

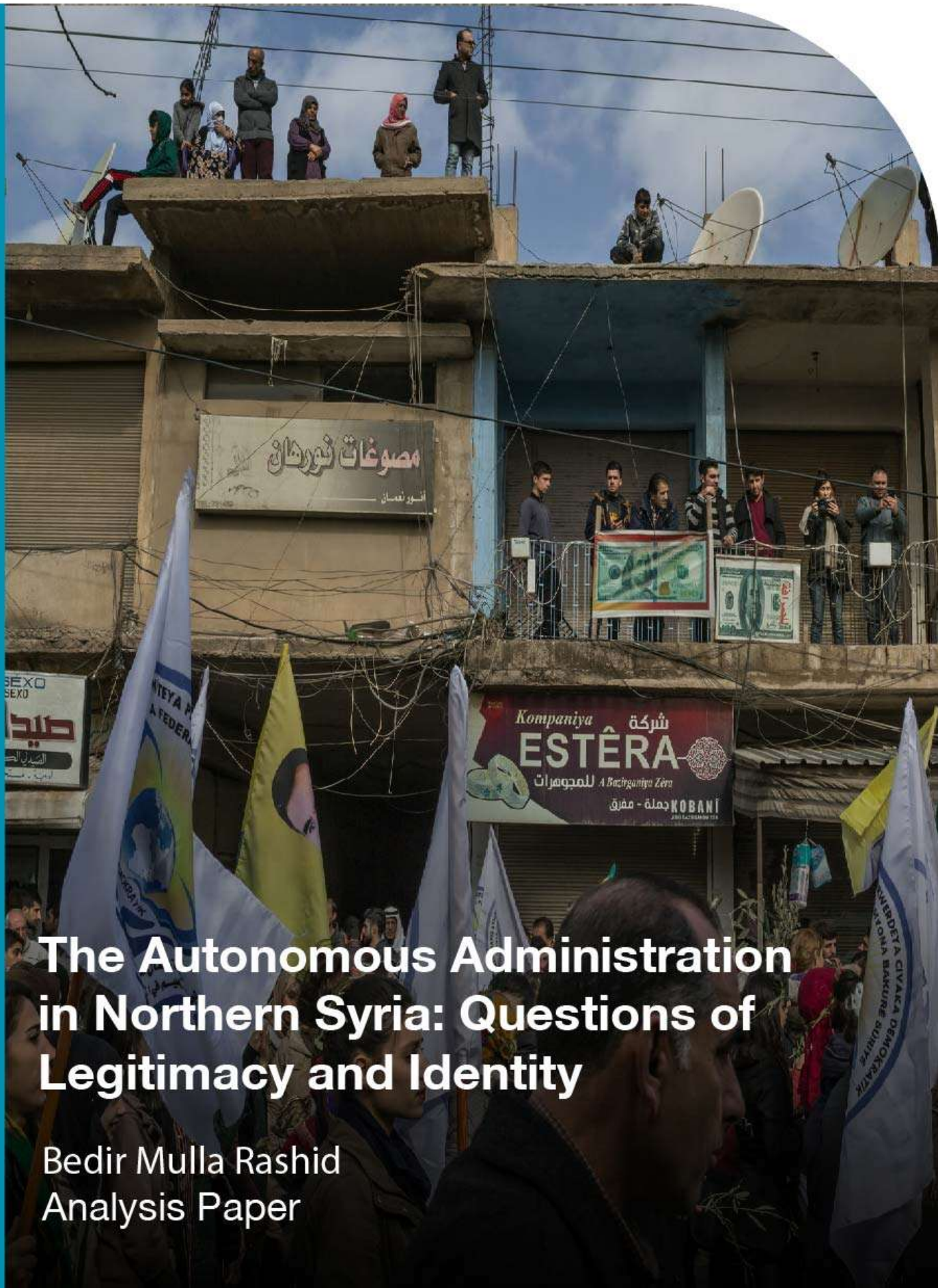


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The Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria: Questions of Legitimacy and Identity

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Analysis Paper

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Executive Summary

- The Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA) project faces a number of challenges, including repeated **failed attempts at gaining legitimacy and recognition** by different actors within the Syrian conflict. Despite the success of the DAA's military wing—the People's Protection Units (YPG)—in fighting the so-called Islamic State group (ISIS) and becoming America's main ally on the ground for the international coalition; their alliance with the US did not gain them additional political recognition. Nor did it protect them from parties to the conflict such as Turkey that view their project as a major threat, in response to which it launched Operation Olive Branch. The Assad regime in Damascus also views them as a threat to its national sovereignty and threatened to wage a non-stop war on areas under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and to push for public uprising and protests against them in Raqqa, Manbij, and Hasaka.
- The DAA has been unable to garner support from the local communities under its control, both Arab and Kurdish populations, for a number of reasons including their lack of a clear identity. On one hand, the DAA is “Kurdish-centric when needed,” and on the other hand, it preaches a “Democratic Nation Theory” that transcends ethnicity and religion. This is reflected in the “Social Contract,” it imposes, which contains some concepts that can be regarded as general Syrian demands after years of war and killing, such as the idea of strengthening local governance and decentralizing power. But at the same time the “Social Contract” details a number of concepts that overstep central state authority, and alter local social norms and practices based on a partisan ideological background.
- Difficulties in implementing the “Social Contract” and a new political program in different geographical regions of Syria with a variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious identities, resulted in a number of conflicts within the SDF alliance on several occasions.⁽¹⁾ Furthermore, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was unable to convince the majority of the Kurdish public to adopt the DAA project either. Despite their security grip on the DAA areas, there have been several protests held by the Kurdish National Council (KNC), criticizing various issues such as the forced implementation of Kurdish as the only language used in schools in Kurdish majority areas.
- In terms of resource management, the DAA's governance suffers a lack of transparency with respect to its mechanisms for managing institutional income expenditures. DAA's assets are administered by the Executive Committee of the cantons, which act in place of typical government ministries and operate independently. Despite the relative stability in large areas under DAA control, they have not successfully achieved a level of administration that is proportionate to the amount of resources and assets available to them.
- Despite having characteristics of a functioning governance system, the DAA still suffers from a number of key deficiencies, notably: a lack of transparency and clarity, the absence

