

Research Paper

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# Governing Rojava

## Layers of Legitimacy in Syria



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## Summary

- Syria is without functioning government in many areas but not without governance. In the northeast, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has announced its intent to establish the federal region of Rojava. The PYD took control of the region following the Syrian regime's handover in some Kurdish-majority areas and as a consequence of its retreat from others. In doing so, the PYD has displayed pragmatism and strategic clarity, and has benefited from the experience and institutional development of its affiliate organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PYD now seeks to further consolidate its power and to legitimize itself through the provision of security, services and public diplomacy; yet its local legitimacy remains contested.
- The provision of security is paramount to the PYD's quest for legitimacy. Its People's Defense Units (YPG/YPJ) have been an effective force against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), winning the support of the local population, particularly those closest to the front lines. Conversely, in areas further from combat zones, the PYD has less support, with locals citing its brutality and authoritarianism. While many in Arab-majority areas appreciate the YPG's expulsion of ISIS, the PYD is seen with fear and distrust as a result of its human rights violations against rebel groups and its perceived linkages with the regime. The PYD continues to suppress critical civil society voices and political opposition.
- The PYD is an effective provider of services, a function it also instrumentalizes as a means of consolidating its power. Service provision varies across Rojava: in areas where the PYD co-exists with regime authorities, a myriad of institutions have developed, sometimes creating parallel structures. Meanwhile, in areas where the PYD enjoys greater control, power remains centralized, despite the PYD's claims to decentralize power to the local level. In Arab-majority areas such as Manbij, locals report that the PYD ensures that only representatives that are loyal to it are able to govern, undermining the legitimacy of the new structures in the eyes of the local community.
- The PYD utilizes its access to global communications and advocacy networks to pursue a sophisticated programme of public diplomacy. The PYD appeals to international audiences by presenting its fight against ISIS as a battle between universal liberal values and extremism. However, for many Kurds, it is the undertones of Kurdish nationalism that entices them. Balancing the apparent contradictions in its discourse is likely to become more difficult in the event that ISIS is defeated on the battlefield.
- Rojava's leaders continue to walk a tightrope between international and regional interests. However, Turkey's continuing opposition means that prospects for the PYD to build international support for its political goals are slim. This places greater import upon locally-derived legitimacy, an area where the PYD continues to fall short. Only by ensuring real representation of civil society, opposition and Arab and Syriac constituents can Rojava achieve this legitimacy. Failure to move past security and stability-based arguments will greatly diminish the long-term prospects for the survival of the Rojava project.

## Acronyms and Overview of Key Listed Actors

<b>DAA</b>	<b>Democratic Autonomous Administration</b> A structure of local governance systems comprised of local councils and assemblies across three cantons the PYD collectively calls Rojava. The PYD refers to it as the administrative governing authority but the division of powers between it and the TEV-DEM governing coalition remain unclear and, seemingly, fluid.
<b>FSA</b>	<b>Free Syrian Army</b> Armed opposition groups founded principally by defectors from the Syrian Arab Army in 2011 to overthrow the Syrian regime.
<b>KCK</b>	<b>Group of Communities in Kurdistan</b> Organization founded in 2005 to implement PKK leader Abdulla Öcalan's vision of democratic confederation in regions it identifies as Kurdistan in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. It is the umbrella organization of PKK, PYD, PCDK and PJAK.
<b>KDP-S</b>	<b>Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria</b> Group of Kurdish political parties linked to the first Kurdish party in Syria founded in 1957. Most have joined the Kurdish National Council.
<b>KNK</b>	<b>Kurdish National Congress</b> An umbrella body for pro-Kurdish organizations to lobby governments and media. It is headquartered in Brussels.
<b>KNC</b>	<b>Kurdish National Council</b> An umbrella opposition group of many KDP-S parties. Linked to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, with the sponsorship of Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, it was founded in October 2011 in Erbil, Iraq.
<b>KSC</b>	<b>Kurdish Supreme Committee</b> Formed by the KDP-S and the PYD in July 2012 as a power-sharing mechanism but disbanded in 2013 due to disputes between the two blocs.
<b>KRG</b>	<b>Kurdistan Regional Government</b> Government of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan, founded in 1992.
<b>PCDK</b>	<b>Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (Partiya Çareseriya Dîmokrat a Kurdistanê)</b> The PKK's sister party in Iraq.
<b>PJAK</b>	<b>Kurdistan Free Life Party (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê)</b> The PKK's sister party in Iran.
<b>PKK</b>	<b>Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)</b> A Marxist-Leninist Kurdish militant party founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 seeking Kurdish self-determination in Turkey. Its base is in the Qandil mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan.

- PYD**      **Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Dîmokratik)**  
Founded in 2003, the PYD is the dominant force in Kurdish majority areas in Syria. It established the Rojava governance project, which it administers through its subsidiary organizations. Distinct from the KDP-S, the PYD is often considered the PKK's militant sister organization in Syria, although it denies this.
- SDF**      **Syrian Democratic Forces**  
Alliance of Arab and YPG/YPJ armed groups created in 2015 and dominated by the YPG/YPJ. It is supported by the United States and its Counter ISIL Coalition partners to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and jihadist groups.
- SNC**      **National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces**  
A political coalition of Syrian opposition groups founded in November 2012. It seeks to overthrow the Assad regime and establish a transitional government.
- TEV-DEM**      **Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Dîmokrat)**  
The PYD-dominated coalition leading the Rojava project.
- YPJ**      **Women's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê)**  
The female armed service of the PYD, and, by extension, the Rojava project.
- YPG**      **People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)**  
The male armed service of the PYD, and, by extension, the Rojava project.

## Introduction

It is a historical chance for us. We have a right and are making use of it.

Salih Muslim, PYD co-chairman<sup>1</sup>

The Syrian conflict has precipitated the disintegration of the country's political authority, creating a governance vacuum in areas from which the state has retreated. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has skilfully navigated this environment to form its own governance project of Rojava<sup>2</sup> (West Kurdistan) in northern Syria, along the Syrian–Turkish border. Founded in 2003 and affiliated with the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militant organization struggling for Kurdish self-determination in Turkey, the PYD is relatively new to Syrian–Kurdish politics. However, it has managed better than its competitors. While opposition groups elsewhere have also sought to capitalize on this vacuum, the Syrian regime's strategy of predominantly targeting population centres in the northwest and Damascus countryside has comparatively spared areas under PYD rule of regime shelling and barrel bombs. Those areas under PYD rule benefit from a non-aggression pact with the regime. Meanwhile, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has prompted international intervention, leading to security deals with the PYD to combat the advance of the terrorist organization. Aided by the support of a Kurdish constituency, which was finally able to express its legitimate grievances against long-term oppression and marginalization in Syria and the region,<sup>3</sup> these factors ensured the time was right for the PYD to act.

Unlike other Kurdish parties, which were politically active, but institutionally weak, insular and distant from locals, the PYD was prepared. The PYD, through PKK affiliates, already had experience, networks and governance institutions set in place years before the Syrian uprising.

Unlike other Kurdish parties, which were politically active, but institutionally weak, insular and distant from locals,<sup>4</sup> the PYD was prepared. The PYD, through PKK affiliates, already had experience, networks and governance institutions set in place years before the Syrian uprising. This infrastructure has played a key role in incubating the current Rojava project. The PYD's institutions now run functions previously performed by the Syrian state, ranging from the provision of security and public services to restructuring society in adherence to the PYD's own ideology. These functions are ostensibly managed in a decentralized manner by local councils and assemblies through the Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA) system across three cantons – Cezire (Jazira in Arabic), Efrin and Kobane (Ain al-Arab in Arabic) – which the PYD collectively calls Rojava.

Nonetheless, despite approximately four years of self-administration, Rojava's legitimacy remains contested locally, regionally and internationally. For many locals, when questioned about the Rojava

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad, S. M. (2011), 'Turkey's henchmen in Syrian Kurdistan are responsible for the unrest here', KurdWatch, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/html/en/interview6.html> (accessed 15 May 2016).

<sup>2</sup> This paper uses the term Rojava to indicate the PYD's territorial control area and governance project. Using this terminology is not intended as an endorsement.

