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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> <p>During four and a half years of war inside of Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's military and economic conditions have deteriorated. Forces loyal to President Assad are in decline, sanctions and drought have crippled the Syrian economy and the regime is diplomatically isolated. As Bashar al-Assad's situation has worsened he has turned to direct support from Russia and has benefitted from an increase in Iranian military advisors to his ground forces. The results of these interventions are positive, but the final resolution to the conflict is distant. In the north of Syria are the Kurds, an ethnic group who has carved out an enclave of security and self-reliance built on democratic principles. The Kurds exist in a pseudo-autonomous status that is not legally recognized by the Government of Syria. The author asserts that President Assad should actively engage with Syria's Kurdish population in order to make permanent territorial autonomy of their homeland in exchange for their allegiance in the fight against the regime's enemies. The Kurds have proven highly effective in the fight against extremists across Syria and Iraq. Bashar al-Assad should recognize this and unlock the gains that could be achieved through properly negotiated Kurdish territorial autonomy.</p>					
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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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**Syrian Kurdish Autonomy: A Decisive Strategy for Bashar al-Assad**

**by**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**30 October 2015**

## CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Background	2
Defining Autonomy	4
Iraqi Kurdistan	5
Assad: Military Gains	8
Assad: Non-military Gains	12
Counter-Argument: Turkey	14
Counter-Argument: Iran	16
Counter-Argument: Lack of Kurdish Unity	17
Conclusions	18
Recommendations	19
Bibliography	21

## **ABSTRACT**

### *Syrian Kurdish Autonomy: A Decisive Strategy for Bashar al-Assad*

During four and a half years of war inside of Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's military and economic conditions have deteriorated. Forces loyal to President Assad are in decline, sanctions and drought have crippled the Syrian economy and the regime is diplomatically isolated. As Bashar al-Assad's situation has worsened he has turned to direct support from Russia and has benefitted from an increase in Iranian military advisors to his ground forces. The results of these interventions are positive, but the final resolution to the conflict is distant. In the north of Syria are the Kurds, an ethnic group who has carved out an enclave of security and self-reliance built on democratic principles. The Kurds exist in a pseudo-autonomous status that is not legally recognized by the Government of Syria. The author asserts that President Assad should actively engage with Syria's Kurdish population in order to make permanent territorial autonomy of their homeland in exchange for their allegiance in the fight against the regime's enemies. The Kurds have proven highly effective in the fight against extremists across Syria and Iraq. Bashar al-Assad should recognize this and unlock the gains that could be achieved through properly negotiated Kurdish territorial autonomy.

## INTRODUCTION

The regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad maintains its tenuous grip on power despite slow progress in the prosecution of the ongoing wars against anti-regime forces and Sunni extremists. Forces loyal to Assad are seriously reduced, and the Government of Syria (GOS) now controls only twenty-five to thirty percent of territory within the state.<sup>1</sup> While it once appeared that regime collapse was imminent, this premonition has been altered by the recent deployment of Russian forces to the Syrian coastal city of Latakia and an increase in support from Iran.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, President Assad's allies recognize that his hold on power is tenuous and that only through direct military intervention will he survive. The question that remains unanswered is what additional actions Bashar al-Assad could take in order to assure the survival of his regime.

In the Northern Syrian area of Rojava are the Kurds whose militia, the People's Protection Unit (YPG), number approximately 40,000 and have proven to be a resilient force able to seize and defend territory from the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>3</sup> Largely ungoverned, Syrian Kurds exist in a legally unrecognized "pseudo-autonomous" status, fearful that the conclusion of the ongoing war will bring a return of anti-Kurdish sentiment and repression.<sup>4</sup> Bashar al-Assad must seize on this opportunity and actively engage with Syria's Kurdish population in order to negotiate territorial autonomy of Rojava on terms that decisively benefit the GOS' military and economic conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Yaakov Lappin, "Russia, Iran Step up Support for Syria," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (September 11, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Lappin, *Russia, Iran Step up Support for Syria*, 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Stephens, "Analysis—YPG: The Islamic State's Worst Enemy," *Jane's Defence Weekly* (September 11, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Ofra Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 213.

The author will first present an analysis of Iraqi Kurdish territorial autonomy, drawing parallels between their progress and the potential for Syria's Kurds. An argument will then be presented to detail the military gains that Bashar al-Assad may reap from a properly negotiated Kurdish autonomy. This will be followed by an analysis of the potential economic, security and international diplomatic yields that may be achieved. Finally, counter-arguments will be considered and recommendations will be outlined.

