



# BEYOND THE FRONTLINES

The building of the democratic  
system in North and East Syria



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# GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

## Key terms pertaining to the political system

Municipality – Şaredarî  
 Council/Assembly - Meclîs  
 Self-defense - Xwe parastin  
 Education - Perwerde  
 Conflict resolution and consensus building - Lihevkirin  
 Democratic Nation - Netewa Demokratîk  
 Office – Nivîsgeh  
 Commission – Deste  
 Committee - Komîte  
 Social Contract – Peymana Civakî

## The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria - Rêveberiya Xweser a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê

Commune - Komîn  
 Neighborhood - Tax  
 Subdistrict - Bajarok  
 District - Navçe  
 Canton - Kanton  
 Region - Hêrem  
 The General Council - Meclîsa Giştî  
 The Executive Council - Meclîsa Cîbicîkar  
 The Justice Council - Meclîsa Edalet, Meclîsa Dadê

## Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) - Meclîsa Sûriya Demokratîk (MSD)

Executive Council - Meclîsa Cîbicîkar  
 Political Council - Meclîsa Siyasî  
 General Conference – Konferansa Giştî

## TEV-DEM (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk) - Movement for a Democratic Society

### Women's movement – Tevgera Jin

Star (Ishtar) Union - Yêkitiya Star  
 Star (Ishtar) Congress - Kongreya Star  
 Women's Economy - Aboriya Jin  
 Women's House - Mala Jin

**Political parties:**

Kurdish National Council - ENKS (Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê)  
Democratic Union Party - PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratîk)  
Future Syria Party - Partiya Sûriyê ya Pêşerojê

**Military and Self Defense:**

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces – Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk (HSD)  
People's Defense Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG)  
Women's Defense Units – Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (YPJ)  
Civil Defense Forces – Hêzên Parastina Civakî (HPC)  
Civil Defense Forces (women's division) – Hêzên Parastina Civakî - Jin (HPC Jin)  
Local Military Councils - Meclîsên Leşkerî  
Internal Security Forces - Asayîş  
Self Defense Duty - Erka Xwe Parastin  
ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) – Daîş

## INTRODUCTION

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The Turkish invasion of Syria on 9 October 2019 started a new chapter in the Syrian Civil War and opened new arenas for the political power plays of regional and global powers. As the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and their proxy militias have advanced across the border, supported by air strikes and artillery, it has become more urgent to answer the question: “what is at stake in North and East Syria?” International media attention directed towards North and East Syria highlighted the USA’s ‘betrayal’ of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the tragic civilian cost of the invasion. Yet in order to fully understand the Turkish assault on North and East Syria, it is necessary to understand the unique social and political system that the Syrian Democratic Forces are fighting to protect.

The civil institutions which make up this social and political system – with which the SDF are aligned – seek to offer a new political direction for the Middle East by presenting a model of social organization which describes itself as revolutionary. The political project, which organizes through the system of ‘confederal democratic autonomy’, grew initially out of the Kurdish rights movement within the Kurdish-majority regions of Northern Syria – commonly known as Rojava. However, it has since expanded to include Arab majority regions as these areas were liberated from ISIS by the SDF. This political project has built the foundations of a multi-ethnic democratic society based on gender equality, ecological regeneration and locally devolved power. Thousands of international and Syrian activists, researchers and professionals have come to the region to support and join the work of its institutions. While still in its early years and open to valid criticism for a number of inconsistencies and shortcomings, the ‘Rojava Revolution’ has gone some way towards demonstrating the viability of its structures.

This report outlines the political and social structures of the region of North and East Syria, as well as the social and historical context which shapes these structures. We explain the development of the institutions since the development of autonomy in 2012, as well as the expansion and adaptation of these institutions following the liberation of regions formerly under ISIS control from 2016 to 2019. Although we highlight gaps between theory and practice, the aim of this report is not to evaluate whether the political project in North and East Syria has been a ‘success,’ but to describe the situation as it stands and what it aims to be.

Some parallels can be drawn with the caracoles system of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, and smaller scale projects like the FEJUVE municipal confederalist project in El Alto, Bolivia. However, in many ways the system in North and East Syria ventures into uncharted political territory. Having already survived for longer and achieved more than many observers expected, its future trajectory cannot be predicted. Therefore, an analysis of the political system must necessarily stray into the territory of ideology and history in order to bring the system to life for those seeking to understand it.

The Turkish invasion has threatened the survival of the project, particularly in the occupied regions of Tel Abyad (Gire Spi), Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn) and surrounding countryside, as well as in the region of Afrin, which has been occupied by Turkish-backed forces since 2018.

**“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**

However, despite over-excitabile media coverage to the contrary then the political and social institutions remain intact, functioning and autonomous throughout the remainder of North and East Syria. Local interviewees have stressed their will to continue the work of

**“The Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria is based on the principle of making the land, water, and resources publicly owned; it adopts ecological industry and societal 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**

building the political system even as they continue to defend themselves against Turkish attacks. At the time of publication - two months after the invasion started - there are signs that although shaken and stretched, the local institutions and people will continue to develop the political project that has taken root in North and East Syria.

## Methodology and remit of the report

### Authors

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

### Aims

The RIC was in the process of conducting long term-research on the political system of North and East Syria when the Turkish invasion began. While the RIC initially put the writing of this report on hold in order to cover the security and humanitarian situation, it soon became clear that the political system underpinning the military forces of the SDF (including its YPG and YPJ components) was not well understood by those writing or making policy decisions about the conflict and its humanitarian impact. Rather than being described as the military force of a civil administration, the SDF were described as the governing force of the territory – which is not the case in either theory or practice. Furthermore, much information about the civil administration is either outdated, superficial or inaccurate. Consequently, the RIC decided to finalize this report, as we believe that it is important that the system of democratic governance of North and East Syria is understandable to an external audience.

## Methodology and Scope

The report is based on over 50 interviews with people involved in political organizing. The bulk of these interviews are with representatives of the political structures, civil society organizations and members of civil 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 political, administrative and civil society institutions. More broadly, all members of the RIC live and work in North and East Syria, some for several months or years, and some for their whole lives. Thus, the report draws on a range of first hand experiences and countless conversations with people who are experiencing life within the evolving system of governance. Some inconsistencies inevitably resulted: while trying to highlight the areas which lack clarity, we acknowledge that there may be errors in the report as a result of this.

One aspect of research that remains incomplete is an investigation of how the political system is being applied in the regions most recently liberated from ISIS: Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir ez Zor. The initial vision for this report included a close examination of the extent to which the Arab-majority regions are accepting and participating in the political system, and observations of the ways in which it has been adapted to the specific context of each region. The RIC was able to conduct several interviews with representatives of the political structures and civil society in Manbij and Raqqa, but research in Tabqa and Deir ez Zor has been impossible due to the war and the impact of the degenerating security situation on our travel and research. The RIC also wanted to conduct more interviews with political parties not participating in the Syrian Democratic Council and analyze their criticisms of the system. Again, the impact of the war and lack of response from potential interviewees meant that this was not possible, but will hopefully be the subject of future research. Nonetheless, on the basis of both interviews and our own observations, we draw out some of the main criticisms of the system described here - particularly in the two sections marked 'challenges and evaluations', but also where relevant throughout the report.

This report could have been far longer. For example, it is difficult to describe legislative bodies without also talking about the community-based reconciliation work being carried out in civil society. It is also a challenge to address issues of democracy and empowerment without also talking about the 'democratic economy' that is being developed through the establishment of cooperatives. One of the unique aspects of the political system of North and East Syria is how it seeks to encompass and include civil society and diverse ethnic and religious groups, yet it is impossible to fully explore the range of organizations, associations and initiatives representing the diverse peoples of the region within the limits of this report. In this report, we describe the major institutions and practices of the democratic system of North and East Syria. Deeper explorations of justice and reconciliation, economy and ecology, ethnic and religious groups, civil society and many other topics will be the subject of future reports if it becomes possible in the context of the security situation.

Important documents and declarations of the institutions of the confederal system are available on the RIC website at <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/background/political-system-documents>. There is also a further reading section with reports, documentaries and books which provide background and current information on the development and actuality of the confederal political system of North and East Syria: <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/background/useful-resources/>.



# A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

1

## 1960's onwards

No autonomy for the Kurdish region in northern Syria, Kurdish language banned.  
**1962** Syrian government census leaves 300,000 Kurds without citizenship.  
**1970's** Ba'ath regime settle Arab populations in traditionally Kurdish areas to create an "Arab belt."  
 People organize underground, holding secret meetings and celebrations of Newroz.  
 The PYD is created in **2003** as a mobilizing force in the early developments of autonomy.  
**From 2004**, women organize secretly through the Yêkitiya Star network.

2

## 2011-2012: revolution unfolds

After months of protest against the Ba'ath regime, the population of Kobane (**19 July 2012**), followed by Afrin (**20 July 2012**) and Jazeera regions expel the Syrian army and administration from its territories. They start to organize themselves through communes, councils and cooperatives.  
**January 2011**: TEV-DEM (Movement for a Democratic Society) is created to build up and coordinate the autonomous system.  
**July 2011**: establishment of YPG (People's Defense Units).

2013

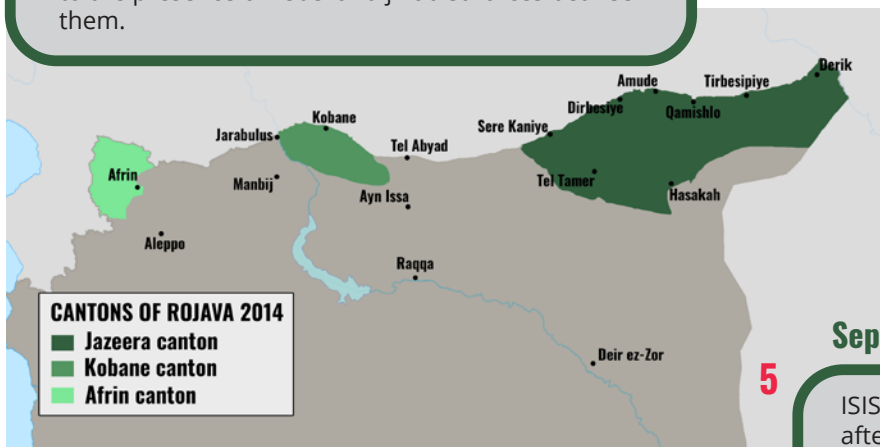
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**April**: YPJ (Women's Defense Units) established  
**July**: Liberation of Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn) from Al-Nusra Front by YPG and YPJ.

4

## January 2014

Independence declaration, under the name of Rojava, of the three cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Jazeera, organized through TEV-DEM.  
 The cantons are geographically non-contiguous due to the presence of rebel and jihadist forces between them.



5

## September 2014 – January 2015

ISIS forces attack the city of Kobane, and after months of fighting, the YPG, YPJ and allies successfully repel the attacks in a victory that attracts global support.

6

## 2015

**10 October**: Creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces / SDF.  
**9 December**: Creation of the Syrian Democratic Council / SDC.

7

## March 2016

Proclamation of the Democratic Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria and beginning of the constitution writing process.

8 August 2016

Liberation of Manbij from ISIS by SDF. Establishment of communes and civil administrative councils in Manbij.

9 December 2016

The constitution is formally adopted under the name of the Democratic Federation of North-Eastern Syria, dropping the term 'Rojava' to be more inclusive of Arab-majority areas, particularly Manbij.

2017

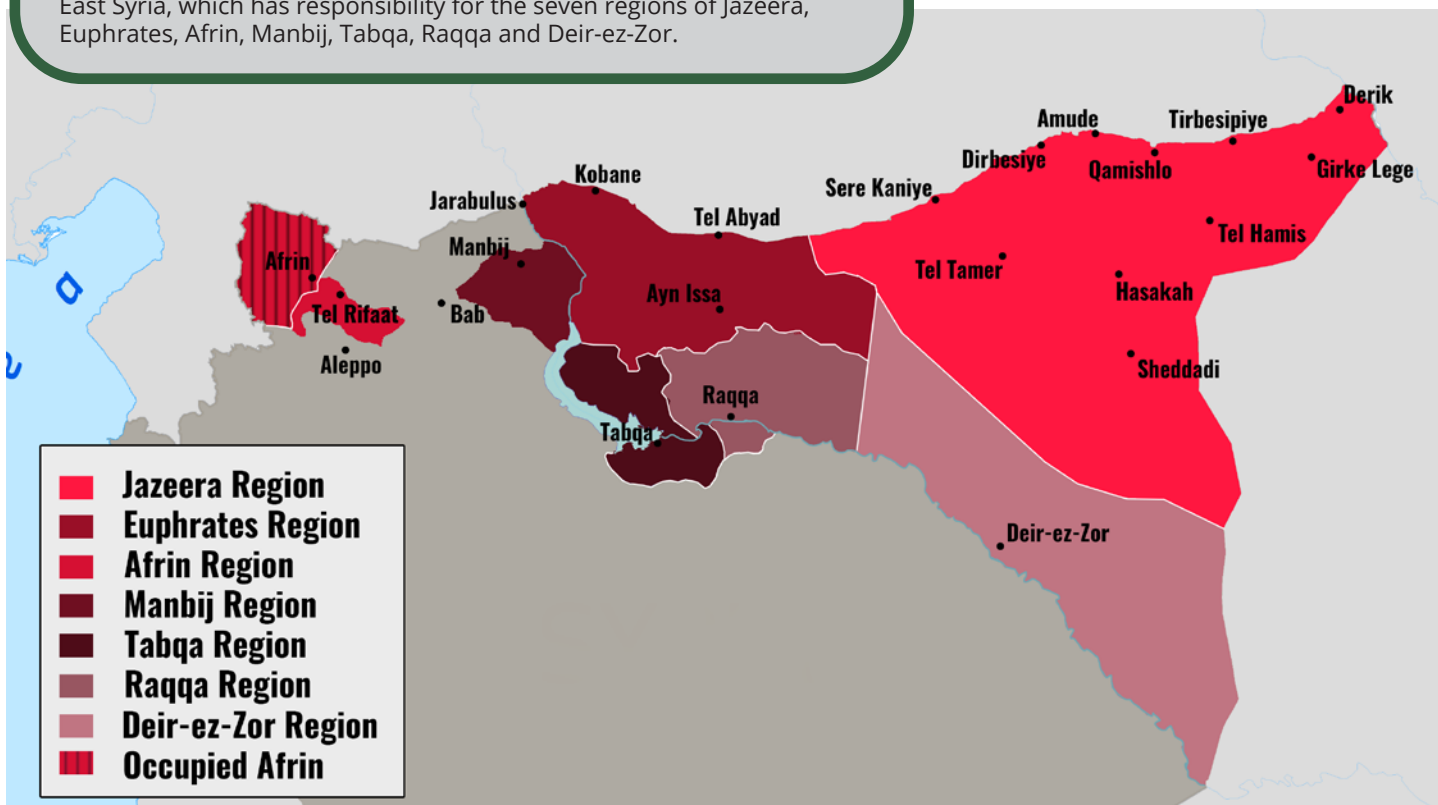
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SDF liberates Tabqa (May) and Raqqa (October) from ISIS. Civil councils established in liberated territories.