<sup>3</sup> See box 1 for an overview of the Kurdish oppression and struggle in Syria.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance the analysis by Allsopp, H. (2017), 'Kurdish political parties and the Syrian uprising', in Stansfield, G. and Shareef, M. (eds) (2017), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London: Hurst Publishers.

governance project, they complain in response, ‘you mean the de facto authority?’<sup>5</sup> The PYD’s Kurdish opposition and critics<sup>6</sup> exclaim that the Rojava leadership is illegitimate, authoritarian and seeks only to increase PYD power and control at the expense of its own population and local neighbours. ‘While we all are ultimately grateful for the security the YPG/YPJ has provided,’ one activist said, ‘they are using their fight against ISIS as a cover for their authoritarian actions’. When asked about their legitimacy, PYD co-leader Asya Abdulla insists, ‘We are struggling to revive democracy ... Thirty-three political and social organizations/components are working together to prepare the federal system in Syria ... We are the ones on the ground fighting ISIS and protecting people, we are the legitimate authority’.<sup>7</sup>

Legitimacy itself is a subjective concept. To untangle it, this paper delves into both its minimalist and maximalist meanings. This paper assesses the rational-legal legitimacy linked to the provision of security and to the effective provision of social services and public goods, but it also extends to other maximal understandings of legitimacy. Here, legitimacy is also based on a set of beliefs, values, relationships and institutions (endogenous and exogenous) that govern the social compact between governance actors and society, enabling both to satisfy their needs. Local legitimacy implies social and political trust, unforced public acceptance of the governing power relations and structures, as well as responsiveness to shared rights and obligations. Without these, the effectiveness and legitimacy of any governance cannot be sustainable.<sup>8</sup>

Within this understanding of legitimacy, this paper seeks to analyse how the PYD, through its leadership in Rojava, is attempting to expand its governance structures to consolidate power and create legitimacy for itself. The paper starts by explaining the institutional infrastructure of the Rojava governance project and its rise. The following sections cover the factors and institutional mechanisms that help the PYD legitimize itself at the local and international levels. These factors include the provision of security; the effectiveness in the provision of public services; and public diplomacy and image management. As trust and representation remain the missing links to ensuring local legitimacy, the concluding section further discusses these aspects and assesses the prospects for Rojava to bridge its shortcomings.

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<sup>5</sup> Author face-to-face and Skype interviews with Kurdish intellectuals, journalists and activists between April and July 2016, Turkey, Syria (via Skype) and London.

<sup>6</sup> In many interviews, local activists requested anonymity for their own security. In respect of this, all activists and local journalists’ names will remain anonymous.

<sup>7</sup> Abdulla, A. (2016), statement at Chatham House, 15 September 2016, London.

<sup>8</sup> For further details, see the definition of and argument on legitimacy in conflict-torn states in Roberts, D. (2011), *Liberal Peacebuilding and Global Governance: Beyond the Metropolis*. New York: Routledge Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution; Edwards, L. (2010), ‘State-building in Afghanistan: A Case Showing the Limits?’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 92(880), pp. 967–991 (accessed 3 Sep. 2016).

### Box 1: Oppression and the Kurdish struggle in Syria<sup>9</sup>

Kurds have long desired self-determination, due to the continued oppression they have faced from the nationalist states in which they reside. Kurdish oppression by the Syrian Ba'athist Arab regime has been unrelenting; ranging from the denial of the most basic cultural rights such as using Kurdish names and language, to economic rights such as employment in high-level positions in government institutions, and political rights such as self-mobilization.

Perhaps the most severe institutionalized discrimination against the Kurds resulted from a 1962 decree, which, by the estimates of Michael Gunter,<sup>10</sup> stripped around 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian nationality and classified them as *ajaneb* (foreigners). As the status is inherited, Gunter estimates the total number of *ajaneb* amounts to 300,000 at present. A further 75,000 were estimated to have been classified as *maktoomeen* (unregistered, literally: concealed). The latter suffered more than the former as they were denied basic rights such as registering property, attending university, or even obtaining a driver's licence.

Another major violation of Kurdish rights took place in the 1960s, when the Syrian authorities decided to create the so-called 'Arab Cordon' (Al-Hizam Al-Arabi) policy, resulting in the Kurds' fertile lands being taken over by the regime and later given to the Arab tribes. Further Arabization policies were also imposed on villages in the 1970s, resulting in the collective punishment of Kurds.

This was accentuated with the agricultural reforms in 1984 through which the amount of certain agricultural products in Hassaka were minimized and controlled by the regime as a form of controlling Kurdish farmers' income.

These measures are among other dire violations and oppression practised by the Ba'athist regime against the Kurds in Syria including the response to the 2004 Qamishli Kurdish uprising in which it is estimated hundreds of civilians were killed or injured.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on interviews and discussions with Kurdish activists held in 2015 and 2016, Turkey, Lebanon and online. Gunter, M. (2014), *Out of nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in peace and war*. London: Hurst and Company; Allsopp, H. (2015), *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris & Company Limited.

<sup>10</sup> Gunter (2014), *Out of nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in peace and war*.

## PYD Pragmatism and the Emergence of ‘Rojava’

The PYD had popularity on the ground as they were addressing the Kurdish population’s concerns. They are pragmatic and organized, unlike other Kurdish parties who failed to deliver.

Farooq Haji Mustafa, a renowned Syrian Kurd journalist<sup>11</sup>

The PYD has astutely exploited its own position and the opportunities that have arisen from Syria’s descent into conflict to consolidate its governance.

While Kurdish political activism in Syria was forbidden, the PYD’s sister organization, the PKK, had found ways to work with the regime in the past. In the 1980s and 1990s, Hafez al-Assad’s antagonistic relationship with Turkey meant that the regime had provided sanctuary for the PKK’s leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and helped the PKK establish military training camps.<sup>12</sup> Part of the regime’s rationale for this tacit support was based on the conclusion that the PKK was defined by its struggle against the Turkish state and avoided domestic Syrian issues.<sup>13</sup> Other Kurdish parties, the majority of which were descended from the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S), were not afforded such room to manoeuvre.<sup>14</sup> The fragmentation of the KDP-S, along with intense regime surveillance and oppression of its successors left them adrift from local society and ill-prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that would come their way in 2011.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the PKK benefited from the space to develop its strategy, organization and popular mobilization ability. By essentially espousing the political platform of the PKK, when it appeared in Syria in 2003, the PYD managed to draw directly upon this experience and capability while managing to be highly pragmatic.

Although the Syrian regime turned against the PKK when it first made a deal with Turkey in 1998, the PYD was willing to negotiate following the 2011 Syrian uprising, when it marked itself out among the anti-regime opposition as being in favour of negotiating a non-aggression pact with the regime.

Although the Syrian regime turned against the PKK when it first made a deal with Turkey in 1998,<sup>16</sup> the PYD was willing to negotiate following the 2011 Syrian uprising, when it marked itself out among the anti-regime opposition as being in favour of negotiating a non-aggression pact with the regime. In return for preventing rebellion against the regime, the PYD would assume responsibility for governing areas in northern Syria.<sup>17</sup> This would become clearer in July 2012 when the regime turned over

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<sup>11</sup> Sinjab, L. (2016), ‘Can Syria’s Kurds realise territorial ambitions?’ BBC News, 26 July 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-36773195> (accessed 17 Sep. 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Allsopp (2017), ‘Kurdish political parties and the Syrian uprising’.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Harriet Allsopp details how due to this and other factors traditional support for the old, long-established political parties – including those involved in the KNC – was fading regardless of the PYD’s rise.

<sup>17</sup> Albeit there is no documented evidence, the author’s interviews with a number of Kurdish and Arab intellectuals, journalists and civil society activists between April and June 2016 confirm events of collaboration and agreement between both sides. The PYD was especially accused of being tacitly allied with the regime when it suppressed anti-regime demonstrations. See for instance Allsopp (2017), ‘Kurdish political parties and the Syrian uprising’.

administration of some Kurdish-majority areas to the PYD and withdrew from others, except for areas in Hassaka and Qamishli. Such events, with the PYD's perceived history (through the PKK) of co-existing with the regime, have placed a question mark over its credibility among the wider Kurdish and Arab opposition. While the PYD highlights that it had to fight the regime for control of these areas, there is no evidence of major sustained conflict. The relationship has been defined by precarious coexistence, and has been key to the empowerment of the PYD to eventually become the dominant Kurdish political party in Syria.

The flexibility and pragmatism displayed by the PYD in its dealings with the regime has been mirrored in its interaction with other actors to promote its governance project of Rojava. Furthermore, the PYD's readiness has allowed it to capitalize on opponents' mistakes to further push its governance. For instance, in late 2012, when groups from the neighbouring Free Syrian Army (FSA) attacked the city of Serê Kaniyê (Ra's al 'Ayn) and looted Kurdish houses, upon expelling them, the PYD used the opportunity to recruit local youth into its army ranks and therefore increase its local legitimacy. Later, it used such events, including ISIS attacks, to mandate army conscription and to further establish itself as the de facto authority. Furthermore, possibly the most instructive – and critical – event was the PYD's violent response to demonstrations against it in Amude (Amuda) in June 2013. The YPG killed three men and arbitrarily detained around 50 Yekiti Party supporters, while other PYD security forces killed a further three protesters.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this incident, as well as other major areas of disagreement, the Kurdish National Council (KNC), the PYD's principal opposition, withdrew from the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC), which the PYD had set up with the KNC. This gave the opportunity for the PYD's political coalition the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) to take sole control of the KSC, which was eventually disbanded and replaced by its own cantonal governance system of the DAA.<sup>19</sup> As this paper will illustrate, decisive and pragmatic action has defined the PYD's approach, serving as its greatest strength, but the PYD has also displayed an opportunism that may prove to be its Achilles heel.

