Toward a Generational Rupture within the Kurdish Movement in Syria?

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The so-called Arab Spring of 2011 has once more showed that although the political trajectory of Kurdish movements is still determined by the political agenda of the nation in which they exist, Kurds are affected by conditions in other countries with significant Kurdish populations and may at times benefit from what takes place there.[1] The verbal escalation between Syria and Turkey since April 2011 and the threat of a Turkish intervention in Syria, should the Syrian regime attempt to use the "Kurdish card" to destabilize Turkey, illustrate the cross-border character of the Kurdish issue.

The Arab Spring has also opened the door to regional transformations that are not limited to political parties. My main argument in this chapter is that although the protest movements of 2011 may fall short of their most radical goals, they have succeeded in irreversibly changing national and even regional thinking and expectations.[2] The most obvious change that present revolutionary upheavals, including in Syria, have brought about is probably a new beginning for youth seeking to become prominent agents of political change.

The unexpected Middle Eastern revolutions that erupted in December 2010 have propelled the region's youth to the forefront of the political and media stage.[3] It has long been anticipated that young people would emerge as a powerful force, simply because the median age across the Middle East is just twenty-five. Moreover, the Middle East is characterized by the fastest-growing labor force as well as the world's highest regional average of youth unemployment. In the next decade, some 100 million jobs will have to be created in the region to absorb the emerging workforce. The "question of the youth" as a critical object of change was indeed addressed by various international agencies, at least for a while.[4]

But many observers were surprised by the protesters' rejection of traditional opposition leaders. To a certain extent, and as a hypothesis, one could argue that for the first time the youth in the Middle East were trying to make their own revolution, to become the real subjects of change and not just objects or tools of action for the sake of their respective nations, as had been the case in the 1960s and 1970s.[5]

It seems certain that a generation's shared experience and its rejection of the tutelage of "paternal" parties were also in effect in the Middle East; however, the youth movement never reached the point of disowning these parties' conceptions of politics. In other words, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the radical student movements in Morocco, Egypt, or Turkey were a continuation of the traditional radical politics and social movements, as Arif Dirlik and others have suggested.[6] The students resented the fact that the reformist or left-nationalist parties had not done anything after seizing power, but this did not bring about a radical questioning of the conception of politics held by these parties.

Such a response is partly due to the fact that the state itself played a major role in producing the identity of the "university's youth." The universities were the source from which future ruling elites were to be nurtured. Yet expectations for the universities and the students were not solely those of the state. The forces of the opposition also considered that the students would become the avant-garde within their respective nations. The Middle Eastern students, like their counterparts in other regions of the world, animated the public space and pretended to speak *to* and *in the name of* society as a whole. As time passed, the students and the intelligentsia in general imposed themselves on the wider public as the architects of dissident politics that would extend well beyond their militant circles.

In 2011, however, I would argue that the youth in the Middle East did not wish to sacrifice their collective and individual hopes and expectations (e.g., living standards, job opportunities, personal and collective dignity, and active political participation) "for the sake of the nation." The Kurds had always been an integral part of Middle Eastern societies and as such evolved in a way very similar to that of other Middle Eastern populations. They were also affected by the lack of democracy and by political, social, and economic transformations throughout the second half of the twentieth century: rapid population growth, an increasing proportion of young people, rapid urbanization, rising levels of unemployment, and higher standards of education (especially in urban areas).

Kurdish youngsters now hold social and political expectations that

could hardly be met by the Syrian regime. However, traditional Kurdish parties have also failed to offer a comprehensive response to such demands. Instead, they have clung to old strategies (internal divisions, contacts with both the regime and the rest of the Syrian opposition) and cultural framing (e.g., identity politics). The parties' lack of new approaches has led to an increasing gap between them and Kurdish youth.

This chapter considers the complex relationship between young Kurds and the Kurdish political parties over the last three decades. After analyzing Kurdish identity in Syria and its articulation in the political field, a brief discussion is presented on the formation of the Syrian Kurdish political parties and, more specifically, the reasons why the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) filled the vacuum left by previous parties. I suggest that both the engagement of thousands of young Syrian Kurds in the ranks of the PKK throughout the 1990s and the Qamishli revolt of 2004 were signs of more complex dynamics within Kurdish society—namely, the first phase of a generational and political rupture. Finally, I will argue that the "Syrian revolution" of 2011 could lead to a serious widening of this gap between political parties and young Kurds if the Kurdish parties do not take into account the expectations of the younger generation.