⁽¹⁾ See Omran Center for Strategic Studies previous report about internal SDF conflicts, “Military and Security Structures of the Autonomous Administration,” <https://goo.gl/MX2dmq>

of a clear strategic plan or set of policies, the marginalization of civil society, a lack of bureaucratic and technocratic expertise.

Introduction

The Syrian Revolution created conditions that allowed non-state actors to emerge across the Syrian map including the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its umbrella, the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which together along with other smaller parties established the Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA). From mid-2012 until present day, the PYD tried to keep feet in both camps (to remain neutral – supporting neither the regime nor the opposition) while working to strengthen its own project. The DAA project went through a number of phases, from times of relative stability to times like the battle for Kobani in January 2015. They continued to gain power and territory until Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch, which resulted in the DAA losing Afrin, one of its most critical cantons.

During the development of the DAA, challenges arose at the political, legal, executive, and administrative levels, operations and take away from its legitimacy to govern. These issues are explained at length in this analytical paper.

The DAA: Acceptance and Recognition

The DAA originated—and emerged from its dominant group, the PYD—in a political and social context in which people were looking to undermine the legitimacy of the Assad regime in all its forms. The main political force, the Democratic Union Party (PYD as a party formed at 2004), comes from within the DAA itself. They existed in a political reality in which people were looking to discredit any legitimacy for the Assad regime. The DAA failed to get any guarantees during its fight against ISIS that would safeguard its political gains afterwards. Despite the PYD's extensive efforts to stabilize its project, the DAA still suffers from a lack of recognition from key actors: first from a large slice of its primary constituency the Kurds; second, from the Assad regime; and finally, Syrian opposition groups differ in their evaluation of the DAA, some because of their differing standards of local administration and others due to their regional alliances.

There are three identifiable sources of legitimacy in Syria today: the Syrian people and their cultural and political activity; the regime, due to the international community's continued recognition of the Assad government as the Syrian state; and the Syrian opposition due to the international community's recognition of its coalition institutions. The DAA will continue to suffer from a lack of legitimacy if it does not secure recognition from one or all of these sources.

On a local “Kurdish” level, the DAA's legitimacy is contingent on a number of factors, the most important of which is the success of its security operations in keeping armed conflict out of urban areas under its control. Other factors include its success in the fight against terrorism, and its ability to delay Turkish intervention deeper into DAA territory. The DAA has been able to effectively use these issues in developing its political narrative, often exploiting developments in the situation of Kurds in Iraq and Turkey. For example, the PYD used the fighting against Turkish army in Kurdish populated Turkish cities in 2016 to spread fear among

the public by broadcasting details of the fighting through the DAA's media channels. Promoting an "external threat against the Kurds" narrative in its political rhetoric has been a key strategy for the DAA since it first took control of territory in northern Syria. The fear of instability is one of the most important reasons that the population continues to overlook other practices, in some cases human rights violations, by the DAA.

With the end of ISIS's military power in sight, there is a growing need for the DAA to gain legitimacy in the eyes of much larger cohort of non-Kurdish Syrians, especially after taking control of places like Raqqa and rural Deir Ezzor. The events of Manbij City, with increasing calls for protest against "Kurdish" control of the city, have revealed the size of the imbalance between security and local support. Recent assassination attempts in Manbij targeting the DAA's civil and military leaders, including members of the US-led international coalition, highlight the local population's low tolerance for DAA practices.⁽²⁾ It is worth noting that the regime has tried to capitalize on these negative sentiments towards the DAA and reintroduce itself as the legitimate governance structure northeast of the Euphrates River. The regime has funded and supported Hussam Katerji, a local businessman and Member of the People's Assembly, to form the so-called "Popular Resistance in Raqqa," with the stated goal of ending what it refers to as the American occupation. The group has called on locals in Raqqa to protest in support of Assad and to demand that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and others coordinating with the US-led international coalition leave the city.⁽³⁾

Internationally, the PYD has worked hard to gain recognition from three key stakeholders: Russia, the United States, and some EU member states. The PYD traditionally enjoyed strong ties with Moscow due to the historic relationship between the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Soviet Union, but made recent efforts to get closer to Washington for a number of reasons. The most important of these was to hinder a Turkish intervention, especially as they approached the brink of armed confrontation with the Turkish military. The PYD's relationship with the US began during the siege of Kobani, and later developed into a partnership on the ground fighting ISIS. The People's Protection Units (YPG) succeeded in convincing the Pentagon to depend on them exclusively by quickly adapting to America's regional priorities. This was facilitated by the Syrian opposition's insistence on fighting both the Assad regime and ISIS simultaneously, an approach that Washington rejected, arguing that it did not want to be distracted from critical anti-terror operations.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) was eager to work with the YPG, but put pressure on them to merge into a new group called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in order to avoid potential legal issues due to the designation of PKK as a terrorist organization by the US. The SDF's literature does not refer to any ideological affiliation with the PKK and does not preclude Arabs or other non-Kurdish people from joining. Instead, the SDF actually encouraged Arab armed groups to join them in full, with their fighters and equipment, in order to show their ethnic and political diversity makeup of the new formation at the behest of the Americans. Regardless, the new group and its all of its subsequent mergers maintained a framework

