

Representation of Northeastern Syria in Political Transition

Perspectives of Local Communities in North and East
Syria on the Autonomous Administration and the Future
of the Region: Between Negotiation Demands and Internal
Challenges

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Justice for Life Organization

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INTRODUCTION

Post-war Syria faces complex political, security, and economic challenges that hinder efforts to rebuild the state and ensure stability. One of the most pressing issues in the current Syrian landscape is the ongoing negotiations between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, represented by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the new Damascus government led by Ahmad al-Shara'. These negotiations serve as a crucial test for the country's future, as the Autonomous Administration controls nearly a quarter of Syria's territory, which includes ethnic and religious diversity, as well as agricultural, underground, and water resources, along with borders with Turkey and Iraq.

The Autonomous Administration's demands, as broadly outlined, center on recognition as a political entity within a unified Syria and the implementation of an expanded decentralized governance model, which would enable it to manage the areas under its control while securing a share of natural resources such as oil and gas. Additionally, it calls for the integration of SDF forces into the Syrian army while maintaining its independent structure and local security role. Conversely, the Damascus government rejects these demands, arguing that any form of self-rule threatens the unity of the state and insists on fully integrating the SDF under the command of the Ministry of Defense after removing foreign PKK fighters, with centralized control over all national resources.¹

Despite both parties' stated commitment to peaceful negotiations and the positive atmosphere surrounding them thus far,² these talks take place within a complex internal and regional context. Domestically, the Autonomous Administration faces mounting challenges in securing support from the local population in the Arab-majority areas of Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hasakah, which have witnessed popular protests since the regime fell, supporting the new Syrian administration and demanding the withdrawal of SDF forces³, and even demonstrating in Damascus to call for the Shara' administration's full control over these provinces.⁴

This issue is not confined to Arab-majority regions, as political divisions within the Kurdish community also impact the negotiations. The Kurdish National Council and its affiliated parties

¹ Western mediation brings together the SDF and the Kurdish National Council, Enab Baladi website, January 27, 2025, available at: <https://rb.gv/timm7d>

² He welcomed me in Kurdish. “.. Mazloum Abdi recounts the details of his meeting with Ahmed Al-Shara’, Syria TV website, January 20, 2025, <https://www.syria.tv/299789>

³ Against the backdrop of demonstrations against it. "SDF" launches an arrest campaign in the Ghweiran neighborhood, Syria TV website, December 15, 2024, available at the link: <https://www.syria.tv/295573>

⁴ A sit-in in Umayyad Square in Damascus demanding the expulsion of the SDF from the eastern region, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed newspaper website, January 31, 2025, available at the link: <https://rb.gv/gpsw51>

advocate for a unified Kurdish delegation to negotiate with Damascus on Kurdish demands, a stance backed by the Kurdistan Regional Government, the United States, and France, who are sponsoring a parallel negotiation track between the National Council and the Autonomous Administration.⁵

At the regional level, the Autonomous Administration faces military and political pressure from Turkey, which regards the SDF as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Meanwhile, the PKK maintains a rigid stance, conditioning its withdrawal from Syria on the SDF securing a leadership role in the country.⁶ Furthermore, regional and international political shifts, including growing openness and rapprochement with the new Syrian administration, may, over time, bolster Damascus' negotiating position against the SDF. While the Autonomous Administration primarily depends on U.S. support and the protection of its forces in Syria, this backing remains subject to change based on the stance of the Trump administration in Washington,⁷ adding further challenges to the stability of its negotiating position.

This paper focuses on the internal dynamics influencing negotiations between the Autonomous Administration and the new Damascus government, shifting the emphasis from regional and international variables to the perspectives of local communities in the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration. It also aims to examine their political demands and negotiating positions with Damascus, assessing how much these communities accept the Autonomous Administration as a governing system that reflects their aspirations. Additionally, it explores their views on decentralization, the role of the SDF, and the equitable distribution of resources, ultimately providing a thorough understanding of the internal challenges impacting the future of negotiations.

⁵ Op. cit.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Where are the American forces distributed in Syria, Enab Baladi website, January 31, 2025, available at the link: <https://rb.gy/i7z7wq>

SIGNIFICANCE

This paper's significance lies in its examination of the relationship between the Autonomous Administration and the local communities it claims to represent. It evaluates the extent to which these communities accept its policies and negotiating stance with the new Syrian government. In doing so, it provides deeper insight into the local reality, assessing the dynamics of political and administrative representation and the alignment between the Autonomous Administration's vision and the aspirations of the local population.

