

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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“The areas of the Democratic Self-Administration do not accept the concept of a centralized, nationalistic, military and theocratic state.” Democratic Self Administration Office of External Affairs, 2014

INTRODUCTION

The political system governing the regions of North and East Syria is a unique democratic project that has caught worldwide attention in recent years. Though its roots lie in decades of organizing within the Kurdish rights movement, as well as a wider culture of collective social structures and diverse demographics, it first took concrete shape in 2012 when the people of the region commonly known as 'Rojava' expelled the Assad regime and established a system of autonomous self-administration.

The political system is based on the principles of grassroots democracy, women's liberation and ecological sustainability. The structures of the system – called 'democratic confederalism,' devolves power to local units which confederate into larger units as necessary. The confederal system describes itself as revolutionary and seeks to establish a liberated, self-governing society. Ideologically rooted in the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, it seeks to implement socialism without the authoritarianism of state mechanisms.

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) produced this report in order to make the system of democratic governance of North and East Syria understandable to an external audience. Many media narratives describe the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the governing force of the territory. This is not the case: rather, the SDF is the military force which answers to the governing civil administration. Furthermore, much information about the civil administration is either outdated, superficial or inaccurate. Although the political and social institutions – and people – of North and East Syria are facing significant challenges because of the ongoing attacks from Turkey, they have expressed determination to continue to develop the political project.

This report is based on over 50 interviews with people involved in political organizing, including representatives of the political structures, civil society organizations and elected delegates and members of defense institutions. The report also draws on observations of commune and council meetings, as well as the documents outlining the stated aims and activities of key institutions. More broadly, members of the RIC are living and working in North and East Syria, some for several months or years, and some for their whole lives.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Historical, political and cultural roots of the political system

The Kurds are an ethnic group of 35-50 million people who are spread between their traditional homeland of Kurdistan and a diaspora community around the world. Kurdistan has long been divided between four nation-states: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world who do not have a state, and Kurds living in the north of Syria have long been politically disenfranchised and denied cultural rights by the Syrian government.

Kurds and Arabs in North and East Syria organized together as part of the Arab Spring of 2011, but most Kurdish groups eventually distanced themselves from the movement due to lack of acceptance of Kurdish rights, and the growing influence of fundamentalist Islamist groups. As the ISIS caliphate spread across Syria, women and girls became particular targets of violence and rape, and the establishment of a political system which centers women's liberation took place in the context of resistance against the Islamic State.

Although the Rojava revolution came out of predominantly Kurdish organizing, it is no longer an exclusively Kurdish project. In every region, councils and co-chairs include significant representation from the Arab community, as well as from other ethnic groups.

Demographics of North and East Syria

The total population of North and East Syria is estimated at four and five million. North and East Syria encompasses a wide range of ethnic and religious groups, some of which have lived in the area for millennia, while many others have settled there more recently. The Kurdish majority regions are concentrated in the north – Afrin, Kobane, Jazeera – while Arab majority regions Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor more recently became part of the confederal system. The ethnic makeup can vary from city to city, with minorities of Armenians and Turkmen living in several cities. There are small minorities of Syriac-Assyrians, Yezidis, Circassians (descendants of Caucasian Muslims), Chechens and nomadic Dumi (Nawar) whose presence varies from region to region.

THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

The political system of North and East Syria has evolved in the seven years since the beginnings of autonomy in Afrin, Kobane and Jazeera. A major development has been the growth in territory as the SDF liberated significant amounts of territory from ISIS with the backing of the International Coalition to Defeat ISIS. This added the regions of Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor to the area operating under the democratic confederal system.

Following a reformulation of existing structures, the current system was announced in September 2018, making it just over a year old. It is made up of three major structures, based on the principles of devolved power and federation into higher levels. The three main structures are:

TEV-DEM (established in 2011) means the Movement for a Democratic Society. It is an umbrella body for labor unions, professional associations and some civil society organizations. TEV-DEM provides practical support and ensures that the voices of workers are fed into the political and administrative aspects of the confederal system. It acts as a kind of ‘counter-power’ to the Autonomous Administration and organizes on a federal basis from local to inter-regional level.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (established in 2018) builds up the system of communes and elected councils throughout North and East Syria, and is responsible for coordination between the seven regions. It is based on a federal system from the local commune to the inter-region level.