2018

11

**January:** Invasion of Afrin by the Turkish army and its proxy forces. Over 300,000 people are displaced, the majority of whom are Kurdish.  
**March:** SDF withdraws from Afrin. Turkish-backed militias impose sharia law, kidnap, torture and execute civilians, and commit human rights violations and war crimes.  
**September:** Creation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which has responsibility for the seven regions of Jazeera, Euphrates, Afrin, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor.



2019

12

**March:** Military victory over the ISIS caliphate in Deir-ez-Zor under SDF leadership.  
**October:** Turkish attack and invasion of Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn) and Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) cities in North and East Syria after the USA decides to withdraw their troops from Syria. Over 200,000 civilians displaced so far; over 450 civilians killed; over 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land occupied; settlement of Turkish-backed fighters and their families in the occupied zone with a strategy of intentional demographic engineering.

# HISTORICAL, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ROOTS OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

## Kurdish history

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 – which literally means ‘the place of the Kurds’ in Kurdish – 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 nation-state of their own.

In Syria, prior to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, they formed the nation’s largest ethnic minority, numbering around 2 million people concentrated in the north of the country. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Syrian government’s Arabization policies – resettling Arab civilians to establish an ‘Arab Belt’ where the Kurdish population lived - forcibly displaced many Kurds from their oil-rich homeland, and stripped hundreds of thousands of Kurds of citizenship, leaving them stateless.

Kurdish minorities have also faced sustained discrimination and oppression in other countries. In Turkey, the Kurdish population faced institutionalized racism, economic and political marginalization and the outlawing of the Kurdish language. They also experienced multiple massacres and attacks: the massacre of over 10,000 people in Dersim in 1938, the burning of 4,000 villages in the 1990s, the Roboski airstrike massacre of 2011 that killed 34 civilians and the destruction of neighborhoods and killing of civilians in Diyarbakir (Amed), Nusaybin, Salopi and Jazira Botan in 2015-2016. Following an upsurge of political organizing and social movements over recent decades, including the armed insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) thousands of Kurdish people – among them elected MPs and mayors – have been arrested and thousands remain as political prisoners in Turkish jails.

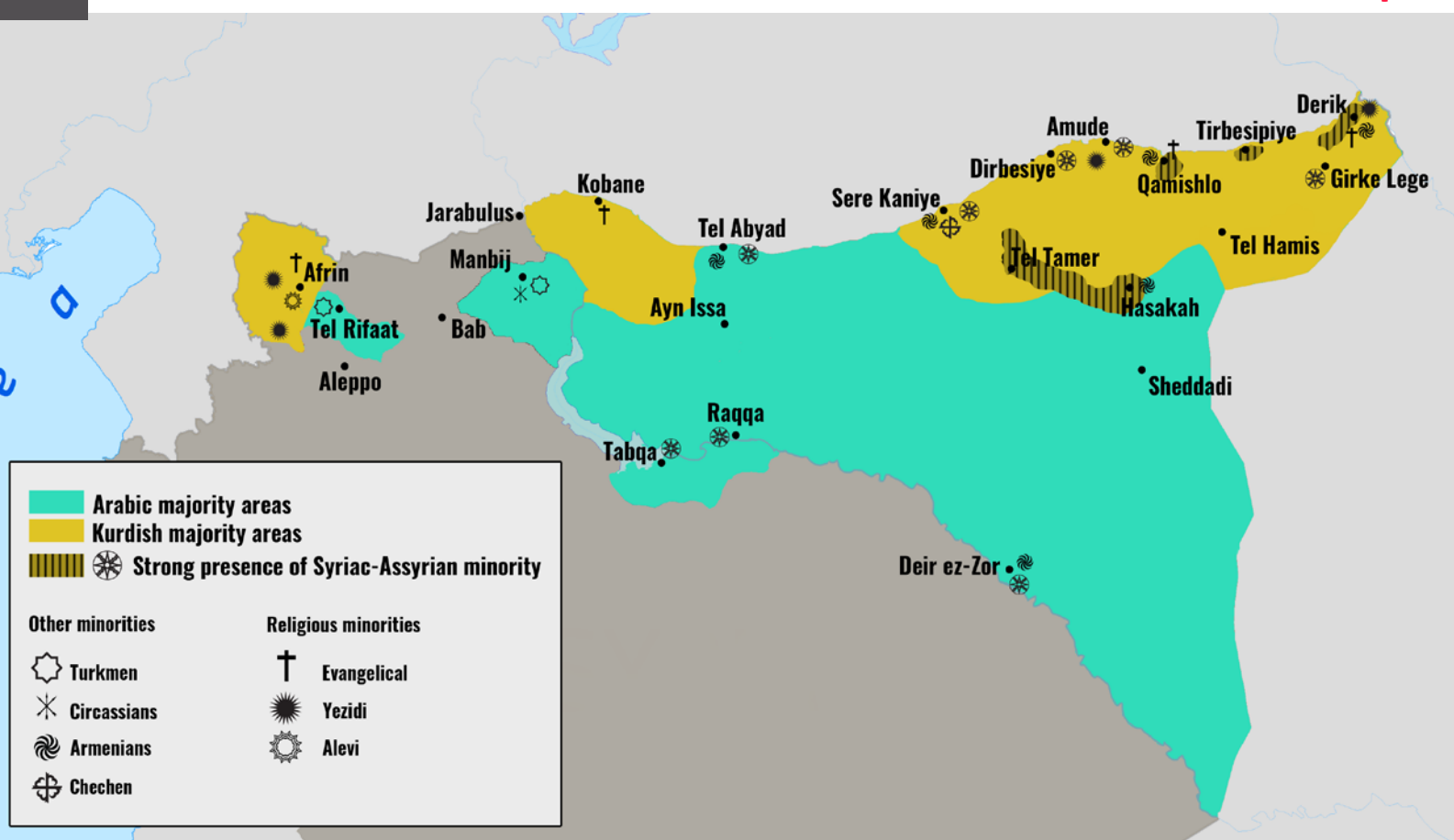
In Iran, Kurdish people experience discrimination and are denied social, political and cultural rights. Expressions of Kurdish religion and culture face political repression, with some Kurdish names decreed illegal. Kurdish activists face arbitrary arrest and detention, and hundreds have been sentenced to death.

Iraq also has a long history of oppressing the Kurdish population, including the Anfal genocide under the Saddam Hussein regime. The Anfal genocide included the use of chemical weapons against civilians and resulted in 80,000 - 182,000 deaths. In 1992 the Kurdistan Regional Government was set up for the Kurdish region of Iraq, which aims to establish a semi-autonomous Kurdish region based on the leadership of the Barzani family and a neo-liberal economic model.

Ongoing repression and violence against Kurds has given rise to a large diaspora community and strong feelings of solidarity between Kurds. This can be witnessed in the large popular mobilizations against the Turkish invasion across diaspora communities in Europe. However, there exists a strong division between the two political tendencies of Kurdish rights movements: the state-centered vision of the Iraqi, Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic

Party (KDP) and the democratic confederalist model of the 'Kurdish freedom movement,' which includes the political project in North and East Syria, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) of Turkey, among others. Many other political tendencies exist within Kurdish politics, both throughout Kurdistan and the diaspora community.

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. Although the Rojava revolution developed 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 other ethnic groups. The shift from organizing under the name 'Rojava' to 'Northern Syria' and subsequently 'North and East Syria' also indicates a vision which goes far beyond ethnic identity.



Demographics of North and East Syria as of January 2018

North and East Syria encompasses a wide range of ethnic and religious groups. Some communities 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 – but there are also areas which contain sizable Arab populations. 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. Syriac-Assyrians have historically formed a large minority in Jazeera region, though many fled abroad as ISIS gained power and committed atrocities against Christians in the region.

The original territories of the three non-contiguous cantons which first declared independence - Afrin, Kobane and Jazeera – have Kurdish-majority populations, but the expanded territory these regions now encompass, plus regions which more recently became part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor – are largely Arab. In Jazeera, Kobane and Afrin, some of the Arab population comes from tribes who have been there for centuries, while others were settled there in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to demographic engineering policies of the Assad regime.

The total population of North and East Syria is difficult to determine, though estimates place it between 4 and 5 million. Since the beginning of autonomy, there have been waves of displacement due to violence, and local authorities do not have the capacity to conduct a thorough census. The Turkish-backed occupation of the Kurdish-majority region of Afrin resulted a complete demographic change of that region, with 300,000 mostly Kurdish people displaced. The same is happening as a result of the new-founded occupation of Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) and Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ayn), where Turkey and its proxies are settling fighters and their families - mostly Arabs from other parts of Syria, as well as Turkmen - in the homes that the original residents fled from.

## Political principles

The ideological division between the two tendencies of the Kurdish rights movement, statist and democratic confederalist tendency, plays out within North and East Syria through the ideological opposition between two main Kurdish political parties, ENKS and PYD. The current political system as a whole is a product of the democratic confederalist tendency, although the PYD is no longer the driving force behind the development of democratic confederalism and participates in the system alongside a range of other political parties. Regions such as Derik which are geographically closer to Iraqi Kurdistan tend to exhibit stronger affiliation to the ENKS. The ENKS has refused to formally engage in the political system due to this ideological conflict, and claims that the Autonomous Administration has imprisoned ENKS members on a political basis. There have been some internal conflicts and defections within ENKS following the participation of ENKS groups in councils set up by Turkey in Afrin to legitimize their occupation.

The democratic confederalist political tendency within Syria has been heavily shaped by the writings and thought of Abdullah Öcalan. This connection stretches back decades to when Öcalan and other leading figures in the PKK were based out of Syria and Lebanon following his exile from Turkey from 1979, giving seminars and developing the ideology of their party. The presence of the PKK leadership within Syria has had a long term impact on the political development of the Kurdish rights movement within Syria, as for several years militants of the PKK circulated through the Kurdish regions of Syria and Kurds attended lectures and events in Damascus. Political mobilization took place largely through in-person meetings and gatherings rather than through circulation of literature, shaping the modern political culture. More recently, these political ideas have circulated throughout Kurdistan, particularly into Rojava as people from all parts of Kurdistan came there to join the fight against ISIS, participate in the social movement and live in the region.

The ideology of the Kurdish rights movement – as influenced by the writings of Abdullah Öcalan – has its roots in traditional Marxism and nationalism, much like many of the anti-colonial liberation movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the ideology of the Kurdish rights movement evolved over time in response to the profound failure of state based socialism as embodied by the USSR. Following many years of analysis and theoretical development, the ‘new paradigm’ of the movement was defined in 2005 through the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, who was at that time – and continues to be – jailed in Turkey. The paradigm presents a vision of socialism that rejects the centralized mechanisms of the state, and instead proposes an alternative model of governance called democratic confederalism. This model is intended to provide a counter-proposition to traditional state-based socialism as well as to the nation-state and capitalism. Further diverging from the model of Soviet socialism, Öcalan proposed that the liberation of women is key to building a liberated society, rather than something that will happen following the establishment of socialism.

## Multi-ethnic and religious diversity

A core idea of the ‘new paradigm’ is the idea that Kurds should not seek to establish a state of their own, but should instead fight for a political system which embraces the cultural and political rights of all people. This approach aims to avoid the danger of reproducing the oppression of one people by another through the system of the nation-state. The shared values and principles of a society are seen as more important than the ethnicity of the people living in it. Rather than dissolving identity, culture and language, this ideology promotes the idea of a ‘democratic nation,’ which proposes that all identities should be given space to organize themselves and be represented at every level of decision-making, but that none should be given a higher status than others. For example, this is put into practice in North and East Syria through policies such as the adoption of Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac-Aramaic as the three official languages of North and East Syria, though practically speaking Arabic is the primary language of most meetings and political affairs. The promotion of diversity and grassroots democracy are central to the political ideology of the democratic confederalist project.