OBJECTIVES

This paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. Assess the compatibility of the Autonomous Administration's demands with the aspirations of the region's ethnic, religious, and political communities.
2. Understand the local population's views and concerns about the new Syrian government.
3. Assess the population's level of acceptance for various decentralization models, both administrative and expanded.
4. Evaluate public opinion on integrating the Syrian Democratic Forces into the Syrian army and its implications for the local community security.
5. Examine concerns about the potential military confrontation with the new Syrian administration, Turkish threats, and the possible withdrawal of U.S. forces.
6. Explore the perspectives of local communities within the Autonomous Administration's territories to ensure fair and inclusive representation in the negotiation framework between the Autonomous Administration and the new Syrian government.

DATA SOURCES

To achieve the objectives of this paper, two types of data were utilized:

Primary Data: These consisted of the results from seven focus group discussions (FGDs) held during December 2024 and January 2025 in areas governed by the Autonomous Administration, specifically Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Hasakah, and Qamishli. Each FGD included ten participants representing the local community (notables and tribal leaders), civil society representatives (local organizations active in the region), political activists, and representatives from unions and political parties involved in the area. Gender representation was considered in each session.

Secondary Sources: These included reports and media materials that have analyzed the negotiations between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the new Damascus government, emphasizing key negotiation points and the internal and external factors affecting the negotiation process.

FINDINGS

Through the in-depth discussions conducted in the focus groups, the following findings were obtained:

Perceptions and Concerns Regarding the New Central Authority in Damascus

Hasakah

- Participants expressed concerns that the new authority might replicate the former regime's policies of marginalization and exclusion, particularly affecting ethnic and religious communities in northern and eastern Syria.
- Concerns were raised regarding the lack of guarantees to protect cultural diversity in the region, as well as the effects of regional interventions, especially from Turkey.
- Some participants noted that the current central authority lacks a comprehensive vision that adequately represents all components of society.

Deir ez-Zor

- Participants generally viewed new government positively; the new government was seen as a result of the joy surrounding the fall of the former regime. However, concerns persisted about the ongoing marginalization of the governorate, highlighting a long history of central governments neglecting the eastern regions in Damascus.
- Concerns arose about direct foreign interference, particularly from Turkey, along with worries that regional power dynamics could affect the new authority's policies.
- Some participants called for mechanisms to ensure the participation of the eastern regions in national-level decision-making.

Raqqa

- Participants expressed a relatively more optimistic stance toward the central authority, highlighting positive steps such as improved security and the restoration of some services.

- However, concerns lingered about the possible marginalization of resource-producing regions and worries that the new authority might eventually mirror a rebranded version of the old regime.

Qamishli

- Participants discussed concerns that the new authority might simply replace the previous one while maintaining the same centralized and sectarian characteristics.
- Questions were raised about the new authority's ability to achieve justice for all communities, particularly given the complexities of the transitional phase.

Summary

All participants shared concerns about the return of centralization, inadequate political representation, and economic marginalization, emphasizing the need to ensure justice for all regions. While Raqqa expressed more optimism about the steps taken by the central authority compared to Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor, Qamishli focused on the sectarian dimension linked to the new authority's religious background.

Evaluation of the Autonomous Administration's Performance Over Recent Years

Hasakah

- Participants praised the Autonomous Administration for maintaining security and stability in the absence of a strong central authority.
- However, they criticized its performance in service sectors such as health and education, highlighting weaknesses in resource and infrastructure management.
- Concerns were raised about a lack of transparency in economic and political decision-making.

Deir ez-Zor

- Criticism was more severe, with participants focusing on discrimination in resource distribution across areas under the Autonomous Administration's control.
- They perceived the Autonomous Administration as a de facto authority serving the interests of a specific group while excluding tribes and local communities.

Raqqa

- Participants emphasized poor service performance, particularly in reconstructing conflict-affected areas.
- Concerns were raised about partisan dominance over the Autonomous Administration, which was seen as a key factor in the underrepresentation of the Arab component.