The Syrian Democratic Council (established in 2015) is the political umbrella which provides a political framework for the resolution of the Syrian conflict through Syrian – Syrian conversations, as well as taking on diplomatic work. Political parties participate in the SDC, as well as representatives from civil society, the Autonomous Administration and key individuals.

The Autonomous Administration is responsible for the administration of the seven regions through elected bodies, whereas the SDC represents political parties and civil society, and is geared towards unifying all of Syria into a federal, democratic, women-led and multi-cultural political entity. The Autonomous Administration concerns itself with the administration of issues like health, education and electricity, aiming for these issues to be decided on and controlled at the most local level possible.

The structures and principles of the political system are outlined in the Social Contract, which serves as a constitution. Versions of the Social Contract corresponding to the 2014 and 2016 incarnations of the system exist, but the version describing the 2018 reformulation has yet to be released.

One of the foundations of the confederal system of North and East Syria is the principle of autonomous women’s structures. This means that every institution and structure of the political and social system in North and East Syria – from communes and workplaces up to unions, regional assemblies and North and East Syria as a whole – have a women’s structure parallel to the general structure. There are no male-only structures. All institutions outside of the autonomous women’s structures are lead by one female and one male co-chair, and there is a 40% quota for either gender.

In addition to the women's structures, youth are also given a degree of autonomy which is enshrined in the Social Contract.

THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

Aims and basic structures

The Autonomous Administration is the structure that administers the territories across the regions of North and East Syria. The Administration encompasses the most local decision making bodies ('communes') up to the seven regions of North and East Syria. As many decisions and as much power as possible are devolved to the most local level. The inter-region level only concerns itself with issues affecting multiple regions, such as education, health, security, development, the unification of customs duties and fuel prices, or roads. At the inter-region level, most of the administration involves coordinating and organizing work between the different regions.

The 'skeleton' of the Autonomous Administration is structured by a confederal, bottom up system. The basic unit is the commune, generally made up of less than 200 families, and then these units federate into progressively larger bodies. Each level contains committees which focus on specific areas of work.

The units of the Autonomous Administration, from the most local to the largest, are: Commune, Neighborhood, Subdistrict, District, Canton, Region, and the inter-region Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

There are seven regions: Jazeera (which contains Qamishlo and Hasakah cantons), Euphrates (which contains Kobane and Tel Abyad (Girê Spî) cantons), Afrin, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor.

Communes – the building block of democratic confederalism

Communes are the most basic unit of the political system of North and East Syria. As well as acting as a democratic body, the commune also is the organization through which basic necessities, such as diesel and subsidized bread, are obtained and distributed.

The core pillars of the communes are self defense, conflict resolution and consensus building, and education. Once these pillars have been established, the commune is able to act as the foundation of an autonomous economy. Cooperatives are developed from communes and the emergence of a communal economy through pooling resources and joint investment is commonplace.

Communes have committees which focus on areas of work such as health, education, economy, self defense, reconciliation and other issues.

The Councils

Councils are the representative bodies which discuss and make decisions about societal issues, formulating necessary policies and representing the will of the people. Councils exist at each level of the Autonomous Administration, except for the level of the commune because communes are based on direct participation.

Councils are elected and work through committees such as Health, Education, Reconciliation and Justice, Self Defense, Women, Youth, Economy, Families of the Martyrs and Arts and Culture. There are quota requirements for women and ethnic and religious minorities, so even very small minorities are represented in the councils of the areas in which they live.

The election system for councils has been complicated and incomplete so far. Elections up to the district level took place in 2015 and 2017, but the planned elections for the canton and Autonomous

Administration level were interrupted by the Turkish invasion of Afrin. Elections were planned again for September 2019, but they were once again interrupted by mounting Turkish threats and the subsequent invasion in October 2019.

The Regions

The regions maintain a high level of autonomy of decision making for most matters, with the Autonomous Administration playing a role of coordination and communication. Decisions about the economy, law, judicial systems and education are made on a regional level, within the framework set by the Social Contract. The Autonomous Administration plays a role in the redistribution of resources (such as natural resources) between regions to maintain a level of equality across regions.

Institutions on the Autonomous Administration level

The work of the Autonomous Administration on the inter-region level focuses on coordinating between the regions. The Administration is split into General, Executive and Justice councils.