**“A democratic system is the future for Syria, in order to achieve stability. This must include Arab people, Armenian people, Turkmen people, Kurds... everyone must live together in brotherhood. There must be a democratic system, not just for North Syria, but for all of Syria and the whole of the Middle East, so that those people can live together... so that the wars, the conflicts and the killings which are going on now may come to an end.”**

**Erifa Bekir, co-chair of the Social Affairs Commission of Afrin region**

## Women’s liberation

The influence of the women’s liberation movement is another critical aspect of the ‘new paradigm.’ For many years, women within the Kurdish freedom movement struggled to establish gender equality as a core tenet of the movement’s ideology. Although Öcalan declared that “a society can never be free without women’s liberation,” it took decades for this to become widely accepted throughout the movement. During this time, women built up autonomous assemblies and structures within the movement, and became present in numerous leadership positions. In northern Syria, Kurdish women organized under the banner of Yêkitiya Star to fight for women’s rights.

## Ecology

The modern incarnation of the Kurdish movement also emphasizes the importance of ecology and sustainability, drawing parallels between the domination of man over woman, human over human and human over nature. In order to develop an environmentally sustainable society, an economic system advocating collectivizing natural resources and land is proposed. Some have called this proposed system 'eco-socialist' due to its emphasis on sustainability and wealth redistribution. The thinking around ecology draws on the writings of Murray Bookchin, who developed the concept of social ecology.

## Democracy

Democratic confederalism is not an academic concept, but a system of organization based on the idea that power should be rooted in society rather than in the state. Society should be governed through local democracy based on geographically organized units called communes. These communes confederate to higher levels as necessary, all the while preserving the autonomy and decision-making power of the most local levels.

Through confederation via democratic assemblies, democratic confederalism can exist within the framework of a state, as well as on a global level. In fact, it has already been proposed by local commentators as part of the solution for other situations which have reached a deadlock, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict. The democratic confederalist project of North and East Syria does not attempt to directly supplant a preexisting nation-state - in this case the Syrian state - but starts building power alongside the state, working towards democratization and federalization. The ultimate stated aim is that as the power of society grows, the state becomes obsolete and ceases to function both as an institution and as a mentality.

**“The consensual democratic federal system guarantees the participation of all individuals and groups, on equal levels, in the discussion, decision, and implementation of affairs. It takes ethnic and religious differences into consideration according to the characteristics of each group based on the principles of mutual coexistence and fraternity. It guarantees the equality of all peoples in rights and duties, respects the charters of human rights, and preserves national and international peace.”**

**Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, 2016**

## Political culture

Within the cultures of North and East Syria there are already forms of social organization and values which are conducive to building a new political system that draws on pre-capitalist social structures, as is the stated aim of the local administration. The ideology of the confederal system of democratic autonomy in North and East Syria is rooted in the culture and social context of Middle Eastern society. There is still a strong trend of ruralism, as well as the collective economy and mutual aid sociologists have identified as concomitant with rural, village life. The cities which do exist are fairly small, and generally retain strong social ties in neighborhoods, with families living in close proximity and contributing to a strong

sense of identity. The family remains a powerful social structure, fostering strong relationships of support. Social organization through families or through tribes has historically led to federation between tribes and assemblies between the peoples of multiple tribes.

**“When the revolution started, in international policy they said ‘it’s the Kurds’ revolution’. It was hard for us to conceive how Kurds would start a revolution and how we would join them. At first we thought it’s a nationalist revolution for the Kurds and not for all of the people like Arabs and Syriacs, not a revolution for peoples’ brotherhood and democracy.”**

**Khawla Diab, PYD co-chair in Tel Tamer**

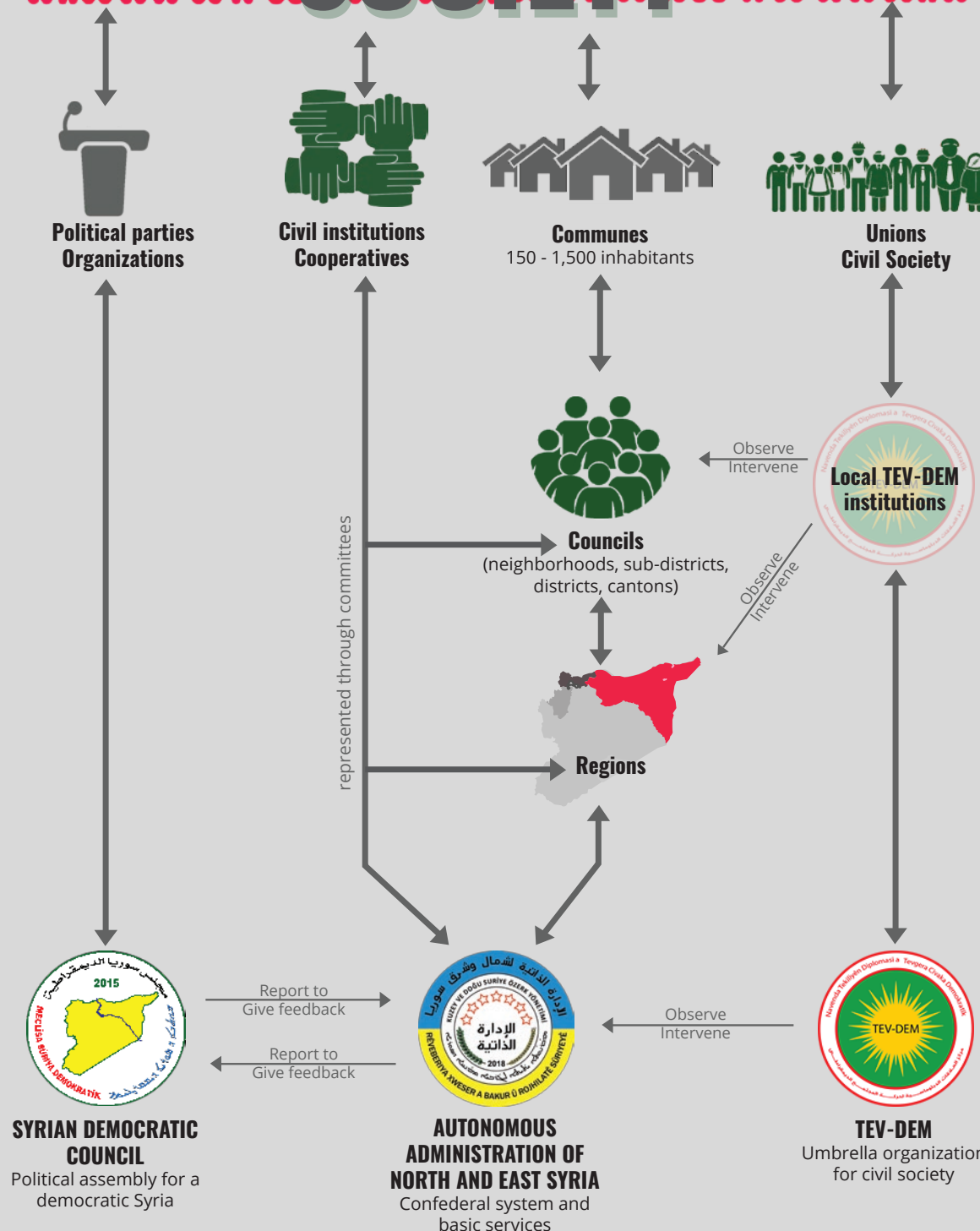
The region of North and East Syria has historically been home to many ethnic and religious communities. Tensions have arisen at points throughout history, and have been exploited and strengthened through Syrian state policies and colonial policies. However, in general the region – including fairly multicultural urban centers – has been one in which Kurds, Arabs, Yezidis, Syriac-Assyrians, Armenians, Circassians, Turkmen, Chaldeans and Chechens have coexisted and shared space. This creates a

foundation for a social system that embraces diversity, as the presence of a range of ethnic groups in a region is considered to be the status quo.

The ideological approach of rooting the new political system in a foundation of history, culture and social values has also shaped the role of women in the democratic confederalist system. The women-centered organization of the historically matrilineal societies of the Middle East has been emphasized by women’s organizations to give continuity to the current movement for women’s liberation. Women are seen as guardians of social values and the glue that holds society together, facilitating their transition to political leaders and fighters.



# 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 Global Coalition Against Daesh. This added the regions of Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor to the area operating under the democratic confederalist system.

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

TEV-DEM (established in 2011), the Movement for a Democratic Society. It is an umbrella body for civil society, supporting, coordinating and ensuring that the voice of civil society is fed into the political and administrative aspects of the system. It acts as a kind of 'counter-power' to the Autonomous Administration and organizes on a federal basis from the local to the 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-regional 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 responsibility for 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 7 regions through elected bodies and ministries, whereas the SDC represents political parties, 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. The Social Contract affirms basic social rights, a commitment to gender equality in the political system, and sets out the institutions of the democratic confederalist system. 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.

**“When the revolution started in Rojava, what did we think? PYD as a party was not enough for organizing the people- this would have been a too narrow way of thinking. So what did we do about it? We wanted to create an umbrella organization, a council. A council that could lead all of society. So we created the Movement for a Democratic Society, or TEV-DEM. Through TEV-DEM we could reach all of the people: Kurds, Arabs, Syriac-Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Circassians and all the people of Rojava.”**

**Zelal Jeger, co-chair of TEV-DEM**

All three bodies contain both mixed-gender institutions as well as a parallel and organizationally autonomous women's system. The women's structures feed into the mixed-gender structures at every level, and exercise a significant amount of influence. There are no male-only structures. In addition to the women's structures, young people are also given a degree of autonomy which is enshrined in the Social Contract and through the representation of youth throughout the structures of the political system from the most local to the inter-regional level.

The ideology of democratic confederalism aims for society to be more powerful than the institutions of governance. Therefore, the role of society in North and East Syria is central to the political system. Society feeds into the Autonomous Administration through the system of communes and councils, and into TEV-DEM through civil society organizations. Civil institutions and cooperatives also engage in the Autonomous Administration through daily interactions with the relevant commissions and official meetings. For example, cooperatives feed into the Autonomous Administration through involvement in local Economy Committees, who federate into the Economy Commission of the Administration. The stated aim of the democratic confederalist project is for society to govern itself, dispensing with the need for government institutions separate to and distant from society.

Individuals engage with the political system in multiple ways. For example, a teacher in a village would organize as a resident in her commune, and might possibly be elected to the councils of the higher levels of the Autonomous Administration. She will also organize within TEV-DEM through the teachers' union, and if she wants to, can participate through a political party, such as the PYD, Syria Future Party, etc. which has representation on the SDC. She could also organize through the women's structures within each of these bodies.

# THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

## EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Works through the offices and commissions to oversee and coordinate matters of health, economy, natural resources...

Membership:

- 2 elected co-chairs
- Co-chairs of all 7 offices and 10 commissions

## GENERAL COUNCIL

Coordinates legislative matters and unifies laws between regions

Membership:

- 2 elected co-chairs preside over the council
- 7 representatives from each region [49 people]
- 21 specialists

## JUSTICE COUNCIL

Administrates tribunals and coordinates the justice systems and guideline sentences between regions

Membership:

- 16 people from across all 7 regions

## OFFICES AND COMMISSIONS

- Local Administrations Commission
- Finance Commission
- Economy and Agriculture Commission
- Interior Commission
- Education and Learning Commission
- Health and Environment Commission
- Social Affairs Commission
- Culture Commission
- Women's Commission
- Youth and Sports Commission

- Communication Office
- Planning and Development Office
- Religion and Beliefs Office
- External Relations Office
- Defense Office
- Humanitarian Affairs Office
- Oil and Natural Resources Office



## Aims and basic structures

The Autonomous Administration is the structure that administrates the territories constituting the seven regions of North and East Syria. ‘Autonomous Administration’ (sometimes translated ‘Self-Administration’) is an approximate translation of the Kurdish term ‘Rêveberiya Xweser.’ The word ‘xweser’ means ‘autonomous,’ (literally meaning ‘to be [have power] over oneself’), and ‘rêveberî’ is commonly used to mean management, leadership or coordination. However, the roots of the word ‘rêveberî’ mean ‘to be at the front of/indicating the way/path.’ The term ‘rêveberiya xweser’ is used to express the concept of society leading itself.

**“There was a need for an overarching Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, to bring together these seven regional Administrations at the level of collective decisions, of common laws, to build equality in society, equality on an economic level, develop common perspectives, to coordinate, and to be a force of mediation if problems appear between two regions.”**

**Berivan Khaled, co-chair of Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria**

Administration encompasses the most local decision making bodies (the commune) up to the highest level of federation across the seven regions of North and East Syria. As many decisions as possible are devolved to the most local level feasible, and 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. Each level works via committees and councils, with a

quota for women (40% minimum of either men or women) and representation for each ethnic, religious and cultural group present in that area. A parallel women’s system exists alongside the mixed gender structures.

The decision to establish the Autonomous Administration as the administrative body of North and East Syria was made at the Syrian Democratic Council congress in Tabqa on 16 July 2018. On 6 September 2018, in Ayn Issa, the Autonomous Administration was officially declared. The congress gave the Autonomous Administration the responsibility for the administration of the system of democratic confederalism from the communes to all the regions. This role complements but is distinct from TEV-DEM’s responsibility for civil society organizing and the SDC’s political organizing and diplomatic work.

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 are:

Commune/ Komîn

Neighborhood / Tax

Subdistrict / Belde

District / Navçe

Canton / Kanton

Region / Hêrem

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria / Rêveberiya Xweser a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyê

There are seven regions: Jazeera (which contains Qamishlo and Hasakah cantons), Euphrates (which contains Kobane and Tel Abyad [Gire Spi] cantons), Afrin, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. The majority of the region of Afrin has been under Turkish occupation since March 2018, but continues to be represented in the political system through the area of Shehba which is populated by Afrin's displaced population. Parts of the Euphrates and Jazeera regions have been under Turkish occupation since October 2019, and their displaced administrations are now operating out of different cities.

