raising a Kurdish flag (three horizontal stripes red, white and green with a star in the middle) in a way reminiscent of Iwo Jima that accompanies an article describing Kurdish history. The webpage portrays the nobility and universal nature of the Kurdish struggle and this is also helped by its primary language being English.¹⁸³

Council, <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/issues/item/618-national-covenant-for-a-new-syria.html> (accessed April 20, 2013); Wieland, *Syria A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring*, 114.

¹⁸³ "Info on Kurds: Who are the Kurds?"

Alliance for Kurdish Rights is by no means the only website where global Kurdish identities are promoted and catered to. News sites such as *Rudaw*, *Kurdpress* and *Réseau d'informations libres de la Mésopotamie* (Free information network of Mesopotamia) and *Hawarnews* provide Kurdish orientated news coverage. These are places where the diaspora communities as well as those in the Middle East can exchange ideas, opinions and culture. Both *Rudaw* and *Kurdpress* categorize their news coverage differentiating between the various Kurdish regions using modern state's names in the case of Iran, Syria and Turkey while treating the Kurdish region in Iraq as the *de facto* Kurdistan. The French based *Réseau d'informations libres de la Mésopotamie* has a more activist outlook focusing on France, Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora.¹⁸⁴

The aesthetics of webpage design are important for how the message is received. This applies to how the page is designed and the type of information that is included on the webpage. For example if we examine the PYD's webpage (<http://www.pydrojava.net/>) a few interesting things come immediately evident. The web address itself is telling - after the acronym for the party PYD the next part is the Kurdish word for west. The Kurdish area in Syria is also known as Western Kurdistan. If this is taken together with the likely connection between the PYD and the PKK the aspirations of a wider Kurdish state or liberation are evident. There are three different webpages for three different audiences English, Kurdish, and Arabic. Part of the reason for the difference likely originates from a language issue, but the types of images shown in the banner at the top as well as the types of stories suggest larger differences than simple translation.¹⁸⁵

The 2011 version of the English webpage (<http://www.pydrojava.net/en>) was less modern looking, the pages that are more likely to be viewed have more effort put into them. Aside from the practical differences there is an obvious difference as the iconography of Abdula Öcalan is noticeably missing from the English PYD page. Prior to a recent renewal of the webpage the English page was updated less often than the Arabic or Kurdish versions and while this has been remedied the English version looks a lot different from the other two. While the others are loaded with news articles and images and have an eye catching format for presenting their content, the English version is much simpler and peaceful looking. The images in the banner are of festive demonstrations with Kurdish flags as well as the PYD's tricolor version (yellow, red and green). It also includes a child with both flags painted on his face and giving the

¹⁸⁴ "Main Page, English" ; "Main Page, English" ; "Main Page" ; "Info on Kurds: Who are the Kurds?"

¹⁸⁵ "Home" PYD, <http://www.pydrojava.net/> (accessed April 16, 2013).

peace sign. The images speak of a unified Kurdish front and there are no images of Abdula Öcalan - a possible effort to distance themselves from PKK links.¹⁸⁶

The underlying messages behind each page are as follows: on the Kurdish site they project an image of being there for Kurds providing protection, shelter, food and meeting cultural needs. The Arabic version focuses on the war and unity against Assad while containing some similar images. The English version also addresses wider Kurdish issues and the efforts during the Crisis however it presents everything in a calmer non-threatening manner. It speaks to the earlier demonstrations by the party in the 2000s tying the Kurdish cause to Human Rights struggles and norms. The textual content on this page, and the other versions is a mixture of: news, party activities and philosophy, contextualising the current situation. Also included on the English page are links to demands dealing with human rights and the shortcomings of the Syrian government.¹⁸⁷

The internet is one area where Kurdish groups can cultivate their image. The current openness of the internet means that providing they have access to it there are no limitations on their cultural expression for example there are no rules on the internet against the use of Kurdish language or playing Kurdish music. Webpages allow Kurdish groups and organizations to choose specific target audience, as we have seen with the PYD's webpage there are three different versions of the webpage one for an audience speaking Kurdish, Arabic and English. The medium of the webpage allows them to specify their particular message to each intended audience. Webpages also allow different groups to frame the Syrian Crisis from their perspective: they can use what stories are shown and how those stories are told.