⁽²⁾ The international coalition announces the killing of two soldiers after being targeted in Manbij, Source: Northern Syria Observer, Date: 30/03/2018, Link: <https://goo.gl/Y1SBN4>

⁽³⁾ The "Popular Resistance" attacks and American military base in Raqqa, Source: Syria News, Date: 02/04/2018, Link: <https://goo.gl/7smXXv>

dominated by the YPG, which controls all decision-making mechanisms and power structures within the SDF.

Despite the flexibility towards the American demands demonstrated by the PYD's leadership in Qandil (The PKK has bases in the Qandil mountain area of Iraq⁽⁴⁾) and at the local level in Syria, their relationship with Washington remained limited to military cooperation between the SDF and the international coalition, without translating to any sort of political recognition. Instead, the Americans put significant political pressure on the PYD leadership to break ties with Qandil. This culminated in the creation of the new "Future Syria" party as an ideological partner to the SDF without direct connection to the PKK or related institutions.

The lack of US political recognition of the DAA in Syria pushed it to keep some remnants of positive relations with both Tehran and Damascus, and to maintain their historic relations with Moscow. Russia recognized the DAA's interests in pursuing relations with Russia despite its military coordination with the US. The DAA's relations with the US did not deter Russia from using the DAA to serve its own political agenda in Syria. Russia allowed the DAA to open a representative office in Moscow, and invited the group to participate in international forums and negotiations for a peaceful political solution. Russia also used its unique relationship with the DAA to put pressure on both Turkey and the United States at certain times of the conflict. Russian political recognition of the DAA was coupled with security cooperation after Russia's military intervention in Syria. They supported YPG offensives to take control of Tel Rif'at, Menagh Airbase, and other villages in northern Aleppo, and sent Russian military detachments to serve as a buffer zone in Afrin. Ultimately, Russian interests came to align more closely with Turkish security priorities, especially in Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, which were both results of military and security arrangements made during the Astana process.

The DAA's relationship with EU member states offered them opportunities to open political missions in a number of European capitals including Brussels, Stockholm, Paris, and Berlin. These missions do not have official political recognition from their host countries and their legal presence is limited to registration as non-governmental organizations. However, these missions are directly managed and operated by PYD representatives.

As described above, despite its political and military maneuvering, the DAA was unable to overcome the obstacle it faces in gaining societal, national, and international acceptance and recognition. In reality, its activities did not extend beyond portraying a façade of a formal structure with little space for local participation. On a national level, the two sides of the conflict—both the regime and the opposition—have hostile relations with the DAA until today. On an international level, the changing political context and its impact on the political process means that behavioral shifts are a key characteristic of the actors. For this reason, any legitimacy or recognition the DAA attains is temporary and could change at any moment.

⁽⁴⁾ The Kurdish Qandil Mountains, Source: Stratfor orldview., Date: 28/03/2013, Link: <https://goo.gl/J2SGz4>

A Social Contract in a Fluid Political and Military Context

A group of parties affiliated with TEV-DEM, and several other related organizations, together announced the formation of the DAA on January 21, 2014.⁽⁵⁾ The announcement followed a series of failed meetings and attempts to form the Council of Western Kurdistan, negotiated in Erbil.⁽⁶⁾ The DAA announced a special social contract, which would act as the foundation of a constitution. Later on, this social contract became the cornerstone of “The Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria,” a DAA project that evolved from the Syrian Democratic Council that was formed on October 12, 2015. A draft of the social contract for the federation was circulated June 28, 2016 in the city of Malkiyeh. The document was approved by the DAA’s Constituent Assembly on December 29, 2016, under the name “The Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS),” after the word “Rojava” was removed from the title. The “Social Contract” document raises a number of challenges related to legitimacy, including questions surrounding the political representation of key actors of northern Syria, issues related to the absence of a capacity to measure popular support, the absence of approval of the “Social Contract” from the Syrian central government or any other government.

The “Social Contract” does not specify the borders of the DFNS. Instead, the text of the preamble refers to a “geographic concept, and political and administrative decentralization within a unified Syria.” The concept of political decentralization is unclear and vague, and the text appears to confuse the concepts of the rights of entities within a confederation—which is more like a union of sovereign states—and federalism, which is a looser term that cannot be defined by one particular model.⁽⁷⁾

Through its new constitution, the DAA granted itself authorities of a central government. In article 22 of the DAA’s “Social Contract”, it not only recognized the right of self-determination, but also appointed itself as the executor of this right without a national agreement with other components in specifically northeast Syria or other parts. Additionally, it contradicts itself when it recognizes the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and at the same time unilaterally declares the right of self-determination to all groups and components of Syria. Articles 54 to 84 describe the governance structures and institutions of the DFNS starting with the smallest structure—the commune—all the way to the committees and executive councils of the cantons, as well as the executive council of the DFNS. The same articles explain how the councils and committees are formed, including the election commission and the defense council. The Executive Committees of the cantons includes 16 offices and the Executive Committee of the DFNS has 18 general councils. The total number reaches 33 executive bodies without taking into account the neighborhood councils. Despite the fact that the “Social Contract” stresses principles of democracy and freedom, it created a

⁽⁵⁾ On the second anniversary of its announcement: Opinions about the Autonomous Administration’s works, Source: Buyer Press, Date: 01/21/2016, Link: <https://goo.gl/jp1RhC>

⁽⁶⁾ The failure of negotiations between TEV-DEM and KNC occurred for many reasons, notably the conflict between the different regional Kurdish factions supporting the two councils.