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<sup>18</sup> For documentation of these and other PYD violations, see Human Rights Watch (2014), '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> (accessed 16 May 2016). For the responses of the PYD to these accusations, see the Foreign Relations body of Democratic Self-Rule Administration (2014), 'The Democratic Self-Rule Administration Response to the Report of Human Rights Watch Organization', [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/The%20Democratic%20Self-Rule%20Administration's%20Response%20to%20the%20Report%20of%20Human%20Rights%20Watch%20Organization.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/The%20Democratic%20Self-Rule%20Administration's%20Response%20to%20the%20Report%20of%20Human%20Rights%20Watch%20Organization.pdf) (accessed 16 May 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Narbone, L. et al. (eds) (2016), 'Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya', European University Institute, [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20wars\\_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41644/Inside%20wars_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed 10 Oct. 2016); Federici, V. (2015), 'The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict', *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 35(2), 81–90, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/605098> (accessed 6 Aug. 2016).

## Smoke and Mirrors: The PYD's Search for Legitimacy Through Governance

Benefitting from a network of institutions locally, in Turkey and across Europe, the PYD relies on three governance factors to legitimize itself: the provision of security, public services, and public diplomacy. And while, under the DAA and TEV-DEM, the PYD manages these factors relatively well in Kurdish-majority areas, the lack of true representation of local actors not subservient to the PYD in the Rojava project structures, challenges both its quest for local legitimacy and its ability to govern effectively and sustainably.

In order to assess these governance factors, it is first necessary to analyse the institutional development of the Rojava project. In doing so, it is clear that the infrastructure that has developed in Rojava is complex and not uniform across its self-declared territories. Given the difficult conflict environment in which Rojava has emerged, this is hardly surprising. A critical question is, however, the extent to which Rojava represents the implementation of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's concepts of 'democratic confederalism' and 'democratic autonomy'. These concepts reject the hierarchical and patriarchal nation state, challenging its hegemony via grassroots radical democracy and self-governance, gender equality, an ecological society, and a cooperative economy.<sup>20</sup> It is this value system that the PYD presents as its alternative to the authoritarianism of Syria's Ba'athist regime, a value system that can localize power and protect rights.<sup>21</sup> Yet, a closer analysis reveals a divergence between theory and practice in the implementation of Rojava's institutions: while decentralized institutions are being built, the reality is, as shall be explained in the following sections, that power is heavily centralized in the hands of the PYD.

The Rojava model of democratic autonomy represented by the DAA appears to possibly mirror that of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK).<sup>22</sup> The KCK was established in 2005 to implement Öcalan's democratic confederal model in the regions it identifies as Kurdistan (parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran).<sup>23</sup> The KCK has since become an institutionalized umbrella structure overseeing its member organizations: the PKK in Turkey, the PYD in Syria, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq.<sup>24</sup>

The KCK most likely formed the base of structures from which the Rojava project has developed. Dr Alan Semo, UK representative of the PYD, noted that in Rojava, TEV-DEM replicates the KCK

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<sup>20</sup> New World Academy (2015), 'New World Academy Reader #5 with the Kurdish Women's Movement: Stateless Democracy', <http://newworldsummit.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NWA5-Stateless-Democracy.pdf> (accessed 2 Jul. 2016); Corporate Watch (2016), *Struggles for Autonomy in Kurdistan and Corporate Complicity in the Repression of Social Movements in Rojava and Bakur*, London: Corporate Watch, <https://corporatewatch.org/sites/default/files/Struggles%20for%20autonomy%20in%20Kurdistan.pdf> (accessed 26 Jul. 2016).

<sup>21</sup> While Öcalan followers are seen to abide by this new ideology, many still feel the end goal is Kurdistan as a nation. This was echoed during the author's interview with several pro-PYD supporters in May and June, 2016, Turkey and London.

<sup>22</sup> In comparison to the structures constructed in both of: Kekevi, S. (2015), 'System of Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK): An Assessment of State, Federalism, KCK Practices and International Developments', *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*, 10(2):pp.112:148, ISSN 2201-4624. (accessed 26 Jul. 2016); Saeed, S. (2014), University of Exeter, PhD thesis: 'The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From the PKK to the KCK', <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/16936> (accessed 26 Jul. 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Kekevi, S. (2015), 'System of Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK): An Assessment of State, Federalism, KCK Practices and International Developments'. See also: Stanchev, P. (2016), 'The Kurds, Bookchin and the Need to Reinvent Revolution', *New Politics*, 15(4): pp. 77-82, <http://search.proquest.com/openview/082149f3fdad2d3a515f9c02133f8338/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=43987> (accessed 26 Jul. 2016).

organization in its approach, but he argued that the DAA and KCK do have differences as the latter is not an actual governing body. He insisted that ‘the PYD has nothing whatsoever [in common] with KCK ideology ... none of the Rojava parties or organizations are affiliated with KCK.’<sup>25</sup> However, a comparison between the KCK and DAA structures, reveals parallels.

The DAA consists of three cantons: Cezire (Jazira in Arabic), Efrin and Kobane (Ain al-Arab in Arabic). Each of these has its legislative, judicial and executive councils and one general coordinating council acting for all the cantons.<sup>26</sup> Cantons have academies, committees, commissions and cooperatives operating within them.<sup>27</sup> Committees and commissions under the executive function focus on areas related to diplomatic, social, political foundations, economic, legal and self-defence functions.<sup>28</sup> Decision-making under these focus areas is said to federate upwards from communes, to neighbourhood/district councils, to city councils, and then to the cantons. In Cezire canton, for instance, Qamishli city has six neighbourhoods or districts, each has 18 communes, and each commune is made up of 300 households. All levels run different committees according to requirements and context.<sup>29</sup>

According to the Rojava leadership, cantons work in a decentralized manner with administrative autonomy. Each canton is said to have its own constitution, government, parliament, courts, laws and municipalities in a manner compatible with the charter of the democratic autonomy of Rojava.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, TEV-DEM, whose function can be compared to that of a parliament,<sup>31</sup> is viewed as the entity leading coordination between the cantons.<sup>32</sup>

In practice, TEV-DEM’s specific role and how these sub-structures link to each other remain vague. Public statements by those involved do little to bring about clarity. For example, when questioned about the role of TEV-DEM, Aldar Xelil, a leading member of its executive committee, explains, ‘TEV-DEM has no power, it leads society’.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Semo describes TEV-DEM as ‘an umbrella organization... for all ethnic-religious communities’ including political parties, such as PYD, and civic societies, municipalities, public services and trade unions in Rojava and northern Syria.<sup>34</sup>

The official democratic ideology is, however, trumped by the PYD’s desire to monopolize power.<sup>35</sup> Many activists see the Rojava project is practically governed by TEV-DEM, and that the PYD permits leadership positions in the Rojava and DAA governance structures only to those who are willing to abide by its rules: ‘The PYD operates like a cult; you are either in or out, there is no place for anyone who thinks differently or who would challenge it or try to hold it accountable’, one activist said.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Based on author’s online correspondence with the PYD UK representative, Dr Alan Semo, 16–23 October 2016, London.

<sup>26</sup> Based on author’s online correspondence with Dr Alan Semo, UK representative of the PYD, 16–23 October 2016; Saeed, S. (2014), University of Exeter, ‘The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From the PKK to the KCK. From the PKK to the KCK’; Omran for Strategic Studies (2015), ‘Al Idara Al Mahaliyya Fee Manatek Kurd Souria- Afreen Namouzajan’ (Local Administration in Syrian Kurd Areas – Afreen Case Study) <https://www.omrandirasat.org/الأبحاث/الدراسات/الإدارة-المحلية-في-مناطق-كرد-سورية-عفرين-محوذجا/> (accessed 5 Jul. 2016). (In Arabic)

<sup>27</sup> For an explanation of the functioning of these structures, see Corporate Watch (2016), *Struggles for Autonomy in Kurdistan and Corporate Complicity in the Repression of Social Movements in Rojava and Bakur*.

<sup>28</sup> For further explanation of each area, see Peace in Kurdistan Campaign (2015), ‘The Project of a Democratic Syria: TEV-DEM’, <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/resources/rojava/the-project-of-a-democratic-syria/> (accessed 7 Jul. 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Biehl, J. (2015), ‘Rojava’s Communes and Councils’, Janet Biehl Blog, 31 January 2015, <http://www.biehlonbookchin.com/rojavas-communes-and-councils/> (accessed 9 Jul. 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Kurdistan National Congress (2014), ‘Canton Based Democratic Autonomy of Rojava: A Transformation Process from Dictatorship to Democracy’, <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/rojava-info-may-2014.pdf> (accessed 9 Jul. 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Also see: Savran, Y. (2016), ‘The Rojava Revolution and British Solidarity’, *Anarchist Studies* 24 (1), [https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/as24.1\\_01savran.pdf](https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/sites/default/files/as24.1_01savran.pdf) (accessed 29 Aug. 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Biehl, (2015), ‘Rojava’s Communes and Councils’.