## **BACKGROUND**

What began in March 2011 as state-tolerated freedom of expression in the wake of the regional "Arab Spring" has morphed into a complex civil war and battle against religious extremists. Bashar al-Assad's enemies now include numerous anti-regime groups, Al Qaeda-sponsored affiliates, ISIL, foreign fighters and exiled political groups. The most serious of these threats comes from the 20,000-30,000 strong ISIL, who is currently in control of one-third of Syrian territory.<sup>5</sup>

Syria is also host to proxy influences from Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Turkey.<sup>6</sup> Russia has recently begun providing the GOS with direct military support that include bombing sorties and cruise missiles, while the United States and its allies have conducted over 7,000 air strikes inside of Syria as part of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah El Deeb, "A look at Combatants in the Air and on the Ground in Syria," *U.S. News and World Report* (October 1, 2015): <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/10/01/a-look-at-combatants-in-the-air-and-on-the-ground-in-syria>.

<sup>6</sup> Hassan Hassan, "Could the Iran Deal Lead to a Syria Deal?" *Foreign Policy* (July 15, 2015): <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/15/could-the-iran-deal-lead-to-a-syria-deal-assad/>.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve," [http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve).

Through four and a half years of war, Assad's position has weakened. Aside from Iran, Russia and, to a lesser extent China, the GOS is diplomatically isolated.<sup>8</sup> Many states, including Syria's neighbors, Turkey and Jordan, have openly called for Assad to step down.<sup>9</sup> Once a founding member of the Arab League, Syria was ousted from the alliance in 2011 after Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown of protesters.<sup>10</sup> Forces loyal to Assad have experienced significant losses due to battlefield attrition, defection and desertion resulting in a reduction from 325,000 troops in 2011 to estimated an 178,000 today.<sup>11</sup> In a sign of his weakening position, Assad has indicated that he will focus on "critical areas" at the expense of others, and has implemented his "Army in All Corners" campaign plan, relying on a network of widely dispersed territorial outposts that do little more than emplace small static units into the far reaches of the Syrian territory.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the Kurds of Northern Syria have established an enclave inside of this troubled state. The GOS pulled out of Kurdish lands in July 2012 leaving the Syrian Kurdish political body, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to assume control of the Area of Rojava, an area that includes most of Syria's northern border.<sup>13</sup> In January 2014 the PYD declared autonomy from the Syrian state and published "*The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons.*"<sup>14</sup> This constitution did little to establish legitimacy as the GOS has refused to recognize the PYD's claim to autonomy. As recently as September 2015 President Assad stated, "After we

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<sup>8</sup> James Hackett, ed., *The Military Balance 2015* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015), 1061.

<sup>9</sup> Jay Solomon and Nour Malas and Laurence Norman, "World Leaders Urge Assad to Resign," *Wall Street Journal* (August 19, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Cochrane, ed., *IHS Jane's Sentinel: Country Risk Assessments, Eastern Mediterranean 2014*, Issue 36 (London: IHS, 2014), 456.

<sup>11</sup> Reed Foster, ed., *IHS Jane's World Armies* (London: IHS, 2015), 689.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Kozak, "An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria: Middle East Security Report 26," *Institute for the Study of War* (April, 2015): 32.

<sup>13</sup> Stephens, "Analysis – YPG: The Islamic State's Worst Enemy," 2.

<sup>14</sup> "The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons," <http://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/>.

defeat ISIS, al-Nusra and the terrorists, the Kurdish demands expressed by certain opposition parties can be discussed nationally.”<sup>15</sup> Assad placates the Kurds by fueling hopes of an autonomous future with no real near term offer.

The Kurds have signaled their willingness to meet with Assad. In the absence of legally recognized autonomy, the PYD exist in a “pseudo-autonomous” status, one that could easily be undone after cessation of hostilities. The Kurds are uneasy, recognizing that if Assad should fall he may be replaced by a less tolerant Arab regime that could change course dramatically and reverse the gains made since 2011.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Bashar al-Assad holds in his hands the preeminent bargaining chip, one that would inspire the Kurds to action on behalf of their best interests, as well as his own.

### **DEFINING AUTONOMY**

Central to this thesis is the concept of autonomy, specifically the type that is applicable to Syrian Kurds. Late twentieth century examples of countries that recognize territorial autonomies within their federations include Spain, China, Italy, Denmark, and the United Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> International agreements apply to the most highly developed autonomous regions such as Hong Kong, Northern Ireland and the Palestinian Authority, while many others have only domestic agreements.

Scholars differ in their definition of autonomy. In the book “*Asymmetric Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*,” the authors assert that territorial autonomy includes two concepts: self-governance and the idea that self-governance takes place within territories

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<sup>15</sup> *Interfax: Russia & CIS Military Newswire*, “Damascus ready to discuss Kurdish issue after terrorist threat is eliminated in country – Assad,” (September 2015):

<http://usnwc.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1712706021>.

