

## Syrian Kurdish Political Activism: A Social Movement Theory Perspective

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Syrian Kurdish politics is complex. While the political parties appear rather similar in terms of their goals, fierce inter-party rivalry exists, nonetheless. Shedding some light on Syrian Kurdish politics using Social Movement Theory as a theoretical framework, this article deals with how and why Syrian Kurds choose a specific political party. Interviews with Syrian Kurdish political activists in Iraqi Kurdistan provide the data. The interviews point out that a striking cleavage exists: Respondents sympathizing with the dominant political party preferred social equality, while interviewees belonging to other parties have a preference for non-violence.

**Keywords:** Syria; Kurds; Political Parties; PYD; KNC

### Introduction

During 2014 the Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, a new stage was reached as Syrian Kurdistan came under threat from the Islamic State. The Syrian-Kurdish canton of Kobanî became the focal point of global media reporting on the fight between jihadists and Kurdish forces. The shared threat presented by the Islamic State appears to bring the politically fragmented Syrian Kurds closer together (Rudaw).

Almost three years into the Syrian civil war a de facto autonomous Syrian Kurdish political entity was established (Hawar news). It appears the conflict provided the Kurds with the opportunity to create an entity in which the dominant party was able to create transitional governments in the three Kurdish cantons, albeit without elections (“Flight of Icarus?” 1).

Rojava—the Kurdish name for the areas forming Syrian Kurdistan—became relevant not only within Syria but for the whole Middle East as a potential regional political actor and the second autonomous Kurdish area after the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (Gunter 1). This article focuses on the dynamics between macro and micro level occurring within Syrian Kurdish politics. From both a scientific and a societal perspective, future analysis benefits from better understanding regarding the intentions and interests of the new entity. The main research question in this study is why do Syrian Kurds choose to support specific political parties?

Since Rojava declared autonomy, two major blocs have dominated its politics: the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat; PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (Encûmena Niştimanîya Kurdî li Sûriyê, KNC) (Hevian 46; Hokayem

78-79). The self-description of both emphasizes their struggle for an autonomous and democratic Syrian Kurdistan in which minority rights are guaranteed (KNC; PYD; Sinclair and Kajjo). But neither have yet outlined what they mean by these key concepts. (Savelsberg, "The Syrian-Kurdish Movements" 102). Their resources differ greatly: "Although the KNC is a coalition of more than a dozen Kurdish parties, it wields no real power in the region. It lacks, above all, the military force and other necessary means [...] to counter the well-organized PYD" (Hevian 47). Furthermore, it is argued that both blocs are influenced by foreign actors. PYD is closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*; PKK), originating in Turkish-Kurdistan. KNC's parties have strong connections to different foreign parties like the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê*, KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekêtiy Nîştîmaniy Kurdistan*, PUK) from Iraqi-Kurdistan. In addition, some KNC-parties sympathize with the PKK as well (Savelsberg, "The Syrian-Kurdish Movements" 94-96).

Although exact numbers are lacking, it is estimated that approximately ten percent of Syria's nearly two million Kurds are members of organizations that are labeled political parties (Sinclair and Kajjo). How-

ever, these organizations do not exactly match the western idea of political parties—associated with electoral processes (Allsopp 6). If the party narratives are rather similar, then how and why do people choose one specific political party and not another one? To answer this question, which is essentially about political mobilization, this study will use Social Movement Theory to provide an explanatory model.

Applying Social Movement Theory to political mobilization among Syrian Kurds is not completely new. Jordi Tejel studied the Syrian Kurdish 2004 Qamishli revolt using an implicit Social Movement Theory model, focusing on the macro level. According to Karl-Dieter Opp political mobilization involves a reciprocal process in which both the macro and micro level are involved. It makes this research—that does include the macro-micro dynamics—a necessary complement to Tejel's to understand political mobilization in Rojava. As far as the studies overlap, studying similar phenomena in different times and circumstances makes a comparative analysis possible. Other research has applied Social Movement Theory in a Middle Eastern setting but not to Syria (Munson; Wiktorowicz), nor to the Syrian Kurds (Leenders and Heydemann).