<sup>33</sup> Author interview with Aldar Xelil, leading member of TEV-DEM’s executive committee, 16 September, 2016, London.

<sup>34</sup> Based on author’s online correspondence with the PYD UK representative on 23 October 2016, London.

<sup>35</sup> See: Lowe, R. (2014), ‘The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria’ in Romano D. and Gurses M. (eds) (2014), *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East*, US: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 228–229; International Crisis Group (2014), Middle East Report No. 151, ‘Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria’, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/flight-icarus-pyd-s-precarious-rise-syria> (accessed 1 May 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Based on author’s interviews with local activists and journalists, April to October 2016, Turkey, Lebanon and online.

When asked about criticisms regarding their authoritarianism, Aldar Xelil explained:

Yes, we are a de facto authority but at least there are institutions servicing the people; we are trying our best to fill a void in governance with limited resources. This is a war situation. Do we have an alternative? No, we do not have an alternative but to govern ourselves democratically and together protect and serve people's co-existence values?<sup>37</sup>

In the meantime, however, all significant Rojava institutions are deemed to remain dominated by PYD-affiliated associations,<sup>38</sup> with trusted PYD cadres placed at the core decision-making levels. The cadres – those who have received military training in the PKK stronghold of the Qandil Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan – dedicate their lives to carrying Öcalan's message. They play the central role in linking the different structures of the network seemingly with the KCK leadership at the core.

## 1. Provision of security

I fully support the PYD militarily, but I strongly disagree with them politically.

A Kurdish activist<sup>39</sup>

The success of the PYD's fight against ISIS is the foremost driver of legitimacy, both internationally and in Kurdish-majority areas in Syria. Arab-majority areas maintain a different dynamic.

At the international level, the United States sees the YPG as the most effective fighting force on the ground against ISIS. It has increased its level of assistance since the ISIS offensive in Kobane, which commenced in September 2014 and ended with the recapture of Kobane and its nearby villages from ISIS by early 2015. The view of the other large external global player, Russia, is more difficult to discern, but it apparently sees the PYD as consistent with its anti-Free Syrian Army stance and with its support for the regime. Russia also sees the PYD as challenging Turkey and thus started openly supporting it since Turkish authorities downed a Russian aircraft in late 2015.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, a new warming in the relationship between Turkey and Russia, in which Russia gave its blessing to Turkey's intervention in Jarablus in late August 2016, appears to have further limited the PYD's hopes of linking its cantons.

Locally, the YPG/YPJ's fight against ISIS has become a defining one. ISIS's defeat in Kobane has come to symbolize the Kurdish struggle, not just in Syria but beyond.<sup>41</sup> With ISIS posing an existential threat to the Kurds, success on the battlefield against ISIS has given a boost to the Kurdish cause and to the YPG/YPJ specifically. Minorities such as the Yazidis and the Syrians also see the YPG/YPJ protection against ISIS attacks as critical to their survival. In Arab-majority areas, many Arabs, albeit deeply fearful and distrustful of the PYD, also appreciate the defeat of ISIS by the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). One activist from Manbij testified: 'While we fear the PYD with its brutality and alliance with the regime, with the international coalition's shelling on our area and the hell of ISIS inflicted on us, we did not mind whomever saving us. All of us truly rejoiced when the SDF expelled ISIS; at least we retained some freedoms.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Author interview with Aldar Xelil, leading member of TEV-DEM's executive committee, 16 September 2016, London.

<sup>38</sup> Gunes, C. and Robert Lowe, R. (2016), *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf) (accessed 6 Jul. 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Based on author's interviews with a Kurdish activist based in Ghazi Antep, April 2016, Turkey.

<sup>40</sup> The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2016), Research Notes No. 32, 'Ascent of the PYD and the SDF', <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote32-Barfi.pdf> (accessed 26 Oct. 2016).

<sup>41</sup> For details see: Gunes, C. and Robert Lowe, R. (2016), *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*.

<sup>42</sup> Based on author's online interview with an activist from Manbij on 27 October 2016.

The PYD's military success against ISIS, coupled with an ability to manage security on the ground, derives from institutional and organizational strength.<sup>43</sup> The PYD says that it benefits from members with years of experience fighting with the PKK but insist these are no longer PKK members and that they have no organic affiliation with the KCK or PKK organizations.<sup>44</sup> Aldar Xelil from TEV-DEM noted: 'We do not receive military support, but some of us, like myself, were cadres or fighters with the PKK but left to join the effort in Rojava, thus we possess a lot of military experience.'<sup>45</sup>

### The PYD's military success against ISIS, coupled with an ability to manage security on the ground, derives from institutional and organizational strength.

The perceived local legitimacy attributed to this military success and to the Rojava administration's security institutions, depends on the security context across the different PYD-controlled regions in Syria. Geographical variations in terms of the security-related legitimacy of PYD institutions were obvious in the interviews conducted with activists between 2015 and 2016 across the different Rojava cantons. Some clear trends were notable in the responses of the interviewees.

In Kurdish-majority areas, the further an area from a specific security threat the less favourable the local opinion of the PYD and the Asayish. Having suffered from ISIS and other armed attacks, activists from Serê Kaniyê (Ra's al 'Ayn) and Hassaka city were more favourable to and less critical of the PYD and the Asayish than, for instance, activists from Amude (Amuda), which was relatively more secure and further from ISIS threats. Activists in Serê Kaniyê (Ra's al 'Ayn) noted that the Asayish and the PYD had supported them against extremist groups, and even FSA attacks. In Hassaka activists also noted that the operating environment for civil society activity had improved in comparison to the regime era, which was highly oppressive. However, other activists argue that civil society had the most space for development following the uprising but preceding the PYD's control. As for Qamishli, the situation was less clear. Locally, the common perception is that this area is historically more favourable to the pro-Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) camp to which the KNC is also inclined. However, activists' responses regarding the KNC local councils and other political parties did not confirm this.

Across Kurdish-majority areas, Amude (Amuda) activists demonstrated the highest criticism of the PYD and Asayish. When pressed to explain their responses, some civil society organizations highlighted the PYD and Asayish impeded their work and pressured them to register under Rojava administration, which they resisted as they saw it as an illegitimate de facto authority. One activist complained 'under their rule there is no space for anyone but them; they have left us with two options – either shutting up and staying or becoming exiled.' Others explained their distrust of the PYD and Asayish by recounting the clashes with protestors in Amude (Amuda) in June 2013.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Based on author's interview with Dr Alan Semo, PYD representative in the UK, 24 July 2016 and with Erdelan Baran (member of the foreign affairs committee of Kurdistan National Congress), 26 July 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Based on author's interview with Dr Alan Semo, PYD representative in the UK, 24 July 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Author interview with Aldar Xelil, 16 September, 2016, London.

<sup>46</sup> For documentation of these and other PYD violations, see: Human Rights Watch (2014), '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> (accessed 16 May 2016); For the PYD response to the report, see: Peace in Kurdistan (2014), 'PYD Responds to Human Rights Watch Report', 19 July 2014, <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2014/07/03/pyd-responds-to-human-rights-watch-report/> (accessed 16 May 2016).



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Locals in Arab-majority areas also appreciate the YPG/YPJ campaign against ISIS, however, like many pro-KRG locals and activists in Kurdish-majority areas, they do not trust and feel insecure with the PYD control. When comparing the YPG/YPJ and PYD with ISIS, one Arab activist described them as ‘two evils, the better of which is bitter’, after the PYD’s victory in Manbij. Another activist from Manbij noted that she celebrated the PYD’s defeat of ISIS but also expressed her fear saying:

Our country is very dear to us; I did not want to leave and have stayed in Manbij even under ISIS terrorism. However, I was forced to leave it four months ago and cannot go back if Manbij remains under PYD rule. My entire family and I risk the Syrian regime’s detainment due to our activism. The PYD is the regime’s ally. If we return to Manbij under its rule, we would end up dead in the regime’s torture cells.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, following PYD violations against Arabs in Tell-Abyad,<sup>48</sup> the PYD and YPG/YPJ’s reputation in Arab-majority areas has come to resemble that of an oppressor. While it must be acknowledged that the YPG/YPJ has had to deal with ISIS booby traps and sleeper cells in areas it has been seeking to clear, this has created an environment of mutual suspicion. ‘We are treated as if we are all members of ISIS, until proven otherwise’, lamented one interviewee. Activists claim that the failure of locals to return to Tell-Abyad and Manbij following the YPG/YPJ’s defeat of ISIS in these areas is evidence of local fears.

**When comparing the YPG/YPJ and PYD with ISIS, one Arab activist described them as ‘two evils, the better of which is bitter’.**

Across areas it rules, as these dynamics show, it will take more than just protection from external threats to garner local legitimacy. One concern, even to those who strongly appreciate the YPG’s fight against ISIS, is the security threat the PYD could pose to locals as it seeks to monopolize power. The shrinking space available for the opposition, political activists and journalists – due to the increased monitoring of their activists and even exile of some of their members by the PYD – needs to be revisited by the PYD to enable it to assess itself and maintain security for all.