⁽⁷⁾ Analysis of the Social Contract of the Northern Federation, Source: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 08/16/2016, Link: <https://goo.gl/6fJedS>

fertile ground for local dictatorship and a crippling bureaucracy by obligating all citizens to serve in at least one neighborhood commune office.

Article 66 states that “every region can develop and strengthen its own diplomatic, economic, social, and cultural relations with the neighboring people and countries, provided they do not contradict with the ‘Social Contract’ of the DFNS or with the Syrian state.”⁽⁸⁾ Yet, the DAA has itself opened offices and developed relationships, including the opening of foreign missions, as an effort to secure its political interests. Interestingly, hosting foreign militaries in a territory is an act usually undertaken by a formal state, and is therefore incompatible with Article 66. In response to such criticisms, the Co-President of the Council of the Federation of Northern Syria, Hadia Yousef, said during a presentation at the Kurdish Center in Egypt on July 20, 2016 that:

1. The federal system detailed in the document does not call for the division of or separation of northern Syria, instead we accept to live in a state that protects the rights of the people who live in it.
2. Federalism is the only solution to the Syrian issue, and if they desired to separate, they would have already done so.
3. Defense and foreign policy will be managed by the central power.⁽⁹⁾

The “Social Contract” of the Federation of Northern Syria faces a number of complex challenges, especially as it expands. There continues to be a lack of representation of the KNC as well as the residents of Raqqa, Manbij, southern rural Hasaka, and Shadadi, all cities that have a majority Arab ethnic makeup. There is also the issue of unilaterally adopting the federal model without consulting other political components in the country, and doing so during a period of political and military fluidity and with increased regional and international intervention.⁽¹⁰⁾

Administration of Social and Geographic Diversity

Since the start of the Syrian revolution, the PYD (DAA) controlled different and diverse geographic territory in which people from a variety of backgrounds live. Between 2012 and 2015, they had control of 12% of Syrian territory including Afrin, Kobani, and two thirds of Hasaka province.

⁽⁸⁾ Full text of the “Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” <http://vvanwilgenburg.blogspot.com/2017/03/social-contract-of-democratic.html#/2017/03/social-contract-of-democratic.html>

⁽⁹⁾ Program at Kurdish Center: The video shows experts: The Kurds take apart northern Syria, Source: Masr Al Arabiya, Date: 07/20/2016, Link: <https://goo.gl/xKCQGM>

⁽¹⁰⁾ In reference to the subject of identity, it is important to note that nation states emerged in the Middle East following the collapse of the empires of past years. The legacy of this experience was that the locals were unable to create a succinct all-encompassing political identity. For example, the Turkish Republic, which has its roots in the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, is unable to overcome the conception of a single ethnicity and accept that the country is made up a multitude of ethnicities. Similarly, the Islamic Republic of Iran is unable to escape the legacy of the Shah, and cannot clearly identify as Persian nor live in peace in a region that is plagued with plentiful ideological differences. Based on this we can observe that the political structures at the bottom of the governance pyramid in the DAA suffer from the lack of a clear identity. The PYD rejects a Kurdish nationalist identity but at the same time calls for holding a “Kurdistan Conference.” The PYD also denies its core relationship with the PKK, while the success of “Rojava” and the Democratic Autonomous Administration are attributed to Abdullah Öcalan personally, the de facto leader of the PKK. The PYD also compromises its own identity when it is politically convenient. For example, the Syrian Democratic Forces are allied with the capitalist United States, putting the PYD in direct contradiction with the Marxist ideology that it still subscribes to.

The area of Afrin, located in the larger Akrad Mountains region,⁽¹¹⁾ has plentiful fresh water, fertile mountainous terrain, and strong olive and textiles manufacturing and trade industries. Most of the area's residents are Kurdish and unaffiliated with tribes. Al-Jazira and Kobani on the other hand, lie on flat plains and are known for their dependence on wheat and cotton cultivation. These two regions suffered from marginalization by the Assad regime as well as a stifling of the private sector. The main cities there are also relatively young, founded at the turn of the last century after demarcation of the current borders between Syria and Turkey.⁽¹²⁾

In addition to the impacts of economic and commercial activity on the social structure and ideological orientation of the cantons, there are other social and political differences within the DAA areas. For example, Afrin's close proximity to Aleppo is one of the reasons that it had a strong manufacturing sector and an abundance of factories. The manufacturing and commerce-based social structures of Aleppo have also had an influence on Afrin, helping create more stable social dynamics than in the al-Jazira and Kobani regions, which depend more on seasonal crops. The level of attachment to a specific geography is dependent on natural factors. For example, olive trees in Afrin are hundreds of years old, whereas al-Jazira and Kobani were pastoral lands for the inhabitants of nearby cities just 100 years ago – with the exception of historic cities like Amude and Malkiyeh. For the reasons, settlement patterns east of the Euphrates River are different from Afrin. For example, one of the main reasons for the migration of 1.5 million people from al-Jazira to Aleppo and Damascus between 2006 and 2008 was the lack of rainfall.