The Kurdish Identity in Syria

Most Kurds tend to move back and forth between Kurdish and Arab cultures. Yet despite the fact that the Kurds have been subject to some "linguistic Arabization" and, as Syrian citizens, have come under Arabo-Syrian cultural and political influence through education, television, and the army, Kurdish culture still maintains its vitality. Kurdish ethnic identities in Syria take various forms of group affiliation, such as tribe, locality, or class, depending on the social context in which they are produced and expressed. The geographical fragmentation of the Kurdish enclaves compounds this variety. Nevertheless, there is a shared sense of belonging to a Kurdish community with a common culture and history that articulates the various social and cultural realities of Kurdish life in Syria. The collective emphasis on maintaining certain cultural features, such as the use of the Kurdish language or folklore festivals, aims to mark the ethnic boundaries that define the translocal Kurdish identities.[7]

Although ethnic awareness is an important attribute of the Kurds in Syria, translocal identities have not been conducive to Kurdish national mobilization. A number of approaches could resolve this paradox. The

demographic argument, i.e., the relatively small number of Kurds, seems insufficient given that the Alawites, a minority group in Syria, managed to take control of the state apparatus in the mid-1960s. Nor does the geographical distribution of the Kurds in several enclaves in itself explain the political absence of the Kurds in Syria, at least until 2004. Like the Alawites and the Druze, the Kurds took part in the massive exodus from rural areas to Syrian towns and cities, and now populate both rural and urban areas.[8]

A dialectic approach based on the evolution of the Syrian state and of Kurdish communities can, however, provide some explanation for the Kurdish predicament. During the years of the French Mandate (1920–1946), there was no well-defined Kurdish group; this was a direct consequence of their diverse origins, local histories, and the fact that each Kurdish group experienced a different process of integration into their Arab environment. With almost no active involvement by the Syrian state in the country's northern districts, Kurdish peasants and tribesmen there were led by tribal and religious leaders—and this in spite of the Khoybun's efforts to mobilize them around a national Kurdish project.[9] Yet at that time, Kurds were able to live normal lives in the framework of their ethnic identity.

Until 1963, and despite the end of the French Mandate, the Syrian state and its elites possessed neither a clear ideology nor a sufficiently coercive power base to pose a serious threat to Kurdish identity. While the rise to power of the Ba'th led to the imposition of an official ideology, the new regime suffered from internal divisions that prevented it from establishing viable official institutions or even from creating a myth of national integration, which would have given it at least some legitimacy. It was not until Hafiz al-Asad came to power in 1970 that a coherent and dominant power structure was finally established.

The Kurds, along with other ethnic groups lacking an official identity in the Syrian state, were invited to either adhere to the principles of the regime or maintain passive obedience. Like all Syrian citizens, the Kurds were subjected to the state of emergency that came into effect in 1963, with its new norms and restrictions on expression and association. However, some essential principles of the regime, notably that of Arab nationalism, and some laws (including restrictions on Kurdish language and folklore) were direct attacks on the core of Kurdish identity and threatened the survival of Kurdish groups.

The Kurdish Parties at the Margins of the Legal System

The Kurds have resided in four different states since 1925 and therefore fall under the political, economic, and military authority of four distinct jurisdictions. A different mode of action is adopted by the Kurdish nationalist movements in each country in accordance with its political system. It was therefore inevitable that the Kurdish political movements would follow distinctive trajectories in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria.

An analysis of the history of the Kurdish movement in Syria largely confirms that the Kurdish parties there constitute an exception among oppositional Kurdish nationalist movements. Syrian Kurdish parties never took up arms against the government of Damascus, while armed struggle has long represented the primary mode of opposition for Kurdish movements elsewhere. As a result, Syrian Kurdish parties were unable to put themselves forward as legitimate political actors or to open negotiations with the central government—a step that is normally taken only after a period of armed conflict.