When looking at civil society perceptions of Rojava’s institutions, it is clear that the YPG/YPJ is more popular in Kurdish-majority areas than the PYD itself. Governance structures the PYD dominates such as the DAA, TEV-DEM and the Asayish remain the topic of debate among local civil society groups in the areas they govern.<sup>49</sup> This implies that the PYD remains respected predominantly for the provision of security and relative stability rather than as a governance actor. Thus, if the PYD is to improve its local governance, it needs to ensure its institutions are accountable to the people rather than its own command structure. This also applies to Arab-majority areas where both the YPG/YPJ and PYD remain untrusted and much feared.

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<sup>47</sup> Based on author’s online interview with an Arab activist from Manbij on 27 October 2016. When asked further why she thinks the PYD is aligned to the regime, the interviewee responded: ‘It does not take a genius to understand they work together. Members in the local council they selected constitute families linked to the regime; the educational curriculum they are using is the regime’s and they are asking staff to coordinate with the regime’s institutions in Aleppo; now we have fuel and electricity – without their open trade with the regime this is inaccessible, even the route between Aleppo and Manbij that meant we needed to travel for almost a day to reach Damascus, is now open and reached directly in less than three hours’.

<sup>48</sup> See for instance: Amnesty International (2015), ‘We had No Where Else to Go: Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria’, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MDE2425032015ENGLISH.PDF> (accessed 16 May 2016). Although this report is contested even by KNC members who say violations do not reach the level of ethnic cleansing; human rights violations by the PYD have been discussed by other organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Kurds Watch and the International Crisis Group.

<sup>49</sup> This is excluding the view of areas of Arab-majority populations, which have different dynamics with the YPG/YPJ.

## 2. Effectiveness in the provision of services

They [the PYD] are authoritarian and do not let anyone else provide these services other than through them. However, I have to admit, they have excelled in the provision of services. In Amude [Amuda] where I live, you have the main needs like electricity, water, hospitalization, bread, etc.; even mazout [fuel oil] is delivered to your house!

An Arab activist<sup>50</sup>

The PYD's effectiveness in the provision of services is a critical factor in building local legitimacy. 'All ideologies drop in front of a loaf of bread,' one activist said as he praised the PYD's ability to provide services. 'What does a federation mean when there are no vegetables in the market?' another exclaimed in response to the PYD's announcement that it intends to establish the federation of Rojava. Whether in support or opposition to the PYD-led Rojava project, locals stressed that effective service provision was an important criterion to accepting its establishment. Effectiveness here means service provision needs to be equitable and sustainable. It relates to what services are provided, how they are managed and by whom.

### Box 2: DAA Executive Council Bodies<sup>51</sup>

1. Foreign Relations
2. Defence
3. Internal Affairs
4. Justice
5. Cantonal and Municipal Councils and affiliated to it: Committee of Planning and Census
6. Finance, and affiliated to it: a. Committee on Banking Regulations; b. Committee of Customs and Excise
7. Social Affairs
8. Education
9. Agriculture
10. Energy
11. Health
12. Trade and Economic Cooperation
13. Martyrs and Veterans Affairs
14. Culture
15. Transport
16. Youth and Sports
17. Environment, Tourism and Historical Objects
18. Religious Affairs
19. Family and Gender Equality
20. Human Rights
21. Communication
22. Food Security

<sup>50</sup> Author Skype interview with an Arab activist in Amude (Amuda), 20 October 2016.

<sup>51</sup> See article 95 in the Rojava Social Contract presented in: <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/>.

DAA governance has been able to provide services including fuel, education, job provision, electricity,<sup>52</sup> water, sanitation, customs, healthcare, education, and security. The services the DAA seeks to provide are reflected in the variety of its executive commissions, akin to ministries (see box 2).<sup>53</sup>

Crucially, among the most visible of these services is the coverage of locals' daily needs. The DAA has built bakeries and covered shortages in key items like gas cylinders and in food material unavailable in the market, like sugar.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, it has also built new educational structures like that of the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy,<sup>55</sup> forming the second public university in the Hassaka region.<sup>56</sup> This is topped by the DAA's ability to secure resources for reconstruction projects (see box 3).

### Box 3: Resources of the Rojava project

To compete with other service providers and to strengthen its service-related legitimacy, the DAA needs large financial resources. It declared expenditures of about SYP 2.7 billion (USD 7.7 million) in 2015, during the same period it planned to raise revenue of SYP 5.6 billion (USD 16 million).<sup>57</sup> The DAA provides most public services for a fee. It generates income from its water and electricity operations, food and other products that it sells. It also raises taxes from sources such as construction permits, land, business revenue, cars, agricultural income, border trade and even from the passage of people to and from Rojava.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, it continues to receive financial support from diaspora networks and support groups.

A major source of wealth, however, is the region's natural resources: oil and agriculture. The Syria Report estimates the area generates around USD 10 million a month from its export of crude oil, thanks to a recently built 8.9km pipeline extending from Rumeilan – north Syria's largest oil field – to northern Iraq, from where the oil is exported to Turkey.<sup>59</sup> The report also cites other sources that suggest the average volume of crude oil pumped from the Rumeilan field is 40,000 barrels per day in 2014.<sup>60</sup> However, it remains unclear who is exporting the oil, to whom and how much net income the PYD makes out of it. Agriculture meanwhile forms another important activity the DAA invests in, as this region is a main source of wheat, cotton and livestock.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>52</sup> In many areas it controls with interrupted state electricity, the DAA provides electricity through power generators – for a fee. And while cities and villages along the Sweidiyyeh line like Rumeilan and Derik (Malkiya in Arabic) have always had electricity; those areas on the line from Kobane to Qamishli passing through Tell Abyad, Serê Kaniyê (Ra's al 'Ayn) and Amude (Amuda) have had electricity restored when the YGP/YPJ took over the Tishreen Dam.

<sup>53</sup> For details on the DAA structure (in Arabic) see: ANHA Hawar News (2016), 'Man Kal Anna Al-Idara Alzatiyya Al Dimocratiyya Molk li Hezb Al Ittihad Al Deemocrati?' (Who said the DAA belongs to the PYD?) 16 March 2016, <http://www.hawarnews.com/اروق مي دلالة-تة-ادال-قرا دل-ان-الاق-نم/> (accessed 16 May 2016). For further details on the institutional structure and vision of Kobane (Ain al-Arab in Arabic) and Efrin cantons, view Kobane Canton Website: [http://www.cantonakobane.org/?page\\_id=181](http://www.cantonakobane.org/?page_id=181); Efrin Canton Website: <http://cantonafryn.com/en/>

<sup>54</sup> Narbone, L. et al. (eds) (2016), 'Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya'.

<sup>55</sup> Stanchev, P. (2016), 'The Kurds, Bookchin and the Need to Reinvent Revolution'.

<sup>56</sup> Prior to the 2011 uprising Hassaka governorate hosted only one public university and one private university (established in 2005). Students from this region have had to commute to other governorates for higher education.

<sup>57</sup> Narbone, L. et al. (eds) (2016), 'Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya'.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> The Syria Report (2015), 'New estimate for Kurdish revenues from oil exports', 28 September 2015, <http://www.syria-report.com/news/oil-gas-mining/new-estimate-kurdish-revenues-oil-exports> (accessed 5 Aug. 2016).

<sup>60</sup> The Syria Report (2015), 'Oil Output by Syrian Kurds at 40,000 bopd – Report, 24 November 2014, <http://www.syria-report.com/news/oil-gas-mining/oil-output-syrian-kurds-40000-bopd-%E2%80%93-report> (accessed 5 Aug. 2016).

<sup>61</sup> Apart from these, hardly any investment exists in this region except for Lafarge (Syria's largest cement plant of a 2.7 million tons annual production capacity) that is partly demolished and Qamishli International Airport that the regime controls. The latter links Syria's northeast to the rest of the country and abroad, especially with the Turkish border closure and ISIS control of the region connecting to Damascus. Pre-uprising, the only international flights from Qamishli were charter flights to Sweden where significant Kurdish and Syriac communities lived. The passenger traffic of the airport has since exploded and rose from 2,700 passengers per month in 2010 to about 21,000 a month in 2014. See Jihad Yazigi (2015), 'Le projet autonomiste kurde est-il économiquement viable en Syrie?' (Is the self-autonomous Kurdish project economically viable in Syria?), Jihad Yazigi blog, 1 November 2015, <https://jihadyazigi.com/2015/11/01/le-projet-autonomiste-kurde-est-il-économiquement-viable-en-syrie/> (accessed 5 Aug. 2016).

