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The Kurds in Syria
Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?

Summary

- Kurds in Syria have been denied basic social, cultural, and political rights, in many cases stemming from the Syrian state's refusal to grant citizenship.
- Kurdish political opposition in Syria is fractured. Though some join Kurds in other countries in calling for the emergence of a separate Kurdish state, many Kurds reject separatism and have generally been committed to peaceful democratic struggle.
- Democratic reforms in Syria that improve the human rights situation for Kurds and non-Kurds could go a long way to alleviate the tension between the Kurds and the Syrian state.
- The problems that Syrian Kurds face cannot be truly solved without an effort both to improve the human rights of Kurds throughout the region and to foster their political inclusion in their states of residency.
- The United States and European Union should use any diplomatic tools at their disposal to promote appropriate reforms in Syria and the region.

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Introduction

The Kurds of Syria, in contrast to the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey, are little known in the West, but they have similarly strained relations with the state that governs them and face human rights abuses as a minority. The Syrian state's repression of its Kurdish population, which thus far has not sought a separate state, may contribute to Kurdish claims for self-determination in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. However, it would be a mistake to see the Kurdish problem in Syria solely as an ethnic problem with regional dimensions; the Syrian Kurds also should be seen within the context of the lack of democratic governance in Syria, which affects all Syrians. That the Kurds are denied basic human rights—especially civil, political, and cultural rights—is particularly damaging. But the situation also offers a direction for policy work: the development of democratic

governance in Syria could mitigate the Kurdish problem in Syria and, in turn, diminish calls for separatism by other Kurds in the region.

According to current estimates, there are nearly 1.5 million Kurds in Syria, or approximately 9 percent of a total population of 22 million, making them the largest non-Arab minority in the country.[1] They are concentrated primarily in the north and northeast of the country, in the Jazeera, Efrin, and Ain al-Arab regions. A substantial Kurdish population also lives in Hasakah province in the northeast; a smaller number live in Damascus. The majority of Syrian Kurds speak the Kurdish language and identify with Sunni Islam. The Kurds' status as a stateless minority in the region has its roots in the post–World War I period, when the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 left the Kurds of the Middle East divided among the four new states of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.[2]

