

Research Paper

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# Kurdish Self-governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition



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## Summary

- Syria's Kurds have emerged at the forefront of the battle with self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), gaining them support from the United States even as tensions between them and the Syrian opposition have increased. Their strategic gains have been significant, but remain fragile.
- Ideological and tactical divisions between Syrian Kurdish political movements have manifested in their response to the Syrian uprising. The ascension to power of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) signalled a pragmatic approach in which tacit agreements with the regime have been sought in order to obtain greater autonomy from the central government.
- The Syrian opposition has consequently criticized the PYD as no more than a regime proxy. But the reality is more complex. The PYD's relationship with the regime should be seen as an ambitious survival strategy adopted in the circumstances of the Syrian civil war.
- The PYD's local legitimacy, while not uncontested, stems from its success in combating ISIS and its ability to deliver a localized form of governance. The governance model adopted by the local administration, the PYD-led Rojava Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), remains insufficient, and at times heavily dependent on the central government in Damascus.
- The Syrian government's ruling elite is split over these developments: some believe that the new model in Rojava can work in parallel with the Syrian government, and that convergence between the two will be a natural result of their simultaneous survival. Hardliners continue to insist that the accommodation with the PYD is a temporary measure, arguing that power will be centralized again once the war the government is waging in other parts of Syria winds down, and warning of the potential for future confrontation.
- TEV-DEM should be cognizant of the dangers associated with overreach. It would do better to focus on strengthening the local administration in areas it already controls rather than continuing to expand into areas of Sunni Arab majority. Such expansion threatens to sow the seeds of ethnic conflict and place unmanageable burdens on TEV-DEM capacities and resources. Over-reliance on the support of the anti-ISIS coalition would be unwise given the fickle support of the United States to date for its allies on the ground in Syria.

# 1. Introduction

As areas of Kurdish majority have come under attack and occupation by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Syria's Kurds have been at the forefront of the battle with the militant Islamist group. The struggle against ISIS has conferred international legitimacy on Kurdish forces – led principally through the People's Protection Units (YPG) – resulting in significant military support from the United States.

With this support, the battle for Kobane (Ain al-Arab in Arabic), in northern Syria near the border with Turkey, saw the first major defeat for ISIS. The victory of Kurdish forces in the city in January 2015 has become a symbol of resistance in Kurdish communities across the region. While initially considered of little strategic importance, the battle also became significant for the international community. Until that point, the United States and its international partners were primarily focused on countering ISIS expansion in neighbouring Iraq. This was partly because the US-led coalition needed to work with local forces: after the invasion and occupation of Iraq, putting substantial US forces on the ground was seen as both unpalatable to US domestic opinion and ineffective – or counterproductive – in securing local stability. In Iraq, Washington was willing to partner with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government, but it initially saw no equivalent partners in Syria, particularly after the failure of the 'Train and Equip' programme to unify vetted Syrian opposition groups.<sup>1</sup> However, in the Syrian Kurdish forces, US policy-makers came to identify a partner they felt they could work with. Unlike the assortment of rebel forces that had identified the regime of President Bashar al-Assad as their primary foe, Kurdish forces' prioritization of ISIS as their principal enemy matched the US assessment. The subsequent provision of sustained US support to the YPG has provided it with a significant battlefield advantage, assisting Kurdish forces in their advance on ISIS-held territory.

Events in Kobane have taken on symbolic meaning for Kurds across the Middle East, with some referring to it as the Kurds' 'Stalingrad' moment,<sup>2</sup> yet the united front presented there masks divisions between Kurdish political movements over their response to the Syrian uprising. Despite historical and contemporary grievances with the central government, the Rojava Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM<sup>3</sup>) – dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – had kept discreet lines open with regime officials in the capital, Damascus, and focused its efforts on combating ISIS and establishing a form of localized government. This has led the opposition, including some of TEV-DEM's rivals, to accuse the movement of acting as the regime's proxy, and is used as a justification for excluding TEV-DEM from internationally brokered peace talks.

Critically, it has been the ability of Kurdish forces to stabilize and govern the areas taken from ISIS that has made it such an effective force on the ground. Despite the fact that Kobane was decimated

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<sup>1</sup> Gibbons-Neff, T. (2015), 'Only 4 to 5 American-trained Syrians fighting against the Islamic State', *Washington Post*, 16 September 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/09/16/only-4-to-5-american-trained-syrians-fighting-against-the-islamic-state/> (accessed 28 Jul. 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Gold, D. (2015), "'Welcome to Stalingrad. Welcome to Kobane': Inside the Syrian Town Under Siege by the Islamic State", *Vice News*, 13 January 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/welcome-to-stalingrad-welcome-to-kobane-inside-the-syrian-town-under-siege-by-the-islamic-state> (accessed 28 Jul. 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk in Kurdish.

as a result of house-to-house fighting between the warring parties and coalition airstrikes, significant numbers of civilians returned within months and re-established local governance mechanisms, mirroring events in other Kurdish-administered areas of the country.<sup>4</sup> The ability of the local administration to provide basic necessities and services to the population in Rojava (the Federation of Northern Syria) and maintain security in comparison to other Syrian areas is a key success.

Nevertheless, the system of governance in Rojava still faces major geopolitical and security challenges, particularly as Kurdish forces continue to advance, expanding the territory under TEV-DEM's control to areas populated by other minorities and groups. This is adding to the already heavy burden of service provision, as well as the challenges associated with political and ethnic integration, especially in areas where Kurds do not form the majority of the population, such as Tell-Abyad and Manbij (see map).