Qamishli

- Participants had a relatively positive view of the Autonomous Administration, acknowledging its role in separating religion from politics and promoting cultural diversity.
- However, they criticized administrative inefficiencies in resource management and stressed the need for infrastructure improvements.

Summary

Poor service delivery and inequitable resource distribution were common criticisms across all regions. Hasakah and Qamishli recognized the Autonomous Administration's role in maintaining security, while Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa focused on sharp criticism of partisan dominance.

Position on Negotiations with the Damascus Government Under the Autonomous Administration or Independently

Hasakah

- Most participants favored negotiations under the umbrella of the Autonomous Administration, viewing it as the only entity capable of representing the region and safeguarding the rights of all components, provided that reforms ensure broader participation of Arabs and Syrians.
- Others had reservations about the Autonomous Administration's role but stressed that negotiating independently as groups or local communities could weaken the region's position in dealings with the central government.

Deir ez-Zor

- The vast majority rejected negotiations under the Autonomous Administration, arguing that it does not represent the Arab component or serve the interests of Deir ez-Zor's residents.
- Participants advocated for independent negotiations by groups and local communities, believing that this approach would allow Arab tribes to articulate their demands without being influenced by the Autonomous Administration's policies, which they viewed as biased toward one group.

Raqqa

- Participants largely aligned with Deir ez-Zor's stance, favoring independent negotiations over those under the Autonomous Administration, citing the lack of fair representation for the Arab component.
- Some warned that the Autonomous Administration could lose legitimacy if it continued to ignore local communities' demands, making independent negotiation a more viable option to ensure residents' voices are heard.

Qamishli

- Participants leaned toward negotiating under the Autonomous Administration, provided that it genuinely represented all components, particularly Arabs and Christians.

- They argued that despite its shortcomings, the Autonomous Administration possessed the organizational and political experience needed for negotiations with Damascus, whereas local groups and tribes might be more vulnerable to pressure and internal divisions.

Summary

A clear division emerges between the Arab-majority areas (Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa), which prefer independent negotiations to secure better representation of their interests, and the more diverse areas (Hasakah and Qamishli), which view the Autonomous Administration as a framework for negotiations, provided that fundamental reforms are implemented.

Decentralization and the Future of Governance in Syria

Hasakah

- Participants supported expanded decentralization, considering it the best solution to guarantee the rights of all components within a strong constitutional framework.
- The need for international oversight was emphasized to prevent the misuse of decentralized power by specific parties or entities.

Deir ez-Zor

- Participants rejected the expanded decentralization model, arguing that it could lead to Syria's fragmentation.
- They favored a centralized system with comprehensive reforms to ensure the participation of all regions in decision-making.

Raqqa

- Participants were divided between supporting administrative decentralization as a minimum and rejecting any system perceived as a threat to Syria's unity.
- Concerns were raised that decentralization might escalate conflicts among different components.

Qamishli

- Participants supported a federal model, provided international guarantees, and clear legal frameworks backed it.
- They viewed federalism as a potential solution to ensure political and social stability.

Summary

Positions on decentralization varied. Hasakah and Qamishli supported it as a means to protect the rights of different components, while Deir ez-Zor rejected it, fearing national division. Raqqa had mixed opinions, with some supporting administrative decentralization and others expressing concerns about its potential to heighten conflicts.

Fair Distribution of Resources and Wealth: The Experience of the Autonomous Administration and Future Aspirations

Hasakah

- Participants were reserved about the Autonomous Administration's ability to distribute resources fairly. While some positive initiatives were acknowledged, concerns were raised about a lack of transparency and weak distribution mechanisms. Criticism focused on disparities in services and infrastructure between rural areas and urban centers.
- Broad decentralization was seen as a potential solution, provided that transparent oversight mechanisms and constitutional laws ensured equitable resource distribution. Some emphasized the need for a central authority to prevent power abuse in local administrations.

Deir ez-Zor

- Participants sharply criticized the Autonomous Administration, arguing that it had failed to distribute resources fairly, particularly in resource-rich areas like Deir ez-Zor.

- They claimed that resources were disproportionately allocated to other regions, perpetuating economic marginalization.
- Broad decentralization was rejected, as participants feared it would allow dominant groups to control resources without ensuring fair distribution to poorer areas. Instead, they called for a strong central administration with reforms to guarantee equity.