The diverse make up of these three regions (al-Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin) also affects the political and partisan identities there, as a result of several factors. First, they are influenced by significant Arab cities nearby. Despite high numbers of Kurdish residents in Kobani and Afrin compared to northern al-Jazira, Kurdish nationalism first appeared in full force in Hasaka province in response to the Baath Party's nationalistic and exploitative policies. Looking closely at the geographic distribution of the political forces in Malkiyeh near the Iraqi border in the east, all the way west to Afrin on the Syrian-Turkish border, it is clear that there are large differences even among the Kurdish political factions themselves. The strongest grassroots support for the Iraqi Kurdistan National Party (KDP) is concentrated in the east, and the PKK's support base gets stronger towards the west, culminating in their strongest bastion of support in Afrin. Furthermore, the residents of al-Jazira still hold strong tribal affiliations, while this practice is less prominent in Afrin and Kobani.

The YPG's territorial control expanded with the creation of SDF in mid-2015, reaching 24% of Syria's total territory, more than double the area previously under their control. This increase in territory also significantly increased the number of people as well as the types of cities, towns and villages under the DAA's control. After having only controlled areas with predominantly Kurdish populations initially, the DAA found itself in control of an area that

⁽¹¹⁾ Kurdish presence in northern Syria, Akrad Mountains, Afrin, Source: Madarat Kurd, Date: 04/12/2016 <https://goo.gl/7upuYf>

⁽¹²⁾ The area of Jabal al-Kurd or the Kurds or Old Kordag is in the northernmost corner of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It forms the northwest corner of the Fertile Crescent of the State of Syria, and the heights of the end of the southwest of the Taurus Mountains. The mountains of Jabal al-Kurd begin in the upper reaches of the rivers of Afrin and the west of the city of Gaziantep (Kurdish name Delok) within the Turkish border regions, and are a natural extension of the mountains of Reşa and Zagê of the Kurdish areas in the north and east. The peaks take a northerly northward direction with a slight deviation to the west and a length of about 100 km to its southwestern end, west of the town of Gondirasafirin. Its width ranges between 25 and 45 km. Joining this mountainous region, Mount Lilon and Juma Plain, they have historically formed a single, integrated geographical area along the river valley of Afrin.

spread from Kobani in the north, through Raqqa and rural Deir Ezzor, reaching the Iraqi border in the south at Albu Kamal, and from Manbij in the west through Tal Abyad, reaching Malkiyeh in the east. This geographic area is characterized by small Arab cities and towns, vast desert plains, and numerous small hills and villages. The number of inhabitants under the DAA's control increased from two million to 3.5 million according to some estimates. This also resulted in significantly increased costs related to efforts to protect these territories and people from attacks by ISIS.⁽¹³⁾

The impacts of this geographical expansion on the DAA and its related military and political bodies were not limited to the larger size and higher number of residents. This expansion into southern parts of northern Syria added new Arab elements that the DAA had not dealt with in its initial phase, from 2013 to mid-2015.

The Euphrates River Basin is known to have a large Arab population that still largely retains its tribal traditions. Before the battles for Raqqa and rural Deir Ezzor, the DAA depended on the Kurdish forces as fighters and administrators, and used Kurdish slogans and worldviews to recruit fighters and leaders. This was the most sensitive and volatile issue defining relations between the DAA and the Arab elements coming from a variety of backgrounds and alliances. The Arab tribes in the Euphrates River Valley region in particular have very specific and unique traditions that are unfamiliar to Kurdish members of the DAA. This demographic and social diversity forced the PYD to adopt the idea of a “democratic nation” as a broader worldview in its initial stages, instead of its traditional ethnocentric nationalist worldview. However, this worldview carries with it a number of contradictions to the tribal traditions in the Arab areas, forcing the PYD to constantly reinterpret and redefine their political project according to the orientations of the variety of social groups under their control.

These ideological, political, partisan, and ethnic differences raise the question of the extent to which the idea of a “democratic nation” is influenced by the varied origins of the people living under the DAA. The PYD presented this worldview as a comprehensive solution to achieve justice, equality, and brotherhood for all the people of the east. So what exactly is the “democratic nation,” where did it come from, who suggested it, and how will its problems be solved?

The “democratic nation” as the theoretical basis for the DAA

The “democratic nation” worldview was not created by the DAA. Instead, it is rooted in the evolution of the theory of anarchism by the American thinkers Murray Bookchin and Naom Chomsky. They re-framed anarchism within the existing state structures in a manner that preserves its institutions to avoid total chaos in the absence of governing alternatives. The two thinkers attempted to restrain concepts of anarchism and socialism to recognize the existence

⁽¹³⁾ Syria's population 2018, The numbers are estimates due to the lack of viable partners and resources to collect accurate data, Source: World Population Review, Date: 06/04/2018, Link: <https://goo.gl/4uX9bc>.

and reality of the state in its current framework and then launch its struggle to change this reality away from the workers revolution or the return to natural life.⁽¹⁴⁾

The PYD describes the “democratic nation” as: “a group of people connected by common ties who practice of democracy to govern themselves.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Here “democracy” is not used as a governance system and instead as a description for a group of people. This contradicts the Islamic and modern social concepts that adopt religion and nationalism respectively to define the nation’s borders. This understanding is attributable to the socialist and communist rooted traditions of the PKK. After he was arrested, Abdullah Öcalan engaged in revisions to his worldview, and adopted this “democratic nation” concept as a new ideology for his party and followers. In his revisions, Öcalan criticizes previous attempts by himself and the PKK to create a Kurdish state according to modern standards. He developed the concept of the “democratic nation” after an intellectual journey, studying the most significant cultures, religions, and governance structures that existed in the past and today.⁽¹⁶⁾