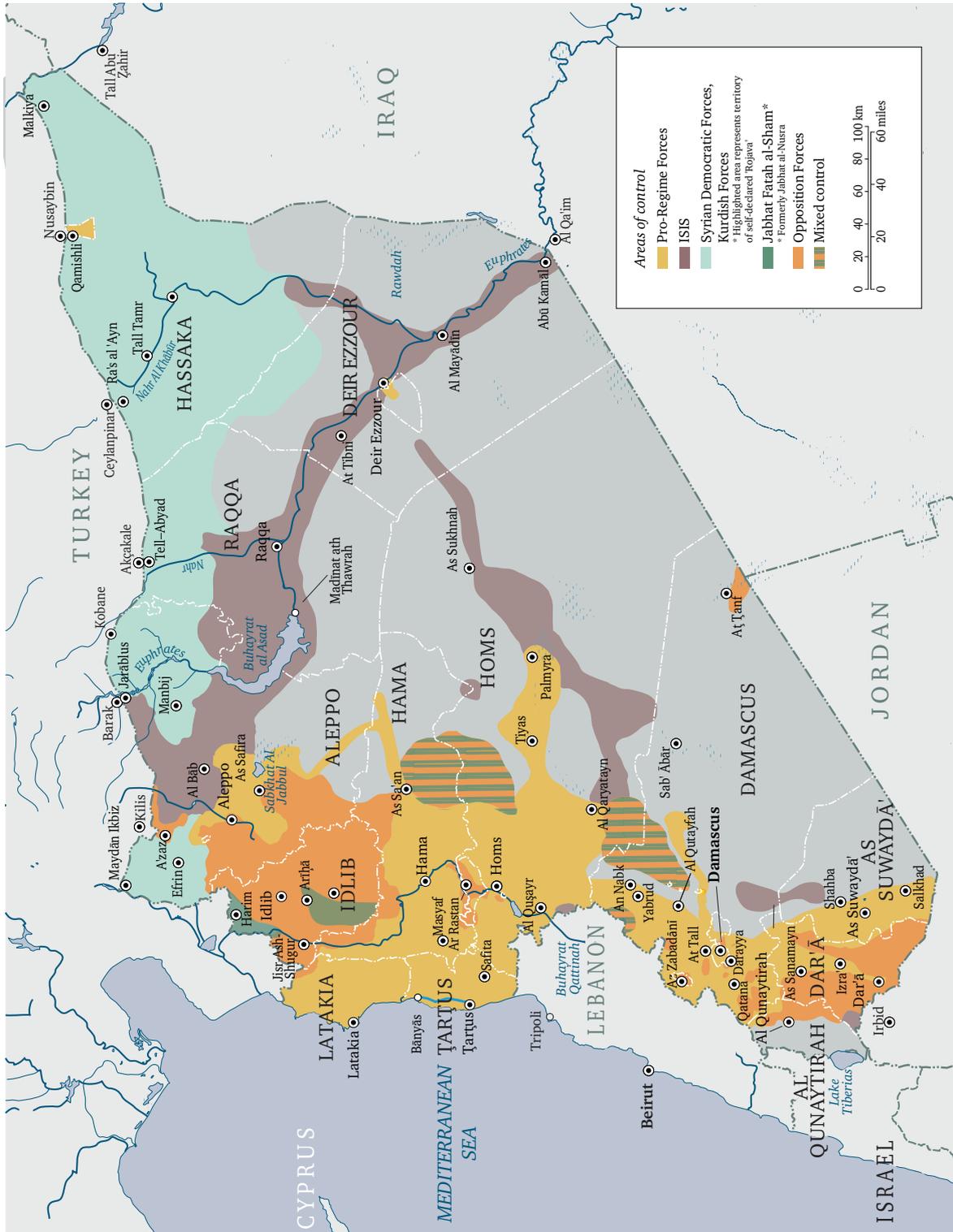
External economic and military pressure, principally from Turkey, has also been brought to bear upon TEV-DEM as more actors in Syria and the wider region have become alarmed by the prospect of the emergence of a Syrian Kurdish entity and the example it could set for Kurdish populations elsewhere. TEV-DEM has tried to respond to those fears by presenting a model of federalism and stressing the unity of Syrian territory, but this outcome remains precluded by the absence of an inclusive political settlement as the war in Syria rages on.

This paper assesses the development of the local administration of Rojava, its context within Syria and the wider Kurdish political scene. It aims to present a different perspective on the challenges, opportunities and threats faced by local powers in Rojava throughout the Syrian conflict. The paper is based on research undertaken during a year-long fellowship, and on field interviews conducted inside and outside Syria with local actors as well as international and regional stakeholders.

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<sup>4</sup> Barzanji, S. (2015), 'Governor of Raha, a third of Kobani refugees return', Rudaw Press, 18 May 2015, <http://rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/1805201514> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

Map 1: Areas of military control in Syria (11 August 2016)



Source: Adapted from UN and Institute for the Study of War maps, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syria-situation-report-august-12-18-2016>. The boundaries and names on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by Chatham House.

## 2. Syria's Kurds Before 2011

Before 2011 Rojava was less of a clearly demarcated territory and more of a concept in the quest for a Kurdish collective identity. Western Kurdistan, or 'Where the sun sets' (the literal meaning of 'Rojava'), refers to a historical geographical component of what was once known as Greater Kurdistan, unrecognized by post-First World War colonially drawn borders. It has, however, become defined since 2011 as constituting three self-administered non-contiguous cantons: Efrin, Kobane and Cezire. Its territory extends over modern-day northern Syria, from Malkiya (Derik) on the eastern border with Iraq to Efrin on the western border with Turkey (see map).

Syria is often referred to as the home of Arab nationalism. The Ba'athist regime of Hafez al-Assad consistently emphasized the Arab identity of the state. In Kurdish majority areas in the north, a policy of demographic and political centralization left an ethnic Kurdish population widely under-represented and marginalized, with hundreds of thousands completely denied legal status, protection and political representation within the Syrian state.<sup>5</sup> Almost 20 per cent of Syrian Kurds became stateless following a census conducted in 1962 in Hassaka governorate. By 2011 their number was estimated at 300,000.<sup>6</sup>

This institutionalized discrimination was complemented by a tacit regional consensus across the Middle East to stifle any Kurdish efforts towards cross-border identity and nationalism. Kurds, like many other minorities, were split between the greater nationalist Kurdish project and the fight for equality and representation within their respective states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

In Syria, the years leading to the 2011 uprising were of special significance to the population in Rojava. While Iraq's Kurds had achieved a high degree of autonomy in post-2003 Iraq, Syria's Kurds became increasingly critical of the central government's failure to respond to popular political and economic demands, amid increasing levels of political repression. In Qamishli (in Hassaka governorate) in March 2004, this spurred a riot in which Syrian security forces clashed with Kurdish youths. The speed with which the local community mobilized resembled the dynamics of the early days of the Syrian uprising and the so-called Arab Spring. These events helped to shape Kurdish political awareness in Rojava and, critically, left an impact on the central government's perceptions of security policy.<sup>7</sup> In the years leading to the 2011 uprising, the Syrian government, perennially preoccupied with security, treated the Kurds as a major risk to national security. A Syrian parliament report from the time included a reference to the Kurdish-dominated areas as the state's Achilles' heel,<sup>8</sup> and Kurdish calls for political and cultural rights continued to be met with an iron fist.

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<sup>5</sup> For scholarly analyses of Syrian Kurdish society and political movements, see Tejel, J. (2009), *Syria's Kurds History, politics and society*, New York: Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies, and Alssopp, H. (2014), *The Kurds of Syria*, London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>6</sup> Lynch, M. and Ali, P. (2006), *Buried Alive: Stateless Kurds in Syria*, Refugees International report, January 2006, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/47a6eba80.html> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>7</sup> The riots that followed a football game between the local team in Qamishli and one from Deir Ezzour developed an ethnic dynamic between Kurdish and Arab supporters. While the Syrian regime's initial crackdown was violent, this contained uprising was resolved by opening new channels of communication between local Kurdish politicians and Damascus, which were immediately called upon by Damascus from the early days of the Syrian conflict.

<sup>8</sup> Shindy, I. (2012), 'Interview with Omar Oussi', Syrian parliament report, 20 June 2012, <http://parliament.gov.sy/arabic/eindex.php?node=5533&cat=2443&nid=2443&print=1> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

### 3. 2011: The Syrian Uprising and the Kurds' Decisive Moment

Disagreements in approach between key Kurdish actors in the region helped widen the differences between Syrian Kurdish groups in the aftermath of the Syrian uprisings in 2011. This led to a failure to collaborate among those groups and consequently diminished the possibilities for the creation of a nation state across 'greater Kurdistan'. Political as well as military developments, most notably the rise of ISIS and the establishment of its caliphate, combined to see the rise to power of the PYD-led TEV-DEM in Rojava. The rival Kurdish National Council (KNC), an organization of Syrian Kurdish parties founded in October 2011 and opposed to President Assad, also withdrew from the local administration. The KNC itself was set up following a convergence of Syria Kurdish parties in Erbil, in Iraq, as an umbrella grouping of parties opposing the regime of President Assad, shortly after the creation of the Syrian National Council (SNC).<sup>9</sup> This section considers how the PYD came to dominate the Syrian Kurdish political scene at the expense of the KNC.

