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Local Governance in Northeast Syria

Past Experiences and Future Perceptions

A stylized map of Northeast Syria, outlined in black and filled with a light blue color. The map shows the irregular borders of the region, including the Mediterranean coast to the north and the Euphrates river to the east.

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The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions
of the Justice for Life organization

The Justice for Life is a Syrian non-governmental and non-profit organization that has been active in northeastern Syria since 2015. It has been registered in Germany since 2019 and in France since 2023. JFL's mission is to collaboratively promote human rights, dialogue, and freedoms in Syria through documentation, advocacy, access efforts, and capacity building for communities and organizations. JFL operates on two strategic tracks, which are reviewed and adjusted every three years. These tracks focus on enhancing justice and defending human rights in Syria and advocating for the right of Syrians to participate in political and civil life.

Introduction

On December 16, 2024, eight days after Bashar al-Assad fled and his regime collapsed amid the expansion of the "Deterrence of Aggression" operation led by opposition factions under the leadership of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria announced the launch of what it termed the "Syrian Dialogue Initiative." This initiative underscored the importance of cooperation between the Democratic Autonomous Administration and the Political Administration in Damascus (the recognized designation for the new authorities in Damascus at that time) in building a new Syria.

In the weeks that followed, official statements and media leaks from both sides confirmed that negotiations were underway. These developments reflected a mutual desire to reach a peaceful agreement and avoid a military resolution. They aligned with public opinion assessments and popular movements across northeastern Syria and other Syrian regions.

The negotiation process, however, faces numerous internal, regional, and international challenges, with several complex issues emerging as focal points. Chief among these are the military integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the newly established Syrian army, the management of natural resources—including oil fields—and the political and administrative representation of the region's population in the negotiation process or any potential agreement.

These matters are closely linked to broader discussions on governance structures and the distribution of administrative powers, taking into account the region's historical context and demographic composition, as well as the governance experience of the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria in recent years. The Autonomous Administration has put forward a governance model based on local autonomy and diversity management mechanisms, which diverges from the governance frameworks previously implemented in Syria, both during and before the conflict. This model plays a pivotal role in shaping the progress of negotiations regarding the region's military, civil, and administrative structures, as well as its level of coordination or integration with the corresponding Syrian national institutions.

This paper presents the perceptions and ideas of a group of stakeholders involved in public affairs in Qamishli, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor regarding the optimal model for local governance in these areas. It also considers the priorities and potential mechanisms for its implementation, offering a proposed conception of this model along with the relevant determinants and considerations.

This paper is part of Justice for Life's broader efforts to enrich public debates and provide a knowledge-based and technical foundation for advocacy efforts. The objective is to influence policymakers in a manner that fosters political and civic participation.

Methodology

This paper primarily draws on input gathered through focus group discussions with key figures from public affairs actors in Raqqa, Qamishli, and Deir Ezzor, aimed at addressing the following overarching question:

What is the most suitable local governance model for northeastern Syria following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime? What mechanisms can ensure local residents' participation in managing their affairs and the region's resources?

The three sessions aimed to explore potential models of local governance in northeastern Syria following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime. This involved examining the relationship between the region, its governance structures, and the central administration in Damascus. The discussions also aimed to gather the perspectives of local stakeholders from various parts of northeastern Syria on the most suitable approaches that ensure residents' rights, encourage their active participation in managing local issues, and facilitate the fair distribution of regional resources in a way that honors the region's unique characteristics.

The discussions during these sessions were based on several core principles and assumptions, namely:

- The principle of preserving the unity of Syria as a single state.
- The distinctiveness of northeast Syria sets it apart from the rest of the country due to historical and contextual factors under Assad's rule, developments in the years following the 2011 revolution, and the region's ethnic, religious, and tribal diversity.
- The importance of ensuring effective community participation in northeastern Syria in managing local affairs and contributing to decision-making and policy formulation relevant to the region.

Additional Methodological Notes

Three sessions, each with 8 participants, were conducted in Qamishli, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor between January 19 and 28, 2025. Key community leaders, civil society representatives, and members of local administration structures from the three regions attended the sessions.

The sessions took place in the second half of January, before the National Dialogue Conference in Damascus on February 24-25, 2025, and before the "victory conference" held in Damascus on January 29, at which Ahmad al-Sharaa was declared president of Syria.

In total, the three sessions involved 24 participants, with 8 participants from each region, including 11 women. While this represents a small and non-representative sample, it is important to note that the participants are active figures in public affairs, and their perspectives may not necessarily reflect the broader views of society.

The sessions included representatives from Qamishli, the Raqqa governorate, and various areas of Deir Ezzor that are under the control of the Autonomous Administration. However, they did not include representatives from parts of Deir Ezzor controlled by the Damascus government or from areas governed by the Autonomous Administration in the Aleppo governorate. In this paper, the term "Northeast Syria" refers to the areas covered by these sessions.