The PYD has been outstanding in its ability to provide these services despite the difficult situation in Syria. Most of the activists also praised these services.<sup>62</sup> One activist explained: ‘the Apogists [in reference to pro-Öcalan camp] are very hard-working, you know if they take on a task, unlike the KNC people, they do it efficiently. Water can be turned into gold in their hands!’ Local activists insisted this ability to provide services is significant especially given the Turkish and KRG economic embargoes affecting Rojava’s territory. The principal Turkish and Iraq border crossings to Rojava have been closed for long periods of time, which has affected the trade of oil – its most important resource – as well as basic commodities and investments in its infrastructure. Yet, others have suggested that these embargoes only exist because of the actions of the PYD leadership, and fear that the PYD’s lack of cooperation with the KRG will make the situation worse.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile, some locals in Kurdish-majority areas complained that the services provided have come at a cost. They are not satisfied with the fees and level of taxation the DAA collects on its activities, especially those related to customs duties, housing and people’s income.<sup>64</sup> Activists have also noted the PYD has recently imposed taxes on local and international civil society organizations. Many locals feel forced to pay the PYD and thus to give it credibility by doing so even though they may not want to help it consolidate its power as a shadow state, due to its unilateral actions.<sup>65</sup> In Arab-majority areas, there is a perception that the PYD assigns its own candidates to the local council providing services in order to stop locals governing themselves.<sup>66</sup>

In terms of education provision, many Kurdish activists are appreciative that Kurdish-language education is taking place. Yet, the curriculum has come under fire as it has been seen to be heavily politicized with Öcalan’s ideology, and it has been noted that some of the school and university teachers lack the relevant qualifications. One activist added that now ‘Kurdish pupils learn in Kurdish and Arabs in Arabic, which creates parallel communities and segregation’. A further problem is that new institutions are unaccredited, which means that students face problems in getting their qualifications accepted should they wish to continue their education. Some locals highlighted they are fine with this and that they have their children sit for both the Syrian government and the PYD curricula exams. Erdelan Baran, a member of the foreign affairs committee of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), has brushed off these complaints, arguing ‘it is about creating a new model of education based on the Democratic Confederalism paradigm instead of the classical nation-state concept of education’. In this model, criticism and self-criticism is a tool, he insists.<sup>67</sup>

Geographically, just as perceptions of security provision vary, local perceptions of the provision of services differ from one canton to another. In Kobane, for instance, the city has been largely destroyed by conflict. Reconstruction is consequently the main service provided, along with critical functions like electricity and education. International organizations have been implementing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and other infrastructure programs, but as per several humanitarian organizations, the PYD controls all such operations in the city.<sup>68</sup> A Local activist stated the PYD has also taken control over the main hospital (Al-Mashfa al Watani) and over another privately owned hospital (Al-Mashfa

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<sup>62</sup> The information that follows is based on author’s online interview with a local activist based in Amude (Amuda), unless otherwise stated, 23 October 2016, Skype.

<sup>63</sup> Omran for Strategic Studies (2015), ‘Al Idara Al Mahaliyya Fee Manatek Kurd Souria- Afreen Namouzajan’.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid; partly from author’s interviews held with local activists in April and May 2016, Turkey.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Based on author’s online interviews with Arab activists and humanitarian actors working on and in Tell Abyad and Manbij, April–October 2016, Skype.

<sup>67</sup> Based on author’s interview and online correspondence with Erdelan Baran (member of the foreign affairs committee of Kurdistan National Congress), July and November 2016, London.

<sup>68</sup> In the three interviews held by the author with international humanitarian organizations working in Kobane in September and October 2016, Turkey and London; all complained that their experience with the authorities there is comparable to that of dealing with the Syrian regime.

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al Namsawi).<sup>69</sup> Local activists complain that the PYD has built and controls housing units and bakeries and does not allow others to provide such services without its permission.

In Hassaka, however, the dynamics of service provision are different as the Syrian regime still controls part of the city and its institutions.<sup>70</sup> There, the PYD coordinates and competes with Syrian government institutions. Some DAA institutions run in parallel to these institutions, while others replace them. The situation is most striking in certain areas in Qamishli, where, according to one local businessman:

Both the PYD and regime people work in the same building, each with their own budget. Across many services, the division of labour implies that while both plan together, the regime pays in some way and the PYD implements. Meanwhile, if a project solely belongs to the PYD (especially if it taxes and/or charges people for it), the PYD takes full control. Such projects often relate to the construction of roads, electricity generation, clinics, cleaning, etc.<sup>71</sup>

But cooperation between the PYD and the regime does not always run smoothly, and it is the local population that often bears the brunt of this. One local businessman noted that locals are sometimes forced to pay fees or taxes to both the regime and the PYD.<sup>72</sup> Sometimes they can choose whom to pay. For instance, many locals stopped paying for the Syrian regime's interrupted electricity once generation became available from the PYD. In the case of landline phone bills, while it may no longer be the case given PYD's increased control of the service, locals who use the landline phone service continue to pay the regime. In the justice sector, the PYD has created parallel structures to that of the regime, urging locals to register with the PYD-run system for their own protection. Yet, the locals are also obligated to use regime courts for official documentation, as the regime does not accredit PYD institutions.

**These services are critical to the PYD's efforts to legitimize its governance. However, by restricting other groups, except those willing to go through the PYD, from providing services the PYD is in effect bolstering its position, consolidating its power and creating a dependency upon it.**

These services are critical to the PYD's efforts to legitimize its governance. However, by restricting other groups – except those willing to go through the PYD – from providing services the PYD is in effect bolstering its position, consolidating its power and creating a dependency upon it. International and local humanitarian organizations are obliged to go through either the commune system or other DAA institutions to deliver aid. This can leave them facing obstacles that delay deliveries and encourages either the diversion of aid to those less in need or corruption and favouritism.<sup>73</sup> In an interview conducted by the author, an international humanitarian worker expressed his frustration with the PYD's control, saying: 'They make the process very bureaucratic and unclear. In Efrin, we are told to deal with the PYD; in Kobane (Ain al-Arab), we are asked to deal with the canton; and in

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<sup>69</sup> According to a local activist, given that a Norwegian citizen owns it, currently there are disputes over ownership of the hospital as the Norwegian government has sued the PYD for its takeover.

<sup>70</sup> This, as highlighted in map 1 is mainly around – Al-Mourabaa Al Amni area [the security square]. However, the Syrian regime's presence may exceed these geographical boundaries with state services it provides. It still pays the salaries of the majority of state employees, for instance. However, there are some exceptions, such as in the case of school staff whose salaries the regime stopped paying after the PYD decided to change the main teaching language for Kurdish students to Kurdish. When questioned about this, the PYD highlighted they are now paying those salaries and that other Arab and Syriac components can still attend public schools taught in Arabic as per the regime's curriculum.

<sup>71</sup> Based on author's online interview with a local businessman in June 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Narbone, L. et al. (eds.) (2016), 'Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya'.

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Hassaka, we deal with the Humanitarian Affairs office'. He further complained, 'We can work in Efrin, for instance, but not with the people we want to work with'. The main goal, he concluded, was to portray the DAA as the provider of the service, thus increasing its legitimacy.<sup>74</sup>

KNC affiliates have also formed their own local councils to provide services; however, apart from the infrequent provision of some relief aid and health services, their contribution is limited. Regardless of the PYD's rise, the KNC-backed local councils have proved to be less organized and experienced than their DAA counterparts. Yet, in addition, the growth of the KNC-backed local councils is inhibited by the PYD. The PYD monopolizes certain domains by forcing all organizations to register with it – through the DAA – or to apply for a licence. Several activists further confirmed that those that oppose this rule are eventually deemed illegal.<sup>75</sup>

The situation is similar in Arab-majority areas. In Manbij, the PYD is said to have dismantled the elected council that had been operating prior to the takeover of the city by ISIS. In its place, the PYD – which remains a stranger to the area – has appointed its preferred local council members. Local activists and researchers claim Manbij local council is now formed of members of families historically linked to the regime and thus further distrusted.<sup>76</sup> Local activists highlight that one of the Manbij local council's members is Farooq Al-Mashi, whose cousin, Mohamad Al-Mashi, is part of the people's parliament that is subservient to the regime. The Al-Mashis, who returned to the area after the PYD took control, are cited to have violently attacked demonstrators five years ago in their role as 'shabbiha' (pro-regime mercenaries). While this signals linkages between the PYD and the regime, the power remains with the PYD. One local noted, 'the Al-Mashis and others remain a façade, they have no power to sign any document. According to one of this council's members, they do not know where orders come from; they do not even know how the hierarchy works; they only implement orders!'<sup>77</sup>

Meanwhile, the DAA continues to expand and provide employment opportunities through its institutions, particularly with its police force, the Asayish. Again, the top leadership positions and power in these institutions belongs mainly to PYD cadres and as it expands, even if elections are held, it is unlikely that employees in these institutions would risk their livelihood to challenge PYD governance. This raises the prospect that employment in Rojava's fledgling civil service may be a means of co-opting locals, as has long been the approach of the regime.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Based on author's Skype interview with the leader of an international humanitarian organization that operates in a number of PYD-controlled areas. August 2016, London.