**Table 1: Kurdish political groupings**

Kurdish National Council (KNC)		Rojava Movement for Democratic Society (TEV-DEM)	
Founded: 26 October 2011 Led by: Ibrahim Berro		Founded: December 2011 Led by: Aldar Khalil and Ruken Ehmed	
Composing Parties	Party Leader	Composing Parties	Party Leader
Kurdish Democratic Unity Party	Moheiddine Sheikh Alli	Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Salih Muslim and Asya Abdullah
Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria	Saleh Keddo	Star Congress	
Kurdish Yeketi Party in Syria	Ibrahim Berro	Organization of Martyrs' Families	
Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party	Jamal Sheikh Baqi	Several student, youth, legal, cultural, industrial and healthcare unions and organizations	
Kurdish Future Movement	Siamand Hajjo		
Kurdish Future Movement*	Fadi Merhi		
Kurdish Azadi Party in Syria	Mustafa Joumaa		
Kurdish Azadi Party in Syria*	Mustafa Usso		
Kurdish Left Party in Syria	Mohammed Moussa		
Kurdish National Democratic Party in Syria	Taher Sfoug		
Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria	Naamat Daoud		
Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria	Nassreddine Ibrahim		
Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria	Abdul Hameed Hajj Darwish		
Kurdish Democratic Party – Syria*	Ahmad Sinno		
Syrian Kurdish Democratic Accord Party	Fawzi Shingal		
Kurdish Yeketi Party	Fouad Alliko		
Reform Movement	Faisal Youssef		

\*Kurdish parties often witness splintering and mergers caused by personal differences among some of their members. Some parties then become defined by the name of the original party and the name of the current head of the new group.

<sup>9</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2012), 'The Kurdish National Council in Syria', <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/48502> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

The regime's concern about security threats emerging across Syria in the early days of the uprising soon led President Assad to make conciliatory moves towards the Kurdish population. He called upon several key figures within different communities, including a request for a meeting with a senior Kurdish elder in Qamishli. The invitation was followed by a flood of decrees, including the announcement of the granting of full Syrian citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds in April 2011 as a sign of goodwill.<sup>10</sup>

Kurds were divided over how they should respond to this new outreach from a traditional foe, and the Qamishli elder,<sup>11</sup> who argued for regime change and more involvement in the Syrian uprising, declined the presidential summons. He sought counsel instead from influential Kurdish leaders outside Syria, including meetings with Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Masoud Barzani of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). Each offered very different advice, which would soon be reflected in the stark divisions among Kurdish political parties in Syria.

An anecdote cited by several Kurds in interviews for this paper sums up the PUK approach. Talabani, or 'Mam Jalal' (an abbreviation of 'Uncle' in Kurdish), who is seen as one of the symbols of the Kurdish struggle, received the elder despite his own poor health. Following lunch, and before the tea server had finished making the round of the room as Kurdish custom dictates, the elder was already urging President Talabani to grant his support to the Syrian revolution, pleading that this was a regime that had oppressed the Kurds for 40 years, and that the moment was approaching when the Kurdish dream of a unified Kurdistan might be realized. All chatter faded across the room, for the view of the president would have historical repercussions not only for Syria but for the fate of Kurds across the Middle East. Talabani thundered with a firmness well understood by those who had accompanied him throughout his political career:

This is a regime that has repressed you for 40 years, you tell me? Then why is it only now that you wish to rise? Listen carefully, you as Syrian Kurds have rights within the Syrian state that you need to fight for, you must go back now and work on getting them, but you must not confuse that with our dream of greater Kurdistan ...<sup>12</sup>

For those present at the meeting, it was clear that President Talabani was sceptical of grand projects aimed at redrawing the map in the Middle East, at a time when Kurds in different areas, and sometimes within the same nation, continued to disagree over what forms of governance and shape greater Kurdistan would take.

By contrast, Masoud Barzani, another pillar of the Kurdish historical struggle and president of the Kurdish Region in northern Iraq, strongly backed the Syrian opposition, in alliance with Turkey. 'Kak Masoud' (an abbreviation of 'brother' in Kurdish) urged by members of the KDP-S, his party's Syrian branch, hosted the first meeting of the KNC. He believed that he could build on his good relationship with Turkey, which, some months earlier, had hosted the creation of the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella group of opposition Syrian parties based in Istanbul. President Barzani was hopeful that the SNC and the KNC would work together to oppose President Assad and later coordinate the transition in Syria.

While the KNC wanted to work with the broader opposition, the PYD took a different, more pragmatic approach. The PYD was established in 2003 in Syria, and regarded Abdullah Öcalan as its ideological

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<sup>10</sup> D Press (2011), 'Assad Issues decree granting citizenship to Kurds', 7 April 2011, <http://www.dp-news.com/pages/detail.aspx?articleid=80129> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with author under condition of anonymity. The elder is not named at the request of the interviewee.

<sup>12</sup> Author interview with PUK officials present at the meeting, 2016.

leader. Öcalan, nicknamed 'Apo' (an abbreviation of 'uncle' in Kurdish), an ethnically Kurdish national of Turkey, has been imprisoned by Ankara since 1999 for leading the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). His political philosophy and approach to issues of nationalism are deeply rooted in his supporters.<sup>13</sup> And while the PYD retained organizational independence from the PKK, it mirrored the latter's defiant position on Turkey as well as its political paradigm, and several of its officials had spent years within the structure of the PKK before the Syrian war.

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The PYD, which had a large presence among Syrian Kurds, was working under the umbrella of TEV-DEM, which had been established in December 2011 in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising, and which was actively competing with the KNC. One of the main points of divergence related to the PYD's stance of urging regime change, yet rejecting foreign intervention and alignment with the Syrian opposition. It claimed to offer a 'third line' within the Syrian conflict, centred around self-defence and the primacy of non-violent solutions. Asya Abdullah, the co-president of the PYD, explained:

The third line is an independent and open track, which does not support either the regime or the opposition. The latter is similar to the regime in that its aspirations are limited to power. The third line is based on the organization of society and the formation of cultural, social, economic and political institutions in order to achieve the people's self-administration. We rejected from the start all that leads to deepening the crisis, as well as the militarization of the revolution, and we saw a clear distinction between gun chaos and self-defence.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this competition, the KNC and TEV-DEM had agreed to work together within the Kurdish Supreme Committee (DBK), established in 2012 in Erbil, in the hope that unity would allow a rapid and stable transition in Rojava.<sup>15</sup> The DBK's goal was to continue governing territory in Rojava that had witnessed the withdrawal of the Syrian government, which was by this time actively engaged in military operations against the Syrian opposition across the country.