Regions vary in terms of how the political system works on the ground. In rural areas one commune can be a whole village – or even several villages – whereas a larger village may be divided into several communes. Some communes have developed a high level of collective organizing and exhibit strong participation and initiative, with many community and economic projects emerging from the commune, while others remain less active. Successful development of communes is often due to the work of key individuals who understand the vision of the system and nurture wider engagement within their communities. The structures of the Autonomous Administration are responsive to the economic, social and cultural characteristics of each area, and can be adapted depending on population size and whether the area in question is rural or urban area.

## Communes – the building block of democratic confederalism

Communes are the most basic unit of the political system of North and East Syria. They are established in Article 48 of the Social Contract, which defines the commune system as “the essential basic organizational form of direct democracy. It is a system that sets out an organizational and administrative framework within which to make decisions and management. It works as an independent body in all stages of decision making.” As well as acting as a democratic body, the commune also is the organization through which basic necessities are obtained and distributed. One of the earliest functions of communes was the pooling of resources to buy collective generators to provide electricity. Now they serve as an access point for subsidized diesel and bread, as well as the first port of call for many administrative issues.

The three core pillars of the communes are outlined as:

*Self-defense (xwe parastin): protection of the commune*

*Education (perwerde): changing mentalities and empowering people*

*Conflict resolution and consensus building (li-hevkirin): addressing conflicts within and between families, reconciliation or referral to relevant justice institutions*

Once these pillars have been established, the commune is able to act as a foundation of an auto-

**“In the beginning there were difficulties with the commune system - it's a new system, and people don't accept new things very quickly... People here saw the old system where everything came from the center, from Damascus, 700 or 800 km away. Orders came from there, without the input of the people... Sure, it's necessary that we work together at the level of Syria, but each region has its own particularities, its own society, languages, cultures, religions and beliefs. Now the communes are being built up... they are resolving not just questions of bread and diesel, but personal questions, questions of religious beliefs, conflicting opinions, all kinds of things.”**

**Mohamed Said, PYD co-chair in Tel Tamer, 28 March 2019**

## Case Study: Carudi, a village commune

*Carudi is a village in the countryside of Derik, sitting on the border with Turkey. It has an active commune which holds regular meetings and engages in collective activities. The residents of the village collectively manage some agricultural land, a 'relaxation' community garden with a fountain, fruit trees and flowers, and a herd of sheep and goats.*

*They manage the collective fields according to cooperative principles, with most of the villagers donating time and labour to work the land, with the harvest shared between everyone. In recent years they have decided to grow 'firik,' a variety of wheat that is prepared via traditional methods involving burning the grain as it is harvested, giving the wheat a unique flavor. Carudi residents also organize trash-picking together to address complaints about rubbish accumulating in the common spaces of the village. Recently the commune decided to build a village community center, which is being constructed by the villagers themselves.*

*All the families in the village are involved in these activities, regardless of political affiliation. This has involved a lot of work from a small number of active individuals who have repeatedly visited families in the village, organized meetings and encouraged people to participate. The results of this work are visible. Many families who otherwise express reserve about the new political system are enthusiastic about the tangible results produced by organizing as a commune.*

mous economy. Cooperatives are developed from communes, with the ultimate aim being the emergence of a communal economy through pooling resources and joint investment.

Communes have committees which focus on areas of work such as health, education, economy, self defense, reconciliation and other issues. The nine committees which are listed as the standard committees for all levels of the Autonomous Administration are:

*Self defense committee  
Education committee  
Reconciliation and Justice committee  
Women's committee  
Youth (and Sport) committee  
Health committee  
Families of the Martyrs committee  
Arts and Culture committee  
Economy committee*

Most communes have a handful of committees, though very few have all nine listed above. Communes will organize committees based on their needs and capacities. For example, rural areas are more likely to have agricultural committees and not all communes have an economy committee. However, each of these nine committees will exist in the councils of the higher levels of the administration.

Even though the commune is the smallest unit of the system, it is intended to form the core of the political system and serve as a key political check and balance. Decisions from higher levels shouldn't prevent decision making at the level of

the commune: rather, they should in theory be directly based on commune decisions.

**“Women are co-chairs in the commune system, they are leaders in society, they act as counselors in conflict resolution processes. They sit on the committees of the communes: reconciliation, services, society and management. The Autonomous Administration cannot work without the involvement of women. On the social level and as regards self-defense the communes cannot work without women.”**

**Hediye Ahmed Abdallah, Self-Defense Committee of the People's Council of Derik district**

## 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. At the neighborhood level (one level up from commune), more responsibility lies with the co-chairs of each commune coordinating with each other rather than a full elected council. Councils are meant to be the channel through which genuine democracy works, advancing and protecting the principles of the 'liberated society' that the confederal system is trying to build.

Councils are elected and work through the standard nine committees (see above). As part of the mechanism of direct democracy, each institution (such as unions and committees) submits three people to the list of candidates for election to each of the relevant committees. For example the Teachers' Union would submit candidates for the Education Committee. There are quota requirements for women and ethnic and religious minorities, so that even very small minorities are represented in the councils of areas where they live.

So far, the process has followed the system described above, where institutions and component councils of the Autonomous Administration submit candidates to the 'Democratic Nation' (Netewa Demokratik) list which is then submitted to the public for approval via vote. The opposition has and exercises the right set up its own lists: for example, in the 2017 Qamishlo district elections a Kurdish Nationalist opposition list ran against the Democratic Nation list. The Social Contract stipulates that 60% of the councils should be elected, and 40% reserved for quotas, with the details of how this is carried out left to the councils. Although there are many shortcomings in the election system (see below), it is important to note that due to the more direct and participatory nature of democracy in North and East Syria, elections are less central to democratic practice.

### **Case study: Derik District Autonomous Administration**

*Communes: Each commune in Derik is made up of 120-150 families. Each of these communes has a name, such as 'Şehid Cudi Commune'. There are 125 communes in Derik district, and 44 in the municipality.*

*Neighborhood: Each neighborhood is made up of several communes. There are seven neighborhoods in Derik municipality.*

*Municipality: Larger cities will contain more neighborhoods, and each of the neighborhoods is represented in the municipality, which itself is a committee of the district assembly.*

*The municipality of Derik is a structure which exists alongside the councils of the Autonomous Administration structure, rather than as a level within the Administration structure. The district of Derik contains the city of Derik as well as the surrounding villages, whereas Derik municipality applies only to the city of Derik.*

*Sub-district: In the Derik district there are four sub-districts, organized around four smaller towns in the countryside outside of Derik city.*

*District: The Derik District Peoples' Council is made up of 42 people. There are 3 representatives from each of the nine committees of the district, 11 people from the municipality commission, 2 co-chairs and 2 deputy-co-chairs. The co-chairs work in coordination and communication with the communes which make up the district. Derik district, along with 9 other districts, come together to form Qamishlo canton, which is one of the two cantons of Jazeera region.*



The system of the Autonomous Administration applies a municipalist approach to larger towns and cities, creating special bodies for municipalities to administrate themselves outside of the standard confederal system of commune into neighborhood into sub-district. Municipality Commissions are made up of representatives from each of the city's neighborhoods, concerning themselves mostly with administrating services within the municipality rather than acting as a democratic representative body. For the purposes of democratic representation, meanwhile, residents of a municipality participate in the 'Peoples' Assembly' of the district within which the municipality is based (see below).

**“The economic system is set out in laws, but as is often the case with laws, we realize that there are difficulties in applying them. For example, there are laws against monopolies, but in reality we can see that we still need to fight against them. We discuss these problems in the communes and assemblies. If they are not solved in the communes, they are discussed in the higher levels of the administration. Criticism and feedback comes up from the communes in this way, and the system can be adjusted accordingly.”**

**Arin Khalil, Women's Economy Committee of Qamishlo**



*Tribe Reconciliation meeting. SereKaniye, 2019/09/08*

## Council and commune system: challenges and evaluations

The role given to communes in the new political system enshrines communes as the 'democratic shields' of society. Although the culture of the region is much more conducive to localized collective organization than more individualized societies in Europe and North America, the envisioned role of the communes still requires a significant culture shift in order for the system to work as intended. Although some communes certainly live up to this vision, the extent to which communes in general fulfill this role is debatable. There are ongoing conversations across the Autonomous Administration evaluating whether communes are living up to their purpose, and highlighting the ways in which they fall short. Although there is a general agreement that communes have yet to fully fulfill their role in building a democratic confederalist system, the prevailing sentiment is that they are a non-negotiable part of the political structure, and to eliminate communes would be to "kill society," in the words of one interviewee.

One challenge facing the Autonomous Administration in fully implementing the ideas behind the confederal political project is a lack of understanding of and education about the commune system across the general population. The Administration is caught in a paradox because in order to build a new political system based on a 'revolutionary' political culture, people need to engage in and put energy into the communes. Yet many people do not engage in the communes because the new political culture is not established yet. However, part of the incremental change which can be seen in the society of North and East Syria is the developing understanding of the new system. Concepts like the 'commune' and 'council' are now part of common vocabulary, and communes have at many points stepped in to fulfill the basic needs of society.

The challenge of transitioning to a system of governance which requires a higher level of engagement and participation has meant that rather than smaller communes of up to 150 people (over 15 years old), which was the original intention, communes tend to be 100-150 households, which can translate to over a thousand people. Membership of some communes exceeds several thousand people. It has been observed that this scale of operation reduces the potential for genuine direct democracy and makes it harder to build a sense of collective responsibility and engagement. An additional concern is that the remits of communes have become broader than the original three pillars, which means that communes can become overstretched and not able to effectively prioritize their roles and responsibilities.

A wider challenge of creating a new political culture is that people are not used to seeing themselves as a part of the political process. They are instead used to working within a system in which one person has power and others don't. This leads to situations where the co-chairs of the communes put themselves in a dominant position, stifling rather than fostering democracy. At the same time, members of communes can lack a sense of individual and collective responsibility and see the co-chairs as a 'new state' who will solve their problems and provide services. This can lead to a relationship of reliance on the co-chairs for basic resources like gas, bread and water, and also information. This is described as a lingering 'state mentality' by political activists who are trying to implement the new system. They describe the challenge of trying to build up a new approach to politics through a change in mentality and culture, not just through changing political and economic structures.

## The Regions

The regions maintain autonomy in decision making for many matters, with the Autonomous Administration fulfilling the role of coordination and communication. Decisions about economy, law, judicial systems and education are made on a regional level, within the framework set by the Social Contract. For example, the region of Afrin proactively transformed its education system so that it became the first region to have its own university, and to provide Kurdish language education and women's studies courses in high school. 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.

One challenge of the system is navigating the mismatch of social values of the dominant political tendencies within the Administration and those of some sections of society due to regional and cultural differences within North and East Syria. For example, the prevailing attitude within the Autonomous Administration is anti-polygamy. Through the Women's Law of 2014, the newly established legal system forbids the practice. However, it is still technically legal under Syrian government law, which continues to be the regulating body for issuing marriage certificates. It is crucial that the Administration is inclusive of those sectors of society – such as Arab tribes in Deir-ez-Zor – who are opposed to attempts to forbid polygamy. As a result, the Autonomous Administration must balance the principles of the revolution which brought it to power with a more diplomatic approach.

Some interesting social initiatives are being trialed in order to overcome these tensions. For example, the SDC has set up and works with a Tribal Council representing leaders from Arab tribes across North and East Syria. At the same time, the Women's Office of the SDC engages with the wives of tribal leaders in order to empower women within the existing social context. At the same time, people in the Administration acknowledge that although the social values between tribes and the Autonomous Administration and Syrian Democratic Council do not

**“In the system of the regime, when you join the security forces, the Ministry of Internal Security of Syria is in charge of your assignment. This means that – for example - if you are from Damascus, they can send you to Deir-ez-Zor, and for 10 years, 20 years, you have to live there. In the Autonomous Administration, assignments are made within the region. People don't go far from their families.”**

**Amin Saleh, deputy-co-chair of the Interior Commission of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria**

**“We are now in the second year since the establishment of the Administration, and the local population has come to understand that this is a democratic system that has come out of and is legitimized by our people, and which is working to serve our people and unify Syria. All the members of the Legislative and Civilian Councils of Raqqa are sons of Raqqa and its countryside.”**

**Telal Hilal Alsibat, tribe leader of the Jubat Clan of the Werd Tribe**

always match up, there is a political culture of collectivism and mutual aid within tribes which communes aspire to. Although the process of change can at times be incremental, members of the Administration who RIC spoke to were adamant that this was the only way to make the new political system sustainable. One interviewee observed that if the system were imposed from above, they would have “fought against Assad for nothing” because it would just be replicating the authoritarian power structures of the regime.

## Manbij Region Autonomous Administration

*“Before, society and the state were really distant from each other. The state would make decisions and society would not really apply them. Now the society makes decisions by itself and applies them. If you give value to society, the society has more agency – they will take ownership of their decisions. This is something really positive, so we want to spread this democratic system across all of Syria, the Middle East, Europe, and the whole world.”*

*– Zozan Hussein, co-chair of the Legislative Council of Manbij Region*

The region of Manbij was liberated from ISIS by the SDF in August 2016. Following liberation, a system of communes and councils was built up to take responsibility for civil governance, while the Manbij Military Council established to lead the assault on ISIS-held Manbij took responsibility for defense.

There are 360 villages and 8 small towns in Manbij region. The majority of the population is Arab, with large Kurd and Turkmen minorities and a small Circassian community of 700 people. All ethnic groups are represented on the councils of the region (from neighborhood to regional level), as well as in the leadership of each council: between the co-chairs and deputy co-chairs, all the ethnic groups should be represented. This system seeks to avoid the dominance of one ethnicity over the others, as was the case under ISIS.