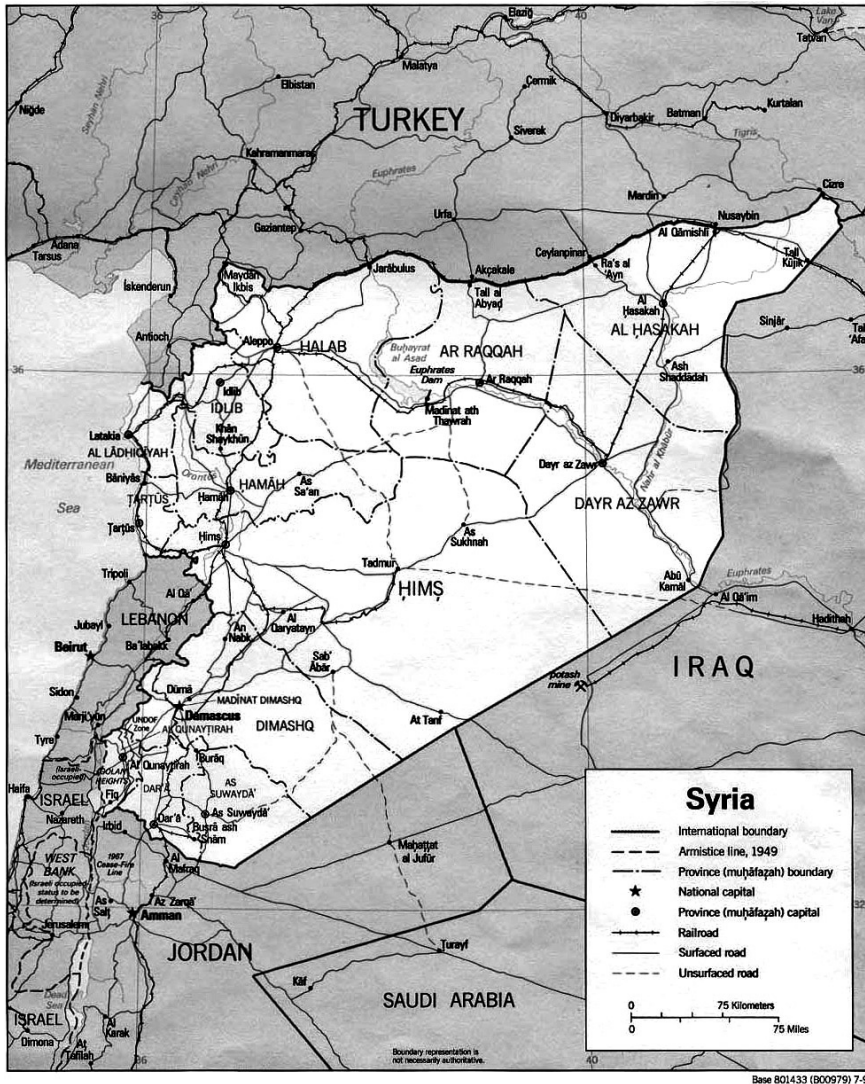## The Syrian Kurds and Human Rights

Denationalization and the Repression of Syrian Kurdish Civil and Cultural Rights

The disenfranchisement of the rights of Syrian Kurds can be traced to 1958, with Syria's official adoption of Arab nationalism and backlash against non-Arab ethnic minorities, which included the Kurds. In October 1962, Syrian authorities issued a so-called special census in Hasakah province, the northeastern Syrian province in which the majority of Kurds have their origins. The authorities then produced statistical reports on the pretext of discovering people who may have crossed illegally from Turkey to Syria. As many as 120,000 Kurds—nearly 20 percent of Syria's Kurdish population—were denationalized as a result, losing all rights of citizenship, including the right to vote and participate in public life, the right to travel outside the country, the right to private ownership, and the right to employment in the public sector.[3]

Since 1962, the Syrian state has divided Kurds in Syria into three major demographic categories: Syrian Kurds, foreign Kurds, and 'concealed' Kurds. Syrian Kurds have retained their Syrian nationality. Foreign Kurds were stripped of citizenship and registered in official archives as foreigners; in 2008, there were about 200,000 of them. Concealed Kurds are denationalized Kurds who have not been registered in official records at all and whom Syrian authorities characterize as concealed. Nearly 80,000 people belong to this category. Among the concealed Kurds are persons whose fathers are classified as foreigners and whose mothers are citizens, persons whose fathers are aliens and whose mothers are classified as concealed, and persons whose parents are both concealed. In addition, there are about 280,000 undocumented Kurds who reside in Syria but have no citizenship, according to Kurdish sources. No government statistics are available on this group.[4]

The rise of nationalism, stemming regionally from Nasserism and locally from the Baath Party's ascendancy in 1963, increased official discrimination against Syrian Kurds in all the above categories, as the Baathist government's Kurdish policy was intended to eradicate the Kurdish presence from Syrian public life.[5] Kurds experienced a lack of political representation, poor economic development, and reduced social services. Important elements of Kurdish cultural identity, such as language, music, and publications, were banned. Political parties were forbidden and their members incarcerated. The Syrian government also began to replace the names of Kurdish villages and sites with Arabic ones.

In addition, the government mandated population transfers to weaken the concentrations of Kurds in sensitive areas.[6] For example, in 1973, the Baathist government instituted the so-called "Arab Belt" draft, under which Arab families from the areas of Aleppo and al-Raqqa were forced to migrate to forty Kurdish villages throughout Jazeera province, covering an area 365 kilometers long and 10 to 15

Source: University of Texas, map library

kilometers across that bordered on Turkey and Iraq. The draft severely disturbed the region's social balance, especially in Jazeera province, to such a point that social and civic disputes there remain a source of persistent local tension.[7]

Many of Syria's denationalized Kurds live in Hasakah province, especially in Malkia and the cities of Qamishli and Ras al-Ain (see map above). Over the years, a small number of denationalized Kurds from this region emigrated to Damascus and other larger Syrian cities throughout the country. Kurds classified as foreigners carry red identity cards that permit them to be recorded as aliens in official records. They cannot, however, obtain a passport or leave the country. Concealed Kurds carry only a yellow definition certificate, or residence bond, issued by a local *mukhtar* (chieftain) and used purely to identify the holders whenever authorities found it necessary to do so. Though authorities issue the certificates, official Syrian institutions do not accept them, so for all intents and purposes the holders of yellow documents have no official status in Syria at all.