In fact, Kurdish forces had taken advantage of the Damascus bombing that killed several members of the Syrian regime's top brass on 18 July 2012. The following day saw skirmishes between Kurdish and regime forces before the Syrian regime withdrew its troops to key security zones in Qamishli and the provincial capital Hassaka, as it was forced to divert its attention elsewhere in the country, especially to Damascus.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, however, the Syrian opposition dealt a heavy blow to the KNC by refusing its demands to include a reference to the 'Kurdish people in Syria' in its Cairo meeting in July 2012. This led to scuffles among the Kurdish delegation and other members of the SNC. The failure of the KNC

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<sup>13</sup> Gunes, G. and Lowe, R. (2015), *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*, Briefing, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

<sup>14</sup> Author's correspondence with Asya Abdullah, co-president of the Democratic Union Party, 7 August 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Gunes and Lowe, *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*.

<sup>16</sup> Van Wilgenburg, W., 'Dissecting the YPG: structure and capacity; operations and strategies as defender of Rojava', unpublished paper presented at the London School of Economics and Political Science on 19 July 2016.

to gain recognition of Kurdish identity from the internationally backed opposition weakened its quest for legitimacy among Kurdish constituencies. Over the next two years, the PYD continued to gain influence and control within Rojava, especially as it formed the bulk of the militarized YPG and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), which were defending areas under Kurdish control in Rojava against attacks by Islamist militants. Fighters from other Kurdish parties joined the YPG, while others loyal to parties outside TEV-DEM were joining the Syrian opposition armed groups or leaving for nearby Iraq or Turkey.

Despite an initial agreement between the two major Kurdish coalitions, the KNC and the PYD-led TEV-DEM, to collaborate on the production of an 'interim administration' project for Rojava, as local popular support tilted towards the latter the KNC eventually withdrew its participation. It accused the PYD of monopolizing decision-making and harassing its activists.<sup>17</sup> TEV-DEM responded by accusing the KNC of trying to establish a competing parallel force and divide Rojava into competing zones of influence, risking Kurdish infighting.<sup>18</sup> In November 2013, it unilaterally announced the creation of an interim administration extending over Rojava's three cantons. This led to a serious deterioration in relations between the Kurdish parties in Rojava, and in effect saw the withdrawal of the KNC from the local administration.

The new status quo prevailed until ISIS launched its offensive on Kobane in September 2014, after ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi had appeared in the grand mosque in Mosul, on 30 June, following the announcement of the so-called caliphate.

President Barzani initially denounced the PYD's power grab and supported the KNC's claims to have been politically targeted and excluded in Rojava. Nevertheless, he came under mounting pressure within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) to show solidarity with Syrian Kurds enduring what was tantamount to ethnic cleansing by ISIS in Kobane.<sup>19</sup> He eventually agreed to support the YPG in its struggle against ISIS by allowing fighters and weapons into Kobane through Turkey in November – a move in which US pressure played a significant role. Barzani himself was leading the battle with US and UK support to defend the KRI capital, Erbil, as ISIS was advancing, and had been halted only 30 km away a few months earlier, in August.<sup>20</sup>

As a new global threat arising from the Iraq conflict and the Syrian war, ISIS was wreaking havoc across the borders of the Middle East. Its spectacular defeat in Kobane at the hands of the YPG/YPJ with US air support put an end to its string of military victories and claims of infallibility on the battlefield. A new campaign was forming in the war on ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, combining international air strikes and local boots on the ground. It also completely altered the political scene in northern Syria, leading to the establishment of a de facto local government by TEV-DEM.

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<sup>17</sup> Rudaw (2014), 'Divided Syrian Kurds reach deal in face of ISIS threat', 22 October 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/221020141> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Author interview with Sihanok Dibo, presidential adviser to the PYD, 27 July 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch (2014), Human Rights Watch Report, 'Under Kurdish Rule, Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria', <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria#page> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Muir, J. (2014), 'Islamic State Crisis, Kurds ready for action in Iraq', BBC News, 11 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29152703> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

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## 4. Beyond Security: Local Administration in Rojava

The model of local administration in Rojava has fostered a number of positive developments, such as a focus on individual personal freedoms. In addition, it can also be argued that its decentralized model may hold at least part of the solution to a lasting settlement in Syria. At the least, the local administration has helped to reduce the repercussions of the Syrian war on the population in Rojava, and to limit the spread of ISIS. TEV-DEM was able to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of Assad's forces from northern Syria; its nuanced position *vis-à-vis* the Syrian government allowed a continuation of the basic services previously rendered by the state, because it met with less resistance from Damascus than the opposition-aligned KNC would have done. However, there is still pressure on the local administration at the economic, security and political levels, and TEV-DEM in turn continues to follow a security-focused model of governance and remains relatively dependent on Damascus. The local administration's institutions will need to be strengthened and civilian–military relations well defined and separated if the threat of internal destabilization is to be warded off. Accusations of authoritarianism from PYD opponents are cited as one of the main reasons for restricted Western backing for the local administration.<sup>21</sup>

Encouraged by military victories and the receding popularity of the KNC, TEV-DEM had switched by December 2013 to a new governance model, democratic confederalism, which was dubbed the 'democratic self-administration project' and had stronger ties to the PYD's own ideology on governance.<sup>22</sup> This came to replace the 'interim administration project' previously agreed upon with the KNC. In July 2016, the provisional charter was replaced by an updated version, the 'Federal Democratic Rojava Social Contract'.<sup>23</sup>

It was clear that the PYD's vision on governance dominated the legal and political references in the document, especially with regard to multi-ethnic recognition and the notion of democratic confederalism noted above. Yet despite its radical leftist roots in the decades-long connection to the ideology of Öcalan and the PKK, the new administrative structure has in its multi-ethnic and secular components met some fundamental requirements of Western international backers opposing the Syrian regime.

The 'Social Contract' charter, which acts as a provisional constitution for Rojava, dedicates articles 8–53 to basic principles of rights, representation and personal freedoms that match the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also contains a number of other principles so far never applied in Syria and neighbouring countries, such as the inadmissibility of civilians being tried by military courts and the abolition of the death penalty. In addition, the PYD adopts a progressive gender equality standard in its governance structures, with equal gender representation in all administrations and the establishment of a ministry for 'Women's Liberation' – a standard that has been largely adhered to, including within the military.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Author interview under Chatham House Rule, July 2016.

<sup>22</sup> According to Öcalan's theory, democratic confederalism responds to the failure of capitalism and the nation-state system through a direct system of bottom-up government that includes grassroots democratic participation. Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Draft of the 'Federal Democratic Social Contract' (in Arabic), 1 July 2016, <http://www.fdr-bs.com/ar/2016/07/01/1808> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Coughlan, T. (2016), 'Revolutionary Kurdish feminist leads assault on Raqqa', *The Times*, 27 May 2016, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/revolutionary-kurdish-feminist-leads-assault-on-raqqa-29kdsrgpc> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

The charter also indicates that decentralization was a response to the multitude of religious, ethnic and regional conflicts in Syria, and to dictatorship, while stressing the full integrity of Syrian territory within a federal system. TEV-DEM has also created executive, legislative and judicial councils, and stipulates a bottom-up democratic selection of their members, and their councils, stipulating that these should be directly elected and overseen by communal committees.