<sup>16</sup> Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 213; Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 110-111.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Weller and Katherine Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 22.

that reside inside of the state.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, territorial autonomy includes several elements: self-administration reflective of the ethnic or cultural population, public power resident in the autonomous region, legal recognition by the state (entrenchment), local or regional statute-making powers, governmental institutions, and mechanisms by which the autonomous state remains integrated within the overall state.<sup>19</sup>

The Iraqi central government has negotiated each of the elements of territorial autonomy outlined above with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Negotiated autonomy in Iraq's case has been hugely beneficial to their central government. Bashar al-Assad should learn from their successes and consider the wide range of benefits that Kurdish autonomy would bring to the Rojava area and to his country.

### **IRAQI KURDISTAN**

Facilitated by a referendum held on 15 October 2005, Iraq's Kurdistan cemented its status as a territorial autonomy.<sup>20</sup> Four out of five Iraqi voters and sixteen of the eighteen governorates voted to permanently ratify the Iraqi constitution, giving far-reaching powers to the KRG.<sup>21</sup> Under the new permanent constitution the KRG have an exclusive relationship with the federal government, one not enjoyed by any other Iraqi ethnic minority. Kurdish language is now officially recognized as the second language of Kurdistan, the Peshmerga (KRG's militia) is the lawful army of Kurdistan, and Iraqi Kurds manage the natural resources within their borders.<sup>22</sup> What is perhaps most striking is that the 2005 Iraqi permanent constitution empowered the Kurds with the right to veto any attempt by the

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<sup>18</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Weller, and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 196.

<sup>22</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 196.

federal government to alter their powers or status.<sup>23</sup> It has been a rapid political and social evolution from the brutal atrocities the Iraq's Kurds suffered under Saddam Hussein to the economic and political status recognized today.

The initial seeds of autonomy were planted in the wake of Saddam Hussein's swift 1991 defeat by the United States-led coalition, and under the protective auspices of Operation: SOUTHERN WATCH. In much the same way that GOS withdrew from Rojava in 2012, the Kurds of Iraq were unrestrained by the Hussein regime. Once on their own, they were able to make important incremental steps toward autonomy. Like the Kurds of Syria, they held elections, a significant step toward self-governance.<sup>24</sup> Also like Syria's Kurds, Iraqi Kurds began to extract oil from the wells within their lands and brought it to market. On the diplomatic front Iraqi Kurdish leaders met with many influential regional leaders. Slowly the KRG gained political, diplomatic and economic independence from Bagdad in much the same ways that Syria's Kurds have made gains in the absence of intervention from the federal government in Syria.

Events that followed the 2003 United States-led invasion of Iraq facilitated the final push toward lasting Kurdish autonomy. After the defeat of Saddam Hussein, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) established an Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which offered five of the available twenty-five seats to the Kurds.<sup>25</sup> This influence within the IGC smoothed the way for legalizing the KRG's authorities, first by enshrining it in the

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<sup>23</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 196.

<sup>24</sup> Yaniv Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 71.

<sup>25</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 95-96.

Transitional Administrative Law, and later by gaining permanence in the October 2005 constitution.<sup>26</sup>

President Assad must extend the same right to representation within the federal government to the Kurds of Syria as offered in Iraq. Syrian Kurds will view such influence in Damascus as being in their best interest; it would protect their right to autonomy while ensuring that their voice is heard at the national level. Assad must also follow the Iraqi model and facilitate a change to the Syrian constitution, a demonstration of his long-term willingness to grant territorial autonomy.

Historically speaking, Syrian Kurds are justifiably uncertain about their future. In the past the Kurdish language had been outlawed, and in 1962 the citizenship of 120,000 Kurds was revoked on the grounds that they were not legitimate Syrians.<sup>27</sup> The decades that followed brought discrimination and repression to the Kurdish population. The historical suppression of the Syrian Kurds looms large in their psyche and fuels fear that they will one day be re-marginalized.

President Assad should also recognize the economic advantages that Iraq's Kurdistan has brought to the Iraqi state. Economically, Iraqi Kurdistan is home to more than 1,000 Turkish companies.<sup>28</sup> In fact, approximately 30,000 Turkish citizens have permanent residency in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>29</sup> Between 2003 and 2012, bilateral trade between Iraq and Turkey accounted for an increase from \$941 million to approximately \$9 Billion.<sup>30</sup> While not all of these proceeds are attributable to Iraqi Kurdistan, a large proportion of these

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<sup>26</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 97-99.

<sup>27</sup> Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 112.