The degree that webpages are successful in actually affecting the perspectives and actions of others is questionable as they are a passive media, there may be interactive aspects such as a comments section however it is up to the visitor to find the webpage. The amount of effort put into a webpage, its layout, how often it is updated etc., reflects the organizational ability and priorities of the group who created it. Some webpages like *Kurdpress* are slower to update focusing on the accuracy of their information rather than how current it is. While others

¹⁸⁶ "Democratic Union Party. Home"; "Home" ; "PYD Info. Home" PYD, <http://pydinfo.com/> (accessed May, 2013); "Home, Kurdish" PYD, <http://www.pydrojava.net/ku/index.php> (accessed May, 2013); "Home. Arabic" PYD, <http://www.pydrojava.net/ara/index.php> (accessed May, 2013).

¹⁸⁷ PYD, "Democratic Union Party," PYD, <http://www.pydrojava.net/> (accessed May 16, 2013); Muslim Saleh, "Muslim Saleh Co- President of the Democratic Union Party, 1 November 2012 "PYD Vision on the Situation in Syria" Filed Under Reports, Syria, Syrian Revolution," <http://supportkurds.org/reports/pyd-vision-on-the-situation-in-syria/> (accessed December 5, 2012).

like *Alliance for Kurdish Rights* strives to be up to date and very active. For Kurdish parties their online presence is only one aspect of their activities. The PYD for example has a large presence both on the internet and in the physical realm. Similar to an international brand they use their webpage as a space to display and present their activities. ¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ "Main Page, English"; "Info on Kurds: Who are the Kurds?"; "Home"; Earl, Kimport and et al., *Changing the World One Webpage at a Time: Conceptualizing and Explaining Internet Activism*, 429-433.

6.0 Concluding remarks:

6.1 Forged in Crisis: Creating a Western Kurdish Identity through the Consolidation of Territory:

For ninety or so years the Kurdish Question has been a nagging issue affecting Syria, Turkey and Iraq. The importance of it has ebbed and flowed over this time, both uniting and dividing each country's foreign policy objectives and shaping the nature of their relationship with one another. Developments occurring in the past twenty years have forced the issue to be addressed. With the Syrian crisis it may finally be the time for serious efforts to answer the question. The general instability in Syria combined with the emergence of internally focused Kurdish nationalism threatens to exacerbate the Kurdish problems in Syria's neighbours. The ongoing turmoil in Iraq and Turkey's continued difficulties with the PKK have been impacted by the devolving situation in Syria as refugees cross the borders and the pan Kurdish ties developed over the past decades are tested by an influx of Kurdish refugees.¹⁸⁹

Kurds may be entering the best opportunity since the Mandate Period to gain an autonomous Kurdish state or at least rectify the state of liminality they have existed in by establishing the conditions for an autonomous region within a redesigned Syria. After years of control and repression by the Assad Government the Syrian Crisis has provided Syria's Kurds the freedom and opportunity to explore their culture again. In a way that is reminiscent of activity during the Mandate Period there is a renewed focus on culture. During the Mandate Period individuals like the Bedhir Khan Brothers, who produced *The Hawar*, recognized that the creation of a nation requires more than military force. While military means might secure territorial boundaries it is through cultural means that a nation becomes consolidated. The retreat of the state from the north east of Syria necessitated the formation of alternative governing structures. Recently political parties have worked to promote Kurdish culture along their ideological lines and are well placed to seize the opportunities brought about by the turmoil in Syria. The PYD, the most powerful Kurdish party has taken the lead on these matters implementing their own political agenda. Though TEV DEM, the YPG and the Asayis (local security forces similar to police) local government roles have been filled.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Hirst, *This could be the Birth of an Independent Kurdish State*.