The model was put into action immediately after the recapture by the Kurds of Tell-Abyad (Gire Spi) from ISIS forces in June 2015. An Arab president was elected to the male/female joint presidency of the town's local council. This was repeated in March 2016 when the first co-president of the local self-administration, Mansour Salloum, was elected to lead the Rojava Constituent Assembly charged with producing a constitution for Rojava. Salloum was succeeded by Arab lawyer Hamdan Al-Abed as a co-president alongside Kurdish Layla Mustafa in Tell-Abyad.<sup>25</sup> Arab communities that had been living in towns and villages under the rule of ISIS militants were invited to put forward representatives for local councils and committees.

General elections have not been held yet, with Kurdish sources emphasizing that this is due to the current security constraints. If and when the TEV-DEM authorities deem elections possible, it is clear that they will require international support and monitoring to ensure full participation across the political spectrum.

The PYD has undertaken a process of decentralization at every level, with the establishment of local executive institutions designed to present organic responses to the needs of the local communities in Rojava after decades of heavily centralized rule. The Syrian government institutions are being replaced by those of TEV-DEM, but many within TEV-DEM's ranks felt that the prematurity and rapidity of the process were giving birth to a weakened form of governance.<sup>26</sup>

Syrian government buildings were taken over by the local administration across Rojava, and while some retained their original function, the majority were converted into YPG and Asayish (police) headquarters. The focus of the PYD and other Kurdish groups was to replace the security structure of the Assad regime while guaranteeing the basic services provided to citizens within Rojava. The balance between the two has proved more problematic than originally perceived, as the Asayish became involved with the most mundane of administrative activities, such as building permits, trade and transportation.

TEV-DEM critics have accused it of simply replacing President Assad's poster – which adorned almost every government institution and office – with that of the PYD's political godfather Abdullah Öcalan. For them TEV-DEM is simply a new form of authoritarianism rather than democratic confederalism in action.<sup>27</sup> As evidence of this they cite the exclusion of opposition parties within Rojava, which has been seen to add to the rigidity of the newly established administrative structure. Tensions between the TEV-DEM and its opposition came to a head as this paper was being finalized. The KNC's president, Ibrahim Berro, was arrested in August 2016 at an Asayish checkpoint in Qamishli, after a legal complaint was brought against him by one of TEV-DEM's parties, the Committee of Martyrs' Families. The complaint centred around the opposition of Berro and other KNC leaders to the 'Kurdish revolution in Rojava'. Although TEV-DEM had so far avoided the arrest of senior opposition officials,

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<sup>25</sup> Van Wilgenburg, W. (2016), 'Young female mayor breaks boundaries in Syrian town freed from Islamic State', Middle East Eye, 1 July 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/young-female-mayor-breaks-boundaries-syrian-town-freed-552711157> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>26</sup> Author interview under condition of anonymity.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with author under Chatham House Rule, Erbil, 2015.

Berro's critical view in the aftermath of the liberation of the northern town of Manbij, resulted in his arrest by the Asayish and his expulsion to the KRI, according to a KNC statement.<sup>28</sup>

The PYD's Kurdish and Arab opponents also argue that it has been utilizing institutions to further its own political agenda, especially in the education sector.<sup>29</sup> In a demonstration in Amuda in October 2015, Majeed Badran, a local official in the Kurdish Yeketi party, said, 'While the introduction of Kurdish as a language of instruction is our national demand, no one party should set the curriculum according to its own wishes and agenda.'<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, critics have questioned the sincerity and effectiveness of the PYD's attempts to include Arab representatives in its governance structures.

Despite relative success in terms of internal security and defence, other key services deteriorated as a result of the vacuum created by the absence of the state.<sup>31</sup> Electric power and water provision became considerably less reliable until the successful recapture by the YPG of the Euphrates Tishreen Dam, in January 2016, led to some improvement in this sector. Although some areas still suffer power cuts for more than 12 hours per day. Meanwhile health provision was being stretched: key health centres and public hospitals had to deal with the increasing flow of injured fighters and security personnel, and a lack of medical equipment and medicine. While these facilities remained accessible to civilians and, in general, service at public medical institutions is perceived to have improved since 2011, those seeking medical aid continue to rely on private clinics and health centres.

The local administration also still lacks control over large sectors of the economy that were once heavily regulated by the Syrian state. The provision of wheat continued to be closely monitored by the administration, but merchants and importers, as well as those benefiting from the war economy and the monopoly of goods, became the decisive power in the market.<sup>32</sup> On more than one occasion this led to spikes in the prices of basic goods and food items, despite efforts to control prices by the imposition of taxes on trade between the different cantons of Rojava and on goods imported by daredevil lorry drivers from other parts of Syria and from territory controlled by ISIS. Accusations of incompetence and nepotism within the local administration were even echoing in the margins of the Geneva peace talks, with critics of the PYD describing tomatoes as so rare as to be 'red gold', and blaming the administration for failing to ensure adequate supplies of basic goods.<sup>33</sup> On several occasions, staples had completely disappeared from the market, forcing the administration to lift the customs tax on goods traded within the different cantons in Rojava.<sup>34</sup>

The local economic, trade, and planning organizations created by the charter and the local administration have faced challenges in implementation. Citizens trying to acquire routine permits complain of excessive bureaucracy, a lack of structure and a failure to make decisions. The bureaucratic and ponderous nature of the Rojava authorities is seen to hinder the implementation of larger projects. On some occasions 'communes' or village associations have taken it upon themselves to fill the void caused by the local administration's delay in responding

<sup>28</sup> Rudaw (2016), 'UPDATED: Rojava Asayesh arrest political party leaders', 16 August 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/150820162> (accessed 16 Aug. 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Mulla Darwiche, S. (2015), 'Kurdish self administration hastens to Kurdify the Kurds', Raseef 22, 22 September 2015, <http://raseef22.com/life/2015/09/22/new-school-program-curriculum-adopted-by-the-kurdish-self-administration-in-syria> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Nasro, J. (2015), 'Demonstration in Amude against shutting of schools and local administration curriculum', Ara News, 12 October 2015, <http://goo.gl/zGU7YG> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016). PYD officials denied these accusations and insisted that the purpose is to allow young Kurdish children to learn their own language in schools.

<sup>31</sup> Author interview via Skype with local residents.

<sup>32</sup> Author interview under Chatham House Rule.

<sup>33</sup> Radio Al Kul (2016), 'Rising tomato prices turn it into Red Gold', 20 April 2016, <http://www.radioalkul.com/p54304/> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Hammo, A. (2016), 'Crazy price upsurge of basic provisions with total absence of local administration institutions', Xeber 24, 14 April 2016, <http://xeber24.org/119196.html> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

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to infrastructure needs. In one example, the commune of Kokhri in Efrin resorted to collecting bags of cement from private individuals and volunteering private tractors in order to pave the entrance to the village, despite calls from TEV-DEM officials to wait until the implementation of a wider infrastructure project that would pave the roads with asphalt.<sup>35</sup>

TEV-DEM has blamed its shortcomings on Turkish and KRG policies, for placing an embargo on Rojava and blocking the procurement of much-needed goods from outside Rojava, most notably medical supplies.<sup>36</sup> But it is also true that the Asayish and other security forces continue to lead and bypass other organizational structures, citing security reasons. This continues to be an obstacle for a decentralized decision-making process, which is also leading to delays in project implementation as well as affecting economic growth.