<sup>30</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 112.

revenues were generated inside of that area. President Assad should strive to cultivate a Kurdish area that is welcoming to foreign investment, similar to that of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Like the KRG, Syria's PYD have established primary governmental functions, fielded a highly effective military force comparable to the Peshmerga, published a progressive constitution and recognize clearly defined borders. Like Iraqi Kurds, they have expressed no desired secession from the state.<sup>31</sup> The PYD leader, Salih Muslim Muhammad, supports this by offering, "The ruling powers in Damascus come and go. For us Kurds, this isn't so important. What is important is that we Kurds assert our existence."<sup>32</sup>

The security situation in the areas that the Iraqi Kurds govern also stands in sharp contrast to their surrounding provinces. While ISIL has made significant gains through vast areas of Al Anbar and into major cities such as Mosul and Ramadi, the Kurds have rebuffed many of their offensives. Capitulation by the Iraqi Army has emboldened ISIL, while they have been afforded no such victory at Singjar, an area that they held and were later forced to abandon. Assad must note the results brought about by the Peshmerga militias. He too has a pressing requirement for improved border security, tougher defenses and an offensive capability against ISIS, requirements that can be achieved by leveraging the YPG.

### **ASSAD: MILITARY GAINS**

Given the conditions in Syria today, Assad is not positioned for a decisive victory against his opponents in 2015.<sup>33</sup> Experts estimate that 55-72 percent of the Syrian population live in areas controlled by the GOS, a land mass comprised of only twenty-five to thirty

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Eppel, "Kurdish Nationalism's Moment of Truth?," *Middle East*, (December 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Seale, "The Kurds Stir Regional Pot," *Washington report on Middle East Affairs* Volume 31, Issue 7 (Oct 2012).

<sup>33</sup> *Economist*, "Syria's Civil war: Assad on the Back Foot," (April 4, 2015): <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21647673/>.

percent of the area within Syria's borders.<sup>34</sup> During the first half of this year conditions had been on a steady decline. Specifically, forces loyal to Assad lost control of Idlib, a city south of Aleppo, to the Al Qaeda-aligned Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>35</sup> Later, ISIL took control of Palmyra, a central Syrian city that is strategically vital for the control of eastern Syria. The regime continues to wrestle for control in the suburbs of Aleppo and the capital city, Damascus.

Military manpower is a limiting factor for the Syrian regime. In July 2015, Assad gave a public address where he admitted, "a shortfall in human capacity."<sup>36</sup> His primary ground force, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has had a significant decline in strength. Although numbers vary, estimates are that the SAA has approximately 150,000-175,000 troops of which only 65,000-70,000 could reliably be deployed in an offensive.<sup>37</sup> Other Assad loyalists operate under a paramilitary umbrella called the National Defense Forces (NDF), comprised primarily of Assad-aligned Alawite numbering 50,000-100,000.<sup>38</sup> Despite the varied forces, Assad is short of offensive manpower.

The Syrian border with Turkey has long been problematic for the Assad regime. It is widely asserted that Turkey provided early tacit support to ISIL, who now controls the Syrian side of the border crossing at Jarablus.<sup>39</sup> Prior to the current United States-led air campaign, it was assessed that oil revenue funneled \$2 million per month into ISIL coffers, allowing them to pay fighters \$400 per month while facilitating the purchase of arms through the black

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<sup>34</sup> Aron Lund, "The Political Geography of Syria's War: An Interview With Fabrice Balanche," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (January 30, 2015): <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriancrisis/?fa=58875>

<sup>35</sup> *Economist*, "Syria's Civil war: Assad on the Back Foot."

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Kozak, "Syria 90-Day Strategic Forecast: The Regime and Allies," *Institute for the Study of War* (September 17, 2015): 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> Kozak, "An Army in All Corners," 12-13.

<sup>38</sup> Foster, *IHS Jane's World Armies Issue 37*, 690.

<sup>39</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey," *Middle East Policy*, Volume XXII, Issue 1 (April, 2015).

market.<sup>40</sup> Control of the northern border is essential to reduce the flow of oil, black market arms and to prevent the influx of foreign recruits.<sup>41</sup>

As figure 1 shows, anti-regime forces also control an area adjacent to the ISIL held portion of the border north of Aleppo, a situation that poses similar challenges to Assad, with the notable addition of the support that those forces are receiving from outside states. This area also provides a considerable amount of maneuver space for anti-regime elements that continue their assault on Aleppo, where Assad’s forces have suffered significant losses in a campaign that began in November 2013.<sup>42</sup>