¹⁹⁰ Ruigendijk, *TEV- DEM*.

The PYD is masterful in their control of the message, from a branding perspective they have effectively identified what their core values and goals are and know how to present them. Through TEV DEM the PYD has engaged with Kurdish society in North Eastern Syria holding rallies, funeral processions and by creating memorial walls for fallen fighters and party members. In this way the visible cultural symbols are PYD productions and versions of Kurdish Expression. Kurds in northern Syria have been able to start publishing books in Kurdish. Language and images of wider Kurdistan's past are unifying features for the Kurds. There may be regional and tribal differences between them but the historic identity helps to bridge the gaps on a cultural level. Under the PYD the Kurds in Syria appear to be in a process of creating a nation and in the early stages of formulating a specific national canon for the Kurds of Syria.¹⁹¹

Kurdish groups in Syria's neighbours have had a large impact on the development of Kurdish nationalism in Syria going back to the Mandate Period. Over the decades Kurds originating in Syria have participated in the cause of these groups from The Khouybun League to the PKK and the Kurdish parties in Iraq. Kurdish history is both regional and country specific. Traumatic events like Halabja and injustices are felt by Kurds across regional and international borders. The crisis has split the political organization of Syria's Kurds into two basic camps the PKK, Northern Kurdistan (Turkey) influenced groups and the KRG Southern Kurdistan (Iraq) influenced groups. While there is some cooperation between these factions their assistance to the Western Kurds, those in Syria, is tied to their own regional visions and desires. The desires of Syria's non-politically affiliated Kurds, like those of other Syrians in opposition to the government of Bashar al Assad, have for better or worse been picked up by groups influenced by those outside of Syria.¹⁹²

The crisis has allowed more freedom to express their cultural identity. Sadly the positive opportunities presented by the Crisis are not guaranteed. Syria's civilian non-politically aligned Kurds face internal community pressures. Kurdish parties have their own visions for Kurdish nationalism and culture; however they do not necessarily reflect the will of Syria's Kurds.¹⁹³ The strongest of them, the PYD, is capable and attempting to ensure that its brand of Kurdishness becomes the dominant one. As a result of these goals, Kurdish expressions of

¹⁹¹ MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, *Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam.*

¹⁹² *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle within a Struggle*, 1-42.; MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013; Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, 1-40.

¹⁹³ MacBurnie and Abdelfatah, *Interview Conducted by Author with Rosh Abdelfatah on 21st of March 2013; MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam.*

culture are being regulated. While the PYD is providing stability its level of control is concerning to many, including Kurds themselves.¹⁹⁴

The Kurdish Question within Syria does not seem to be any closer to being addressed than prior to the crisis. The Kurds may have been able to consolidate their territory and have fought hard to preserve it but most of the opposition groups within the country still do not recognize it as a major issue. In many ways this is understandable, as the western half of the country is locked into extremely destructive battles. If the situation in the west can be calmed down the one in the east is likely to remain. The fighting that is occurring between the FSA and the Kurdish forces continues to be seen in terms of terrorists fighting terrorists, for the Kurds they are fighting Islamist fighters from outside of Syria while the FSA see themselves as fighting Kurdish Separatist fighters. As the Syrian Crisis has taken its course specific Kurdish groups have become more adept at managing their image. At the moment the largest winner amongst Kurdish issues appears to be the PYD whose victories may be at the expense of what is actually best for the desires of the Kurdish people. But when faced with the choice between an authoritarian Kurdish Populists movement and a repressive chaotic and violent anti Kurd FSA there is little doubt over who the Kurds would unite behind the PYD.

¹⁹⁴ *Sergie, Kurds Caught between Islamists and the PKK; MacBurnie and Ruigendijk, Interview Conducted by Author with Jeff Ruigendijk on 8th of May 2013 in Amsterdam.*

Appendix 1: The Middle East



Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Appendix 2: Kurdish-inhabited area:



Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Appendix 3: Map of Syria:



Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

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