Meanwhile, many Syrian state structures and local support networks continue to function in Rojava, with financial support from the central government. Many of the TEV-DEM administration's employees who were previously employed by the Syrian government continue to receive their government wages in addition to salaries paid by the local administration.<sup>37</sup> The existence of parallel structures between the central Syrian government and local administration is often confusing for the local population: the state's continued presence is seen as weakening TEV-DEM's legitimacy, especially in the eyes of those belonging to non-Kurdish communities in Rojava. One Rojava resident quipped over the confusion of authorities: 'Which date should we follow for Eid? The Syrian Government one, or the Saudi Government one? Perhaps TEV-DEM's mufti can weigh in on this?'<sup>38</sup>

There are great strains on the viability of the Rojava experience, be it in the shape of security threats or from the economic and social pressures arising from over five years of continued struggle in Syria. These are constraining the degree of autonomy that TEV-DEM can exercise in the administration of areas under its control. Elements of political development are thus still pending under the burden of the ongoing conflict.

Equally, there is a serious risk of the development of one-party rule under the PYD should non-Kurdish components be unable to participate within the local administration's structure. Here, Rojava is in danger of repeating the bitter experience of Iraq, which saw years of efforts in rebuilding evaporate as a result of Sunni Arabs' non-participation in protest against the power-sharing structure. For some Sunni Arab leaders in Iraq, this was a strategic mistake, by all parties, that irreparably damaged political representation and contributed considerably to Iraq's future plight.<sup>39</sup>

There is a continuing need to encourage wider political inclusion and transparency within the ruling structure in Rojava. This would have to involve separating military and civilian institutions, which will prove crucial in implementing the economic and political reforms required within Rojava.

There is also a need to include Rojava itself in the wider Syrian peace talks and reconstruction roadmap. So far the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has acceded to the wishes of the Syrian opposition to exclude TEV-DEM from representation at the negotiation table in Geneva. The reality on the ground, however, shows that TEV-DEM is a significant organic actor: despite its complex relationship with the Syrian regime, it is important to recognize the stability that it has brought to areas under its control.

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<sup>35</sup> Hannan, N. (2016), 'with soil and cement, my villagers pave streets, resisting the need and weak capabilities', *Niddal Hannan Blog*, 1 June 2016, <https://nidalhannan.wordpress.com> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Author interview with TEV-DEM officials, Beirut, June 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Author interview under Chatham House Rule, Damascus, March 2016. This was also verified in various interviews with residents in Rojava.

<sup>38</sup> The quote is taken from a Facebook post of a Rojava resident. It is cited with permission. Eid dates are calculated on lunar cycles. Different dates are adopted by different countries. TEV-DEM of course does not have a mufti (Muslim legal expert).

<sup>39</sup> Author interview with Ali Hatem Suleiman, Iraq, August 2014.

## 5. Rojava and Damascus: Decentralization or a Marriage of Convenience?

Against a backdrop of increasing opposition and loss of territory, the regime's strategy of defending what it deemed to be its core heartlands – predominantly Damascus and western Syria – has allowed for a quid pro quo in the northeast with the PYD. In this arrangement, the TEV-DEM can generally pursue its governance project without bringing it into direct armed conflict with the regime, which continues to focus upon defeating the opposition.

In this marriage of convenience, the regime has been forced to accept de facto decentralization in the area, leaving a void that TEV-DEM has stepped in to fill. Yet the central government has not officially recognized the constitutionality of the local administration in Rojava. Here, differences between the two sides over the definition of decentralization may lead to future conflict between them, as presaged by the clashes between the Syrian state air force and YPG units in Hassaka as this paper was going to press in August 2016.

As the uprising gathered momentum in 2011, President Assad passed a law on decentralization (Decree 107) that could be used in future negotiations for official recognition of Rojava by the central government. Yet it remains an open question whether this was a purely tactical approach by the regime while it prioritized other threats, or whether it indicated a strategic assessment by the regime in realizing that it would be forced to share power in future. TEV-DEM currently holds no real guarantees of continued coexistence with the regime beyond the strength of its own institutions and international support of the anti-ISIS coalition.

Satisfied that its remaining core security institutions were safeguarded in Qamishli under YPG protection, the Syrian government actually withdrew the bulk of its troops from northeastern Syria by July 2012. Having mastered the dynamics of ethnic politics, the regime was confident that the identity politics played by Kurdish forces in Rojava was a double-edged sword that could be used to its advantage: it understood that other groups in the area would be resistant to the rise of Kurdish power. Indeed, it found in several Arab tribes, Assyrian and other minority groups many recruits for its National Defence Forces (NDF), a loyalist militia with localized branches in different parts of Syria fighting alongside the Syrian Arab army and other regime security structures. This meant that the central government would manage to maintain a presence in Kurdish-dominated areas without resorting to violence as it had in other areas.

The regime then proceeded to establish agreements with the Kurdish de facto forces on maintaining its share of oil and agricultural revenues. Flights to and from Qamishli airport resumed, allowing Kurds in Rojava an aerial access point as Turkish troops soon sealed off the region's land borders to the north, and flying passengers to Damascus and Latakia, as well as to Lebanon, Iraq and Kuwait.<sup>40</sup> This also suited the national security policy of the Syrian regime, which saw the length of its borders as a weakness to overcome. It deemed a Kurdish-controlled enclave to the northeast a natural protective belt, hindering Turkish support for Syrian opposition groups. In doing so, the regime put

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<sup>40</sup> Airline ticket purchase is only possible through agents of Damascus-based airline operator Cham Wings, and Qamishli airport continues to be run by Syrian government border control officers.

its faith in the deep-rooted conflict between the Turkish state and its own Kurdish opposition. This was not the first time the regime had sought to utilize these dynamics: Öcalan and the PKK were offered refuge in Syria for the majority of the 1980s and 1990s.

Ammunition and military equipment shipments sent by the central government to the YPG landed in Qamishli on several occasions throughout the war, according to officials in Damascus<sup>41</sup> (it should be noted that this is officially denied by the PYD). Military coordination with the Syrian regime and the central government forces peaked whenever YPG forces became overstretched following major attacks from Islamist opposition forces and ISIS offensives. This accommodation was further illustrated by the government's decision to allow the local administration to restart the extraction and production of oil from the Rmeilan oilfields by supplying equipment and paying the salaries of some of the facility's employees.<sup>42</sup> Through the regime's strategic lens, the Kurdish project remains something that can be manipulated and controlled. 'The Kurds go off track every once in a while, before sooner or later requiring our support, at which point they are often ready to give Damascus what it's been waiting for,' one Syrian official told the author.