Violations of Family and Related Rights

Tens of thousands of Kurds in Syria are designated as foreigners in their country of birth. Many of them are children born in Syria to denationalized parents, even though the Syrian constitution grants all children born in Syria, including Kurds, the right to

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citizenship. The logic of the post-1962 census demographic policies is totally arbitrary, lacks real criteria to classify citizens, and in many cases those criteria that do exist have been inconsistently applied even within the same Kurdish family. One might find among a family's members some who retain their nationality and others who remain denationalized. The demilitarized zone in Hasakah on the Syria-Turkey border is notorious for its anti-Kurdish discrimination measures.

The Syrian state's discriminatory geographical and civil policies affect all parts of the lives of Syrian Kurds. In family relations, it is illegal for Syrian female citizens to marry men labeled as foreigners under the 1962 census. If they do, the law recognizes neither the marriage nor its progeny; these women remain single in official records. Although technically one could sue the state to confirm such a marriage by obtaining a verification decision, the departments dealing with civic status issues generally decline to recognize these proceedings in their archives. Consequently, the number of concealed children in Syria is growing steadily as the population rises. According to current Kurdish sources, nearly 25,000 Kurdish children are designated as such.

Deprivation of the right to education affects both foreign and concealed denationalized Kurds. Foreigners enjoy the right to attend the basic levels of the public education system—primary school, which lasts from six to fifteen years of age, and secondary school, which lasts from sixteen to eighteen years of age—and eventually obtain their secondary-school certificate. However, although this certificate permits entry into universities, upon graduation Kurds face enormous discrimination in the job market. They cannot work as lawyers, doctors, engineers, journalists, or in most other professions, since employment in these fields requires affiliation with unions or professional syndicates, which almost all Kurds are denied. Moreover, persons with either foreign or concealed status are barred from holding government posts and concealed Kurds are denied the right to a secondary-school certificate altogether, destroying their prospects for a university education.

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The lack of equal opportunity in marriage and family life, education, and employment creates a vast climate of frustration among denationalized Kurds, particularly youth, making them feel more like a burden to society than active members in it and depriving them of hope for the future. Not surprisingly, disillusioned youth comprise the bulk of supporters of secessionist Kurdish parties. Recent expulsions of large numbers of Kurdish workers and students from jobs and academic institutions have only contributed to their sense of frustration.

In addition to the difficulties associated with finding work, denationalized Kurds are not permitted to privately own homes, land, or other assets. This forces them to register all property through fellow Kurds carrying Syrian citizenship, adding to their burdens in day-to-day dealings with the state.

Violations of Cultural and Linguistic Rights

Syrian Kurds have been under increasing pressure to erase their cultural identity, including public celebrations and feasts as well as speaking the Kurdish language—the essential mechanism for Kurds to preserve their culture—in public and the workplace. Kurdish children are not allowed to study Kurdish in schools and Kurdish teachers are forbidden to employ it during classroom instruction. Children are also forbidden to learn Kurdish through alternative means. To maintain their knowledge of the language, certain individuals, in addition to political parties, take the risk of teaching Kurdish in informal settings.

Since the early 1990s, Damascus has issued orders forbidding Kurdish parents from officially registering their children with Kurdish names. For the most part, Kurdish persistence on the issue has caused the government to back down, but Kurds are still prevented from printing publications in Kurdish; most publications currently in circulation were either brought illegally from Lebanon or Iran or printed in secret. (It is

important to note that limits on freedom of expression affect all Syrian citizens, not only the Kurds.)