The PKK’s members and supporters adopted the “democratic nation” worldview as a roadmap to the “brotherhood of people,” and a key to addressing the problems of the modern nation state. They criticize Marxism and socialism for stopping at dividing society up into competing classes, while its model failed to govern when faced with the capitalist system, which monopolized manufacturing and science and put them under international control in direct violation and oppression of people’s rights. Supporters of the “democratic nation” believe that continued studies and revelations about the shortcomings of past ideologies and philosophies are required in order to develop a new philosophical basis on which to revive critical efforts to deal with the effects of modernization and capitalism.

Öcalan developed the “democratic nation” concept in his early years of captivity. The application of his worldview went into effect in 2003 when alternative local structures emerged to take the place of the central administration of his party. This happened first in order to take the pressure off of his supporters and as a shift away from a Marxist-socialist model towards the model of a “democratic nation.” In terms of application, this approach attempts to enforce the principle of a people’s confederation by shifting central powers away from an authoritarian nationalistic state that gets its legitimacy from external powers. In regard to Kurdistan, its liberation is achieved through the liberation of the Kurdish people. This change does not generate freedom, but rather awareness and revolutionary thinking as the basis of a free society.⁽¹⁷⁾

Yusuf al-Khaldi, a researcher at the Kurdish Center for Studies, identified two main aspects of the “democratic nation”:

⁽¹⁴⁾ Janet Biehl, Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy, 2012, <http://new-compass.net/articles/bookchin-%C3%B6calan-and-dialectics-democracy>

⁽¹⁵⁾ Dana Jalal, Democratic nation is a new human identity, 2011, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=258651>

⁽¹⁶⁾ He includes in his arguments explanations of the development of the Sumerian priests and the way to democratic civilization as humans. He treat the Sumerians as if they were the first to establish a "state" in history, followed by the Egyptian, Chinese, Buddhist, Confucian, and Greek civilizations, the birth of monotheistic religions, Islam’s dismantling of the slave system, reaching the capitalist civilization and world’s general state of identity crisis. He concludes that the concept of the “democratic nation” is inclusive of all previous civilizations with their divine and human characteristics, and that it is a nation of multiple identities, cultures, and political entities in the face of the monsters of the nation-state.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Sihanouk Dibbo: Towards a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue; a battle between Ra’ and Aviv, Source: Fourth Power, Author: Sihanouk Dibo, Date: 08/29/2016, link: <https://goo.gl/JXVxAv>

1. Local autonomy: This is achieved by allowing local residents to declare their own individual and group identities, with the right to declare themselves as part of a general shared identity capable of representing all the smaller sub-identities as part of the entire nation. Through this reality Kurdish nationalism can transform into an entire nation that shares a semi-independent democratic form.
2. General structure: This is achieved by offering widespread freedoms in the diplomatic, legal, social, cultural, and economic sectors within the context of a general state and its borders.

The DAA achieves the principles of semi-democratic independence through two mechanisms:

1. An agreement with the nation that controls the modern state apparatus in accordance with a new social contract shared by all aspects and components of society based on their heritage and shared histories in the region, as well as the history of their cultures and relationships.
2. The exclusion of any concepts that contain ideas that suggest or refer to policies of integration, dissolution, and exclusion of the other, and complete abandonment of genocidal solutions previously followed by the nation-state which ended in failure. The Kurds should also abandon demands for an independent Kurdish state.

He specifies two ways for the establishment of the “democratic nation”:

1. Nationalistic groups should give up their efforts to establish their own states and desire to monopolize the state, and accept a nation state based on semi-democratic independence.
2. Kurds should take unilateral steps to move away from trying to establish an ethnocentric nation state and instead adopt the principle of semi-democratic independence.⁽¹⁸⁾

The philosophical foundations of the “democratic nation” also offer solutions for the problems of women and marriage. According to the theory, the modern capitalist system has failed to understand married life by considering women as the property of men. Instead, the “democratic nation” theory, as opposed to traditional and religious beliefs, views women as productive members of society that are capable of being more productive than men. Addressing women’s problems requires creating a balance in basic tasks and responsibilities in communal life: securing food, safety, and the reproductive process. In the case of the “democratic nation,” the growth of the human population should stop, society must be built between women and men based on "equal life," and gender equality must be fully established.

Resource Management

The reality of the DAA’s rule are further complicated by the lack of transparency of a number of mechanisms related to its resource management and institutional expenditures. The resources available to the DAA are best studied in two phases: the first phase is pre-2015—before they controlled Tal Abyad—and the second phase is from the control of Tal Abyad to present day. Taking control of Tal Abyad brought partial contiguity to the DAA’s territory, connecting the two islands of al-Jazira and Kobani, spanning along the Turkish-Syrian border

⁽¹⁸⁾ The Democratic Nation, Source: The Center for Kurdish Studies, Author: Yusuf al Khaldi, Date: 06/23/2016, Link: <https://goo.gl/tLRtXo>

from Malkiyeh to Manbij. During both phases the nature of the DAA's resources remained similar:⁽¹⁹⁾

1. Income from public properties: oil and gas in eastern Hasaka province, and grain silos.
2. Income from local taxation and customs fees taken at the border crossings.
3. Income from service delivery.
4. Expats in Iraq and Turkey.
5. Local donations.