Over the years, political participation has been restricted to such an extent that more often than not the Kurdish parties remained outsiders, marginal actors in the political arena. This was an outcome of an exclusive political system rather than of the nature of the Kurdish movement itself, which had traditionally limited itself to cultural and civic demands such as lifting the ban on the Kurdish language and restoring citizenship to those stateless Kurds affected by the census of 1962.

It was not until the creation in 1957 of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Syria, eventually renamed the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS), that a popular Kurdish national party finally appeared on the Syrian political scene. Even at this point, the party kept a "Syrianized" agenda in that the objectives of the party did not include the liberation of "Syrian Kurdistan." The party did, however, incorporate improved living conditions for the Syrian Kurds. The KDPS's popularity could be assessed effectively for the first time during the legislative elections in December 1961. Although Nur al-Din Zaza and Shaykh Muhammad 'Isa Mahmud, both founding party members of the KDPS, were elected as independent candidates in al-Jazira, the party was unable to develop as a legal political body after Zaza's election was nullified by the government.

The instability of the KDPS was due at least in part to its internal politics. Since its inception, the party had been subjected to internal discord due to generational and ideological differences. Though it succeeded in bringing together the former members of the Khoybun and the Syrian

Communist Party (SCP), this union was not sufficient to neutralize the tensions between its left-wing former SCP members, young students, teachers, and manual laborers and its right-wing notables, religious leaders, and landowners. These differences were exacerbated by the divisions within the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq that separated the partisans of the "progressive" approach of Jalal Talabani and the party's "conservative" followers led by Mustafa Barzani. The internal divisiveness within the KDP also had repercussions for the KDPS, which was divided into three camps: one pro-Barzani, and two contesting parties split between the left ('Uthman Sabri and Muhammad Nayo) and the right ('Abd al-Hamid Hajj Darwish). Even though he was not a leftist, Darwish eventually joined the Marxist camp of his schoolmate Talabani in 1965.

Five years later, Mustafa Barzani attempted to reunify the KDPS by inviting all of the factions to Iraqi Kurdistan. He was unsuccessful in reuniting the contesting factions under his party's banner, however, and a new party was created by Daham Miro, a landowner. Though the new party succeeded in uniting the conservative party members, the "young wolves," led by Nayo and Darwish, were not reintegrated into the KDPS, known henceforth as "the Party" (or "al-Parti"). In fact, the majority of Kurdish parties professed Marxist and anti-imperialist ideologies, following the example of political parties of non-Kurdish regions, and demanded a degree of autonomy and legal rights from the Arab majority. In the face of pointless ideological disputes, many of which were driven by personal differences, many young Kurds left the parties, which were henceforth left in a state of political lethargy.[10]

There is not space here to give a detailed account of the extreme fragmentation of the Kurdish political arena.[11] My main argument is that, divided by personal and ideological quarrels, lacking in human, material, and symbolic resources, and plagued by an (at best) ambiguous relationship with the government, the Kurdish parties in Syria lacked a clear political project ambitious enough to attract the Kurds and inspire them to proclaim their Kurdish identity and their attachment to a nationalist ideal. Drawing a comparison with the evolution of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Syria during al-Asad's presidency based on an analysis of opportunity structures, resource mobilization, and cultural framing might further clarify this issue.[12]

Filling the Gap: The "Success" Story of the PKK

In the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK was the only organization capable of developing into a truly popular party in Syria, and that had the regime's authority to do so. Unlike other Kurdish parties, the PKK could benefit from a favorable political context that facilitated its expansion in Syria. To a large extent, its success can be explained by the complicity of Damascus in its recruitment and propaganda activities. There are, of course, additional reasons behind the engagement of thousands of Kurds in this guerrilla movement.

First of all, the slogan of a united and independent Kurdistan aroused great sympathy across all social classes in the Syrian Kurdish community in the 1980s. As in Turkey, many Syrian Kurds, whether allied with or opposed to the PKK, recognized that the PKK's discourse of the "new Kurd" helped to restore and even reinvent a Kurdish identity on equal footing with Arab identity. The armed struggle led by the PKK also aroused sympathy because it increased the odds of real political achievements, in contrast to the clandestine activities of other Syrian Kurdish parties, which rarely bore fruit. The repressive practices of the Turkish army in Turkish Kurdistan also generated sympathy for the PKK cause.