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Social Movement Theory's different schools focus on collective action (Opp 47-48). Framing Theory assumes individuals interpret situations according to an idiosyncratic reference, the frame, which influences their consequential behavior (Benford and Snow 614). Collective Identity Approach assumes that the more an individual feels a sense of belonging to a group, the greater the chance that the individual participates in politics on behalf of that group (Klandermans 889). Political Opportunity Structure assumes "exogenous factors enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization" (Meyer and Minkoff 1457). Finally, Resource Mobilization Theory focuses on social support and assets within society that need to be mobilized (McCarthy and Zald 1213). These different approaches appear to complement or overlap one another. They share Mancur Olson's Theory of Collective Action of an individual being a rational actor, despite different interpretations of the concept of rationality (Opp 2-8).

### **Theoretical Framework: Structural-Cognitive Model**

Opp combines the schools of Social Movement Theory mentioned above into a comprehensive model. In it, he considers these approaches as hypotheses. He

assumes that micro-macro-level dynamics (between individuals and groups) are essential in understanding political mobilization:

The *framing perspective* deals with macro-to-micro relationships (effects of social movement activities on frame alignment) and [...] with the relationships of framing and incentives. [...] The *resource mobilization and political opportunity structure perspectives* focus on the macro model and—implicitly—adumbrate macro-to-micro relationships. The *theory of collective action* is the only one that explicitly addresses micro and macro relationships, but the theory does not mention framing. The *identity approach* is mainly a micro model, although there are hints of effects of macro structures on identity formation. The micro-to-macro relationship from individual to collective protest is not addressed by any perspective. (Opp 335, italics in original)

Opp's is a cyclical model in which macro aspects influence the individual, but in which the individual's shared preferences also affect the macro level. For this article to focus on micro-macro-dynamics, it will use Opp's model to explain why individu-

als (micro level) choose specific parties (macro level).

#### **Methodology: Literature Review and Semi-Structured Interviews**

The study's contextual base is a literature review of Syrian Kurdish politics. Apart from Tejel's, relatively few studies exist about politics in Rojava (Allsopp 7; Tejel 1). Developments in the Syrian conflict trigger new research and publications on politics in Rojava. For current affairs (social) media are important but unreliable sources. In order not to rely completely on secondary or tertiary sources, interviews were conducted in the region. The literature review provided the basis for the semi-structured interviews.

#### **Syrian Kurdish History and Present Situation**

While the origin of the Kurdish people can be traced back approximately 5,000 years, the traditional starting point of modern Middle Eastern history appears to begin with the First World War (1914-1918) and the consequential fall of the Ottoman Empire (Fisk; Tejel). Strictly speaking, this is correct in the case of the *Syrian* Kurds, because Syria as a modern political entity only came into existence as a French mandate region after the First World War (Allsopp 20) before which only *Kurds* existed.

In the Ottoman Empire the Kurds experienced autonomy as part of the *millet*-policy, providing a high level of self-rule to minorities within the Empire with Kurds having their own principalities and kingdoms (Black 210). This history, together with a culture distinctive from that of the neighboring Arab, Persian and Turkish people, lead to the inclusion of the Kurds in the 1920 Sèvres Treaty, intended to achieve peace between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies of World War I. Article 62 of the treaty promised "local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas" and Article 64 spoke of "an independent Kurdish state of the Kurds". The Sèvres Treaty was never ratified and the 1923 Lausanne Treaty sealed its fate by granting Turkish borders. Meanwhile, following the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement Iraq and Syria had come under control of Great Britain and France, respectively (Khidir 26), dissolving the creation of a Kurdish state. France acknowledged the sectarian difficulties of its inter-war Syrian mandatory area and divided it into several autonomous regions, although, the Syrian Kurds did not receive an autonomous area (Dorin), and Syria gained independence in 1946. A series of coups d'états occurred during the first two decades of independent Syria, until Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963. The Ba'ath Party had a secular,

strong Arab-nationalist agenda. They changed the country's name from Syrian Republic into Syrian *Arab* Republic when they assumed power (Allsopp 22), excluding people considering themselves non-Arabs, like the Kurds. They enforced programs of Arabization upon non-Arabs whom the Ba'th considered a threat. Harsh repression of Kurds occurred: they erased Kurdish references from culture, enforced relocations (Tejel 65) and took Syrian nationality from between 120,000 (Tejel 51) and 300,000 (Allsopp 148-75; Hokayem 78) Kurds. The Arabization policy also frustrated Kurdish political ambitions to unite the different Kurdish areas and create a Kurdish state. With this ambition in mind the first Syrian Kurdish political party was established in 1957. Together with its offspring it aimed at political, cultural and socio-economic emancipation of the Kurds and the democratization of all of Syria (Allsopp 28).