Finally, Kurdish rights to freedom of association and assembly are curtailed. Syrian authorities generally forbid the formation of private Kurdish forums and associations, which constricts Kurdish civic and cultural life. This is, however, typical of restrictions on civil society throughout Syria, which experienced major crackdowns after the Damascus Spring, a brief period of liberalization in 2001. Kurds face difficulty in obtaining licenses to celebrate certain cultural events, such as the Norouz celebration marking the Kurdish new year. In March 2008, Syrian security forces opened fire on Kurds celebrating the festival, killing at least three people and wounding others. The government has completely ignored this event, failing even to launch a formal investigation.[8]

Despite discrimination, however, Kurds feel Syrian. Clearly, the psychological effects of isolation, marginalization, and deprivation of rights that denationalized Kurds experience affect the relationship between the Kurds and the Syrian state, and Kurds and non-Kurdish Syrians. A recent questionnaire on civic identity from the Human Rights Association in Syria covered 129 foreigner Kurds, 19 concealed Kurds, and 152 Syrian Kurds. Of this sample, 233 respondents identified themselves as Syrian, while the rest varied between considering themselves only Kurds or as people without a civil identity.

In a question on family origin, 251 participants responded that they were of Syrian family origin, sometimes adding the phrase "by heredity" to their response. They echo a feeling among the majority of Kurds in Syria, who believe they are already Syrian and feel a sense of belonging to the state, even as it denies them rightful citizenship. In a question regarding the desire to obtain Syrian nationality, only eleven expressed no desire to do so. Most strikingly, given more than a half century of marginalization and deprivation of civic rights, of the entire sample, 198 rejected the idea of seceding from Syria and only forty-eight supported it; the rest abstained altogether.[9] These findings indicate that Syria's policies have not yet inspired widespread support for secession, but the danger should not be overlooked.

Kurdish Political Organization in Syria

At the beginning of Syria's existence as an independent state, politicians and officials of Kurdish descent occasionally boasted a modest yet noticeable presence in many state institutions, including high offices. Husni al-Zaim, who led the first military coup in Syria and became president in 1949, was Kurdish, as were Muhsin al-Barazi and other political luminaries of the 1940s and 1950s. Kurds maintained strong participation in political parties, particularly that of the communists, whose leader, Khaled Bakdash, was himself a Kurd. Many influential clerics, such as the former state mufti, Ahmed Kiftarro, were Kurdish as well.

However, the Syrian government grew increasingly authoritarian, particularly with the rise of the Baath Party,[10] and adopted increasingly discriminatory measures against the Kurds. The Kurdish movement began to experience internal cleavages. By 1965, the Kurdish parties had fragmented into numerous organizations divided over issues such as whether to work for Kurdish autonomy or work within the Communist Party and reject any Kurdish affiliation.[11]

Today, twelve Kurdish parties operate illegally and clandestinely in Syria.[12] In addition, the Kurdish movement has remained not only divided, but also isolated from wider prodemocratic circles. The Syrian state's repression and its attempts to delegitimate Kurdish mobilization by linking any Kurdish activity inside Syria to Kurdish movements outside of the country has been very effective.

The Damascus Spring of 2000 was a short period of relative political freedom in Syria. Kurdish leaders tried to seize the moment to bring greater unity among the Kurds

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and to link up with the Arab Syrian prodemocracy movement. It resulted in the Damascus Declaration for National Democratic Change of October 2005, an umbrella statement representing all the actors in the domestic Syrian opposition, including the two main Kurdish political groupings.[13]

In a special section for national minorities, the Damascus Declaration prioritizes

> ensuring freedom for individuals, groups, and national minorities to express themselves and maintain their cultural and linguistic rights, and making sure that the state shall respect and cultivate such rights within the Constitution and under the protection of the law.

Another section specifically addresses the Kurdish issue, calling for

> a fair democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria to guarantee full equality of Syrian Kurdish citizens with other citizens in terms of the rights of nationality (citizenship), culture, and learning their national language, as well as all other constitutional, political, social, and legal rights, on the basis of a unified Syrian state and people . . . . The rights of citizenship and nationality must be returned to all who are deprived, to settle this matter once and for all.[14]

The Kurdish presence in the Damascus Declaration has provided a good starting point for the Kurds to move out of their isolation in cities such as Qamishli, Ein al-Arab, and Efrin, and begin to be players in the wider Syrian prodemocratic political scene. The declaration also has given the Syrian opposition a national dimension, as the source of its legitimacy came from both Arabs and Kurds. Today, the Kurdish Front and the Kurdish Alliance act in relative coordination with their Arab counterparts. The drafting of the Declaration, which recognized the need to "find a fair democratic solution to the Kurdish issue within the country's unity," is a case in point. In addition, the Coordination Committee, a joint Syrian Arab-Kurdish cooperative effort formed in 2003, issues statements related to human rights cases in Syria.