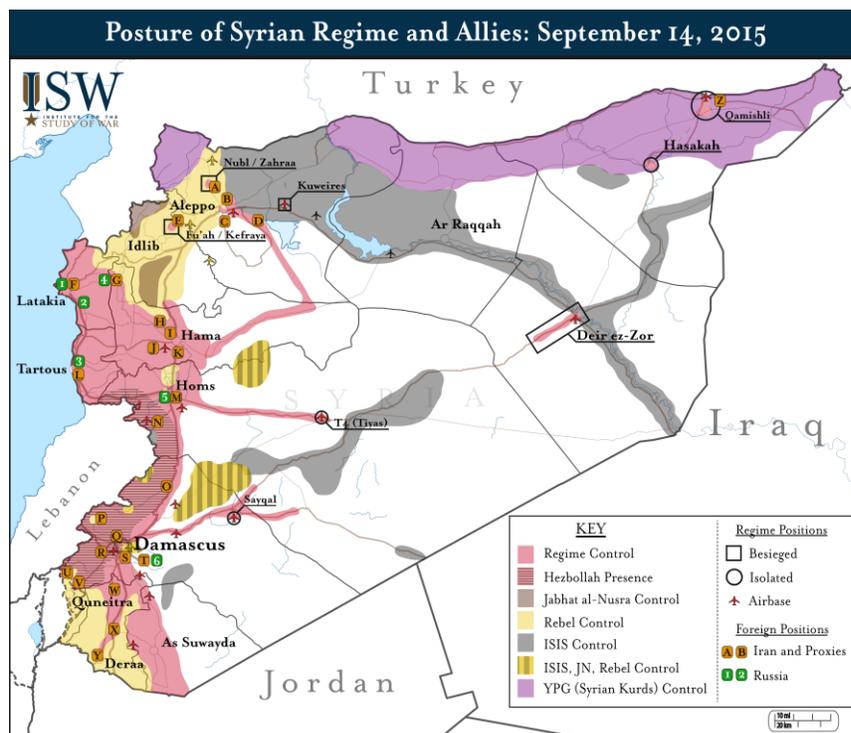


Figure 1. Posture of Syrian Regime and Allies<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *Economist*, “Where the Islamic State Gets its Money,” (September 24, 2015): Proquest ID 164240575.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Micallef, “Turkey and the Kurdish Corridor: Why the Islamic State Survives,” *Huffington Post* (August 16, 2015): [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/turkey-and-the-kurdish-co\\_b\\_7994540.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/turkey-and-the-kurdish-co_b_7994540.html).

<sup>42</sup> Kozak, “An Army in All Corners,” 22-23.

<sup>43</sup> *Institute for the Study of War*, “Posture of Syrian Regime and Allies” (September 14, 2015): <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/search/label/Syria>.

The border area that ISIL and anti-regime forces currently hold intersects the 32,000 square kilometer Kurdish Rojava.<sup>44</sup> Figure 1 shows that this area separates two of the three declared Kurdish cantons of Afrin and Kobane.<sup>45</sup> This territorial split should be leveraged by the Assad regime as he negotiates with them for their autonomy.

While the PYD is thought to number approximately 40,000 men and women, they are often poorly equipped and outgunned.<sup>46</sup> As negotiations commence, they should be offered significant military assistance, weapons, protective equipment, logistical aide and air cover.<sup>47</sup> With the assurance of better support, Assad should then assign responsibility for reuniting the divided Kurdish territory to the PYD. Properly equipped and incentivized, they will act. Assad should also insist that the PYD deny territorial access to anti-regime elements, and allow freedom of maneuver for pro-regime forces. Coordinated YPG/ SAA operations should also be planned. If properly executed, Assad could effectively sever ISIL and anti-regime lines of communication into Turkey and deny them maneuver space to the north of Aleppo.

Once Rojava is reunited, security of the northern border would be left to the YPG while Assad redeploys forces to seize Aleppo and press southward against anti-regime strongholds. Assad must then maintain control of the western population corridor, and mount an offensive to press eastward into the areas under ISIL control. Coordination with Iraqi forces, Kurdish or not, would push ISIL into Iraq. This offensive could repel ISIL and reclaim the territory lost to them in 2013. Next, Assad could focus on internal defense and regaining domestic legitimacy.

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<sup>44</sup> *Economist*, “Striking out on their Own,” (October 28, 2015): <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21628887>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ekurd Daily Website*, “Syrian Kurdistan Divided Into Three Cantons,” (January 6, 2014): <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/1/syriakurd999.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> *Economist*, “Striking out on their Own.”

<sup>47</sup> Stephens, “Analysis – YPG: The Islamic State’s Worst Enemy.”