This dependency reduces the sense of the separation of Rojava from government-controlled Syria in the eyes of several officials in Damascus who encourage wider interaction with the Kurds. Relying on the official stance of PYD officials – who insist on the integrity of the Syrian state within a decentralized democratic system – some in Damascus claim that the 'Kurdish project' in Rojava is not far from the Syrian leadership's vision of decentralization.<sup>43</sup>

It is possible to discern two views of the central government's future options for relations with TEV-DEM. The post-war realists in Damascus believe that the new model in Rojava can work in parallel with the Syrian government, and that convergence between the two will be a natural result of their simultaneous survival. This would not be the first time that decentralization would be considered in Syria by the ruling powers in Damascus, although it has never actually been implemented.<sup>44</sup> For them, this perspective presents the local administration established in Rojava as conforming to President Assad's Decree 107 on decentralization.

**“The Kurds go off track every once in a while, before sooner or later requiring our support, at which point they are often ready to give Damascus what it's been waiting for.”**

Yet, while this decree does contain many similarities to the Rojava charter on the role and functions of local administrations, there are fundamental differences regarding the legitimacy and power of the central organizing body.<sup>45</sup> According to Decree 107, governors – who sit at the top of the local pyramid – are still selected by the president of the republic and not chosen through popular vote as they are under the Rojava charter. Equally, the government would vigorously resist certain provisions

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<sup>41</sup> Author interview under Chatham House Rule, Damascus, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> The National (2015), 'Syrian Kurds refine oil for themselves for first time', 30 July 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/syrian-kurds-refine-oil-for-themselves-for-first-time> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Author interview with Syrian official, Damascus, March 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Decentralization was first constitutionally introduced following unification with Egypt under the fragile United Arab Republic in 1960, though never really put into action owing to the UAR's short life. Similarly, Hafez al-Assad reiterated that view in a decree in 1971 calling for 'popular democracy' and the constitutional introduction of decentralized local administration structures, which was again never put into practice once the Assad regime consolidated its power after its coups.

<sup>45</sup> Syria News (2011), 'President Assad decrees law on local administration', 23 August 2011, [http://syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy\\_seq=136539](http://syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=136539) (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

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of the Rojava charter, such as the freedom of the local administration to engage in direct diplomatic relations. The same is true for defence, where the charter includes no mention of the national Syrian army's role.<sup>46</sup>

The PYD's head of public relations, Sihanok Dibo, said that his party would be willing to send a delegation to Damascus to negotiate the ratification of Decree 107, in the hope of obtaining official recognition from the central government of the core elements of the social contract. But he also doubted whether such negotiations would be appropriate with the current government in Damascus, in light of its international isolation and lack of proper internal legitimacy.<sup>47</sup>

During peace talks in Geneva, Syrian government officials have insisted that reforms and dialogue over power-sharing with the opposition are possible, emphasizing that the Syrian army is focused on battling radical Islamist groups. Should the regime show real commitment towards decentralization, this could provide a light at the end of the tunnel for seemingly stalled power-sharing negotiations in the country.

The government's attitude will determine whether its current accommodation with TEV-DEM will last or is simply a temporary pragmatic alignment. Differences over where the Rojava self-proclaimed federation would fit within the constitution of Syria will be a key factor in shaping relations and a test of the regime's commitment to reaching a power-sharing deal.

Hard-line voices in Damascus continue to insist that the accommodation of TEV-DEM is a temporary measure, arguing that power will once again be centralized once the war the government is waging in other parts of Syria winds down. Such a course would pave the way for future confrontation with the Rojava local administration. The official discourse illustrates this tension; during the failed Moscow talks in January 2015, the Syrian envoy to the UN, Bashar al-Jaafari, presented a firm position rejecting the Kurdish model of decentralization. He called on the Kurds to leave Syria if they did not accept this. Salih Muslim, the co-president of the PYD, responded by saying that it was Jaafari who should leave Syria instead.<sup>48</sup>

Jaafari's attempts to dictate the blueprint for a settlement at the negotiating table are, however, out of kilter with the regime's responses to Kurdish announcements of self-governance. When Kurdish groups unilaterally declared the establishment in Rojava – under the name 'Northern Syria' – of a federal system within Syria in March 2016, the government was unshaken. It contented itself with a statement condemning any political move threatening the integrity of Syrian territory.<sup>49</sup> It was, however, disturbed when clashes erupted between Asayish/YPG forces and NDF forces, mainly the Christian pro-regime Sootoro<sup>50</sup> militia (the Gozarto Protection Force) and the Arab al-Tai tribe. Envoys were quickly dispatched to intervene when clashes in April 2016 between the two forces turned into an overnight battle that resulted in more than 58 deaths, including civilians on both sides.

The clashes in Qamishli were ignited by competing attempts to recruit Kurdish youths into military service, as both sides continue to engage in debilitating battles on different fronts, leading to a serious shortage of manpower. What was revealed of the accommodation reached between the two sides

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<sup>46</sup> Article 76, Draft of the 'Federal Democratic Social Contract' (in Arabic), 1 July 2016, <http://www.fdr-bs.com/ar/2016/07/01/1808> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Author interview with Sihanok Dibo, 7 July 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Rujub, A. (2015), 'Overview of Jaafari's speech, and response by opponents', All for Syria, 31 January 2015, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/190781> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>49</sup> Middle East Eye (2016), 'Syrian Kurds declare new federation in bid for recognition', 17 March 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurdish-pyd-declares-federalism-northern-syria-1311505605> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Not to be confused with the 'Sutoro' militia (Syriac Security Office), which is aligned with the YPG.

indicates that the Syrian government would stop drafting Kurdish youths who enlisted in the YPG in Rojava.<sup>51</sup> Yet that enlistment would still not be counted as part of the mandatory state military service, and consequently those serving in the YPG would still risk conscription if they were to visit other areas in Syria under full state control. Various interviewees voiced criticisms that they are increasingly trapped in a tug-of-war over human resources, and cited this as a main reason why they would choose to leave Syria and seek refuge in Europe.

This episode illustrates how mutual recognition between the central government and TEV-DEM has so far been limited to case-by-case accommodations based on mutual benefit. So far TEV-DEM has failed to obtain official recognition of its legitimacy beyond de facto established deals. The regime's view on developments in northern Syria was conditioned by the inter-Kurdish split and the existential clash between Kurdish troops and radical Islamist groups. This allowed the Syrian leadership greater leverage in negotiations with the local administration. It is a telling example of the prudent, Machiavellian approach the Assad regime has adopted towards the PYD. It also reflects the internal dissension within the Syrian regime between two main currents: those who are more openly talking about decentralization and accepting the new realities imposed by the war, and others who still insist on the centrality of the state and rejection of any expression of Kurdish identity.