Under Ba'th Party rule, Syrian Kurdish political parties went underground (Allsopp 31-34). This appears in sharp contrast with Ba'th Party's aid to PKK during the 1980s and 1990s: "[I]ts [Ba'th Party] support was not due to its love for in Turkey; but rather was the result of its adversarial policies with Turkey" (Hevian 46). The PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan lived in the Syrian capital, Damascus, until 1998. Only when Tur-

key threatened war and to cut off water supplies to Syria the regime forced Öcalan to leave, which eventually led to his arrest. It shows how the Syrian regime used the Kurds in its regional power play (Hokayem 79), bringing Tejel to label the rule under Ba'th Party leader Hafez al-Asad (1970-2000) "the years of exploitation" (Tejel 62). The death of Hafez al-Asad and succession by his western educated son Bashar in 2000 led to expectations and hope of modernization and democratization within Syria. However, disappointment increased among Syria's population, including its Kurds, when these expectations were not fulfilled (Hokayem 21-38). The combination of disappointment and the repressive measures ignited the 2004 Qamishli revolt among Kurds in Rojava. It was named after the city where the main protests occurred. Eventually the uprising stopped after Kurdish parties urged for cessation of violence. It made the Syrian regime aware of the Kurdish capacity for collective action. Since then, as there was no active civil society among the Kurds, the regime allowed Kurdish parties a pivotal role between authorities and the Kurdish people.

[T]he pacification of the protests led by the Kurdish parties themselves was a prelude to a new balance between

the Kurdish movement and the regime. The former has gained a certain freedom of action to create space for protest where Kurdish ethnicity can be openly displayed. The latter seems to confirm the selective withdrawal of the state. [...] Bashar al-As'ad [sic] seems prepared to tolerate the consolidation of a Kurdish space (cultural and symbolic), at least for the time being. (Tejel 136-37)

Nevertheless, dissatisfaction among the whole Syrian population remained, especially when the regime proved incapable of coping with a drought that greatly affected Syrian agriculture. In the wake of uprisings in other Arab countries small scale protests occurred in Damascus in February 2011, without any follow-up. Only when regime forces cracked down hard on protests by schoolchildren in the southern city of Der'ā in March 2011, a process of escalation ignited that eventually led to the Syrian Civil War (Hokayem 9-20). Syria's Kurds initially kept a low profile in the conflict. Only when regime forces withdrew from Rojava mid-July 2012 did the Kurdish militias fill the power vacuum and hence became a prominent actor within Syria (Crisis Group "Syria's Kurds" 2-4).

### Current Syrian Kurdish Politics: The PYD and the KNC

Kurdish militias of the People's Defense Corps (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) affiliated to the PYD replacing regime forces in Rojava raised suspicions of cooperation between the PYD and the Syrian regime. PYD demonstrations are characteristically more pro-PYD than anti-regime.

Rival Kurdish groups argue the YPG belongs to Syria's branch of the PKK—which the regime hosted for so long—, sharing the same organizational principles and Marxist ideology. Further, the YPG-militias are trained by the PKK (Crisis Group "Syria's Kurds" 11). The YPG provides the PYD with the necessary military means to control Rojava in order to administer political power as its best-organized political party (Hevian 46-47).

The KNC which formed in October 2011 is a coalition of around twelve minor parties.<sup>1</sup> Most of these have their roots in the first Syrian Kurdish party, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (*Partîya Dêmokrat a Kurd li Sûriye*, KDPS) (Allsopp 17). Political and personal rivalries make the KNC vulnerable to internal struggles, which can lead to a lack of effective political power (Hevian 47).