However, in 2004, the Syrian government moved troops into the Kurdish regions of Syria, apparently anticipating security concerns within the Kurdish community. The Kurds responded with almost daily confrontations with the Syrian forces, prompting Damascus to label the Kurd-dominated eastern region of the country a threat to national security. President Bashar strengthened the military and security presence in the Shellac region after repeated protests there. Large-scale political clashes were not infrequent, especially in the aftermath of the 2004 riots in a crowded local soccer stadium in Qamishli, which provoked fierce confrontations with security services and left dozens of Kurds dead and wounded.[15] Soon after, the prominent Kurdish cleric Maashouk Alkhoznoi was killed under "mysterious circumstances."[16] Such violent events affecting the Kurdish community, once relatively rare, have become more commonplace, raising the possibility of a further escalation of violent resistance from Syria's Kurds. It has also led to tensions between Syrian Kurds and the Syrian prodemocracy movement.

The Kurds, the Syrian State, and the Wider Region

The issue of Kurdish rights in Syria gained momentum steadily over the last century, but it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that it was seen as crucial to both national and regional politics. Non-Syrian Kurds have been a constant concern in the region because of the conflict between Iraqi Kurds and the Saddam Hussein regime as well as the brutal longstanding struggle between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish government. The Kurds of Iran traditionally have appeared less threatening to political stability, perhaps because Tehran controls Iran's population so stringently. However, its systematic exclusion of non-Persian minorities should not be underestimated.

Under Hafiz al-Assad, Syria's Kurds had a working if uneasy relationship with the state regarding its policy toward Kurds in neighboring countries; throughout his reign, it was not uncommon for Kurdish leaders from the eastern cities to maintain regular strategic contacts with various officials in the Syrian security establishment. When Syria supported the international effort to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1990, Syria's Kurds were grateful for their president's position. Assad even hosted Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, who would later become president of Iraq.[17] Syria also maintained a close relationship with the PKK, in the early 1990s hosting party leader Abdullah Ocalan in Syria as a potential point of pressure on the Turkish state, although that relationship disintegrated soon after the Turkish military threatened to expel Ocalan from Syria and shut down his faction's camps in the Damascus suburbs in 1998. A security agreement between Syria and Turkey took place shortly thereafter, also in 1998, at Adana, Turkey, rendering the matter virtually obsolete. Such dealings provided tactical benefits in easing government relations with Kurds, but they did little to ease the suffering of the larger Syrian Kurdish community. Moreover, the relationships between the Kurds and the state all but disappeared with the passing of Hafiz al-Assad, as the local Kurdish movement grew increasingly resentful of official policy.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 gravely exacerbated the Kurds' predicament and undid the progress the Kurdish community had made. Along with other actors in the region, Damascus staunchly opposed the invasion. Iraq's Kurds, however, not only welcomed the coalition forces, but in some cases provided logistical and field assistance, with Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga paramilitary troops entering Baghdad from the north alongside coalition forces. The Kurdish support for the highly controversial invasion created a direct conflict, not only between the Syrian regime and Iraqi Kurds, but also Syrian Kurds by association. Moreover, Syrian Kurds viewed their own predicament through an increasingly pessimistic lens, as their Iraqi counterparts received political autonomy while their own government neglected to give many in their community so much as a viable national identity card. Government relations became particularly tense when international pressure on Syria intensified after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The international outcry over the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri and increased scrutiny of Syria's relationship with Lebanon made the Syrian regime even more suspicious of internal opposition, particularly from Syria's Kurds.

Beyond the Middle East, the large Kurdish presence in Europe—Scandinavia and Germany in particular—is also a factor in the Kurds' developing role within Syria and the region. The Kurdish diaspora has used international media, protests, and demonstrations to voice its support for Syria's Kurds. In response to the March 2008 Qamishli riots, the European Kurdish community took to the streets, waving the Kurdish flag and chanting slogans favoring secession and the formation of Greater Kurdistan. When the Qamishli protests resulted in the deaths of a number of Syrian Kurds, European Kurds organized a large demonstration in Belgium that ended in the storming of the Syrian embassy in Brussels and the forceful replacement of the Syrian flag there with the Kurdish one. These events—particularly the flag replacement—elicited negative responses from non-Kurdish Syrians inside the embassy.