Russia's recent entrance to the Syrian theater has added a new dimension, the impact of which is still unfolding. Syrian-Russian operations may provide gains, however if they were made simultaneous to coordinated operations with the Kurds, a decisive point could be achieved.

A proper GOS-Kurdish agreement would further serve to ensure de-confliction and economy of force between the YPG and Assad forces. As recently as January of this year the YPG and NDF clashed, as they have several times since 2011.<sup>48</sup> These clashes would be avoided in the future should the Kurds and the GOS align their operations.

The gains that President Assad would realize through proper negotiations with the Kurds would prove decisive. Utilizing the lure of territorial autonomy as a "carrot and stick" incentive to the Kurds, he will put much of what the Kurds desire within reach, and in doing so improve military conditions for his regime.

### **ASSAD: NON-MILITARY GAINS**

Bashar al-Assad stands to gain from a territorial autonomous Kurdish region in other ways. Syria's Kurds are organized and resourceful, and like the KRG of Iraqi Kurdistan the PYD have an established interim government and have set up ministries tasked with overseeing the economy, agriculture, natural resources and foreign affairs.<sup>49</sup> Schools are open, water supplies are sporadic but existent, and food and fuel is available. Most promising is that Syria's Kurds produce 70% more wheat than required, creating an opportunity for exports, and the oil refinery under their control is operating at only 5% of potential capacity.<sup>50</sup> The prospect of the Kurds bringing oil to the market at full capacity and returning

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<sup>48</sup> *Associated Press*, "Kurdish Fighters Clash With Syrian Forces" (January 17, 2015): <http://news.yahoo.com/kurdish-fighters-clash-syrian-forces-161949031.html>.

<sup>49</sup> *Economist*, "Striking out on their Own."

<sup>50</sup> *Economist*, "Striking out on their Own."

a portion of the revenue to the state should be appealing to a government who has presided over the decline of an industry that once added \$4 billion annually to the Syrian economy.<sup>51</sup> Syrian oil exports in 2011 averaged 380,000 barrels per day, a number that has shrunk to an average of 8,486 barrels per day in 2015.<sup>52</sup> Under sanctions administered in September 2011, the Syrian government is not permitted to export oil to Europe, formerly the destination for nearly all oil exports.<sup>53</sup> By endowing the Kurds, as part of their autonomy agreement, with rights to negotiate international oil contracts Syrian oil could once again reach this lucrative market.

A closer relationship with the Kurds would also offer Assad political benefits. Although he does have military, domestic and economic options, he remains internationally isolated. World opinion has galvanized against him during the execution of heavy-handed offensives, indiscriminate bombing campaigns and suspected use of chemical weapons. However, in recent months the tone of world leaders has softened and it appears that there is a gradual acceptance of Assad as a flawed option, but perhaps the best near-term option for Syria. What is clear is that should Assad survive, he will need to emerge from isolation and re-enter the international stage, if for no other reason than to resuscitate the Syrian economy.

By aligning himself with Kurdish aspirations, President Assad could improve his international image. He should meet publicly with the two leading Kurdish groups, the PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and stress a spirit of cooperation and a shared outlook. The Kurds are the most internationally popular group within his borders, a fact that

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<sup>51</sup> *Economist*, "Striking out on their Own."

<sup>52</sup> Caroline Alexander and Donna Abu-Nasser, "How War Has Destroyed Syria's Economy in Four Charts," *Bloomberg* (July 27, 2015): <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-07-29/how-war-has-destroyed-syria-s-economy-in-four-charts>.

<sup>53</sup> Josh Wood, "Syria's Oil Resources Are a Source of Contention for Competing Groups," *New York Times* (March 20, 2013): <http://nyt.ms.YrnFpS>.

he should leverage. Their ideals are set forth in the Constitution of the Rojava Cantons which posits, "...pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability. The Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society."<sup>54</sup> Although his true intentions are toward the advancement of military and economic gains, the outward message should be that of a free and fair Syria, with Bashar al-Assad as the President.

### **COUNTER-ARGUMENT: TURKEY**

One may argue that it would be contrary to President Assad's best interest to grant Kurdish territorial autonomy because it would damage relations with Syria's neighbor to the north.

The Government of Turkey does have a long-standing "Kurdish Problem." In the decades since the 1973 formation of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), there has been much mutual bloodshed between the government of Turkey and the PKK.<sup>55</sup> The PKK has been implicated in several attacks on civilian and unarmed military garrisons.<sup>56</sup> For its part, Turkey has arrested PKK members, conducted targeted killings and has longstanding discriminatory laws that forbid the expression of Kurdish culture. Because of their extremist tactics, Turkey and the rest of North Atlantic Treaty Organization have recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization. Turkey continues aerial bombing of PKK as part of the American led air campaign against ISIL.<sup>57</sup> They also choose to retain the jailed PKK leader, Abdullah

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<sup>54</sup> "The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons," <http://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/>.