Findings of the Focus Group Discussions

Additional Methodological Notes

Amid the rapid developments that followed the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, the relationship between the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria and the rest of Syria—particularly with the new authorities and the caretaker government in Damascus—emerges as a central issue in the transition to the post-Assad phase. Most participants from the three regions agree that the future of this relationship remains uncertain and tense, although there are notable differences in how the situation is analyzed and perceived.

- The participants in Qamishli agreed that decentralization is the only appropriate model for the region and the best guarantee for the rights of its residents. In contrast, participants from Deir Ezzor argued that centralization is the only viable solution, citing the challenges of implementing decentralization and viewing centralization as the safeguard against marginalization or division. They emphasized the need to build a strong unified state and avoid failures similar to the Iraqi model, as one participant put it. In Raqqa, participants did not favor any particular model but instead focused on dialogue and negotiation as the means to explore the most suitable model that would ensure a unified Syria, accommodate diversity across the country, and protect the rights of all Syrians.
- The sessions also reflected the general sentiment among participants from all regions about the importance of continuing the negotiation process, despite recognizing the tensions and challenges that come with it. Participants highlighted the influence of overlapping regional and international interests, which directly affect the negotiation process and, consequently, its outcomes. Additionally, some participants in the Raqqa and Deir Ezzor sessions expressed concerns about representation in the negotiations, noting that the discussions primarily involve de facto authorities and fail to adequately represent the interests of the population or the various groups within it. Furthermore, some participants emphasized the complexity and potential collapse of the negotiation process due to the deep polarization and stark differences between the Autonomous Administration and the caretaker government in Damascus. For instance, a participant in the Qamishli session raised concerns about ideological differences, fearing the "extremist mentality" of the new authorities, dictatorial tendencies, and the potential rollback of women's political participation gains achieved under the Autonomous Administration.

- A consensus emerged among participants from all regions regarding their hopes for Syria's future, its priorities, and key outlines. Most participants emphasized the importance of Syria's unity as a state, the need for civil peace and economic development, and the creation of a state of citizenship based on a constitution and laws that protect the rights and duties of all Syrian citizens, regardless of their race, sect, or region. The participants agreed that initiating a Syrian-Syrian national dialogue process is the only way to achieve fair representation of all regions' interests, taking into account local specificities and safeguarding the rights of minorities and different social groups. However, some participants cautioned against "rushing" or adopting quotas as the foundation for representation in the national dialogue processes.

Community Engagement and Past Experiences in the Region

The second theme of the dialogue sessions centered on examining the past experiences and history of the northeastern Syrian region to identify both positive practices and policies, as well as those to be avoided, in order to achieve the region's aspirations. Specifically, participants discussed potential guarantees to prevent the marginalization policies the region suffered under decades of Assad regime rule. Nearly all participants concurred that this period, its causes, and the mechanisms to ensure it does not happen again should be thoroughly analyzed.

In contrast, participants also analyzed the experience of the Autonomous Administration in recent years, revealing significant differences between the regions. While participants from Raqqa and Qamishli acknowledged that some positive practices or models could be examined and employed in discussions about local governance mechanisms in Syria, participants from Deir Ezzor offered a strongly negative assessment of this experience. They regarded the Autonomous Administration's governance as a failed experiment that has led to increased marginalization, corruption, and nepotism in the region.

The Assad Regime Centralized North-eastern Syria

- Some participants attributed the marginalization faced by the three governorates of the Syrian Jazira during the rule of both Assad father and son to economic and development policies. A participant from Qamishli pointed out that the region's classification as a "developing region" and its neglect in key areas such as education and basic services were among the most significant policies that perpetuated marginalization and deprived residents of their rights. Another participant emphasized economic policies and tax systems that weakened the agricultural sector and further impoverished the region.

- Many participants also highlighted the absence of effective mechanisms for community participation, the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of the central authority, and the lack of authority for local administrations as additional factors contributing to the policies of marginalization.
- Consequently, most participants from all three regions agree that local development policies, which consider the region's diversity and provide space for broad community participation in decision-making—especially in relation to resource management—will be crucial in preventing the recurrence of marginalization policies.

The Assad Regime Centralized North-eastern Syria

- -Regarding the experience of the Autonomous Administration, participants from Qamishli and Raqqa highlighted several positive aspects, including the role of the Autonomous Administration and its military arm (SDF) in combating the Islamic State and achieving relatively good levels of safety and stability. Participants from both sessions also noted acceptable performance levels and institutional organization, along with a degree of freedom for civil society, freedom of expression, and women's rights, which they considered an improvement compared to other regions of Syria in recent years. One participant from Qamishli emphasized the management of cultural and ethnic diversity as a strength of the system.
- -However, participants in both the Raqqa and Qamishli sessions also pointed to several negative experiences, such as controversial education policies, insufficient attention to public services and social development, weak competencies, and the lack of effective policies to attract qualified personnel. They also criticized the mechanisms for appointing local councils, implementing advisors, and the absence of elections. One participant from Raqqa specifically mentioned that some policies, like the principle of co-chairing, had led to confusion and ineffectiveness in practice.
- -In Deir Ezzor, participants expressed a decidedly negative view of the Autonomous Administration experience, particularly in terms of sectoral policies related to education, health, and public services. They also criticized the reduction of key figures and qualified individuals in favor of advisors (cadres) and tribal quotas. Some participants in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa stated that the Autonomous Administration's approach to dealing with tribes had reinforced quotas and nepotism rather than leveraging tribes as cross-regional societal forces capable of mobilizing and enhancing community participation.