In short, animosity between the Syrian government and its Kurdish population is running as high as it has in years. Even so, as mentioned above, the majority of Kurds reject secession and seek only the same rights that non-Kurdish Syrians enjoy. As infeasible as it may be in the country's current political climate, a democratic system in Syria that grants equal rights to all Syrians—Arabs and Kurds—could solve many problems. But the Syrian Kurdish crisis cannot truly be resolved without addressing the concerns of Kurds across the region; although forming an independent Kurdish state is a political impossibility, the Syrian Kurds' situation regarding the violation of their basic human rights cannot be improved separately from the similar situations of the Kurds in Turkey,

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Iraq, and Iran. If the status quo continues, the Kurds in each of these four states and the claims for political secession will continue to be a source of tension for both the regional political regimes and their non-Kurdish majorities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The problems faced by Syria's Kurds exist in a greater context of regional discord and instability that affect Kurds throughout the Middle East. Alleviating these much greater issues would help to improve the situation in Syria, although care must be taken to ensure that such efforts accord with international standards for minority rights, human rights, and humanitarian law. At the same time, a clear message must be conveyed to the regional Kurdish leadership, first, that establishing an independent Kurdish state at the expense of four existing states is unrealistic, and second, that continued separatist discourse will only increase the internal pressures on Kurdish populations in each of the four countries. As mentioned above, general Kurdish public opinion in Syria, and to a lesser degree in Iran and Turkey, already rejects calls for separatism, instead demanding cultural rights and the right to political participation, which a democratic system should guarantee to all citizens in any case.

For its part, the international community can no longer ignore the abrogation of Kurdish rights occurring in Syria. The growing number of denationalized Kurds and worsening violations of Kurdish civic, economic, social, and cultural rights threaten not only to provoke Kurdish resistance to the Syrian state, including demands for independence, but also to encourage the state to respond to these demands with violence. Deepening this cycle would extinguish any hope for peaceful collaborative relations with Syria's non-Kurdish population.

Meanwhile, the entire Syrian population faces continuing abuses of civil and political rights, and a lasting solution to this problem apart from comprehensive democratic reforms in Syria is unimaginable. Given the current absence of such reforms, however, the following recommendations can be made to the Syrian government, the U.S. government, and the European Union and its individual states:

To the Syrian Government:

- Repeal the state of emergency and laws limiting freedom of association, which are contrary to the Syrian constitution. Articles of the penal code used to control and harass civil society in general, and the Kurdish minority in particular, should also be repealed.

- Cease harassment of opposition political activists through arbitrary detentions and routine interrogations.

- End the impunity of the security agencies and make them accountable for their conduct under the rule of law. Such steps should include investigating, prosecuting, and punishing security force members who arbitrarily detain and interrogate activists.

To the U.S. Government and European Union:

- Ensure that human rights concerns explicitly reference Syrian Kurds and make them part of any future talks or negotiations with Syria.

- Extend support for political opposition activists in Syria by advocating on their behalf with Syrian authorities and providing logistical support through capacity-building programs.

- For the European Union in particular, before finalizing the association agreement with Syria (initiated in October 2004), consider the cases of individuals deprived of

citizenship and the social and political effects of denationalization policies in both Syria and the greater region.

- Encourage resolution of the Kurdish issue within a wider democratic framework that includes all ethnic minorities in Syria.

- Reject the principle of separation that Kurdish forces outside Syria so often promote. Such a solution threatens domestic stability and relations with neighboring states that have large Kurdish minority populations. To achieve this, however, the governments of these neighboring states must guarantee the rights of all minorities, including the Kurds.

Notes

1. All figures are from the Minority Rights Group International's *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*, available at www.minorityrights.org/directory (accessed February 3, 2009).

2. See Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (Ann Arbor, M.I: University of Michigan Press, 2006) and Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics, and Society* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008).

3. Maureen Lynch and Perveen Ali, "Buried Alive: Stateless Kurds in Syria," Refugees International, Washington, D.C., February 14, 2006, and Human Rights Watch, "Syria: The Silenced Kurds," Human Rights Watch, October 1996.