Second, the role played by Abdullah Öcalan, the charismatic leader of the PKK, should not be underestimated.[13] As he became the embodiment of a political myth, engaging in the PKK's guerrilla movement increasingly meant engaging in Öcalan's army. Following internal purges and the establishment of a rigid hierarchy within the PKK, Öcalan, both loved and feared by his supporters, came to be perceived as an incarnation of Kurdishness.[14]

In addition, in some regions, such as Kurd-Dagh and Jarablus, the PKK filled a vacuum left by Kurdish organizations based mainly in al-Jazira. Well organized and supported by the Syrian government, PKK officials created a highly effective network, which made it possible for them to recruit men for their armed contingent and to accumulate significant financial resources from Kurdish-owned businesses.

Finally, a number of young men from poor border-town areas such as Darbasiyya and Kobane ('Ayn al-'Arab) may have seen military engagement in the PKK as a potential means of economic and social advancement. On the one hand, the complicity of the Syrian authorities with the PKK allowed organized gangs trained by the party to control the illegal traffic in drugs and weapons across the border. On the other hand, their

access to weapons and the very fact of belonging to such a gang allowed some young Kurds to emerge as powerful local players, set apart from the older generation in their communities and families. In other words, military engagement offered Kurdish youths an opportunity to challenge the Kurdish social order and to renegotiate their own place within it. On another level, the PKK started promoting gender equality among the Kurdish population in Syria and sought to undermine the tribal and religious allegiances that formed the basis of the traditional Kurdish political elite.

However, the engagement of young Syrian Kurds in the ranks of the PKK and their disengagement from traditional parties did not lead to a distinctive youth agenda separate from the general "nationalist agenda." Their expectations therefore continued to be "sacrificed" for the sake of the nation.

The Qamishli Revolt of 2004

Most media coverage reported that on March 12, 2004, insults between the fans of two football teams, namely the local team of Qamishli and that of Dayr al-Zur, escalated into a riot. The governor of Hasaka ordered the security forces to open fire; the shooting resulted in six dead, all Kurds. This sparked further rioting throughout Qamishli, where youngsters burned grain warehouses and destroyed scores of public buses. New repressive measures sparked Kurdish unrest in all Kurdish enclaves, as well as in Damascus and Aleppo.

The same evening, Kurdish students from the University of Damascus attempted to approach the former United Nations office in a diplomatic quarter of the Syrian capital to protest against the inaction of the United Nations.[15] Later that night, some Kurdish parties—including the Yekîtî Kurd and the PYD (Democratic Union Party, founded in 2003 to replace the PKK)—decided to assemble a protest group by means of placards and portable phones and hold a rally against the actions of the security forces, building on the funeral services for the victims of the clashes.

The next day, Kurdish expectations of a large turnout were greatly surpassed. Thousands of people followed the funeral procession to the cemetery of Qudur Beg, the traditional Kurdish quarter of Qamishli. Security forces, supported by armed militias from Arab tribes, countered this demonstration by firing into the crowd, triggering violent attacks against public buildings and the railroad station, which culminated in the destruction

of several statues of Hafiz al-Asad. Rumors of a real massacre quickly circulated, so that thousands of people took to the streets in other Kurdish towns and even in Arab cities with a strong concentration of Kurds, like Hama, Raqqa, Aleppo, and Damascus.

The Qamishli revolt (*serhildan* or *intifada*) signified the beginning of a new era for the Kurds of Syria in a number of ways. First, all players on the Kurdish cultural and political scene immediately abandoned any attempt to conceal the conflict between them and the Syrian government. Both in northern Syria and in Damascus and Aleppo, thousands of Kurds— especially young people—continued to openly defy the Ba'thist regime by mobilizing and initiating collective actions such as marches, demonstrations, commemorations, and cultural festivals.

Furthermore, the Kurdish parties had been courted by other Syrian opposition groups ever since 2004. Abroad, the National Salvation Front (NSF), which was established in early 2006, and the Reform Party of Syria, under the leadership of Farid Ghadri and based in the United States, were about to offer a "democratic" solution to the Kurdish problem in Syria. Within the country, intellectuals, human rights activists, and the secular opposition had already established stable connections with Kurdish organizations. The Syrian regime also issued well-intentioned declarations with respect to the Kurds. And finally, for the first time in history, political parties and population groups from other Kurdish regions expressed their solidarity with the Syrian Kurds by means of public declarations and demonstrations in Diyarbakır (Turkey), Erbil, and Sulaymaniyya (Iraq).