<sup>75</sup> For instance, the DAA and TEV-DEM are said to be forcing journalists to register with them via the 'free media center' while also forcing them to abide by certain regulations like disclosing their sources. Rojava leaders say this is to organize the random media work. Activist journalists say the PYD are using these laws and institutions to control and limit the freedom of expression of journalists. They specifically point at how the 'emergency law' is directed at journalists. Rojava leaders' tactic they complain is 'first to include their opposition and to limit the space for them'.

<sup>76</sup> Based on author's interviews with an activist, a local researcher and a member of the Local Assistance Coordination Unit between September and October 2016, online, in Germany and London.

<sup>77</sup> Based on author's Skype interview with three local activists in October, 2016. For additional documentation, view: Partiya Demokratî Kurdistan-Suriya (PDK-S) (2016), Gelo çekdarên PYD Menbic Radeştî kê kirye? (To whom did the SDF give power in Manbij?), Youtube, 27 October 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmJD67H\\_HKw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmJD67H_HKw) (accessed 28 Oct. 2016). Furthermore, it is important to note that there are also variations to the level of tolerance to the PYD in Arab-majority areas. Al-Raqqqa residents for instance remain most distrusting of the PYD where there are micro conflicts between the two. In Manbij, however, activists cite discontent towards the PYD, to its perceived shared linkages with the regime and to the looting that is deemed either practised or facilitated by the YPG. Some locals have even compared the situation to ISIS days, when they said they were not worried about looting.

<sup>78</sup> In 1999–2003, over 50 per cent of the Syrian state budget was for the military, subsidies, price transfers and public sector wages. Around half of the population in Syria lived on fixed government income. Post-uprising conflict, fashioned to serve an authoritarian regime, these institutions and services have become war tools manipulated by the regime to control resistance to it. To date, as a main employer of the state, the regime controls locals' livelihoods with wages even in areas out of its control. For reference and further details, see: Khalaf, R. (2015), 'Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building during Conflict'. *Syria Studies*, 7(3), pp. 37–72 (accessed 9 May 2016).

Thus, although the services provided by the DAA are effective relative to the conflict in Syria, the structure of the DAA and its operation, together with the above-mentioned concerns, suggest that institutions are mainly used to keep power in PYD hands with representation of the populace being of lower priority. For this to be altered, the PYD needs to create a system where these institutions and laws are truly accountable to the various peoples it governs, including those opposed to it.

### 3. Diplomacy and image management

They run a media empire which, for good or bad, trumps their competition's.

A Kurdish intellectual<sup>79</sup>

The Rojava project is credited for its ability to communicate and create solidarity for itself via traditional and new media as well as diplomacy institutions and networks. This promotes a thriving discourse; one that links to universalist values, is consistent and is crucially tailored to different audiences. Gender equality is a key discourse promoted to feminists worldwide, for instance, and for local Kurds this is promoted through the prism of Kurdish struggle, protection and rights.

Media and public diplomacy institutions in Rojava form an extensive network inside and outside Syria. Under the DAA, an entire institution is dedicated to foreign relations. Globally, the Rojava leadership has opened offices in Berlin, Moscow, Sweden and other European capitals, and is expanding its diplomatic efforts to other countries in Europe and even to Saudi Arabia. Locally, cantons, communes and even commissions have media and public diplomacy functions and at times display online savvy through websites and social media pages. Many have ideological institutions – referred to as academies – that teach Öcalan's ideology. These academies are not limited to Rojava and can also be found influencing KCK cadres in Qandil and diaspora groups.

**Mainly based in Europe, diaspora groups run global campaigns like the Peace in Kurdistan Campaign and mobilize solidarity networks globally, as was the case with the strong advocacy worldwide to save Kobane from ISIS.**

Mainly based in Europe, diaspora groups run global campaigns like the Peace in Kurdistan Campaign and mobilize solidarity networks globally, as was the case with the strong advocacy worldwide to save Kobane from ISIS.<sup>80</sup> Erdelan Baran highlights, 'They are not only trying to get support for Kurdish people's rights, but also give educational training about the vision of the Kurdish movement's ideas of a better democratic society, like the system of Democratic Confederalism'.<sup>81</sup> Their work is solid and sustained. It benefits from educated leaders capable of tailoring media messages to a diverse audience and from decades of activism. This is being run mainly by a social network of volunteers driven by a 'cause' rather than by a 'project' subject to the mercy of fund flows.

Rojava also benefits from the PKK's established media institutions; Med TV started broadcasting in 1995. It later changed its name to Roj TV<sup>82</sup> and has now been succeeded by other individual TV

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<sup>79</sup> Author's Skype interview with a Kurdish intellectual based in Germany, August 2016.

<sup>80</sup> See: Savran (2016), 'The Rojava Revolution and British Solidarity'; Eccarius-Kelly V. (2002), 'Political movements and leverage points: Kurdish activism in the European diaspora', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 22(1), pp. 91–118 (accessed 16 Jul. 2016).

<sup>81</sup> Author online correspondence with Erdelan Baran from the Kurdistan National Congress, 1 November 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Saeed (2014), 'The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From the PKK to the KCK. From the PKK to the KCK'.

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stations.<sup>83</sup> Locally, committees use media platforms like the Hawar Network, Ronahi Magazine, Radio Oskan, and Khabar 24 website and social media.<sup>84</sup>

Opposition media like the online newspaper Rudaw exist, but some of its journalists have been detained and expelled by the PYD. Such cases have ensured local journalists fear PYD oppression. One small network of journalists acknowledged that the PYD reached out to them for their input regarding journalism laws but complained these consultations were then used to exercise stricter control. Evidently, media is crucial for the PYD. Activists insist the PYD continues to control media critical of it and its governance structures by banning some opposition media outlets and by detaining and expelling key outspoken journalists and activists.

While such controls may be less clear to the international audience, globally, pro-Rojava discourse is appealing to many. Its governance is argued to be a revolution anchored on women's rights, democracy, pluralism, diversity, economic justice and even environmental sustainability.<sup>85</sup> The values of equality resonate globally with the left and feminists, in particular. This is not surprising; the visibility of women in Rojava contrasts with many other Syrian areas.<sup>86</sup> The Rojava project has created visible institutions and policies for women, which could eventually ensure increased space and rights for women. One example is the 40 per cent quota set to encourage women to participate in institutions at commune, district, city and canton levels.<sup>87</sup> Another is the social charter the PYD emphasizes, which specifically focuses on women's political, social, economic and cultural rights.

While contested by its critics and local activists, the PYD presents itself as an alternative to an authoritarian regime and to an Islamist opposition that is hostile to other religious and ethnic components. The PYD argues that Kurds have established themselves as a third force in Syria. In reality, nonetheless, it is the fight against ISIS that appeals to world citizens and governments who may not identify with the Syrian or Kurdish cause. TEV-DEM and the PYD understand this; they invoke their struggle against ISIS as a fight for humanity to promote Rojava. PYD representative, Semo, explains, 'we are fighting to defend ourselves, but also to defend Christians, Yazidis, Arabs and the West.'<sup>88</sup> Aldar Xelil from TEV-DEM stresses 'if they truly want to stand against terrorists, they have to support us.'<sup>89</sup>

Meanwhile, locally, it is the undertones of Kurdish nationalism that appeal to many Kurds, and the discourse on defending other ethnic and religious components that appeals especially to the Syriacs. TEV-DEM thus stresses these aspects in its local media. However, TEV-DEM also stresses the symbolism of Öcalan, the 'martyr' and the PYD 'flag', which not all in Rojava share. Öcalan's picture is ubiquitous in Rojava, even in children's books. Several of the interviewed activists commented, 'Bashar Al-Assad's picture was removed to be replaced by Öcalan's'.

Martyrs and fighters are meanwhile deemed sacred. An institution in TEV-DEM is dedicated to them, one that local activists criticize as being used to suppress opposition to the PYD. Activists complain

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<sup>83</sup> These include: MedNuce that covers news in Turkish; Ronahi that covers news in Arabic, Kormanji and Sourani; Mesopotamia that albeit dedicated to music covers Rojava news; Sterk TV in Brussels that covers various topics in all four Kurdish dialects. Faced with threats of closure, some restarted under new names.

<sup>84</sup> Author's online correspondence with local journalists in July 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Kurdistan National Congress (2014), 'Canton Based Democratic Autonomy of Rojava'.

<sup>86</sup> In areas under Islamist rule, many women are mobilized as journalists, activists, etc., yet they are also limited; for example, they are now obliged to be accompanied by men to move around.

<sup>87</sup> Biehl (2015), 'Rojava's Communes and Councils'; Savran (2016), 'The Rojava Revolution and British Solidarity'.