Raqqa

- Dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the Autonomous Administration's resource management, with concerns about the absence of clear and transparent allocation mechanisms. Participants noted that Raqqa lacked services and infrastructure despite its resource wealth.
- Views on expanded decentralization were divided: some supported it with strict oversight measures, while others opposed it, fearing it could widen disparities between wealthy and impoverished regions.

Qamishli

- Participants held a more balanced view, acknowledging that while the Autonomous Administration had made efforts toward fair resource distribution, its administrative planning remained weak. They suggested improving transparency and increasing local community involvement in resource allocation.
- Expanded decentralization received greater support to ensure fairness, provided a clear constitution and effective oversight mechanisms backed it. Federalism was seen as a potential way to balance regional interests if managed transparently and equitably.

Summary

Across all regions, participants agreed that the Autonomous Administration struggled to ensure fair resource distribution, though the degree of criticism varied. Hasakah and Qamishli conditionally accepted expanded decentralization as a means to enhance fairness, while Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa rejected the model, advocating for a centralized system with reforms as the most reliable way to achieve equitable resource distribution.

The Stance on SDF Forces and the Call from the Autonomous Administration for Their Inclusion in the Ministry of Defense Within a Decentralized Government System

Hasakah

- Participants expressed a relatively positive view of the SDF's role, considering it a factor of security stability, particularly in countering ISIS and managing regional tensions. However, some criticized its approach toward the local population, particularly regarding forced recruitment and the exclusion of local communities from security decision-making.
- They emphasized the need for mixed local forces representing all components, integrated within a decentralized system to maintain local security, with national oversight mechanisms to ensure inclusivity and prevent partisan control.

Deir ez-Zor

- Criticism of the SDF was sharp, with participants arguing that it lacks legitimacy in their areas due to perceived discriminatory policies, including forced recruitment and partisan leadership. Some pointed to human rights violations during security operations, which heightened tensions with local communities.
- There was broad agreement on the need for independent local forces managed by tribes and local communities to ensure security under a decentralized system. The SDF was deemed unqualified for inclusion in this system due to its lack of popular acceptance in Deir ez-Zor.

Raqqa

- Participants shared views similar to those in Deir ez-Zor, expressing dissatisfaction with the SDF's performance and highlighting its perceived bias toward a specific group at the expense of the Arab population.

- They called for the formation of independent local forces representing the region's people to manage security in a decentralized system, under general government oversight to maintain balance.

Qamishli

- Participants expressed a relatively positive stance toward the SDF, acknowledging its crucial role in protecting the region from ISIS and regional threats, particularly from Turkey. However, they emphasized the need to improve its relationship with Arab and Syriac communities to enhance broader acceptance.
- They supported the presence of mixed local forces in a decentralized system, while allowing the SDF to remain part of this structure, provided it is restructured to ensure inclusivity and prevent the dominance of any single group.

Summary

Perspectives on the SDF's performance varied by region. Hasakah and Qamishli viewed it positively in terms of security, whereas Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa were highly critical, citing discriminatory policies. There was consensus on the necessity of mixed local forces for maintaining security in a decentralized system, though opinions differed on the role of the SDF. Hasakah and Qamishli supported its inclusion, contingent on reforms, while Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa rejected its involvement, advocating for fully independent local forces.

Stance on the Potential for Armed Conflict Between the Damascus Government and the SDF

Hasakah

- Participants opposed armed confrontation, warning that escalation would destabilize the region and create a security vacuum exploitable by Turkey or terrorist groups. They stressed that dialogue was the best solution and called for international intervention to preserve the security and stability achieved by the Autonomous Administration.

Deir ez-Zor

- Participants expressed deep concern that their areas, given their proximity to conflict zones, would suffer the most in the event of a confrontation. They strongly opposed military escalation, favoring a political solution to prevent worsening poverty and instability.

Raqqa

- The stance was similar to Deir ez-Zor, with participants strongly rejecting armed confrontation, emphasizing its negative impact on reconstruction efforts and the population's suffering. They urged peaceful solutions to prevent displacement and chaos.

Qamishli

- While participants rejected confrontation, they noted that Kurdish communities would support the SDF if conflict became inevitable. They emphasized that dialogue with Damascus remained the preferred option and called for international intervention to pressure all parties to avoid escalation.