According to Article 53, paragraph 8, of the DAA's "Social Contract," the Legislative Committee is responsible for maintaining the administration's budget. From mid-2012 to 2018 the DAA has publicly shared its finances only once in 2014 and 2015 as part of discussions between the legislative and the executive committees on March 17, 2015.⁽²⁰⁾ It is not possible to ascertain the accuracy of the numbers discussed in those meetings. The two budget reports were criticized by members of the councils due to their reliance on lengthy explanations and lack of specific details on revenues and expenditures. The chart below provides details of the DAA's budget between 2014 and 2015.

| DAA Employees | Income 2014 | Start-up, Investment, and Services Funds | Funds spent by Executive Committee in al-Jazira Canton | Total Expenses |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| 2330 | 2,953,000,000 | 2,713,000,000 | 64,000,000 | 244,710,000 |
| all amounts in Syrian Pounds | Remaining: 240,000,000 | It is not clear how the amount went from 308 million Syrian Pounds to around 2.7 billion Syrian Pounds | | |
| Distribution of Funds | | | | |
| 18% al-Jazira Canton ⁽²¹⁾ | Kobani Canton %8.5 | Afrin Canton %8.5 | 15% Internal Committee | 50% Self Defense and Protection |

It is important here to mention the lack of transparency in oil production and sales, as well as international grants, and the spending of money meant for reconstruction.

Executive Authority

The DAA's finances are managed by an Executive Committee, which was formed at the beginning of 2014. In reality, Executive Committees function in a manner very similar to how sovereign state institutions -such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defense- operate. It extends its legal mandate from the DAA's "Social Contract" and laws passed by the Legislative Committee. From the start of the DAA, TEV-DEM and the PYD both tried to build the Executive Committee on the basis of alliances, creating a coalition-like structure involving a

⁽¹⁹⁾ Local administration in Kurdish Syrian territories: Afrin as a case study, Source: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Date: 03/07/2015, Link: <https://goo.gl/c5MpXp>

⁽²⁰⁾ The two councils: Legislative and Executive, discuss the yearly budget for 2015 and the expenses of 2014, Source: Buyer Press, Date: 03/17/2015, Link: <https://goo.gl/QLvB7e>

⁽²¹⁾ The social contract of the democratic autonomous administration in the al-Jazira canton of Syria was approved during session no. 1 on 01/06/2014, Source: Legislative Committee, Link: <https://goo.gl/2bgcde>

large number of organizations, including those directly linked to them, or allied groups such as the National Arab Committee and the Assyrian Union Party, and other Kurdish, Arab, and Assyrian groups. The PYD tried to monopolize public opinion through these alliances by insisting on commitment to the concept of the "democratic nation." There are 16 Executive Committees in al-Jazira canton, formed by integrating a number of previously existing offices and committees. A study of these facts reveals that there are efforts to present the administrative structures as complete when there are actually serious deficiencies in cadres and their ability to carry out work on the ground, in proportion to the significant territory that the DAA controls.

The Environment and Municipalities Committee tops the list as the most active body in the DAA. The municipalities are mainly tasked with executing a number of projects through their technical and service departments, including:

- Paving of roads inside the cities and the road connecting rural areas with the cities through anonymous bidding. Several tenders are listed in favor of the Zagros Public Roads and Bridges Company, established in 2013.
- Clearing drainage systems and distributing diesel fuel. Distribution of fuel causes tension with many residents due to feelings of preferential treatment and the small amount of fuel provided.
- Establishing city plans for expanding urban areas under their control. Among these efforts was the planning of an industrial zone in Malkiyeh, aimed at keeping the city clean and free of pollutants. The price of a store in the new area was posted as 2.5 to 3 million Syrian Pounds (USD \$5500-\$6700) depending on the size. Most of the small to medium manufacturers suffered as a result of this decision because they were forced to relocate their shops that they owned to the new location that was unaffordable. Some local manufacturers claim that some businessmen bought all of the real estate in the industrial zone and they now control the prices.⁽²²⁾

Through taxation, the municipalities bring in large amounts of money for the different services they provide.⁽²³⁾ They prepare slaughter lots and markets where livestock can be sold, and they tax storeowners for providing protection, cleaning, sidewalk maintenance, and other services. The municipalities suffer from a lack of skilled workers with expertise in city planning, development, and law. Furthermore, the municipalities do not have branches in the Arab areas under DAA control.

The DAA places additional focus on the Education and Development Committee through the passage of a law to change curriculums. The DAA's control over the education sector was faced with opposition and disagreements by different components of the local population. There is also the issue of the Assad regime retaining control of the main educational institutions. The DAA influences the educational process by paying teacher salaries as well as training and ideological coaching. The seven years of disconnect from a central government, with little hope of reaching a political solution, allowed the PYD to fill the gap by controlling

⁽²²⁾ The Industrial City project in Derik: Between the Municipalities insistence and the factory owners' rejections!, Source: Qasyoun Agency, Date: 09/16/2017, Link: <https://goo.gl/PmYkaD>

⁽²³⁾ PYD aggression under the guise of taxation from the people's pockets to the war chests, Source: NSO, Date: 07/20/2017, Link: <https://goo.gl/429A2m>

the content of curriculums taught to children in schools, allowing them to preach the ideals and doctrine of PYD ideology based on the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan.⁽²⁴⁾