While the identity aspects of the March 2004 mobilization and the irrational dimension of the violence should not be underrated, other factors, socioeconomic ones in particular, facilitated a better understanding of the occurrences at Qamishli.[16] It is true that today the Druze, Isma'ili, and Kurds are still situated at the political, economic, and geographic periphery, with weak representation in government, a fact that is particularly noticeable in upper al-Jazira. These peripheral groups are more likely to use their ethnic or religious identity as a "political resource."[17] Or, to put it differently, although the demands of the Kurdish minority are not limited to economic issues, the inability to satisfy such demands may further radicalize their nationalist agenda.[18]

Certain factors give added weight to this perspective. The rapid urbanization of towns like Qamishli and the migration of Kurdish peasants toward Arab cities like Damascus or Aleppo introduced a new dynamic,

namely the marginalization of certain social classes of urban Kurds. In Qamishli, while the traditional Christian and Arab quarters have greatly developed over the last few years, with paved roads, electricity, street lights, and refuse collection, the Kurdish suburbs still resemble large third-world villages suffering from a lack of sewers, potable water, and electricity. In Aleppo, industry had drawn thousands of unskilled Kurdish immigrants from the countryside. These Kurdish immigrants relocated mainly in the working-class neighborhoods of Ashrafiyya, Shaykh Maqsud, and Shʿar. In Damascus, the Kurdish immigrants, like the thousands of Syrians who had come from all over the country, crowded together in poor neighborhoods, officially called "informal and spontaneous residential zones."

Although the fragility of the Syrian economy affected the entire population of the country, al-Jazira was also affected by an "Arab Belt" policy (i.e., the confiscation of land), by the census of 1962 and its social consequences, by the state's chronic lack of investment, by the mechanization of agriculture (accelerating rural exodus), and by a major drought between 1995 and 1999 that further impoverished thousands of families dependent on the cotton harvest. A dramatic population growth added to the economic strain, as it was far too rapid to be sustainable. The Kurdish population experienced the highest demographic growth in Syria. The 2006 census came to 1 to 1.5 million people, indicating that the population had increased sixfold in half a century, so that the Kurds were now the second-largest minority group, after the Alawites.[19]

In fact, some of the people in the working-class neighborhoods attributed the participation of young Kurds from Damascus in the violence of March 2004 to poverty, coupled with the repression to which the Kurds were subjected.[20] The high level of popular participation in the riots in Qamishli was confirmed by several witnesses.[21]

The Prominent Role of the Youth in the March 2004 Unrests

Their claims notwithstanding, the Kurdish political parties did not play a significant role at the beginning of the uprising. Instead, the revolt sparked as the Kurdish youth took to the streets, storming official buildings and destroying state symbols. Most of the political parties did their best to calm down the demonstrators in the hope that restoring order in the Kurdish enclaves would make it possible for them to obtain at least some concessions from the Syrian government.[22] Reaffirming their loy-

alty to President Bashar al-Asad, the Kurdish parties—with the exception of Yekîtî Kurd and the PYD/PKK—decided to suspend the festivities of Newroz (the Kurdish National Day, March 21). In return, al-Asad declared amnesty for 312 detainees.

Elsewhere I have argued that a parallel could be established between the aftermath of the Islamic protest following the massacre in Hama in 1982 and the new political equilibrium that followed the Qamishli revolt, namely a new accommodation between the regime and the Kurdish movement in Syria.[23] Aware of the power of the Kurdish movement, the Syrian regime might take a more flexible approach to the public expression of Kurdish identity (language, music, cultural festivals, publications), while the Kurdish movement might at least temporarily abandon its goal of overturning the government of Bashar al-Asad.