4. Human Rights Watch, "Syria," and Human Rights Association, *The Situation of Syrian Kurds: A Human Rights Perspective* (Damascus: Human Rights Association in Syria, 2004), 9 (in Arabic).

5. Interview with a Syrian Kurdish journalist, Damascus, May 2007.

6. This policy may have been building on an earlier model, a 1952 decree—still in effect today—that had rendered Hasakah province and its administrative borders a special security area or boundary area, in which residents had to comply with special conditions in all commercial, administrative, and legal affairs.

7. Azad Mohemed Ali, "The Impact of Special Laws on Urban Development in Rural Kurdistan," *Albosla*, no. 9 (January 2007), 8–9 (in Arabic).

8. Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Investigate Killing of Kurds: Hold Accountable Those Responsible for Unlawful Killings," New York, March 23, 2008.

9. Human Rights Association in Syria, "The Situation of Syrian Kurds," 9 (in Arabic).

10. For more information about the nature of the authoritarian regime in Syria, see Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999) and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria: Army, Party, and Peasant* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

11. Farouk Mostafa, "The Kurdish Movement in Syria," paper presented at the conference Exploring Strategies for A Democratic Movement in Syria, Toledo International Centre for Peace (CITpax), Toledo, May 10–12, 2006 (in Arabic).

12. Most of the Kurdish parties currently operate in two larger and overlapping political groups, the Kurdish Democratic Alliance and the Kurdish Democratic Front. The Kurdish Democratic Alliance includes four parties: the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria (Yakiti), the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria, the leftist Kurdish Party in Syria, and the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (the Parti). The Kurdish Democratic Front also counts the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria and the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria as members, but includes the National Democratic Kurdish Party in Syria and the Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria as well. Four other parties fall outside the two main groups: The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party, Kurdish Party in Syria (Yakiti), the Accord Kurdish Movement in Syria, and the newest party, the Kurdish Future Trend, established in 2005.

13. Immediately after the declaration was issued, however, two Kurdish parties rejected it, accusing its prescriptions of failing to consider the Kurdish issue as a matter of "one land, one people." They complained that many of the Arab groups affiliated with the declaration were not democratic and actually aligned with the authorities. They also critiqued the declaration's drafters for reducing the solution to the Kurdish problem to obtaining merely the rights of Syrian citizens. The Kurdish Party in Syria (Yakiti) viewed the declaration as having mistakenly "identified citizenship as the maximum right of the Kurds" while neglecting to address the critical issue of a Kurdish national home. Sharing these sentiments, the Kurdish Azadi Party argued that the declaration "does not reflect the reality of the Kurdish situation" and that the Kurds represented a "second nation" within the Syrian state. The disagreements over the Damascus Declaration reopened the gaps between Kurdish nationalist aspirations and those of the wider Syrian prodemocratic opposition. The defining conflict remains between those who favor national reconciliation and comprehensive liberties for all, (still a majority of Kurds), and those who want to see the emergence of an independent Kurdish state, totally separate from Damascus.

14. The text of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change appears in the Documents on Democracy section of the *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 2006): 181–84. See also Mona Yacoubian and Scott Lasensky, "Syria and Political Change I" and "Syria and Political Change II," USIP briefings, December 2005 and March 2006.

15. Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Address Grievances Underlying Kurdish Unrest," New York, March 18, 2004.

16. See Robert Low, "The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered," briefing paper, Chatham House, January 2006.

17. Talabani holds a Syrian passport, as did other Iraqi Kurdish leaders who were previously able to find asylum in Syria.

Of Related Interest

- *Iraq, its Neighbors, and the Obama Administration: Syrian and Saudi Perspectives* by the Iraq and its Neighbors initiative (Working Paper, February 2009).
- *Mapping Peace between Syria and Israel* by Frederic C. Hof (Special Report, March 2009).
- *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: American Leadership in the Middle East* by Daniel C. Kurtzer and Scott B. Lasensky (USIP Press, 2008).
- *Promoting Middle East Democracy II: Arab Initiatives* by Mona Yacoubian (Special Report, May 2005).
- *Promoting Middle East Democracy: The Transatlantic Dimension* by Mona Yacoubian (Special Report, October 2004).