The DAA's Health Committee faces the biggest set of hurdles as a result of the war. At the top of their list, they struggle from a lack of qualified medical professionals due to the displacement of doctors outside Syria, and the high costs of securing laboratory and hospital equipment. During the time of ISIS's siege, there was a shortage in the quality and quantity available in the markets. The Tourism and Antiquities Committee is mainly concerned with preventing destructive activities and artifact smuggling. They also conduct environmental protection and preservation projects. The Arts and Culture Commission struggles to use their local branches, theatres, production and distribution of literature effectively. This commission is responsible for organizing rallies, poems, stories, and books based on the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK.⁽²⁵⁾ The Defense Commission is the core of the security and military operations in the DAA. It is working to enforce a mandatory military service rule on everyone born in 1986 or later. Over more than three years, the Commission has taken over 20,000 people into compulsory service.

Despite having characteristics of a functioning governance system, the DAA still suffers from a number of key deficiencies, the most important of which are: transparency, clarity, the lack of a clear strategic plan or set of policies, the marginalization of civil society, and the lack of bureaucratic and technocratic expertise.

Conclusion

A number of factors contributed to the DAA's ability to extend its control across northern Syria. These include the regime's retreat from areas with a majority Kurdish population in favor of the PYD and its military wing, the YPG. This created a stable and secure environment in which the PYD was able to strengthen its authority. Following the battle of Kobani, the US-led international coalition also contributed to the DAA's expansion, helping them take control of 24% of Syrian territory. It had previously controlled less than 10% of Syrian territory before joining the US-led international coalition as their partner in the fight against ISIS in Syria. The PYD's dominance of the military and security sector compared to the other Kurdish parties also contributed to its ability assert its control over the population. The YPG assisted in this by breaking up the armed groups formed by other Kurdish parties, and enforcing strict policies to ensure that there were no competing forces, using the argument that there could not be two competing Kurdish powers.

The DAA faces a number of legal challenges, the most critical of which is their lack of formal recognition by the central government of Syria or any official national agency. The DAA relies solely on its relationship with the US-led international coalition member states for legitimacy. The second legal issue they face is their vague "Social Contract," that has many ambiguous and overlapping political concepts. The "Social Contract," in some cases, contradicts the DAA's traditional ideological and theoretical foundations. On one hand, the DAA claims that

⁽²⁴⁾ The state of education in the Autonomous Administration, Source: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, Date: 12/15/2016, Link: <https://goo.gl/WRn8YP>

⁽²⁵⁾ The Fifth Arts and Culture Conference in Rojava, Source: Rojava press, Link: <https://goo.gl/Kr8U94>

it wants to dispose of the authority of a central government, but in reality, it tied all of aspects of social life with its institutions, and established a monopoly on governance through an intricate bureaucracy of the various communes, councils, and a variety of military formations. The revised the “Social Contract” which proclaims the establishment of “The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria,” presents concepts that are unprecedented in Syrian political history, such as the mixing of pagan and monotheistic concepts thought the use phrases like the “the Mother God” and “I Swear by Allah the Most Great” in the same text. The “Social Contract” was ineffective as a constitution for an autonomous or federal region. Instead, it creates a system that acts more like a confederation since the social contract grants political asylum, builds diplomatic relations, and grants the right to self-determination.

Another issue with the “Social Contract,” is rooted in the DAA’s geographic expansion and unilateral establishment of a so-called “federation,” in the absence of willing and capable partners that represent the large populations like the KNC, and of representatives for places that they have recently taken control of in Raqqa city and the northern part of the province, southern rural Hasaka, and Deir Ezzor countryside. These are majority Arab populations that may reject the legitimacy of a majority Kurdish power structure, and existing local administrative bodies will not be easily convinced to accept such an alliance in their local administration. The most obvious of challenges facing the DAA’s project is the fact that Syria is in a state of constant political and military instability, and regional and international powers still disagree on a format or timeline for political transition in Syria.

The PYD has insisted on adoption of the “democratic nation” concept, and promotes it at a regional level as a solution to the Kurdish question and the problems of other groups. Despite some similarities between their project and the confederation system existing in Europe today, it lacks freedom of application or amendment, because the PYD considers it to be complete and only option. This system also lacks the support of any regional political force. Its policies also conflict with the social reality of eastern Syria, where religion governs many aspects of social life. The philosophy of the “democratic nation” is transnational and cross-border in nature, thus distracting attention away from Kurdish national rights within different countries of the region.

The “Democratic Nation” faces a number of obstacles that have emerged on a local level during its implementation, such as the militarization of society through the formation of groups like the Civilian Defense Forces (HPC), an armed civilian volunteer force responsible for neighborhood security. Furthermore, there are disproportionately large military and security forces compared to the areas and population under the DAA’s control.

The DAA also created a centralized bureaucracy that burdens those managing it. Instead of moving away from the former centralized governing system of the regime, they established a new even more centralized system. Its governing domain expanded significantly and disproportional to the size of the territory and the populating living within it. The DAA also contradicted itself by enforcing a uniform “Social Contract” that does not take into consideration the plural norms and belief systems of the local populations.

Given the size of its control and influence on the Syrian map, if the DAA continues in its current form, it will destroy one of the most important pillars of its political theory: the rejection of modern nation states structures and the borders that create divisions between the people. Instead, the DAA today is responsible for cutting ties between people in the city of Raqqa and its southern countryside, Deir Ezzor and its countryside, and parts of the northern Aleppo countryside.



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