The Turkmen, who claim to represent around 20% of the region’s population, organize autonomously within the communes of the five all-Turkmen neighborhoods of Manbij city and in Turkmen villages. There is a Turkmen Association in the city center which provides a meeting place, language lessons for adults and children, history and culture lectures, and art and sports activities. The association also organizes the community, visits families, and holds meetings in Turkmen neighborhoods. They aim to introduce Turkmen language classes in the schools of Turkmen neighborhoods and villages. Women are entitled to organize autonomously in the association, but only a few women are active participants. One of them, Amel Dada, is co-chair of the External Relations Office of the Autonomous Administration.

On the regional level, there is a Legislative Council, an Executive Council and a Justice Council. These branches mirror the councils of the Autonomous Administration on the level of North and East Syria. There is also a parallel autonomous women’s system for each of the mixed-gender bodies.

### Legislative, Executive and Justice Councils of Manbij Region

*“All laws have to be debated and passed in the Legislative Assembly. Some of our members have been sent to the assembly as representatives of the Turkmen association. We have meetings where we evaluate their work, and if we say that they didn’t represent us well, they have to step down.”*

*Faiz Hedar, Turkmen Association of Manbij*

*The Legislative Council writes the laws for the region through extensive consultation and coordination with the people, associations and institutions of Manbij. There are 'common laws,' which apply to all of North and East Syria, and 'special laws,' which apply only to Manbij region. The membership of the Council is made up of 118 people who represent various political parties, unions and professions (including students), and district and neighborhood councils. Most of the members are tribal leaders, a product of the local culture in which tribal leaders are the most important figures in society. There are three political parties who participate in the Council: the Future Syria Party, the National Reconciliation Party, and the Modernity Party.*

*With the exception of the neighborhood council co-chairs who sit on the Council, the membership of the current Legislative Council has been appointed rather than elected. The Council was formed shortly after liberation from ISIS, when the political infrastructure necessary to hold elections was lacking. Instead, the membership was decided through a series of meetings with key components of society such as tribe leaders, women and youth. The plan is for the next Council to be elected.*

*When a law is being written which is particularly relevant for a sector of society, then that sector is consulted and their views are prioritized. For example, a law that affects women the most will be driven by the views of women, whereas teachers would have more input on a law about the education system. In the case of laws that will effect the whole population, the Administration gathers the views of the population through organizing meetings with the communes.*

*The Legislative Council is in a permanent dialogue with the communes and the neighborhoods, communicating about the problems of the people and the issues that effect people the most. A representative of the Council described how the oppressive and violent behaviour of the Assad regime and ISIS had taught people "to be afraid of the governance structures" and that "they would not be listened to, and their views would not be accepted" in the place of the Council. Therefore, the Council makes an effort to reach out to the people themselves, going out to the neighborhoods and participating in their meetings.*

*For the process of writing common laws for all of North and East Syria, nine people from the Manbij Legislative Council sit on the Legislative Council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. When a common law is proposed, it first goes to the Legislative Council in Ayn Issa (the headquarters of the Autonomous Administration) and then goes to the regions for discussion and approval before being finalized in Ayn Issa.*

*The Executive Council is made up of the co-chairs of all of the committees, and coordinates and implements the decisions and laws that are made by the Legislative Council.*

*The Justice Council coordinates and leads the work of the tribunals, and passes down sentences in line with the law. They also discuss punishment for crimes with society in order to develop sentencing guidelines which are in line with social values.*

**Women in Manbij**

*There is a Women's Council of Manbij region, which organizes meetings with women in the neighborhoods and villages. Their aim is to empower women so that women can fight for and protect their rights. Zozan Hussein, the co-chair of the Legislative Council of Manbij Region, described the process of women's liberation in Manbij:*

*"The regional variation of laws is really important because here in Manbij society can be quite closed, so certain things they will not accept, such as the law against polygamy. So to address this issue, we go speak to the women, and we ask them: 'how can you accept that your husband is marrying another woman? How can you accept being someone's third wife?' And slowly, we change peoples' mentalities."*

**Institutions on the Autonomous Administration level**

The work of the Autonomous Administration on the inter-region level focusses on coordinating between the regions, where the political system operates in varying ways as a result of regional autonomy. The Administration is split into General, Executive and Justice Councils.

The General Council (Meclîsa Giştî / Zagonsaz) takes on a legislative function, and is sometimes referred to as the Legislative Council. 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. 7 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 7 offices and 10 commissions, dealing with issues like health, natural resources, economy and others.

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

At the founding congress in September 2018, Siham Qeyro (a Syriac politician) and Farid Ati (a Kurdish lawyer from Kobane) were elected as co-chairs of the General Council of the Autonomous Administration. The Executive Council is co-chaired by Berivan Khaled and Abd Hamid Al-Muhbash. However, as opposed to the Syrian Democratic Council (see below) the average resident of North and East Syria wouldn't be able to name high-level Autonomous Administration representatives because the Administration's role is primarily bureaucratic: practically, most people relate to the Administration on a local level.

# THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC COUNCIL: A PROPOSAL FOR A DEMOCRATIC SYRIA

GENERAL CONFERENCE	POLITICAL COUNCIL	EXECUTIVE COUNCIL
<p><b>The highest body of SDC: determines the political lines of the SDC</b> <i>Meets once a year</i></p> <p>Membership: - Delegations from all participating parties, civil society, organizations and individual members - 2 co-chairs of SDC</p>	<p><b>A legislative and executive body, makes political and practical decisions about the work of the SDC</b> <i>Meets once a month</i></p> <p>Membership: - 1 or 2 representatives from each political party - 1 or 2 representatives from each civil society organization - 2 co-chairs of SDC</p>	<p><b>Executive leadership body of SDC, implements decisions of the Political Council and coordinates work through the offices</b> <i>Meets every 15 days</i></p> <p>Membership: Elected for 1 year terms by the political council - 2 co-chairs of SDC - 1 chair - Co-chairs of all the offices</p>

The General Council elects two co-chairs, who preside over all three councils and represent the SDC

**OFFICES**



- Organization Office
- Women's Office
- External Relations Office
- Media Office
- Youth Office
- Finance Office
- Archive Office



## Vision and purpose

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) is a political assembly representing political parties and organizations in North and East Syria. The SDC creates a political framework for the governance of Syria along a decentralized, federal model. It is the political body to which the SDF reports. It is also the political counterpart to the Autonomous Administration, which takes on more administrative and executive functions. Negotiations with the Syrian government, as well as diplomatic relations with international powers, are generally conducted through the SDC.

The SDC, was created in 2015. 103 high-profile individual members and representatives of Syrian political parties and organizations were present at the congress which founded the SDC. In its founding declaration, the Council set itself the task of “leading the Syrian revolutionary democratic movement along the right course, and ending the present fragmentation, bloodshed and darkness the country is being dragged through.”

**“The Syrian Democratic Council is a Syrian national democratic political umbrella that consists of a group of Syrian political powers, parties, popular and cultural entities, and national figures... The SDC aims to establish a federal political system through the implementation of the principle of decentralization, adopted by the Council, and to move away from the authoritarian and totalitarian centralized system [of the Assad regime].”**

### Syrian Democratic Council Rules of Procedure

towards a federal model for Syria rather than the top-down centralistic model of the Assad regime.

The SDC supported the development of the democratic administration of Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor after they were liberated from ISIS by the SDF. At a congress of the SDC in July 2018, the decision was taken to create the Autonomous Administration to carry out the work of establishing communes, councils and confederalism in each region. This enabled SDC to focus on its role as a political body, rather than an administrative one.

Participants in the founding congress of the SDC came from a range of political backgrounds and engaged in negotiations concerning key issues and principles behind the establishment of this new political body. One point of discussion which generated internal controversy was the continued use of the term “Syrian Arab Republic,” seen by many as part of the heritage of the oppressive Ba’ath regime. The congress eventually reached consensus on the term Democratic Syrian Republic, and agreed on a strategy of working

## How the SDC is organized

The SDC contains three main bodies: the Executive Council, the Political Council and the General Conference. In many ways the Executive Council takes a leadership function because it is smallest and meets most often. For instance, Executive Council chair Ilham Ahmed led a delegation to the United States Congress to discuss the Turkish invasion in October 2019. However, both the Political Council and the General Conference are larger and more repre-



sentative and so are considered to be higher bodies. The General Conference meets only once a year, acting as a more direct form of democratic input but without much executive power. The Political Council meets on a monthly basis. The SDC organizes its work through several offices: the Organizational Office, Women's Office, Foreign Relations Office, Media Office, Youth Office, Finance Office and Archive Office.

The SDC contains a mix of political parties, civil society organizations and individuals. The membership of the SDC represents all the components of society in North and East Syria; Arabs, Kurds, Syriac-Assyrians, Armenians, Circassians, Chechen and Turkmen. People who want to join the SDC as individuals must make a written submission outlining their goal in joining the assembly, and the relevant group within the SDC conducts research on that person and whether they are suitable for membership. To be considered for membership, the individual needs to accept the principles of the SDC, such as the co-chair system, be making a genuine effort to resolve the Syrian crisis, and be of Syrian nationality. The person does not need to be resident in Syria, as they can join the meetings via a digital platform.

### **The General Conference (Konferansa Giştî)**

The General Conference (also referred to as the 'General Council') 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. Riad Dirar (an Arab) and Amina Omar (a Kurd) are currently the co-chairs of the General Conference.

### **The Political Council (Meclîsa Siyasî)**

The Political Council (also referred to as the 'Political Body') consists of representatives from all components of the SDC as represented in the General Conference. The co-chairs of the General Conference, Amina Omar and Riad Dirar, are also co-chairs of the Political Council, and the full Council is made up of 80-90 people. It is considered to serve both legislative and executive roles, 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. In order to make up the 40% women quota, a party can send a second representative if it is initially only represented by a man.

### **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, currently Ilham Ahmed. 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 and are accountable to the Political Council and the General Conference of the SDC.

The SDC was initially based in Dirbesiye, but then was moved to Ayn Issa when the city was liberated from ISIS. This move was made so that the SDC would be headquartered in a more central and easily accessible location, as well as in order to clearly situate the headquarters of the democratic confederalist project outside of traditionally Kurdish areas. However, since October 2019, Ayn Issa has become one of the front lines of the Turkish invasion. As a

result, most of the offices of the SDC and Autonomous Administration have been moved to Raqqa. The SDC also has additional centers in different cities across North and East Syria, each of which is managed by two co-chairs, one from the Organizational Affairs Office and one from the Women's Office. The centers are located in Qamishlo, Dirbesiye, Hasakah, Ayn Issa, Aleppo, Shehba and Tirbesipiye. There are international offices in Washington, Vienna, Sulemaniye (Iraqi Kurdistan) and Egypt, and work is also carried out by members based in Damascus and across Europe and the Middle East. Riad Dirar, co-chair of the SDC, is an Arab from Deir-ez-Zor and is based in Vienna and vice co-chair Majdolin Hassan also works from Europe.

## Roles and responsibilities

The purpose of the SDC is to work towards a democratic confederal Syria through conversations, consensus building and diplomacy. The SDC poses itself as an alternative to the Syrian National Council, which has been criticized for being under the influence of Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as of the government of Turkey, where it is based. Like the Syrian National Council, the SDC is in opposition to the Assad regime. The SDC states its aim as bringing together a coalition of democratic forces within Syria to build the movement towards a democratic political solution for the country. The Council has a stated focus on 'Syrian - Syrian dialogue' to envision a future for Syria, rejecting the dominant framework of international powers such as Russia, Turkey or the USA determining the fate of the region. Three conferences have already been held as part of this process.

This 'Syrian - Syrian dialogue' process also includes meetings with opposition parties and personalities who are not engaging in the SDC system, both within Syria and in the diaspora. Through these meetings, Council members say they aim to understand the criticisms and reservations of those who do not participate in the system, and to build understanding and unity. There have also been meetings organized within Syria with different sectors of society. For instance, a meeting was organized in Ayn Issa in May 2019 which brought together members of the SDC and 5,000 Arab tribe leaders. The Council is planning a mass conference, aiming to bring together 2,000 intellectuals to develop ideas and solutions for the challenges facing Syria. The SDC also aims to bring together organizations in a 'National Conference of Syria' to build a unified political vision for Syria, strengthen the movement for a democratic, federal Syria, and further the case for participation in the Geneva talks to write a new constitution for Syria. However, the official process for writing a new Syrian constitution has recently started with no representation from the confederal structures of North and East Syria and only nominal inclusion of Kurdish minorities through ENKS. There is also no inclusion of women's organizations from North and East Syria.

**“We will not accept a situation like before, that the Ba’ath party making laws, dividing and destroying. We want the constitution to be changed, we want formal acceptance of the Kurds and Syriacs and Assyrians...so we can take our place in a diverse nation. We don’t accept Syrian politics without a place for all the people of Syria.”**

**Jihat Omar, co-chair of the External Relations Office of the Syrian Democratic Council**

## The diplomatic role of the SDC

The Council plays a diplomatic role both within Syria and internationally. In October 2019, following the Turkish invasion, a delegation headed by Ilham Ahmed, chair of the Executive Council, traveled to the USA. The delegation met with members of the US Congress on the 22nd October to discuss the future of North and East Syria. Delegations of the SDC have also met with government representatives across Europe, and members of the Council have attended meetings in countries around the world, including Australia, Lebanon and Tunisia.