This accommodation seemed apparent after the repression of the March 2004 upheavals. The Syrian authorities decreed that the "illegal" Kurdish parties were to cease all political activities and transform themselves into "legal" cultural associations. In addition, at the time of the tenth Regional Congress of the Baʿth Party (June 6–9, 2005) Minister Buthayna Shaʿban made a rare Syrian public statement, proclaiming that "ethnic diversity is a national wealth that should be maintained," though the recognition of diversity should take place under the "umbrella of national interest," which would evidently remain defined solely by the regime.[24]

Yet the accommodation between the regime and the Kurdish movement did not lead to an end of the conflict. The mostly short-term arrests of Kurdish leaders continued, as did the repression of gatherings organized by the PYD (notably in Aleppo) and by the Yekîtî. Furthermore, by 2006 violence between young demonstrators and security forces had become routine during the Newroz festivals and other gatherings.[25]

Kurdish mobilization between 2004 and 2006 created new dynamics in the movement, including the emergence of new actors, particularly women and young people, thereby creating a new brand of public sympathy for the Kurdish parties. However, the decline of collective action, the stabilization of the regime in the international arena before the violent uprising of 2011, and the lengthy process of political unification in the Kurdish movement induced a degree of lassitude within the movement. This social fatigue manifested itself in less public involvement, more criticism directed at the Kurdish parties, more focus on personal development (professional and economic), and more migration toward large Arab cities.

2011—Toward a Generational Rupture?

When the "Syrian revolution" erupted in March 2011, all eyes turned to the Kurds. Would they join the protest movement initiated in the besieged city of Darʿa, or would they maintain the fragile political balance established after 2005? As a matter of fact, the Kurdish areas remained comparatively calm until October 2011, since most of the Kurdish political parties were reluctant to become actively involved in the "Syrian revolution."

There are several complementary explanations as well for the Kurdish response to the Syrian revolution. Some are linked to the present political context. First and foremost, the regime has met two of the main demands put forward by the Kurdish political parties. Given the dangerous context for the Syrian regime, Damascus issued a decree on April 7, 2011, granting Syrian citizenship to tens of thousands of Kurds who, according to the special census of 1962, had been deprived of citizenship for nearly fifty years. At the same time, Decree 49 was repealed on March 26, 2011.[26] However, these concessions were not the result of successful negotiations by the Kurdish parties, but rather seemed to have been granted in order to prevent, or at least minimize, Kurdish participation in the Syrian revolution.

Consequently, the Kurdish parties were buying time to see whether they could obtain more concessions from the regime. One should not forget that the Kurdish leaders, as leaders and not solely as individuals, were invited for the first time by the Syrian government in June 2011 to negotiate more concessions. Yet the government's invitation was eventually declined, mostly due to social pressure (e.g., demonstrations by and meetings with Kurdish youth).

Other more complex factors kept the Kurdish political parties away from protest movements. One factor was that Kurdish parties had not yet made up their minds about the final goals of the struggle. Nearly ten months after anti-government protests started, Syrian Kurdish parties and their leaders still remained divided over whether to participate in the demonstrations and in the broad-based coalition of opposition forces known as the Syrian National Council, established in Istanbul on October 2, 2011.[27] And, more importantly, they still had to agree about essential issues: Did Kurdish parties and leaders want the downfall of the regime? Did they want to implement a regional autonomy in Northern Syria? Or did they want to ask solely for cultural rights?

The existence of seventeen political parties—half of them not really

meaningful in terms of numbers and political impact—and the lack of a common and clear agenda paralyzed Kurdish activism until July 2012. This was the main reason why ten Kurdish political parties formed a coalition, the Kurdish National Council, in October 2011, allegedly to support the removal of the regime and the establishment of federalism for Syrian Kurds. Not all parties joined the council. The PYD, arguably one of the few Kurdish mass parties in Syria, did not join but instead demanded that the council oppose any foreign intervention in the country, a condition that clearly targeted Turkey. In the view of the PYD, foreign intervention in Syria would open the door to Turkey, which would take advantage of the situation to eradicate the PKK militants in Syria and establish a puppet Syrian government led by the Muslim Brotherhood.[28]