For the PYD, the limited agreement with the central government has centred on the presence of mutual threats emanating from ISIS, and radical Islamist groups:

We couldn't allow the cities of Rojava to become a playground for armed groups and organizations that do not resemble in any way the Syrian and Kurdish cultures. We also did not allow our areas to become a dump for barrel bombs. We believed this from the start, and we saw the Syrian regime as the core of the problem in Syria, but also as a part of the solution. We are open for negotiation with any party in Syria that shares a view of democracy and respect for international law, under the international community's supervision.<sup>52</sup>

But the disagreement over post-settlement political resolution remains a key point of divergence. The PYD believes that a popular rejection of centralized dictatorship is key to TEV-DEM's ability to maintain the model of decentralized governance in Rojava, and that it was the military and political strength of TEV-DEM on the ground that forced the regime to withdraw even before the ISIS threat emerged. This and the international support of the anti-ISIS coalition could, they think, therefore act as a guarantee should there be a deterioration in the relationship with Damascus.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Reuters (2016), 'Kurdish forces to keep areas taken from Syrian government forces truce', 24 April 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-qamashli-idUSKCN0XLOFH> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Author's correspondence with Asya Abdullah, 7 August 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Author interview with Sihanok Dibo, 7 July 2016.

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## 6. Conclusion: Rojava, Limiting the Threat of Ambition

Despite TEV-DEM's success in capturing and administering territory, further expansion brings its own challenges. In addition to placing further strains upon TEV-DEM resources, expansion threatens to sow the seeds of ethnic conflict. The local administration is still perceived as a Kurdish-dominated project: local populations of Sunni Arab majority are less receptive to its arrival. While its US backers are aware of such tensions, the prioritization of the war on ISIS has placed pressures upon the YPG/YPJ to continue to advance. There remains a real risk of overreach. Over-reliance on the support of the United States and its anti-ISIS coalition would be unwise given the internal challenges to US Syria policy.<sup>54</sup>

The YPG/YPJ's success has given prominence to the Kurds' role in the overall international war on ISIS. But as most Kurdish-majority territory has now been liberated, the fight has now seen them advance towards more Arab-majority areas. Some observers have argued that the main role in the liberation and administration of Raqqa must be played by the Arab components of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is a US-backed group composed of primarily Kurdish forces with Arab forces and local Arab tribes.<sup>55</sup>

Several US officials have already visited Rojava, including the Special Presidential Envoy to the Anti-ISIS Coalition, Brett McGurk, and US Central Command commander Joseph Votel, while a contingent of special forces was deployed in the build-up to the operation. Support for the SDF has given the United States the force on the ground that it is unwilling to deploy itself in the fight against ISIS.<sup>56</sup> Despite the objections of Turkey and the PYD's traditional leftist stance, the United States has become a key international ally of the latter because of their shared interest in combating ISIS. For the PYD, this important international relationship opens up access to military and financial resources and lessens its enforced dependence on Damascus.

Yet any effective force on the ground must be capable of garnering support from the local population. The level of local support will depend on the composition of the military force itself. This necessitates efforts to establish a local administration composed of local actors. In order to discourage residents in Raqqa and other areas under its control from collaborating with SDF forces, ISIS is known to capitalize on ethno-sectarian rivalries by highlighting reports accusing Kurdish forces of the ethnic cleansing of Arab residents.<sup>57</sup> The PYD rejects those claims, citing the example of Tell Abyad, Dibo says:

We are not coming as invaders, we are liberators. Even if the liberated population chooses to rule itself outside the Rojava federation, or decide they want to return to regime control, we would rest assured in the fact that they will remember that it was us who liberated them from ISIS.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> NPR (2016), 'State Department dissent on Syria approach signals divide within administration', 19 June 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/06/19/482668959/state-department-dissent-on-syria-approach-signals-divide-within-administration> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>55</sup> Balanche, F. (2016), 'Raqqa will not fall until Arab tribes fight the Islamic State', Washington Institute, 3 June 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/raqqa-will-not-fall-until-arab-tribes-fight-the-islamic-state> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Author interview with US official under condition of anonymity, Washington, DC, May 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Amnesty International (2015), Amnesty International report, 'Syria: Arbitrary detentions and blatantly unfair trials mar PYD fight against terrorism', 7 September 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/syria-abuses-mar-pyd-fight-against-terrorism>, (accessed 28 Jul. 2016).

<sup>58</sup> Author interview with Sihanok Dibo, 7 July 2016.

However, many Arabs and their families did leave areas abandoned by ISIS, fearing accusations of collaboration with the group. The local administration will be under international and internal pressure to guarantee the right of return to those who have fled. This will burden the local administration, especially as no process for post-ISIS reconciliation has yet been put forward by any regional or international actor.

As voices rise within the Kurdish community against the drafting of young men and women to fill the ranks of the YPG, a battle that is perceived to be overstressing the limits of self-defence could potentially backfire. Kurdish forces already have other battles to fight on more pressing fronts, as the conflict in northern Aleppo rages and as suicide attacks continue to claim civilian and military casualties in Rojava.

Others within the Kurdish community have also warned against launching open warfare without full agreement and support from Arab tribes, and without stronger assurances from the United States and the anti-ISIS coalition of support for the SDF/YPG forces. Here, Kurds are reminded of the catastrophe of the anti-Saddam campaign in the 1990s and the trauma they suffered when US forces failed to take any action to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kurds in Iraq, after the then President George H.W. Bush had called on the Iraqi people to rise up against the army of Saddam Hussein.<sup>59</sup> They fear a similar abandonment in the event of a change of policy after the US presidential election.

All this suggests that TEV-DEM's ability to govern territory beyond Rojava itself will be severely limited in its effectiveness. The local administration is already burdened with internal Kurdish strife and centuries-old Turkish and Arab antipathy to Kurdish nationalism. There are also internal fears within Rojava of one-party rule and an over-reliance on security forces, whose mandate is extending to seemingly civilian matters. This is in addition to economic stresses resulting from Rojava's encirclement by governments that do not recognize it. Despite de facto cooperation and mutual understanding, the relationship with Damascus continues to lack a constitutional recognition and a secure future, which also compounds Rojava's physical isolation. The clashes between the YPG and the Syrian air force in August 2016, which occurred as this paper was going to press, illustrate the potential for conflict between Damascus and the Rojava administration to re-emerge, contrary to the assumptions made by many analysts who have regarded the Kurds as virtually a regime proxy.

Equally, the degree of international support Rojava enjoys should not be overestimated. Turkey's unilateral decision, in August 2016, to support Syrian rebel forces in seizing Jarablus from ISIS, while simultaneously targeting the positions of the largely Kurdish SDF, is further evidence of the neighbouring country's commitment to reversing Kurdish gains in Syria. Moreover, the US's acceptance of the Turkish intervention is hardly likely to allay fears that Rojava may eventually be left to fend for itself.

Syria's Kurds thus stand at a crossroads in the region's history. They are living at the edge of an extremely volatile and contested territory where their success could be an important model for conflict resolution in the region. However, full success in countering ISIS and stabilizing Rojava would require good local governance, based on local requirements and ideas. This will need to be accompanied by rapid action to achieve political and economic consolidation in territory captured from ISIS, greater inclusivity of all elements of the Rojava population and further international support.

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<sup>59</sup> Muir, J. (2016), 'Fleeing Saddam with the Kurds', BBC Magazine, 30 May 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-36362107> (accessed 31 Jul. 2016).

## Acronyms

DBK	Kurdish Supreme Committee
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
NDF	National Defence Forces
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNC	Syrian National Council
TEV-DEM	Rojava Movement for a Democratic Society
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units

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Cover image: Tomatoes displayed for sale in the central food market in Qamishli during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, 2016.

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