The SDC is 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 incorporation of the SDF into the Syrian Army has been a contested issue between the SDC and the Syrian government in discussions about possible integration of the political systems. For a long time maintaining the SDF as a separate military force was presented as a non-negotiable by the SDC, because "without defense forces, how should we be able to protect our people and our political vision?" (Jihat Omar, co-chair of the Foreign Relations Office of the SDC). Although the SDC lost a significant amount of bargaining power due to the Turkish invasion, they continue to affirm that "the autonomy of the SDF in the region protected by it" (General Command of the SDF, 30 October 2019) must be maintained, although they may concede some degree of integration.

# TEV-DEM: UNIONS AND COUNTER-POWER

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## History & change of 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, in the three initial cantons: Afrin, Jazeera and Kobane. In Manbij, Raqqa, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor regions, however, the SDC took on the role of implementing the democratic confederalist system throughout society. At the TEV-DEM conference on the 27th August 2018, the new role of TEV-DEM became to organize civil society, particularly through unions.

**“After we worked on the establishment of the communes, we handed that responsibility over to the Autonomous Administration, and during this congress [in 2018] we became the third power, organizing those parts of the civil society which is not yet organized.”**

**Ferhan Daoud, co-chair of TEV-DEM Hasakah**

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## The work of TEV-DEM

Zelal Jeger, co-chair of TEV-DEM, described its new role as follows: “TEV-DEM organize society outside of the Autonomous Administration. But our goal is not to be in opposition, we’re not against the Autonomous Administration. Because our government is not a state, our thinking is not like that of the state. If the people have complaints, we write down the protests of society and we send them to the Autonomous Administration - we criticize it. And so we play a complementary role to the Autonomous Administration within the system of the democratic nation. But if the Autonomous Administration doesn’t listen to us, we will send a message - we will create an uprising,”

TEV-DEM works as an umbrella organization and an assembly for all civil society organizations, such as unions and some civil associations such as the Yezidi House. Its role further extends to organizing those people who are not part of these organizations, and defending the rights of the people. TEV-DEM acts as a counter-power to the Autonomous Administration, “preventing it from reproducing itself as a state and protecting the values of democratic confederalism.”

On the level of North and East Syria, TEV-DEM has two co-chairs, currently Zelal Jeger and Kharib Hisso, 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. The aim is to solve problems at the most local level before referring to a higher level, although if the problem is part of a wider

issue then it would be dealt with at the appropriate level. TEV-DEM operates through the 64-member TEV-DEM Administrative Council at the inter-region level of North and East Syria, as well as through offices. This includes a Women's Office which organizes women in unions and focuses on women's issues in the local economy.

Locally, TEV-DEM hold meetings twice a month with the co-chairs of all unions, who give feedback and report on their work, and discuss proposals. Criticisms, proposals and problems are raised in the meeting, and then are brought to a higher level. Each month, there is a meeting of each regional TEV-DEM assembly, and every three months there is a meeting of the Administrative Council. Co-chairs from unions and all seven regions sit on the North and East Syria assembly, and present reports from their areas of responsibility. In this assembly, problems, proposals and criticisms which affect all of North and East Syria are discussed. Projects that would have an impact on all the regions are considered (such as the establishment of new unions), and wider questions about the needs of society are discussed.

## Case Study - City of Hasakah TEV-DEM

*"One of our roles is to solve issues between the unions and the institutions of the Autonomous Administration. At first we try to speak with the institution on a local level. But if we cannot find a solution, we refer to a higher level... And when it's solved, they report back to us, explaining what solution they reached."*

- Ferhan Daoud, co-chair of TEV-DEM Hasakah

*Hasakah city, in Hasakah canton, Jazeera region, is one of the larger cities in North and East Syria. It is ethnically mixed, with mostly Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac-Assyrian residents.*

### **Trade Unions:**

*Twelve unions have been established in Hasakah: the Workers' Union (distributes worker IDs, supports 8,000 people on labor issues), the Drivers' Union, the Intellectuals' and Artists' Union, the Teachers' Union (approximately 3,000 members), the Traders' Union, the Industrial Workers' Union, the Lawyers' Union, the Doctors' Union, the Agricultural Workers' Union, the Pharmacists' Union, the Builders' Union and the Engineers' Union.*

### **Role and responsibilities of TEV-DEM in Hasakah:**

*TEV-DEM Hasakah both coordinates existing unions, and acts as a body providing oversight and support for labor-related issues. TEV-DEM works to strengthen existing unions as well as establishing new ones. This often consists of holding neighborhood meetings to explain the work of TEV-DEM, and discuss how people can defend their rights as workers and organize themselves. TEV-DEM also supports unions, troubleshooting problems and ensuring that they are working as intended.*

*The city's TEV-DEM association also tackles broader issues, such as identifying and investigating cases of child labor, which is forbidden. If instances of child labor arise, they seek to ensure that the child can go back to school, make sure that the employers understand the severity of the issue, and also find ways to support the family if financial need is why the child was put to work. They also support communication and coordination on bigger initiatives, for example by facilitating coordination between the Drivers' Union and the local council to regulate the number of taxi-pool services on a particular road.*

*Finally, TEV-DEM also supports individuals with issues concerning employment. They help people find work, and many women come to TEV-DEM for support in seeking employment. If a worker has been fired, TEV-DEM can pressure the employer to re-employ the fired worker. For instance, when cleaning workers lost their jobs in Hasakah municipality, TEV-DEM intervened and was able to get the cleaners re-hired.*

# WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

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The Kurdish liberation movement which played a key role in the formation of the current political system of North and East Syria has long sought to set itself apart from most other mass-scale left-wing projects by positioning gender equality not just as an 'add on' to its political principles but at the core of its values and ideology. Even before the beginning of the revolution, organizing women and shifting the balance of power between genders has been a major priority. The women's movement in North and East Syria has drawn on the experience of decades of women's liberation organizing across Kurdistan. A guiding principle of the movement is that "no society can be free until the women are free." This belief appears to be accepted and implemented - to varying degrees - across the political structures of North and East Syria.

One of the foundations of the women's movement in North and East Syria is the principle of autonomous women's structures. This means that every institution 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 - has a women's structure parallel to the general structure. The idea behind this system is to create a space in which women's issues are developed and prioritized, so that they do not get marginalized, as has happened in many other social movements.

**"We want to put women's rights into the hearts of all fathers and all men."**

**Ilham Amare, Women's House of Qamishlo**

The political system across all its branches and levels works on the basis of a 'co-chair' system in which leadership positions in most institutions (outside of the autonomous women's structures) are shared by one man and one woman. There is also a strong principle of 'equal participation,' enforced by a 40% quota set out in the Social Contract, which manifests in a strong women's presence in most - though not all - political and civil spheres. It is important to remember that women's participation in mixed gender institutions exists in addition to extensive women's participation in the all-women's structures which exist alongside the mixed structures. Therefore, even if women's participation in a mixed gender council or committee is at the minimum 40% quota, there is almost always a corresponding autonomous women's structure in which higher numbers of women are participating.

The co-chair system, autonomous women's structures and the principle of equal participation represents a very tangible transfer of power to women, and indicates a commitment to ensuring that women's voices are placed at the center of political processes. Many interviewees - of both genders - refer to women as the natural leaders of a new political system, and see autonomous spaces as necessary in order for women to develop their own leadership, analysis and vision.

## Women in North and East Syria: Main issues

Under the Ba'ath regime, women were politically marginalized, with almost no political power and minimal rights guaranteed by law. Those laws which did exist in order to promote women's rights were rarely enforced. The women's structures linked to the Kurdish movement were repressed and often had to go underground, such as Yêkitiya Star (the predecessor of Kongreya Star) and the Women's Houses, which are women-led centers for community reconciliation and protection of women. Leading women's activists like Ilham Amare of Qamishlo Women's house were repeatedly arrested or assaulted by the regime.



The legal system of the Syrian government contains a hybrid of secular and religious laws, with Sharia courts which apply laws related to marriage and family issues. Although a certain degree of gender equality applies through the state's secular court system, the religious court system which exists alongside it tends to discriminate against women. Unequal social norms particularly influence marriage and family law, in which the marriage contract is made between the bride's father and the groom. The process for a woman to get a divorce – though possible – is much more demanding and bureaucratic than the process for men.

**“There is a fear that has taken root in society. If you look back to the time of Daesh [ISIS], at how women have been suffocated, it's had a big effect on women. Until now this fear is present, and something is broken in their psychology.”**

**Ilham Omar, Chair of the Women's Office of the Syrian Democratic Council**

The legal system, combined with conservative social norms, resulted in structural oppression of women in North and East Syria, as was the case across the whole of Syria. Indeed, women in the primarily poor, rural regions which constitute North and East Syria faced more social conservatism than women in many regions to the south. Polygamy, child marriage and forced marriage were legal, and women could find themselves victims of so-called 'honor crimes' without recourse to justice. Women were denied rights in the context of divorce, child custody and inheritance, while patriarchal power dynamics within families resulted in limited opportunities for women in work or education.

The regional culture – influenced by a conservative interpretation of religion - erects 'soft' barriers to women's liberation, making a tangible impact on women's lives even though not enshrined in law. Few women worked outside of the home, drove cars or were active in the public sphere. Women were thus marginalized from public spaces, as well as having very little economic independence. Common conceptions of 'honor' meant that women were not able to discuss or condemn sexual violence, and social structures based on a feudal system saw women as the property of men, with the effective legal status of a child.

Women also felt the impact of colonialism: both Syrian state's colonization of Kurdistan and Western colonization of the Middle East. The Syrian Arab Republic degraded Kurdish culture and language. Colonizing cultures glorified Western standards of beauty and whiteness while demeaning Middle Eastern appearance, knowledge and culture. At the same time the 'West' and the Middle East were conceptualized as opposites, with the West representing liberation and the Middle East embodying oppression. This stifled the growth of a women's liberation grown out of a Middle Eastern context, instead framing gender equality as something 'imported' from the West.

Siham Qiriyo of the Syriac Women's Council told RIC: “Strengthening Syriac women means strengthening the Syriac community. Strengthening the bond between Syriac women and our homeland will stop our people from fleeing to other countries. Over the past 8 years, our people lived with sorrow. Many have had flee from our homeland. Many of our daughters and sons have died for this land, which is the most difficult issue [that women] face.”

As ISIS' caliphate spread across Syria, women and girls became particular targets of violence and rape. The crimes of ISIS – as well as other jihadist groups which gained power during the Syrian Civil War – are well documented, and have had a lasting effect on the social fabric of North and East Syria. Enslavement, forced marriage, rape and murder targeted ethnic and

religious minorities like the Yezidis and Syriac Christians, while Kurdish and Arab women in the region experienced comparable levels of repression and exploitation. Organizing for women's rights existed long before the rise of ISIS in the region, but the unfolding of the revolution in the region and the establishment of a political system which centers women's liberation took place in the context of resistance against the Islamic State.

One major step towards gender equality was the enforcement of the 'Women's Law' created in 2014, which enshrined the right to divorce and the right to work, as well as prohibiting polygamy, forced marriage and underage marriage. This law is fully applied in the regions of Afrin, Kobane and Jazeera but is not complete yet in the other areas. Due to the Turkish occupation of Afrin, meanwhile, most hard-won women's rights have been reversed. Men employed within the official institutions of North and East Syria are not allowed to marry more than one woman, though those with pre-existing multiple marriages are not barred from employment. In regions where the Women's Law has not yet been fully applied, women's activists say they are consciously adopting a slow approach that works towards a deep societal change, and avoiding a top-down imposition of laws which would be rejected by society and even by the women themselves.

## Women's Law

*"Women's freedom will guarantee the creation of a democratic and free family and society... The level of development of a society depends on strengthening the role of women and her participation in the construction and development of the society."*

- Women's Law, 2014

*The Women's Law was published on the 22nd October 2014 by the Women's Office of the Autonomous Administration of Jazeera region to establish the rights of women in the new political system. The Law contains thirty points that enshrine certain rights and ban practices that are deemed oppressive. The Law has been adopted by Afrin, Kobane and Jazeera regions, but has not yet been passed in Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa or Deir-ez-Zor regions. However, the Women's committees of these regions have been drafting principles and laws for their regions, as well as conducting extensive educational work on women's issues.*

*Key rights and freedoms enshrined in the Law include:*

*Equality in all areas of life, including access to political power, employment and wages, rights before the law and judiciary, inheritance and citizenship.*

*Implementation of the co-chair system in each institution, guaranteeing that one co-chair is a woman.*

*Prohibition of forced marriage, the dowry system, polygamy, honor killings and underage marriage (under 18 years old).*

*Divorce must be a joint decision, a man cannot unilaterally cast off a wife. However, in cases of violence or mistreatment, a woman can secure a divorce without the consent of the husband.*

*In cases of divorce, the mother receives custody of a child until the child is 15 years old, at which point the child can decide which parent has custody. (Traditionally, the man's family would get custody of children). Prohibition of violence against women and sexism.*

*Any form of trafficking and trade of women and children is forbidden, including prostitution. Adultery is also prohibited.*

*Women have the right to be represented by women's institutions in a tribunal, and the right for their opinion and voice to be heard and even prioritized.*

*Protection of the rights of children.*

*The establishment of institutions to support pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and the right of all widows and widowers to access basic health and social needs.*

*These rights are not simply abstract principles: the Women's Law sets out guidelines for fines and prison sentences for those found in contravention of the Law.*

## Women's institutions

**“During the war [to liberate Raqqa in 2017], as soon as a village was liberated, we would go there and start to organize the women into communes. As much as those on the frontlines, we fought an intensive war. But when you go to the women, you see that they have knowledge and they can speak [about politics], they had been suffocated inside the house.”**

**Zalixa Abdi, Coordination Committee of the Women's Administration of Raqqa region**

The amount of energy allocated to resolving the 'woman question' is exhibited through the sheer number of institutions, assemblies and initiatives that comprise the women's movement in North and East Syria. The distinctions between many of these bodies is not easily discernible, and on the surface the system can seem complex and difficult to navigate. However, as most women engage with the women's movement initially through their local organizations, the organizational structures do not present a discernible barrier to participation. It is possible that as the system matures some of the overlapping functions will be smoothed over.