The PYD's image suffers from its link with the PKK, designated by both the European Union and the United States as a terrorist organization. Alliances between the KNC and the PYD eventually failed (Tanir, Wilgenburg and Hossino 9-10), even though they share the same implicit ideal of an independent Kurdish entity (Hokayem 78-79) and both can benefit from cooperation. The KNC has "international partners and legitimacy, it is increasingly divided internally and lacks a genuine presence on the ground; conversely, the PYD's strong domestic support is not matched by its international standing" (Crisis Group "Syria's Kurds" iii). Violent clashes between KNC and PYD supporters have been reported (Wilgenburg) and the PYD is accused of assassinations, harassments and kidnappings of KNC members (Savelsberg, "The Kurdish Factor"). These might reflect a regional rivalry on which an organization represents the wider Kurdish community (Crisis Group "Syria's Kurds" 18). Arguably, only after a new external threat appeared in the shape of the Islamic State, Kurdish parties in Rojava agreed to form a new alliance, known as the Duhok Agreement (Rudaw). Spring 2015 the Duhok Agreement seems to have failed as well.

### Interviews

In the complex Syrian Kurdish politics—as sketched above—people decide on which political parties to support. How and why they choose these parties, as well as which specific bloc they support, is an important question. The two camps are assumed to be quite similar with respect to ethnic composition, their overall goals, and the level of repression they have experienced.

Between March 1 and 10, 2014, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted among politically active Syrian Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan in the cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and a refugee camp. Contacts with political activists were established through academic and Syrian Kurdish political networks. Respondents proved helpful in introducing new interviewees, often from other parties, and sometimes even from rival parties.

### Interviewees' Backgrounds

The interviews were conducted with people from seven different parties, as well as two independent activists (both, however, with clear sympathies). Eight interviewees including the two independent activists, are active on a national (that is Rojava) level, three on a regional level, and one on village level. In total ten men and two women were interviewed, of whom nine

were middle aged and three were in their twenties and thirties. Of the seven people talking about their origins, two originate from peasant families, four from a village and one from a major city. Three villagers and one of peasant background moved to a big city during childhood, usually as a consequence of regime policy. Four respondents originate from contested areas within the Syrian Conflict, such as Damascus or the Afrin region in northwest Syria. Of the eight respondents who mentioned their education, one had finished elementary school and six completed secondary school. One respondent has a doctor's degree.

#### **Interviewee Motivation: Why Become Politically Active?**

Education proved to be one of the fields where interviewees experienced repression by the Syrian regime: not being allowed to attend university, being forced to study Arabic literature, or not being allowed to discuss Kurdistan or Kurdish identity. On the other side of the spectrum, one interviewee became politically active following the receipt of a grant from his father's Kurdish political party. Six people became politically active during their secondary schooling. Other factors that made people politically active include the regime's agricultural policies (that discrim-

inated against Kurdish farmers), the fight for women's rights and the emergence among individuals of a feeling of Kurdish nationalism.

The interviewees all share awareness of the regime's repressive measures towards the Syrian Kurdish population and indicated that this was a key element in becoming politically active. For both female respondents women's emancipation was an additional aspect. In a broader context, four interviewees emphasize their activism is for Kurdish rights in particular, but for Syrian rights in general as they recognize the Syrian regime discriminates other ethnic groups as well.

The political ideas of Mustafa Barzani are also important for the KNC affiliated activists and Abdullah Öcalan for the PYD and their affiliates. These names were mentioned nine times in total, but respondents also mentioned other political thinkers. Among the PYD, left wing writers are popular, such as Marx, Lenin, Gorki and Chekhov, while Nietzsche and Rousseau were also named. A number of interviewees—both PYD—named the Kurdish nationalist poet Cigerxwin among others as a main source of inspiration.

Poems and other cultural expressions play an important role in the lives of many of

those interviewed. One KNC activist summed up his feelings by reciting a self-written poem. Singing and dancing and the Kurdish New Year celebration of *Nowruz* are also important points of reference. Finally, Marxist revolutions inspired solely the PYD supporters have been important. They see Angola, Cuba and Vietnam as examples of peoples who freed themselves from oppression as they consider the Arabs the oppressors in Rojava. One independent respondent also used these revolutions as an example, however, he did so in order to emphasize that violent revolutions eventually lead to less than good outcomes.