Local Governance Priorities for North and East Syria

- In the third theme of the sessions, participants discussed the priorities for the next phase, building on the discussions from the previous themes and reviewing the different roles of various actors. Despite the significant differences between the three regions regarding their views on the relationship between northeastern Syria and the central government and the analysis of past experiences, there was a noticeable consensus on the key priorities and some of the roles designated for the next phase.
- Participants in all three sessions emphasized the priority of continuing negotiation and dialogue while avoiding any escalation into military confrontations. Some participants highlighted the need to halt military operations and initiate the process of holding those responsible for the bloodshed accountable.
- On the other hand, most participants agreed that fair and equal representation for all components and groups of society in the dialogue and negotiation processes is important. They stressed the need to strengthen local participation mechanisms in decision-making at the national level, including local dialogues to select competent representatives from the regions. They also emphasized the principle of relying on technocrats and bringing in expertise. Additionally, some participants proposed broader engagement with communities through studies, surveys, or polls to better gauge public opinion.
- A general tendency among participants from different regions was to consider the regions' diverse demographic and social characteristics, albeit with caution toward the principle of quotas. Some participants argued against explicitly mentioning identity groups in laws, the constitution, or other frameworks, suggesting instead that rights for all Syrians, regardless of their affiliations, should be preserved through legal provisions.
- Participants from all sessions also agreed that strengthening local participation and national dialogue is necessary to promote a political transition process and the establishment of a citizen-state based on laws and a constitution that protects the rights of all citizens.
- Some participants in the three sessions believed that civil society plays a crucial role in achieving local representation and participation. This role encompasses monitoring the performance of authorities, promoting social and political awareness, employing various tools for community organization and representation, and ensuring that the voices of local communities reach representatives in political processes or any local or national administrative bodies.
- A number of participants also emphasized the role of the media and civil society organizations in raising awareness, combating hate speech and incitement, and promoting a culture of dialogue and coexistence.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the three sessions held to discuss the possibilities and the most appropriate model for managing the northeastern areas of Syria and their relationship with the central government in Damascus reveal the complexity of internal and external influencing factors, as well as the lack of agreement or consensus among civil actors in these areas on a unified vision. The views varied widely, ranging from advocacy for administrative decentralization, as proposed by the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria—an idea most prominently supported in Qamishli—to calls for rejecting decentralization in favor of full integration with the Damascus government within a single centralized state, a viewpoint that prevailed during discussions in Deir Ezzor. Between these two positions, various regions expressed preferences for hybrid models, concepts of local governance, or expanded administrative decentralization.

Interestingly, despite some regions and participants rejecting decentralization, certain ideas or proposals were presented that appeared to align with this principle. For instance, there were calls for the creation of elected local councils with significant powers to encourage participation at the national level. These councils would be supported by a legal framework regulating the relationship between the central government and the regions, ensuring respect for local diversity while promoting a unified national vision.

On the other hand, the sessions revealed a strong consensus on the necessity to activate channels for community participation and to strengthen mechanisms for the effective representation of various components and segments of society, including ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups, as well as social structures such as tribes and non-identity groups like intellectuals and technocrats. The discussions also highlighted the critical role of civil society and both civil political and non-political actors in achieving these mechanisms by leveraging technical expertise, creating tools to enhance participation, addressing issues of representation and legitimacy, and promoting knowledge, community empowerment, and civil peace. All these elements are deemed essential for initiating a Syrian national dialogue that would lead to a state governed by law and freedoms, ensuring the rights of all citizens regardless of their affiliations or orientations.

A Proposed Model for the Issue of Local Governance

Therefore, to address the central question posed in this paper, the most suitable model for managing the regions of northern Syria is one that draws upon multiple points of convergence among various groups and areas while recognizing the differences in experiences and perceptions. An examination of the region's recent history and the different governance models it has experienced leads to the conclusion that none of these models should be replicated in their current form. Instead, a hybrid model should be developed, ensuring that the region's residents have the right and capability to participate effectively in decision-making processes related to their lives and region. This can be accomplished by securing their rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and political representation within a constitutional framework grounded in citizenship and equality for all Syrians.

Therefore, this model should develop within these parameters, informed by extensive and ongoing local and national dialogues. It must include a broad spectrum of groups and stakeholders, such as civil society organizations, political movements, community and religious leaders, business owners, and individuals with technical skills and expertise. This can be achieved by harnessing the richness and diversity of civil actors in the region, utilizing the strengths of civil society, and drawing on the accumulated knowledge in areas like community organization, knowledge creation, political and human rights empowerment, media mobilization, and advocacy throughout northeast Syria and the country as a whole.



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