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face the system can seem complex and difficult to navigate. However, as most women engage with the women's movement initially through their local organizations, the organizational structures do not present a discernible barrier to participation. It is possible that as the system matures some of the overlapping functions will be smoothed over.



*Opening of a new women council in village, Raqqa*

## Kongreya Star, the Women's Congress

Kongreya Star, which means “Star Congress,” (in reference to the ancient Mesopotamian goddess, Ishtar), is the congress of the women’s movement in North and East Syria. It was first established in 2004 as Yêkitiya Star (Star Union), an underground organization that sought to organize women at a time of Ba’ath regime dominance over the area. 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.

**“After living under oppression for hundreds of years, our society was heavily influenced by patriarchy and the male mindset. This is why Kongreya Star was established... Our work has a good impact, for example we provide women facing domestic violence with the opportunity to leave the home and gain financial independence.”**

**Hamida Umma Mohammed, Kongreya Star of Shehba, Afrin region**

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. Women organize as Kongreya Star within the structures of the Autonomous Administration as well as through other structures such as the Syriac Women’s Union (for Syriac-Assyrian women) and in an independent capacity. Kongreya Star organizes its work through the following committees: Diplomatic Relations, Participation, Media, Education, Municipalities & Environment, Justice, Culture & Art, Social Affairs, Political Affairs, and Women’s Collective Self-Defense Forces.

Kongreya Star organizes and supports a wide range of activities and initiatives at all levels of society including demonstrations, training programs, participation in international partnerships, and setting up cooperatives. Although it has its roots in the Kurdish movement, steps are being taken to include women of all ethnic groups living in North and East Syria. There have been challenges in establishing a shared vision and practice of women’s liberation across all of society, but there have also been numerous tangible successes.



## Cooperatives, organizations and education

In different sectors, women developed autonomous structures and associations which are linked principally to Kongreya Star, but also sometimes directly to the Autonomous Administration or SDC. One example is 'Sara,' an association that campaigns against violence against women and works to change social perceptions and educate society. Another example is the Women's Foundation (Waqfa Jin), which is establishing kindergartens, orphanages and specialized schools for disabled children. They also offer practical education to women in vocational skills.

A lot of work is also being carried out in the economic sphere: the Women's Economy Committee of the Autonomous Administration and Kongreya Star (Aboriya Jin) has supported the creation of a number of women's cooperatives, allowing women to learn skills and become financially independent. These include bakeries, restaurants, tailoring workshops, factories and agricultural cooperatives. It is envisioned that women-only businesses will develop a mode of working different from more dominant, capitalist ways of working.

An interesting development in North and East Syria has been the growth of Jineology, translated as 'the science of women.' Jineology is a branch of academic study that seeks to develop a methodology and epistemology of liberation through connection with society and 'revolutionary principles.' Since 2011, Jineology has been developed across the broader Kurdish women's movement. Its stated aim is to counter the preconceptions and methodologies of science as developed by a dominant male mentality, and to "re-write knowledge from the point of view of women", with the ultimate objective of "the emancipation of society". In practice, Jineology works through local research centers, institutions and academies, conducting research, developing ideas and running seminars and training programs.

**"We need to change the the capitalist mentality – which is a patriarchal mentality - which seeks to make profit out of everything. But we cannot allow woman to become independent from man by putting herself in an exploited position [of employment]. It is not about integrating her into a capitalist system through work, it's about building up a new economic system."**

**Arin Khalil, Women's Economy Committee  
in Qamishlo**

Jinwar, a village exclusively for women and their children, was founded in 2016 near the city of Dirbesiye. The Jinwar project entails the creation of a village where women alone develop the culture, economy, daily life and governance. Women also built the physical village, using traditional, environmentally sustainable techniques to construct clay houses, a communal kitchen and gardens. The village feature a school, a medical clinic, an academy, a bakery, herd animals, a shop, vegetable garden and several fields for crops. Women organize village life through a council and take part in running the collective economy of the village. However, the women and their children had to evacuate the village for some time following the October 2019 Turkish invasion due to shelling and the proximity of Turkish-backed forces to the village.

North and East Syria contains a network of 'Women's Houses' in all cities and many smaller towns. The Women's Houses exist to solve women's issues, particularly domestic problems such as violence, marriage and divorce, and oppressive behaviors in the household.

## **Women's Houses (Mala Jin)**

*"We are not politicians, judges or soldiers, but mothers who've lost our children to ISIS. All we want is peace – but peace needs work."*

*- Ilham Amare, Qamishlo Women's House*

*Women's Houses (Mala Jin) are institutions which are part of the broader women's justice system. In the Women's Houses, local mothers, young women and grandmothers serve as mediators, using dialogue and their role as trusted community figures to resolve women's issues such as violent husbands, forced marriages, stigmatized health problems and poverty. They provide a space for the resolution of issues which affect women, and to do so from a woman's perspective – though the process of finding a solution involves all parties to the conflict, including men. All the volunteers in Women's Houses are women who live in the area that the Women's House operates in.*

*Women's Houses were first established in 2011, before the start of the revolution. They were set up in secret, and then became official institutions upon the establishment of the Autonomous Administration. When first set up, the Qamishlo Women's House dealt with 70-80 cases per month, but now the number is lower – closer to 40 – as more issues are being resolved directly in society. There were even Women's Houses established in some of the refugee camps in the region, such as the Women's House in Ayn Issa camp. The presence of a Women's House in Ayn Issa camp provided a space in which the women of the camp – many of whom had lived under ISIS – were able to find solutions for problems they were facing. However, with the Turkish attacks on North and East Syria, Ayn Issa camp was evacuated due to shelling and ground clashes close to the camp, uprisings and mass breakouts by ISIS-linked detainees, Turkish proxy forces breaching camp boundaries and fires destroying a large portion of the camp.*

*There are also those who are strongly opposed to the institution of Women's Houses. The House in Deir ez-Zor was fired on by automatic weapons, and locals who are critical of the system call them 'houses of destruction' or 'divorce houses.' However, attitudes are slowly changing, and they are becoming an integral and accepted part of society.*

*If a resolution cannot be found through the Women's House, the case can be referred to a tribunal. However, the Women's House puts the focus on finding justice in local communities before resorting to a trial. The aim is to find solutions collectively, resolving issues through dialogue between neighbors, relatives and community figures, bringing closure and security to the women involved. The Women's Houses also provide wider support beyond conflict resolution. Women who are leaving abusive relationships can learn skills like tailoring to support them to find work and their own home. Women who are at risk of violence from partners or family members are placed into safe houses, and there are also centers for children whose families can't care for them.*

## The Women's Office of the Syrian Democratic Council

The Women's Office of the Syrian Democratic Council exists to build up women's representation and organization in the SDC. Because the SDC is a political project that aims to encompass all of Syria, the work of the Women's Office also includes building relationships with women across Syria including Damascus, Tartus, Aleppo and Latakia, as well as the diaspora community. 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.

The day-to-day work of the SDC Women's Office includes running workshops and holding meetings with women to identify and analyze the challenges facing women in society. This has included meetings with institutions like Kongreya Star as well as women from different spheres of society, including academics and intellectuals, mothers and workers, and meetings with the wives of tribal leaders in Arab areas. The Office aims to develop female politicians and diplomats, as well as bring women's knowledge into the political arena.

Women have historically been highly active in the SDC, reportedly being the first to establish offices and put the work into motion. In fact, in some cities where the SDC has not yet established a local center, the SDC Women's Office is already present. The SDC Women's Office has local or regional centers in Qamishlo, Dirbesiye, Hasakah, Aleppo, Shehba/Afrin, Sheddadi, Amude, Tel Tamer, Tirbesipiye, Tel Kocher, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa. Prior to the October 2019 Turkish invasion, there were also active offices in Tel Abyad (Gire Spi), Zirgan and Ayn Issa.

**“As Kurdish women we've been organizing for over 30 years; but Arab women did not have as much opportunity and suffered under the Ba'athist system and later [ISIS]. But now when I see Arab women, I get hope and morale. They have a desire within themselves to work, to change, they are progressing so much, so fast... There are women who never left the house who are now letting their children attend 20-day training programs... who are joining the Asayish security forces...”**

**Ilham Omar, Chair of the Women's Office of the Syrian Democratic Council**

## The Syrian Women's Council

The Syrian Women's Council is an independent civilian assembly, established by the SDC Women's Office which includes women from all political parties, civil society organizations and NGOs. The Council leadership is made up of a chair and two vice-chairs. The current chair is Lina Barakat (an Arab woman), one vice-chair is Kurdish and the other is Assyrian. Within the Women's Council, there is a Diplomacy Office, a Law Office, an Organizational Affairs Office and a Media Office. The Law Office is responsible for writing laws related to women's issues, and the Diplomacy Office works through representatives in cities like Damascus, Latakia, Homs and Hama. The central office of the Women's Council is in Raqqa, and there are also local offices in Tabqa, Raqqa, Kobane, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, Qamishlo and Rimelan. Prior to the October 2019 Turkish invasion, offices existed in Tel Abyad (Gire Spi), Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn) and al Hol refugee camp.

The aim of the Women’s Council is to empower and represent the views of women in Syria through the organization of women in civil society and legislative work. They have an academy in Tabqa and run trainings and workshops across North and East Syria to build up women’s skills and self-belief. The Council also holds meetings with women in camps for refugees and displaced people, including meeting with the ISIS-linked women detained in these camps.

**“The Syrian Women’s Council was established to be the voice of Syrian women, to demand their rights, to gain their freedom and to restore their position in all fields of life.”**

**Lina Berekat, chair of the Syrian Women’s Council**

## Women’s organizing within the Autonomous Administration

Within the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, women organize autonomously from the local to the highest level. There are women-only discussions and meetings which are seen as an embedded part of the wider political system. 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. In addition to the system of administration, there are various institutions, organizations and initiatives which have been created to build women’s quality of life, leadership in society and political and economic power. Women from different ethnic and religious groups also organize autonomously through those groups, such as Syriac-Assyrian women organizing through the Syriac Women’s Council. 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 Assembly’s Coordination Committee is composed of women representing a range of political parties, regions, ethnic and religious groups and women’s organizations, as well as some individual women with relevant expertise or experience.

**“The Women’s Assembly is an umbrella political assembly that protects social and cultural rights. Representatives from women’s organizations, political parties, civil councils and civil associations, independent women’s activists and young women are taking part.”**

**Jiyan Ibrahim Hussein, member of the Coordination Committee of the Women’s Assembly of North and East Syria**



## **Attacks on women in the context of the Turkish invasion**

*“Daily, the women of Afrin face rape, the forcible marriage of young girls aged 11 or 12. Several days ago, a young woman from my region killed herself, she shot herself, rather than face being raped. Women from Afrin, Jarabalus, Azaz, Bab, Idlib are being brought to Azaz and sold. Friends of mine in Afrin have seen this with their own eyes.”*

*- Hamida Umma Mohammed, former Afrin resident*

*Prior to the Turkish invasion of Afrin region in 2018, women in Afrin enjoyed a high degree of equality, with autonomous women’s structures, the co-chair system and support for women’s initiatives established throughout the region. The Turkish invasion and occupation of the Afrin region in 2018 resulted in a steep decline in women’s rights, safety and representation.*

*Many of the Turkish proxies who have been settled there by the Turkish government and now control the region seek to establish an Islamic caliphate, as ISIS did in the territory they controlled. With the financial, military and organizational backing of Turkey, they impose and enforce laws based on conservative Islamist principles. Reminiscent of the atrocities committed under the ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq, there are reports of women and children being abducted and bought and sold in markets. There are also eyewitness accounts of violence and threats of violence against family members being used to force women to comply with sexual assault. Accounts also describe brutal punishment for violations of the imposed dress code of full veiling in public. Many women do not leave the house for fear of punishment or abduction.*

*In the current Turkish operation against North and East Syria, women are also direct targets of violence. Women have been executed, such as the politician Hevrin Khalaf and the medical workers Mediya Khalil Issa and Sozgin Khalil, abused like the YPJ fighter Çiçek Kobane or had their corpses mutilated like Amara Renas. Videos document Turkish proxies using misogynistic language while abusing and taunting women, including mistreating the corpses of YPJ fighters. Reports from Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) indicate that women are being prohibited from leaving the house without wearing a full veil or being chaperoned by a male. There are also reports of kidnapping of young women, echoing the experience of Afrin.*

*The majority of the people displaced by the conflict are women and children. Women’s experiences of displacement are compounded by their gender, with pregnant and nursing women forced to flee their homes and survive in overcrowded, temporary shelters with inadequate nutrition. There have been reports of women forced to give birth on the road, or while their neighborhoods are being targeted by shelling and air strikes.*

## Women in defense forces

**“The right to self defense is sacred and shall not be restricted. The law shall guarantee to everyone the right to justice.”**

**Article 31, Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, 2016**

The social transformation of North and East Syria in recent years has notably seen a high rate of participation of women in various military and defense forces.

