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Syrian Conflict Gives Kurds New Freedom

by Scott Bobb

AFRIN, Syria — As fighting intensifies in the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Damascus, the Syrian government has withdrawn its troops from several Kurdish areas in northern Syria. Kurdish leaders there have set up their own security force and say they intend to maintain control of their areas no matter what happens in Syria's conflict. Some Kurds see this as a step toward fulfilling the dream of having their own homeland.

When Syrian government forces withdrew recently, the Kurdish city of Afrin came under the control of the Kurd's Democratic Union Party, known as the P.Y.D. Afrin has its own checkpoints and flies its own flag.

Hundreds gathered in the nearby village of Jolbul to bury a local son who died fighting in the 28 year-old struggle by separatist Kurds in Turkey against the Turkish government. Most Syrian Kurds support this struggle and privately many say they aspire to the same goal: a Kurdish homeland in their region.

Kurds make up 10 percent of Syria's population but have never been officially recognized by the government of the Syrian Arab Republic. The PYD commander in this region, who goes by the name Hassan, says the Kurds now control about half of the Kurdish areas along Syria's border with Turkey. But he notes the region also has non-Kurdish communities.

"The demographics [population distribution] do not support independence here and we are not looking for independence," Hassan explained. "All we want are our human rights and self-determination, not separation, just democratic autonomy."

The Kurds are not taking sides in the 17-month conflict between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and rebels of the Free Syrian Army. Commander Hassan says neither side is willing to acknowledge the Kurds' identity or demands and so their struggle will continue.

"Whatever happens, as long as the regime attacks the Kurdish people and maintains its policy regarding us, the Kurdish people will continue to sacrifice and will resist to the last drop of blood," Hassan said.

Altogether the Kurds number about 30 million, spread across parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Their aspirations trouble the central governments of those countries. Syria's Kurds, surrounded by conflict, are in a delicate position. But the war has given them a new freedom that they vow never to surrender.