#### **The Interviewees and Leverage: Becoming Politically Active**

How, then, do people become politically active? Six respondents answered that family members were politically involved; five in the same party as their family members, one was independent. Three interviewees became acquainted with political ideas through the media, especially radio broadcasts. Here education also played an important role because it created awareness among the respondents regarding the regime's repression. Some undertook further research independently and then volunteered for political action, as one of

the female activists tells about her joining the armed rebellion:

In 1996 comrade Zilan committed a suicide attack in Turkey. I named my name after her. At that age, the comrades refused to accept me in the armed revolution. I was allowed to do only political activism [...]. [W]hen Öcalan was arrested, my sympathy grew so strong—due to my own research and since I knew about the Kurdish situation in the Middle East—, that I insisted on joining.<sup>2</sup>

In one case the *peshmerga*, the Kurdish fighting force, triggered political activism by passing through villages and recounting their stories.

**The Interviewees and Choice: Why Become Member of a Specific Party?**

As most of the respondents were of middle age, most answered that the choice was limited when they became politically active. One interviewee said the he remains loyal to his party. Four PYD members emphasized the focus on the whole of society—in case of the female activists including women’s rights. Five non-PYD respondents claim the choice of their party depended on its non-violent nature. When asked about the use of violence for political ends PYD members commented

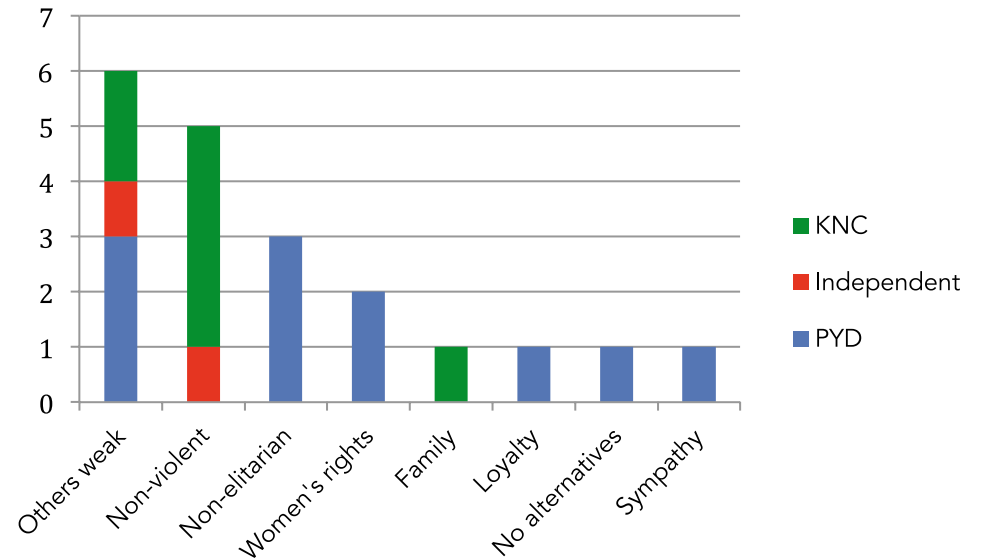


Figure 1: Respondents indicating why they support a specific party, categorized according to party affiliation and answers given. Scores in absolute numbers, n=12. Respondents usually give multiple answers for why supporting a political party.

they are willing to use it in the case of self-defense. In four cases, choice was a matter of lacking other alternatives, either because only one party was active in the village of origin, or that other parties were deemed to be worse. Five people joined the parties in which relatives were already active. Figure 1 summarizes these responses.