### **Military and self defense forces in North and East Syria**

*There are several military and defense forces in North and East Syria.*

#### **Syrian Democratic Forces**

*The principal, unified military force in North and East Syria is the SDF, which was created to bring together the various forces fighting against ISIS following the battle of Kobane. The People’s Defense Forces (YPG) and Women’s Defense Forces (YPJ) were the largest component of the founding forces, which also included the Syriac Military Council, the Khabur Guards and Arab forces. However, since then the SDF have become an Arab-majority force as many local Arab forces have joined - though the top command remains primarily Kurdish. There are also smaller Armenian, Turkmen and Chechen components. The SDF are explicitly instituted as a force for self defense, and are prohibited from taking part in purely offensive action such as attacking a territory outside of North and East Syria.*

#### **Local Military Councils**

*The SDF also supported the establishment of local military councils in order to decentralize military power and strengthen local accountability. This trend continued throughout 2019, as military councils were created in Kobane, Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn), Tel Abyad (Gire Spi), Qamishlo and Derik among others. The transfer of power from the SDF to local military councils was also part of the SDF withdrawal from the Syria-Turkey border zone, as negotiated with the USA in August 2019 prior to the Turkish invasion.*

#### **Internal Security Forces - Asayish**

*The Asayish are the internal security forces of North and East Syria. Their most visible role is manning the checkpoints within and between cities, as well as being responsible for general incident-response, including in preventing and answering to ISIS attacks. They also contain an intelligence service, anti-terror units, prison guard and traffic control units. There are also autonomous Syriac-Assyrian internal security forces, such as the Sutoro which operates in Derik, Qamishlo, and Hasakah, and the Nattoreh in the Khabur valley area.*

*"The mission of the Asayish is to protect the people - we don't want to reproduce the model of the state where the police is primarily used to repress the people. In our academies, we tell them 'you are staffing this check-point or guarding this building to serve the people - you have no right to oppress the people.' Of course we encounter some difficulties. Some people, they get a uniform and think 'Ah, now I am the boss'. But we don't accept this, we tell them, 'on the check-point, you have to smile at people, to say 'welcome.'"*

- Amin Saleh, deputy-chair of the Internal Security Office of the Autonomous Administration

### **Civil Defense Forces - Hêzên Parastina Civakî (HPC)**

*In addition to the professional military and security forces, there are civilian defense forces which are organized on a local level through neighborhoods and cities. These forces, known collectively as HPC, are volunteers who participate in the defense of their neighborhoods as a local force, conducting night and day guard shifts and intervening in violent conflicts. HPC act as security for public events such as protests and holiday celebrations, and guard most public buildings such as hospitals. They are organized at the municipal level.*

### **Duty of Self Defense - Erka Xwe Parastin**

*The "duty of self defense" is the conscription service in North and East Syria. Each man is required to carry out 12 months of service, although this is waived if a child of the family has been killed or if this would leave nobody else to provide economically for the family. The year of service includes training in general self defense, military and political education, as well as service in general defense capacity. Those who are conscripted are rarely posted to the front line, more often being posted as back-up forces at checkpoints and in support roles, which has been the case in the defense against the Turkish invasion so far. This force has historically been majority-male, though small numbers of women have participated on a voluntary basis. An academy of women has recently been established for women who have insisted that they fulfill their family's requirement in lieu of their brothers.*

### **Women's Defense Units - Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (YPJ)**

*The Women's Defense Units, more commonly known as the YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin), gained worldwide attention through their leading role in the defense of Kobane from ISIS and the subsequent defeat of the ISIS caliphate. Women in the YPG first established all-women's units, and then established the YPJ: first in Afrin region in April 2013 and then in Kobane and Jazeera cantons shortly after. Both the YPJ and YPG are part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and therefore report to the Syrian Democratic Council. As of 2017, women fighters made up 35-40% of YPJ-YPG as a whole, and YPJ commanders held responsibility for women-only as well as mixed-gender units.*

*The YPJ have played a key role in most battles against ISIS and Turkish forces. There are women in commanding positions in every battle, and many of the fighters who have been killed in action are women. Most of the women in YPJ are young and unmarried, but women who are married or have children can*

join some of the divisions. Joining the armed forces is also a way for young women to escape forced marriage or oppressive family situations. Although women must be over 18 years old to join YPJ military units, there are regularly younger women who try to join the YPJ in order to escape dangerous domestic situations. As a response to this situation, academies have been set up which accept women aged 16 to 18 years old in which they can live and receive education and support, but do not fulfill any military role.

### **Syriac-Assyrian women's units**

There are women's units within the Syriac-Assyrian forces among the SDF. The Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces (HSNB) were founded in 2015 and operate in 'Gozarto,' the Syriac-Aramaic term for Jazeera region. The Khabur Guards Women's Unit operate in the Khabur valley area. Both forces organise autonomously as part of the Syriac Military Council and the Khabur Guards. They are members of the SDF and though their numbers are relatively low they took an active part in the protection of the Syriac-Assyrian villages in the Khabur valley during the latest Turkish offensive.

### **Women's Internal Security Forces - Asayisha Jin**

The internal security forces of North and East Syria are organized into several branches, the most visible of which is the Asayish. 'Asayisha Jin' is the women's division of the general Asayish Internal Security Forces, who are responsible for checkpoints between and within cities, search and arrest operations, and joining in military operations, particularly within cities. Women can approach the Asayisha Jin directly in cases such as domestic violence, which is particularly important because within the local culture, it is virtually inconceivable for women to report more intimate forms of violence and abuse to male security personnel. Syriac-Assyrian women also organize inside the Sutoro and Nattoreh internal security forces.

### **Women's Civil Defense Forces - HPC Jin**

HPC Jin, the women's division of HPC, is mostly made up of older mothers and grandmothers, but also some young women. They participate in all of the general HPC duties, and an effort is made that HPC Jin guard the buildings and meetings of women's councils and institutions. HPC Jin are considered to be better suited for intervention in domestic disputes in which a woman might be in a sensitive or vulnerable position. HPC Jin have also voluntarily participated in military operations alongside YPJ – YPG, including against ISIS and in the defense of Afrin.

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## ***The impact of the Turkish invasion on the confederal system***

*The Turkish invasion and occupation of over 5,000 square kilometers surrounding Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) and Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn) has posed serious challenges to the political system of North and East Syria. In addition to putting an enormous strain on already limited financial resources by necessitating military mobilization for self-defense, the humanitarian impact of the attacks has been both tragic and expensive. The Autonomous Administration is currently bearing the bulk of financial and logistical support for internally displaced populations, as the Syrian government is obstructing the United Nations' ability to take responsibility for refugee camps and many international NGOs consider the region too volatile to work in.*

*The instability caused by war and the escape of hundreds of ISIS-linked detainees has triggered a resurgence of ISIS. Among those killed by Turkish and ISIS attacks are healthcare staff, media activists and film makers, humanitarian workers and over 250 civilians (per local NGO 'Human Rights Institute - Jazira'). These deaths – and the material damage caused by shelling and air strikes – will add to the financial and psychological burden on generations to come.*

*In a more immediate sense, the seat of the Syrian Democratic Council and the Autonomous Administration – Ayn Issa – has had to be evacuated due to air strikes, shelling and ground attacks. The Administrations of Sere Kaniye (Ras Al-Ayn) and Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) have also been displaced from their cities but are attempting to continue to provide organization and support for former residents through temporary bases in Hasakah and Raqqa, respectively. Many institutions of the Administration are not working, and countless projects, services, educations and centers have paused their work.*

*“This project is not just for North and East Syria, it's a step forward for all of humanity, against terror, against despotic and oppressive systems, against systems of party and state oppression. A democratic system can serve the people, serve humanity, and as such North and East Syria is an important example for the whole world.”*

*- Hediya Yousef, Kongreya Star Coordination Committee*



# CONCLUSION

## The democratic system in North and East Syria: Challenges and evaluations

The political system of North and East Syria – although rooted in decades of political organizing and centuries of social structures – is still extremely new. It aims to tread a new political path and create a new form of governance which breaks down the division between ‘society’ and ‘government.’ Furthermore, it is doing this while facing severe security threats from ISIS and Turkey, as well as political hostility from the Russian-backed Syrian government and the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. Although it remains to be seen whether the political system of North and East Syria is able - as it claims - to offer a solution to the political and economic crises that globally dominant political systems are facing, North and East Syria has at least progressed from being a political experiment to being a political reality.

The confederal political system is still in the phase of troubleshooting, facing challenges internally as well as from external threats. It is important to note that 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 to steepen the learning curve in developing effective mechanisms of confederal governance.

One of the key areas that the system needs to develop is the commune system. As the commune system is the building block of the system, it is critical that through education, support and development of political culture the commune system improves its capacity to fulfill its aims. Currently, not enough people actively participate in the commune system for it to fulfill its function in terms of feeding democratic decisions up through the confederal system. Although the current cross-regional initiative to provide more education about the commune system will work towards addressing this, much more education and institutional support is needed.

Another shortcoming in the democratic system is an inconsistent approach to elections. Although this can be partly attributed to the various security threats – in the form of the Turkish invasions of 2018 and 2019 and ongoing threats from ISIS - that have disrupted the full roll-out of the electoral process, there are also structural inconsistencies that must be ironed out. The situation is further confused by the refusal of some political parties to participate in the system. The electoral system combines forms of direct and representative democracy in a way which undermines the strengths of each system, while also blurring the lines of a party-based system with a non-party system. This results in a rather superficial approach to elections, in which the elected candidates are neither truly ‘representative’ nor directly selected by the people. As in every political system, there have been cases of corruption and abuse of power by people within the system.

There are many areas in which the political system needs to develop in order to progress towards its professed aims. 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. Many projects have been set up, particularly in the field of agricultural cooperatives, but basic structural developments in waste and water treatment, fuel and energy and building standards have yet to be made. The Autonomous Administration has made crucial steps in identifying areas for development and international partners, but often lacks the necessary institutional capacity, funding and expertise to take action.

The question of participation of all ethnicities, religions and cultures will remain key to the future success of the system. The political system lays a foundation for multi-ethnic and multi-religious inclusion, but work still needs to be done to ensure that the reality lives up to that potential. Tensions between Kurd and Arab populations exist for various reasons, stretching back to the 'Arab belt' policies of the Ba'ath regime, and more recently as a reaction to what some Kurds perceive as complicity of sections of the Arab population both during ISIS' rule and in the current Turkish invasion. There has also been a re-adjustment of power from which many have Kurds benefited. Many Kurds have taken positions of responsibility and leadership, including those who have come from other regions of Kurdistan to join the fight against ISIS and build up the confederal system. The presence of non-Syrian Kurds taking the lead - particularly in the military field - is perceived by some locals as a seizure of power by non-Syrian actors. More positively, work is being done to address this and ensure that Arabs are included in the political system through extensive engagement with the Tribal Council and local Arab community leaders.

## A broader democracy

Despite these challenges, however, the political system has achieved some notable successes. Firstly, general standards of living have improved. Subsidized bread and diesel are provided through the commune system to those who cannot afford these two key staples of life, and the salaries of many key professions have increased. For example, the salaries of teachers in Autonomous Administration schools are double those in Syrian government-run schools. In addition, students have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongue, with multi-lingual education standard in Autonomous Administration schools. Save for regions which have recently seen heavy fighting, most people have access to enough electricity and water to meet basic daily needs, and reconstruction efforts are underway across warstruck Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. People are empowered to open small businesses, and there is institutional and financial support for the increasing number of cooperatives. This is understood as an important part of democracy - social empowerment through democratic forms of economy. On many counts, the access to basic goods is better than in nearly all other areas of Syria.

Secondly, both the political and the military structures exercise a largely humanitarian approach. In areas under control of the Syrian government, as well as in areas under 'op-

position' control such as Idlib, violence, disappearances, torture and summary executions are applied systematically. In areas within the confederal system of North and East Syria, these practices are prohibited. There have been instances of arbitrary detention and inappropriate use of force by the SDF and Asayish, but these in no way amount to the structural use of violence to oppress and intimidate people. This humanitarian approach extends even to SDF-captured ISIS fighters and their families, for whom the SDF and Autonomous Administration are responsible. At a time when foreign governments are rescinding citizenship of captured fighters and the Iraqi government is implementing fast-tracked execution through kangaroo court proceedings, the SDF and Autonomous Administration try to ensure those detained have at least their basic needs and dignities met, and implement standards of reconciliation and restoration through managed returns to home communities coordinated with the tribes and families of detained individuals. The SDF and Autonomous Administration have also pushed for the highest standards of due process at the international level. Although the SDF has played a key role in the fight against ISIS and therefore enjoys a high level of prestige and respect within local society, their rhetoric and approach remains focused on self-defense rather than militarism and jingoism. Their role is kept in check through not only a strong civil administration, but also through a diversity of civil and professional self defense forces who take on important security roles.

Finally, it is important to note that those invested in the new political system argue they are not just meeting basic Western standards of democracy, but building a more profound and broad understanding of democracy. The inclusion of civil society within the political system creates a counter-balance to the accumulation of power within the Autonomous Administration and Syrian Democratic Council and nurtures a vibrant and varied range of institutions and initiatives. At every level of society people are empowered as political actors, supported by a wide range of educational programs which raise the general standard of education across North and East Syria. In a region in which women have experienced systemic disenfranchisement and oppression, women in North and East Syria are centrally involved in every dimension of society, and are benefiting from a concrete transfer of power through the structures and principles of the political system. People from a diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds are finding ways to move past historical animosities and inequalities, and many are exercising their long-denied cultural rights.

As pro-democracy protests once again break out across the Middle East in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, and indeed across the world including in Chile, France, Catalonia and Hong Kong, the political system of North and East Syria offers some interesting lessons as to how other societies can seek to deepen understanding of democracy beyond superficially democratic systems which nonetheless leave large sections of society feeling disempowered and unrepresented. Whether the political system of North and East Syria 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.



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\* Names have been changed at the request of the interviewees.

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