<sup>55</sup> Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 140.

<sup>56</sup> *BBC*, "Profile: Kurdistan Workers Party, PKK," (July 27, 2015): <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>.

<sup>57</sup> Isabel Coles, "Kurdish Civilians Under Fire as Turkey Bombs PKK in Iraq," *Reuters* (August 20, 2015): <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/20/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds>.

Ocalan. As a sign that neither side is backing down, the PKK declared an autonomous region in the Turkish Dersim province in August of this year, a claim flatly rejected by the Turkish government.<sup>58</sup>

The government in Ankara views the Syrian PYD as closely aligned with the PKK. It is widely accepted that the PYD was formed in 2003 by members of the PKK who were expelled from Syria in the late 1990s.<sup>59</sup> President Assad has demonstrated noteworthy assistance to the PYD by allowing freedom of travel to its leader, Salih Muslim.<sup>60</sup> The Turks viewed this unfavorably and are convinced that Assad is supporting the PYD in response to suspected Turkish support to anti-regime forces, particularly the Free Syrian Army.<sup>61</sup>

Given the current distrust between governments, Assad stands to lose little by pressing forward with Kurdish autonomy inside of his borders. While the Turks will no doubt express deep concern over this development, their options are limited and they will not resort to direct military actions. The international community favors the Kurds, and Turkey has not yet given up on the idea that it may one day join the European Union.<sup>62</sup> Turkey must be seen in the eyes of the European community as progressive enough to be considered by the European Union for inclusion.

Additionally, relations between Turkey and Syria are unlikely to worsen. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has openly called for the removal of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>63</sup> Turkey

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Chastain, "Kurdish PKK Terror Group Declares 'Autonomous Region' in Turkey," *Breitbart* (August 19, 2015): <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/08/19/kurdish-pkk-terror-group-declares-autonomous-region-in-turkey>.

<sup>59</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst and Company, 2014), 102.

<sup>60</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 104-106.

<sup>61</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 106.

<sup>62</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "*Turkey EU Relations*," (October 20, 2015): <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-the-european-union.en.mfa>.

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Burch, "Turkey Tells Assad: Step Down!," *Reuters*, (November 22, 2011): <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/22/us-syria-idUSL5E7MD0GZ20111122>.

continues to allow the United States to use its airbase in Incirlik for strikes inside of Syria while the United States continues to assist anti-regime forces. Turkey's response to Kurdish autonomy should not concern President Assad. They have no deterrent capability to bring to bear in the event that he presses forward with an autonomous Rojava.

### **COUNTER-ARGUMENT: IRAN**

No relationship is more important to Bashar al-Assad than that between Syria and Iran, thus an analysis of the likely Iranian response to Syrian Kurdish autonomy is essential.<sup>64</sup>

Over recent decades the Kurds and the Iranian Government have settled into an uneasy relationship predicated on the notion by some within the government that Iran's Kurds desire succession from the state.<sup>65</sup> This unease persists despite repeated statements made to the contrary by the predominate Iranian Kurdish party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) who has adopted the mantra, "Kurdish national rights within the context of a democratic and federal Iran."<sup>66</sup> While the tone implied in this slogan appears nonthreatening to the Iranian state, the historical context and fervent Iranian nationalism feeds contrary notions. Memories of a 1979 Kurdish uprising are not distant enough, an event that included Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration of a "holy war" that resulted in the death of over 10,000 Kurds.<sup>67</sup> Tensions remain, as accounts of Iranian suppression of the Kurdish population are common. Prominent leaders inside Iran equate Iranian Kurdish autonomy with the destruction of Iran's national identity and a harbinger of emerging ethnic autonomy from other non-Persian ethnic groups.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Cochrane, *Jane's Country Risk Assessment*, 451.

<sup>65</sup> Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 250.

<sup>66</sup> Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 250.

<sup>67</sup> Rodi Hevian "The Main Kurdish Political Parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey: a Research Guide," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Volume 17, Issue 2 (Summer 2013): 95.

<sup>68</sup> Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 251.

These concerns are exaggerated and cannot be cause for Assad to shrink away from negotiations with the Kurds. While various Kurdish factions send mixed signals to Tehran regarding their intentions, the Government of Iran proves resourceful and resilient in the face of voices calling for Kurdish cessation. They have effectively controlled information dissemination by eliminating Kurdish websites and closing newspapers.<sup>69</sup> They continue heavy-handed yet effective control over any Kurdish separatists' aspirations.