Another factor at work is that, unlike in most Middle Eastern countries (Palestine is probably the other exception), the Kurdish national question has not yet been solved. Therefore, the "national issue," central to the Kurdish political parties and large sectors of Kurdish society, has persisted. Within the context of a yet incomplete "national" normalization, identity politics have remained prevalent in the Kurdish political field, whereas socioeconomic issues have largely been neglected by the Kurdish parties.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the Syrian Kurdish parties could hardly meet the expectations or even channel the uncertainty of the politicized and young Kurds, who refused to end a struggle that had finally erupted with the Qamishli revolt. After Qamishli, young activists established their own "cultural centers," with a view to putting forward their own political agenda. In that sense, the 2011 crisis provided the opportunity that dissatisfied youth had been waiting for. From the very beginning, some groups of Kurdish youth in Syria were active in protests against the regime, not only in al-Jazira, but also in Damascus and Aleppo, having received but little backing from the Kurdish political parties. Later on, such developments were publicly acknowledged by Kurdish representatives such as Abdulbasit Hamo, who told al-Jazeera television that "the Kurdish youth organizations and committees are the real Kurdish revolutionaries on the ground. They have been organizing anti-Asad demonstrations since March 2011 and they are the reason behind the unification of the Kurdish political movement in Syria." He added, "We have to learn from those young activists the actual meaning of pro-liberation revolution against suppression and persecution. We have to follow them, in order to be able to represent them."[29]

In Qamishli alone, dozens of Kurdish youth groups were established,

among them the Revolutionary Youth, the Jizre Civil Society, the Kurdish Youth, and the Sawa Youth Coalition.[30] As mentioned previously, these groups prevented the leaders of the Kurdish parties from accepting an invitation to an official meeting with Bashar al-Asad and the Syrian government in June 2011. More importantly, three Kurdish parties eventually decided to back the youth movements and participate in the demonstrations. Among them were the Freedom Party (Azadî), the Kurdish Union Party (Yekîtî Kurd), and the Future Movement, of which Mashʿal Tammo (who was assassinated on October 8) was the leader. In general, the youth committees were keen to cooperate with the Local Coordination Committees of Syria. In other words, increasing numbers of youngsters were seeking a new beginning within a new framework: a democratic Syria free of sectarian and ethnic strife; a Syria with more job opportunities and a higher living standard.

Another sign of this widening gap between the youth and the political parties became apparent in the last months of 2011. In mid-September the "Army of the Nations," a Kurdish armed group, went public on the Internet, stating its intent to confront the Syrian regime. The founders claimed they had met with a group of military experts and influential Kurdish figures in Qamishli a few weeks previously. Two days after the killing of Mashʿal Tammo in October, a video was posted on YouTube by Kurdish men in military uniforms, with flags and maps of Kurdistan in the background, who claimed to be the founders of the Lions of the Kurdish Homeland.[31] They pledged to use arms to protect the Kurds of Syria and encouraged Kurdish soldiers in the Syrian army to defect.

By early 2012, most Kurdish parties were still trying to prevent youths from using force against the regime out of concern that "forming these kinds of groups may bring killings and looting to the Kurdish areas of Syria."[32] Particularly telling was the attitude of the PYD/PKK in Syria. Still influential among the Kurdish youth in ʿAfrin, the party decided not to participate in mass demonstrations and seemed to have sealed an alliance with the Syrian government, although this development was denied by its chairman, Salih Muslim Muhammad.[33] The reasons for the alliance with the government, however, are self-evident. PKK activists were under pressure in Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey,[34] and the party needed a safe haven where militants could find shelter. Ultimately, the PKK hoped that, should the regime not fall, their loyalty would bring about political hegemony in the Kurdish areas.

This chapter takes the view that growing numbers of Kurdish youngsters felt disconnected from the traditional parties, either because they

wished to establish bridges with their Syrian counterparts, they sought a more radical solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria (that is, local autonomy), or they strove for both cooperation and autonomy. Consequently, the danger of a generational rupture affected all parties, without exception. In addition, the largest and best-educated generation of Syrian Kurds in history sought new avenues that did not necessarily include a dialogue with the political parties. In that sense, it was suggested that three factors—the PKK's successful buildup of the party in the 1980s and 1990s, the Qamishli revolt of 2004, and the 2011 "Syrian revolution"—eventually distanced Kurdish youth from the traditional political field. The already fragile Kurdish parties thus found themselves at a crossroads where their survival might depend on their willingness to listen to the demands and aspirations of the younger generation.