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**Title:**

Syria: the situation of Kurds, including their treatment by the authorities since the start of the uprising (March 2011-July 2012) [SYR104167.FE]

**Publication date:**

07 August 2012

**ecoi.net summary:** Query response on the situation of Kurds and treatment by authorities since March 2011 (political activities of Kurds) [ID 238655]**Countries:**

Syrian Arab Republic

[Original link](#)**Recommended citation:**

IRB - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: Syria: the situation of Kurds, including their treatment by the authorities since the start of the uprising (March 2011-July 2012) [SYR104167.FE], 07 August 2012 (available at ecoi.net)

[http://www.ecoi.net/local\\_link/238655/347804\\_en.html](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/238655/347804_en.html) (accessed 03 April 2013)Immigration and  
Refugee Board of CanadaCommission de l'immigration  
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

# Syria: the situation of Kurds, including their treatment by the authorities since the start of the uprising (March 2011-July 2012) [SYR104167.FE]

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## 1. Situation

Some sources report that the Kurds represent 10 per cent of the Syrian population, nearly three million people (*Le Monde* 12 Oct. 2011; AFP 10 Oct. 2011), while other sources estimate that they represent 15 (Xinhua News Agency 23 July 2012; *The Atlantic* 20 Jan. 2012) to 20 per cent of the population (*ibid.*). According to the Xinhua News Agency, most Kurds reside in the northeastern part of the country (23 July 2012); however, according to *Le Nouvel Observateur*, they mostly live in eastern Syria (30 Mar. 2012). There are also significant Kurd populations in Damascus and Aleppo (*Le Nouvel Observateur* 30 Mar. 2012; Reuters 11 Jan. 2012).

## 2. Political Activities of Kurds since March 2011

Media sources report that, historically, Syria's Kurds have opposed the current regime, which has been in power for decades (*ibid.*; *Le Nouvel Observateur* 30 Mar. 2012). Al Jazeera reports that all Kurdish political parties have been banned by the government (30 Jan. 2012). Similarly, Agence France-Presse (AFP) indicates that Syria has 12 Kurdish political parties that have been banned (10 Oct. 2011). However, several sources report that Kurds are divided in their reaction to the uprising against the regime (Reuters 11 Jan. 2012; *Le Nouvel Observateur* 30 Mar. 2012). Media sources state that, despite their long-standing opposition to the regime, Kurds are suspicious of Arab opposition movements (*ibid.*; Reuters 11 Jan. 2012). Reuters (*ibid.*) and the *New York Times* (17 Apr. 2012) state that Kurds mistrust Arab opposition movements because they fear such movements will oppose Kurds' demands for more rights.

Nevertheless, according to media sources, anti-regime demonstrations have taken place in Kurdish regions (Al Jazeera 10 June 2012; RFE/RL 7 Dec. 2011). In an interview in April 2012 on the KurdWatch news site, which covers human rights violations against Kurds in Syria (n.d.), a leader of the Kurdish Left Party claimed that there had been demonstrations in almost all of the Kurdish cities in the country (18 Apr. 2012). In addition, a *Guardian* article notes that the Kurds mobilized on the streets well before the organized political parties took a stand on the conflict (*The Guardian* 26 Apr. 2012).

The *Guardian* also reports that youth organizations, particularly the Kurdish youth movement (Tevgera Ciwanên Kurd), the largest Kurdish organization in Syria, are actively participating in the organization of street

demonstrations (26 Apr. 2012). Reuters similarly refers to the participation of Kurdish youth in demonstrations (11 Jan. 2012).

However, media sources report that the demonstrations that have taken place in the Kurdish regions have been less intense than those that have taken place elsewhere in the country (Reuters 11 Jan. 2012; Al Jazeera 10 June 2012). In the KurdWatch interview, the Kurdish Left Party leader explained that several Kurdish parties continue to fear reprisals from the Assad regime for their political activities (KurdWatch 18 Apr. 2012).

## 2.1 Syrian National Council

The Syrian National Council (SNC) is the leading opposition coalition (AFP 10 Oct. 2011; Xinhua News Agency 12 July 2012; Al Jazeera 20 June 2012). Sources report that a Kurdish dissident living in exile in Sweden, Abdulbaset Sieda [also spelled Abdul Basset Sayda or Abdelbasset Sieda], was appointed leader of the SNC in June 2012 (ibid.; ORSAM 28 June 2012). This measure was seen as an attempt by the SNC to connect with Syria's minority groups (ibid.; Al Jazeera 10 June 2012). However, according to some critics, the majority of power within the SNC is the hands of the Islamists (ORSAM 28 June 2012; *The Guardian* 26 July 2012).

## 2.2. Kurdish National Council

The Kurdish National Council (KNC) is a Kurdish coalition that includes most of the Kurdish opposition parties (*Le Nouvel Observateur* 30 Mar. 2012; *The National* 15 July 2012).

## 2.3 Democratic Union Party (PYD)

According to sources, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey (*The National* 15 July 2012; AFP 27 July 2012), has ties to the Syrian authorities (*The Daily News Egypt* 21 July 2012; *Le Nouvel Observateur* 30 Mar. 2012). Some sources suggest that the PYD is a pro-Assad organization (*The Daily News Egypt* 21 July 2012; Intelligence Online 5 July 2012). Kurdish opposition parties have also claimed that the PYD acts on behalf of the authorities (*The National* 15 July 2012; *Le Nouvel Observateur* 30 Mar. 2012). An article published by Intelligence Online, an independent organization that analyzes the activities of intelligence services around the world (n.d.), indicates that [translation] "[t]he Syrian Regime is still holding the north and east of the country thanks to backing from armed Kurdish groups like the PKK and Democratic Union Party" (5 July 2012). According to an article in the Abu Dhabi-based the *National*, the PYD denied any collaboration with the Syrian regime (15 July 2012). However, media sources report that Kurdish opposition parties have accused the PYD of killing dissidents and cracking down on demonstrators in the Kurdish regions (*The National* 15 July 2012; *Le Nouvel Observateur* 30 Mar. 2012).