The General Council (Meclîsa Giştî, sometimes referred to as the Legislative Council) takes on a legislative function. The work of the Council is not so much writing laws as unifying the laws between regions and coordinating legislative matters between the legal systems of each of the regions. Seven delegates from each region – 49 in total – sit on the General Council, plus 21 specialists chosen for relevant knowledge.

The Executive Council (Meclîsa Cîbicîkar) works through seven offices and ten commissions, dealing with issues like health, natural resources, economy and others.

The Justice Council (Meclîsa Edalet) consists of 16 people. It administrates the work of the tribunals, discusses guideline sentences and works to coordinate the justice systems of all the regions.

Women within the Autonomous Administration

Within the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, women organize autonomously from the local to the highest level. Within each commune, district, canton and region council there is a corresponding women's council, and each body has a male and a female co-chair. The Autonomous Administration has a Women's Office which coordinates and supports this work. On 14 June 2019, the Women's Assembly of North and East Syria was created by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria as its corresponding women's structure.

THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL: A PROPOSAL FOR A DEMOCRATIC SYRIA

Vision and purpose

The Syrian Democratic Council is a political assembly representing political parties and associations in North and East Syria. The SDC aims to create a framework for a political solution for all of Syria, bringing together a coalition of democratic forces within Syria to build the movement towards a democratic and federal political system for Syria. The Council conducts 'Syrian - Syrian dialogues' to envision a future for Syria, building an alternative to foreign powers making decisions about Syria.

Diplomatic relations with international powers are generally conducted through the SDC. The SDC is also the political entity engaged in negotiations with the Syrian regime about the future of North and East Syria's relationship with the Syrian government. The stance of the Council up to now has been that they want to be integrated within the Syrian state, but in a federal system with a degree of autonomy,

and with guarantees of respect for all the ethnic and religious groups living in Syria.

The Syrian Democratic Council is recognized as the political body to which the Syrian Democratic Forces report to. It is also the political counterpart to the Autonomous Administration, which takes on more administrative and executive functions.

How the SDC is organized

The SDC contains three main bodies: the Executive Council, the Political Council and the General Conference.

The General Conference (Konferansa Giştî)

The General Conference is the highest body of the SDC. It is convened once a year, and is attended by delegations from the participating political parties, civil society organizations and institutions, as well as individual SDC members. The General Conference decides the broader political lines of the political system, but has less of a role in terms of legislative or executive power.

The Political Council (Meclîsa Siyasî)

The Political Council consists of representatives from all components of the SDC as represented in the General Conference. The full Political Council is made up of 80-90 people and meets on a monthly basis. The members include one representative from each political party, the co-chairs of the Executive Council, representatives from civil society, and individual members.

The Executive Council (Meclîsa Cîbicîkar)

The Executive Council (also referred to as the Presidential Council or Presidential Body) consists of 13-15 members: the co-chairs of each office, the two co-chairs of the Political Council and the Chair. It holds meetings every 15 days or more frequently when necessary, serving as the executive leadership body of the SDC. It follows up the implementation of the decisions of the General Conference and of the Political Council and oversees the work of the SDC's offices and committees. Members of the Executive Council are elected by the Political Council for a one-year term.

Women in the Syrian Democratic Council

The Women's Office of the Syrian Democratic Council exists to build up women's representation and organization in the Syrian Democratic Council. The day to day work of the SDC Women's Office includes holding meetings with women to identify and analyze the challenges facing women in society. The Office aims to develop female politicians and diplomats, as well as bring women's knowledge into the political arena. One of the first projects of the SDC Women's Office was to establish the assembly of the Syrian Women's Council as the corresponding women's body to the Syrian Democratic Council.

TEV-DEM : UNIONS AND COUNTER-POWER

History & role

TEV-DEM was founded in 2011 to build up the democratic system of communes and assemblies. This is the role that it played in the previous system of the three cantons of Afrin, Jazeera and Kobane. At the TEV-DEM conference on the 27th August 2018, the new role of TEV-DEM became to organize civil society, particularly through unions.

TEV-DEM works as an umbrella organization and an assembly for all unions and professional associations. On the level of North and East Syria, TEV-DEM has two co-chairs and an Administrative Council of 64 members.

Bottom-up system

TEV-DEM, like the Autonomous Administration, works according to the system of communes and councils, so subdivisions of TEV-DEM are meant to exist in each district corresponding with each level of Autonomous Administration council.