**Overall Findings**

Although twelve respondents is a small number, the observations are interesting and point the way to further research. Re-

spondents referred to either Mustafa Barzani or Abdullah Öcalan on nine out of twelve occasions as an inspiration in becoming politically active. It appears, therefore, that these leaders and their thinking have exerted great influence on Kurdish political life, even though Barzani is dead—his son Massoud has succeeded him—and Öcalan is imprisoned in Turkey. An interesting development, then, is the ostensible approach by Öcalan towards Barzani, claiming the latter to be the leader of all Kurds (Kurdpress). Another important factor is family, which appears to be of great

influence in the way in which someone becomes politically active and with which party they ultimately become involved. Furthermore, one of the primary reasons given for why people join a specific party is the preference—emphasized by PYD members—for a party to be based upon social equality and accepting violence only on the basis of self-defense—all of which are reminiscent of Rousseau (Russell 695). It is also revealing that Rousseau is mentioned directly by one of the respondents as having influenced his political thought. KNC-members emphasize they choose non-violent politics, and while other factors appear to be evenly distributed between both sides, the preference for social equality versus non-violence seems to be mutually exclusive among the respondents. The related observation that only PYD-members regard Marxist revolutions abroad as positive examples seems to confirm this cleavage within Syrian Kurdish politics.

### **Structural-Cognitive Model and Syria's Kurds**

Incorporating the results into the Structural-Cognitive Model leads to somewhat ambivalent outcomes, especially in relation to the impact of relatives on political participation. Research suggests that members of the same group—family—

share common experiences leading to similar political preferences (Barner-Barry and Rosenwein 94). Family as phenomenon in Social Movement Theory can be situated among all main sub-theories of the Structural-Cognitive Model. How to locate family within the model needs further exploration.

From a Framing Theory perspective the choice for either the KNC or the PYD is a dynamic process in which the macro level influences the individual. This explains the importance of family members as the cultural expressions emphasizing Kurdish identity and focusing on collective repression. In case of the PYD, this feeling is enforced by class awareness (itself influenced by left wing literature), creating an image of the colonized people whom must free themselves from repression. Another aspect is that each respondent seems to present their answers in correspondence with the framing of the respective parties when it comes to the acceptance of violence.

Cultural expressions—and, for the female respondents, their gender—that emphasize the group's uniqueness and offer the individual a feeling of belonging can provoke political activism, an argument which is supported by Collective Identity Ap-

proach. Perhaps the issue of family might fit here as well.

In all twelve interviews the respondents mention repression of Kurds as a key factor in becoming politically active. Some scholars use Political Opportunity Structure as an explanatory model for the Kurds political activism during the Syrian Conflict: "The weakening of a state that proved oppressive, manipulative, and oblivious to their needs presented new political options for them" (Hokayem 78). As obvious as this might seem, it does not explain the macro level reluctance of the Kurds to join the opposition in initial years of the Syrian Conflict. Following Tejel, the coming to power of Bashar al-Asad and his tolerance of some form of Kurdish entity after the Qamishli-revolt explains why the Kurds are reluctant to give up this position. Only after the regime withdrew from Rojava did they participate in the conflict. This implies that the political opportunity is not primarily the Syrian Conflict, but al-Asad's changing attitude towards the Kurds.

Resources cohere with opportunities and both are recognized within a specific frame of reference. Hence, Resource Mobilization Theory interprets the framing elements as necessary instrumental assets for creating popular support. Political op-



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portunities are only considered as such if there are enough assets to actually regard them as a viable option. In their reciprocal relationship, Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Opportunity Structure identify the same important factors, such as attractive leadership and organization, both of which were mentioned by KNC and PYD supporters.

Further research is necessary to gain greater insight into the processes of political mobilization among Syria's Kurds. In

addition to having experienced repression, leadership inspired respondents to become politically active. Half of the respondents became involved through relatives, while others were influenced by the media. Why they choose their specific party is mainly due to individual perceptions regarding the weaknesses of other parties, although in some cases there were simply no alternatives. Both sides displayed fairly similar opinions on these issues. The major difference which emerged concerns other reasons that underpinned

the choice of party: KNC respondents were clearly motivated by the narrative of non-violence, while PYD respondents chose social equality while accepting violence in cases of self-defense.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Some parties have different factions that operate independently and are practically separate parties (Allsopp 17; Hevian 47-50; Hossino and Tanir 5).

<sup>2</sup> Interview in Suleymaniyah, 7 March 2014.

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