The Kurds of Syria would have little affect inside of Iran. Kurdish autonomy in Syria would be displaced geographically. The granting of Iraqi Kurdish territorial autonomy has had a stabilizing effect on Iran's neighbor to the west. Additionally, as Iran continues to ensure that Assad retains power, the regime should recognize that the stabilizing effect of an autonomous Kurdish region inside Syria serves to assist Assad's political survival.

#### **COUNTER-ARGUMENT: LACK OF KURDISH UNITY**

One would argue that the often-fractured Kurdish groups would be unable to effectively negotiate as a unified and effective entity. Recent developments indicate that this is not the case. Syria's Kurds are split along ideological lines with the larger, well-armed PYD favoring a socialist agenda and the smaller, unarmed KNC attributing its ethos to Kurdish tribal roots.<sup>70</sup> Regional Kurdish actors such as the Turkish PKK, Iraqi's KRG, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have expressed varying degrees of support for Syrian Kurdish autonomy under the PYD.<sup>71</sup>

The two main groups within Syria appear be aligning their message. Realizing the benefit of presenting a unified Kurdish response to the international community, the PYD

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<sup>69</sup> Bengio, *Kurdish Awakening*, 248.

<sup>70</sup> *Economist*, "Striking Out on Their Own."

<sup>71</sup> Renad Mansour, "The Role of Iraqi Kurdistan in the Syrian-Kurd Pursuit of Autonomy," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies* (September 19, 2012): jcforstudies@aljazeera.net.

and KNC agreed in October 2014 to improve cooperation.<sup>72</sup> The KRG's president, Massoud Barzani also called for closer relations with the Syrian Kurds, an indication that the Syrian YPG may expect better coordination with the KRG Peshmerga in the struggle against ISIL.

While the populations that make up greater Kurdistan (portions of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) are heterogeneous and often disagree on major Kurdish issues, the main parties within Syria are organized enough to effect an autonomous outcome. President Assad's regime can directly negotiate with the two main Kurdish factions within the country and leave the intra-Kurdish dealings to the Kurds. As the most influential Kurdish political group, the PYD would by itself be able to facilitate negotiations, but inclusion of the KNC would be in Assad's best interests. Failure to do so could fracture the Kurds and delay the gains outlined above.

## CONCLUSIONS

After suffering years of repression and varying degrees of marginalization, the Kurds of the Rojava area of Northern Syria have a strong desire to attain legally recognized territorial autonomy. The Kurds are willing to engage in dialogue due to a strong desire to implement the tenants of the Constitution of the Rojava Cantons and fear that conditions will worsen once hostilities inside Syria have concluded. President Assad must leverage the Kurdish situation in order to effectively sever anti-regime and ISIL lines of communication, redeploy forces into the western population corridor, and effectively destroy anti-regime forces and ISIL.

President Assad must also look eastward to the economic and security advancements that have been realized in neighboring Iraq, as the KRG and the armed Peshmerga govern and secure the area within their borders while extracting natural resources and supporting

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<sup>72</sup> *Economist*, "Striking out on their Own."

viable economic relationships with their neighbors. The opportunity presents itself to improve the Syrian regime's military and economic conditions and to gradually re-enter the international community. This key opportunity begins with negotiated Kurdish territorial autonomy.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

President Assad should initiate dialogue with the two primary Syrian Kurdish factions, the PYD and the KNC. The timing is ideal, as the Assad regime continues to benefit from a shift in momentum due to increased support from its allies. First, Assad must make an overt gesture by announcing that he has reconsidered the issue of Kurdish autonomy in Rojava. The framework should mirror the elements of territorial autonomy drafted by Weller.<sup>73</sup> The most important components will be legal entrenchment and integrative mechanisms.<sup>74</sup> Legal entrenchment would formally recognize Rojava as an autonomous territory, outline authorities, and it would also guarantee that the GOS cannot revoke their status unless agreed upon by representatives of the Kurdish region. The integrative mechanisms would then establish the framework for how Rojava would function inside of the existing state mechanisms as well as set the conditions for Kurdish control and sale of natural resources.<sup>75</sup> Most vital though, the integrative mechanisms would establish Kurdish representation in the national government.<sup>76</sup>

National representation and cultural relief associated with achieving what their ethnic brothers in Iraq have achieved will motivate Syria's Kurds to generate substantial military, security and economic benefits for the Assad regime. For his own survival and the long-term

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<sup>73</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Weller and Nobbs, *Asymmetrical Autonomy and the Settlement of Ethnic Conflicts*, 5.

viability of Syria, President Assad must seize on this opportunity and negotiate Kurdish autonomy of Rojava.

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