Women in civil society

Kongreya Star is the congress of the women's movement in North and East Syria. Kongreya Star operates on the basis of confederalism, with organizations, committees, and unions participating. Its vision is "to develop a free Rojava, a democratic Syria, and a democratic Middle East by promoting women's freedom and the concept of the democratic nation." In many ways it acts as the corresponding autonomous women's body to TEV-DEM.

Kongreya Star makes decisions through a conference every two years, as well as devolving decision making power to its various committees and member bodies. It is organized through communes and councils, as well as through academies, unions, political parties, cooperatives, associations and committees.

In different sectors, women have developed structures and associations to address the issues facing women. A lot of work is being done in the economic sphere: the Women's Economy Committee of the Autonomous Administration and Kongreya Star has supported the creation of many women's cooperatives, developing opportunities for women to learn skills and become financially independent. These projects envision that women-only businesses will develop a mode of working different from more dominant, capitalist ways of working.

Other interesting developments include the growth of Jineology, a branch of academic study that seeks to develop a methodology and epistemology of liberation through women's perspectives. Another is Jinwar, a village of women and children which practices collective modes of governance and economy. 'Women's Houses,' which exist in all cities and many smaller towns, solve women's issues, particularly domestic problems such as violence, marriage and divorce, and oppressive family behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The political system of North and East Syria is still extremely new, and aims to tread a new political path which breaks down the division between society and government. It is doing this while facing severe security threats and the uncertainty of its future, which makes it even more difficult to draw firm conclusions about the viability of the project, let alone its applicability to different contexts.

The confederal political system is still in the phase of troubleshooting and overcoming challenges of capacity, skills and resources. There is also a huge amount of variation in how the system works due to the devolution of power and the large extent of autonomy that each region enjoys. Indeed, the political system would benefit from more opportunities in which different regions can compare and learn from each other's approaches.

Some key areas of the confederal system that need development or additional attention are:

Currently, not enough people actively participate in the commune system for it to fulfill its function as the 'democratic shield' of society.

The electoral system combines forms of direct versus representative democracy, and a party versus non-party system, in a way which undermines the strengths of each system. This means that groups opposed to the system are neither integrated into the system as other minorities are, nor are able to act as an effective opposition within formal political institutions.

Although huge progress has been made in terms of gender equality, many women in North and East Syria still experience severe deprivation of rights and lack of access to opportunities. Similarly, although the standard of living has improved and class inequalities have reduced, there is still a class system that perpetuates itself through education, business practices and social grouping.

In the field of ecology, the political system has set itself admirable goals which it has only gone a small way towards fulfilling, lacking the correct combination of institutional capacity, funding and expertise.

The political system lays a foundation for multi-ethnic and multi-religious inclusion, and a lot of work has been done to engage with the Tribes Council and local Arab community leaders. However, tensions between Kurd and Arab populations still exist and addressing this will be crucial to ensure that the system lives up to its principles.

Despite these challenges, the political system has achieved some notable successes:

General standards of living have improved for many people. There is access to subsidized bread and diesel through the commune system, and the salaries of many key professions have increased. People are empowered to open small businesses, and there is a lot of institutional and financial support for cooperatives.

Multi-lingual education is standard in Autonomous Administration schools, meaning students have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue. A strong focus on education has increased learning opportunities for countless children and adults.

Electricity can be irregular, but everyone has access to enough power and water to meet their basic needs. On many counts, the access to basic goods is better than in nearly all other areas of Syria.

Unlike other regions of Syria, there is not a systemic use of violence to intimidate and oppress people. Due process and basic human rights are respected, including for SDF captured ISIS fighters and their families.

The political system is building a profound and broad understanding of democracy which includes civil society and empowers people as political actors.

In a region in which women have experienced systemic disenfranchisement and oppression, women in North and East Syria are benefiting from a concrete transferal of power.

People from a diversity of ethnic and religious groups are moving past historical animosities and inequalities, and are able to exercise their cultural rights.

At a time of resurgence of pro-democracy protest movements around the world, the confederal system of North and East Syria offers some interesting propositions. Whether it is able to offer a model of global democratic confederalism remains to be seen, but for now it is clear that it at least poses some possibilities for a political system which has learned lessons from the past and looks towards the future.

"The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria is based on the principle of making the land, water, and resources publicly owned; it adopts ecological industry and social economy; it does not allow exploitation, monopoly, and the objectification of women; it shall realize health and social insurance for all individuals."

Article 11, Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, 2016