Summary

All regions opposed an armed confrontation between the SDF and the Damascus government, viewing it as disastrous for civilians. Concerns were particularly strong in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa due to their vulnerability to direct repercussions. Hasakah and Qamishli emphasized dialogue as the only viable alternative, with Qamishli expressing readiness to support the SDF if needed to defend security and political gains.

Aspirations and Recommendations by Region

Hasakah

- Participants favored reforming rather than rejecting the Autonomous Administration, emphasizing the need for greater transparency in managing resources and services. They called for urgent improvements in health and education while ensuring genuine

representation of Arab and Syriac communities within the administration's institutions. They expressed aspirations for sustainable security and stability through meaningful reforms that build trust in institutions and a clear call for international recognition of the Autonomous Administration as part of the political solution in Syria.

Deir ez-Zor

- The stance in Deir ez-Zor was more critical, as participants explicitly rejected the continuation of the Autonomous Administration in its current form. Many believed it was too late for reforms, arguing that the administration had failed to provide an inclusive and fair governance model, especially for Arab and tribal communities. They criticized exclusionary policies and the dominance of party leadership, which they viewed as exacerbating marginalization. Participants called for abolishing the Autonomous Administration model and establishing a new local administration that reflects the aspirations of Deir ez-Zor's population, with direct local control over resources, particularly oil and gas.

Raqqa

- Like Deir ez-Zor, participants in Raqqa rejected the continuation of the Autonomous Administration, arguing that it had lost legitimacy due to policies seen as marginalizing the Arab community. They believed reforms would be inadequate to change its current image and called for a new administration led by local leaders, focused on reconstruction and job creation for young people. Economic development and infrastructure were emphasized as priorities, but participants felt the Autonomous Administration was no longer able to meet these needs.

Qamishli

- The stance in Qamishli was less severe than in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa. Participants expressed conditional support for the Autonomous Administration, emphasizing the need for significant reforms to improve representation for all components within its institutions. They called for greater political balance among various groups and increased transparency in resource and service management transparency. Ensuring security and stability remained a primary concern, along with aspirations for international recognition to enhance the administration's negotiating position with Damascus.

CONCLUSION

The discussions revealed that, despite significant differences in political and security perspectives, communities in Autonomous Administration-controlled areas share fundamental concerns about the region's future. A consensus emerged on the need for a decentralized system that ensures equitable distribution of power and wealth while allowing each region to manage its own affairs. However, fears of continued marginalization under a centralized system remained widespread.

These aspirations were met with strong disagreements regarding the Autonomous Administration and the SDF. Participants in Hasakah and Qamishli believed the Autonomous Administration could be reformed if transparency improved and all groups were fairly represented. In contrast, those in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa were more critical, arguing that it had failed to achieve justice and balance. They viewed it as being unfairly managed in favor of one group and considered it beyond reform under its current structure.

This divide also extended to views on expanded decentralization, particularly concerning the potential continuation of the Autonomous Administration and the SDF under an agreement with Damascus. Some believed a decentralized system could introduce legal and oversight mechanisms to prevent abuse of power, while others feared it would merely re-legitimize the current administration, entrenching partisan control and undermining fair representation.

These findings highlight the major challenges in achieving political consensus in northern and eastern Syria, especially as the Autonomous Administration and the SDF continue negotiations on behalf of the region. The viability of a sustainable decentralized system, as envisioned by the Autonomous Administration, depends on significant structural reforms in both its political and military frameworks, particularly regarding representation and resource management. However, the future of such reforms remains uncertain, leaving the region's fate contingent on several key questions:

- Can the Autonomous Administration implement meaningful reforms to enhance its legitimacy among all components, or will internal challenges intensify?
- To what extent is Damascus willing to accept a decentralized system that enables genuine participation rather than replicating centralized authority?

- How can a fair distribution of resources and power be ensured, preventing dominance by any single party, whether the Autonomous Administration or the Syrian government?
- If negotiations fail, will the region be faced with a new armed conflict, and how will internal divisions affect potential confrontations?
- Will international and regional agreements provide enough time for reform and rebuilding trust? Or will swift political changes compel the Autonomous Administration to retreat both geographically and politically to areas with a high Kurdish population demands?

Unresolved questions, among others, make the future of negotiations and governance in northern and eastern Syria uncertain. Internal and regional pressures continue to influence the prospects for reform or further instability.