An AFP article reports that an offshoot of the PYD, the People's Assembly of Western Kurdistan (CPKO), also denied any collusion with the regime. However, the article notes that the CPKO had put in place [translation] "People's Defence Units ... to maintain order" (27 July 2012).

## 2.4 Kurdish Supreme Committee

According to AFP, in July 2012, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) joined with the CPKO to form the Kurdish Supreme Committee (27 July 2012). According to an article published on Rudaw, a news site based in Iraqi Kurdistan (n.d.), under the agreement, the KNC and the PYD were each to govern half of the Kurdish cities from which the Syrian army withdrew in July 2012 (25 July 2012).

## 3. Treatment of Kurds by the Authorities

According to media sources, in 2011, the government announced that it would grant a number of Kurds Syrian citizenship, something they had been denied for several decades (*The New York Times* 17 Apr. 2012; *Le Monde* 23 Nov. 2011). This measure is described by some sources as an effort to appease the Kurds in order to dissuade them from joining the opposition forces (Human Rights Watch 14 May 2012; *The New York Times* 17 Apr. 2012; MRG 2012, 208). In addition, according to Minority Rights Group International (MRG), the process of obtaining citizenship involves an interview with the security forces, during which they make use of "intimidation"; moreover, young Kurdish men who obtained citizenship were "asked" to perform military service (ibid.).

Media sources report that the authorities' attacks against opposition forces were less severe and less violent in the Kurdish regions than in the rest of the country (Reuters 11 Jan. 2012; *Le Monde* 12 Oct. 2011). Similarly, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) states that "the security forces have been in many cases restrained" in their responses to demonstrations that took place in Kurdish cities (7 Dec. 2011). The regime is also

reported to have authorized the PYK to open cultural centres and Kurdish schools (*Le Monde* 12 Oct. 2011; MRG 2012, 209). However, the authorities reportedly made violent attacks against opposition forces in Damascus and Aleppo in July 2012 (*Le Monde* 1 Aug. 2012; Euronews 22 July 2012).

According to MRG, since March 2011, Kurdish activists have been arrested for participating in activities against the Syrian regime (2012, 209). Similarly, Amnesty International reports the alleged forced disappearance of a Kurdish activist (16 March 2012), as well as another activist who was arrested “solely for his activism” by Syrian security forces and allegedly “tortured” (24 Jan. 2012). According to Human Rights Watch, a Kurdish political activist was arrested in Damascus in July 2011 and was “severely beaten” because he was recognized by the authorities as a “regular at protests;” he was released after having signed a guarantee that he would refrain from participating in protests (14 May 2012). According to KurdWatch, whereas security forces refrained from using torture against activists who were arrested and detained in the Kurdish regions until August 2011, “[I]f like detainees in other regions, detainees in the Kurdish regions are now subject to severe torture.” (10 Aug. 2011).

In October 2011, Meshaal Tammu [also spelled Mishaal al-Tammo], a member of the Kurdish Future Party who had recently joined the SNC (Al Jazeera 8 Oct. 2011), was murdered by unidentified individuals at his home in Qamichli (AFP 10 Oct. 2011; RFE/RL 9 Oct. 2011). According to RFE/RL, the Syrian security forces were blamed for the murder (7 Dec. 2011). Al Jazeera reports that Syria's official news agency, SANA, indicated only that the assailants were armed men (Al Jazeera 8 Oct. 2011); however, according to AFP, the Minister of Foreign Affairs blamed this murder on [translation] “an armed terrorist group” (AFP 10 Oct. 2011). At Meshaal Tammu's funeral, Syrian security officials fired shots into the crowd of 50,000 people (ibid.; MRG 2012, 209). Sources report that security officials killed between two (AFP 10 Oct. 2011; *Le Monde* 12 Oct. 2011) and six people (MRG 2012, 209).

According to Human Rights Watch, Syrian border guards fired shots on Kurds attempting to cross the Iraq-Syria border (14 May 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Media sources report that, in July 2012, the Syrian army withdrew from a number of Kurdish cities, surrendering control of the government to the PYD (AFP 27 July 2012; BBC 27 July 2012). However, a BBC article indicates that the Syrian armed forces have maintained their presence in a few cities under PYD control (ibid.). The Syrian armed forces' withdrawal from these cities has been seen by some as an agreement between the PYD and the regime (ibid.; AFP 27 July 2012).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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## Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** The coordinator of the Kurdish Studies Network was unable to provide information for this response.

**Internet sites, including:** AK News; Alliance for Kurdish Rights; Foreign Policy Association; France24; Kurdish Human Rights Project; Kurdistan Democratic Party Syria; Kurdistan National Assembly; Middle East Research and Information Project; Reporters Without Borders; Society for Threatened Peoples; Support Kurds in Syria; Syrian Human Rights Committee; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; Syrian Uprising Information Centre; United Nations — UNHCR; UN Human Rights Council; United States — Congressional Research Service.

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