<sup>88</sup> Author's Skype interview and correspondence with PYD representative to the UK Dr Alan Semo, 24 July and October 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Author's interview with Aldar Xelil, September 2016, London, and online correspondence with Dr Alan Semo in October 2016.

accusations made by martyrs' families against others have been taken at face value and led to citizens being detained.<sup>90</sup>

In addition, activists say that the PYD does not allow the Kurdish flag or, at times, other flags to be raised, instead preferring its own or that of the YPG/YPJ. Aldar Xelil denies this allegation arguing that, 'it is only the Ba'athist flag that is forbidden in Rojava'.<sup>91</sup> This lays bare the paradox of Rojava, and the challenges faced by its leadership to define the region's character. The raising of the PYD flag has connotations of one-party rule. On the other hand, displaying the Kurdish flag stresses pan-Kurdish nationalism, which would include rival Kurdish groups but alienate non-Kurdish elements. It also undermines the narrative that the PYD is presenting Rojava as a federal state of Syria. Finally, the insistence of the SNC over the 'Arab' character of the state means that displaying the revolutionary banner is no less problematic, as it infers the subjugation of Kurds.

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<sup>90</sup> Based on author's interviews with local activists, journalists and politicians. April–July 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Author's interview with Aldar Xelil, September 2016, London.

## Conclusion: The Importance of Local Trust and Representation

The PYD does not represent all Kurds... We fear a Kurdish–Kurdish war with the PYD’s unilateral actions.

A Kurdish journalist

The institutional preparedness of the PYD has been critical to the development of self-governance in Rojava amid Syria’s descent into brutal civil war. In the vacuum created by the withdrawal of the regime, pre-existing KCK institutions seem to have formed the backbone of Rojava’s provision of security and services, and spearheaded its external relations. However, the legitimacy of the Rojava governance project remains contested, in different ways, at the international and local levels.

In the international sphere, the chances for legitimacy in the form of political endorsement are slim. It is not lost on Rojava’s leaders that they have made momentary friends, but not lasting allies. For the US and other western countries, Kurdish forces have been supported militarily as their ability to fight ISIS has corresponded with these countries’ security interests. The challenge for Rojava’s leaders is to leverage this into support for the wider Rojava political project. Yet, strong opposition from Turkey appears to prevent such recognition. Turkey views the Rojava project as a threat that could trigger similar Kurdish ambitions within its borders. As Turkey is a member of NATO, its fellow members are less likely to support Rojava beyond fighting ISIS and terrorist groups.

This increases the imperative for investing in local legitimacy. At the local level, legitimacy means more than just the provision of services, security and public diplomacy image management, all of which authoritarian states can do well. Legitimacy here implies a non-authoritarian approach that enjoys social and political trust in the Rojava project from the different components of society. It involves practising a social contract based on real participation and representation from these societal components and non-coerced acceptance of the DAA institutions.

As this paper has shown, Kurds are not homogenous, nor are they alone in Rojava. Kurds in Syria are divided across three main camps that in many cases remain in conflict with one another. Beyond those who support the PYD, many Kurds look to the KRG as their principal ally. These forces remain engaged with the Syrian opposition under the auspices of the KNC. There are also significant numbers of Kurds who fall into neither of those camps and remain unaligned. Furthermore, other ethnicities, both indigenous and displaced, co-exist with the Kurds in the Rojava territory, including Arabs, Syriacs, Turkmens, Chechens and Yazidis.

Some of the minorities that the DAA claims to represent have formed governance structures of their own. The Syriac Union Party has formed its own defence militias – the Sutoro – which collaborates with the Asayish,<sup>92</sup> while the Syriac Military Council shifted focus from being anti-regime to fighting jihadists with the PYD, but continues trying to retain its independence. Such allegiances can be

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<sup>92</sup> Many amongst the Kurds and Syriacs share common interests against jihadist groups attacking their areas like ISIS but also against the SNC that insists on seeing them as only political parties rather than as peoples who do not want their non-Arab identity and rights to be assimilated under a ‘Syrian Arab Republic’. Both sides are also at odds with micro-conflicts between them dating back to the Syriac’s genocide in the 19th and 20th centuries perpetrated by the Kurds under the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, Syriacs also fear a Kurdish dictatorship rule over them. Based on author’s Skype interview in with a Syriac civil society activist and with the representative of an Assyrian organization, January 2016.

transient and sometimes seemingly contradictory: the Assyrian Democratic Party in Qamishli remains allied with the regime given the latter's strong presence there and has formed its own police – also called the Sutoro. Meanwhile, another group, the Assyrian Democratic Organization, remains more inclined to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SNC).<sup>93</sup>

The Rojava leadership's relationship with groups non-aligned with it remains fraught as a result of PYD authoritarianism. The leadership continues to alienate its political opposition (mainly pro KRG and KNC but also certain civil society activists) by excluding them and by forcing them to either abide by its rules or leave. Despite this internal conflict, Kurdish–Kurdish violence remains a red line for Kurdish groups and thus a low possibility due to the years of experience of internecine conflict in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, as different warring international players often back different Kurdish groups, by fighting the wars of these international backers, the Kurds are indirectly fighting each other. If this situation is to be altered, the PYD needs to be more inclusive and more importantly treat civil society in Rojava as partners in its governance. The PYD is in a strong position to do so, as the KNC has thus far suffered from the highly nationalist agendas of the SNC, which in turn has failed to support Kurdish ethnic rights as it also insists on assimilating them in a Syrian 'Arab' Republic.

Co-existence in Arab-majority areas controlled by the PYD is set to be challenging. Arab–Kurdish tensions date back decades,<sup>94</sup> but when the uprising in 2011 developed into a conflict it caused old tensions to rise to the surface and increased mistrust between Arabs and Kurds.<sup>95</sup> The violations of both sides against each other increase these tensions. The political discourse, which on one side sees the opposition remaining Arab nationalist and continuing to try to assimilate Kurds under a Syrian Arab Republic and on the other side the pragmatism of the PYD and its deals with the regime, has further fuelled those tensions.

At the moment, the PYD has the upper hand as it continues to expand but its chances of achieving international legitimacy for Rojava, in light of Turkey's opposition, are slim. The PYD must therefore look into its local legitimacy by moving past security- and services-based actions alone and act now to ensure that Rojava's institutions are accountable to the people, not simply the PYD's command structure. Eventually, the PYD and other actors in Rojava will need to engage with each other, especially in light of all the opportunities and challenges the Rojava project poses. However, this engagement needs to ensure the PYD creates space for locals and civil society to govern, too. Without local legitimacy, the PYD governance project will only be a time bomb that will trigger further fragmentation and insecurity across Syria and the region.

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<sup>93</sup> Despite these different alliances (with the PYD, with the regime or with the opposition), Syriacs remain a minority in Kurdish-controlled areas with governance structures of limited power. It is only in Al-Khabur that they form their own majority in around 35 villages. Yet there too, they do not follow just one alliance. While Natouret Khabur coordinates with the PYD; the Council of Khabour guardians works independently. This section is based on author interviews with Syriac activists and on the works of Al-Tamimi, A. (2014), 'Christian Militia and Political Dynamics in Syria'; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tami blog, 23 February 2014, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/14455/christian-militia-and-political-dynamics-in-syria> (access 25 Jan. 2016); See also articles from local media sources available on the Syria Observer website: <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28051/Hassakeh+Christians+Unite>; [http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/30383/Syriac\\_Kurdish\\_Clashes\\_North\\_Hassakeh\\_Leave\\_Several\\_Dead](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/30383/Syriac_Kurdish_Clashes_North_Hassakeh_Leave_Several_Dead).

<sup>94</sup> The Arab Cordon, which established where the Ghamr Arab tribes would settle in Kurdish land, is the main issue. The 2004 Kurdish uprising, which was rendered an Arab–Kurdish fight, is another. Tribal conflicts between Kurds and Arabs also have their legacies. For further detail, see: Gunter, M. (2014) *Out of nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in peace and war*.

<sup>95</sup> This was evident with the rebel's attack on Ra's al 'Ayn and abuses against Kurds in mid-2012 and with other micro-conflicts between the two. The pragmatism of the PYD and its deals with the regime as highlighted earlier further fueled those tensions. Rebels recount incidents of truce agreements with the PYD that the PYD breached – in 2015 this relates to the freezing fighting zones (in Marea, Azaz, Manbij and Tal Refaat).

## About the Author

**Rana Khalaf** is the author of several key publications on Syria that seek to bridge the gap between academia and the worlds of civil society, activism and policymaking. Her research spans across conflict, governance, state-building, civil society, youth and peace-building. Having completed an academy senior fellowship at Chatham House, Rana continues to run her own consultancy.

Some of the key organizations she has been providing consultancy for include the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Badael Foundation and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the UNDP Bureau for Development Policy and the League of Arab States. Rana is also a non-resident fellow with the Centre for Syrian Studies at the University of St Andrews and an integral part of bodies and civil society networks working on Syria and the Levant.

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Cover image: Syrian boys flash the sign for victory as they sit in the back of a vehicle driving towards signs bearing Arabic and Kurdish writing, with a poster of Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Öcalan in Syria's northeastern Hassaka province, July 2015.

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