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“ABOUT JPS

There is often a significant gap between political transformations, both domestic and international, and the knowledge produced by researchers, academics, and specialists regarding social issues and phenomena. Despite the proliferation of many journals in the human and social sciences, there is a shortage of publications that provide deep, research-based knowledge and perspectives, that offer valuable alternatives and recommendations to decision-makers across various policy dimensions.

The Jordanian Politics & Society Magazine (JPS), published periodically by the Politics and Society Institute, aims to fill this gap. JPS serves as a scientific platform dedicated to fostering rigorous intellectual debate on issues related to domestic and foreign policies at regional and international levels, with a particular focus on the Jordanian political landscape. The magazine emphasizes the development of scientific and intellectual concepts to address various real-world variables and promotes the exchange of ideas and interactive efforts among specialists.

Note

The views and opinions expressed in the magazine are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of neither PSI nor the Editors.

Internal Dynamics in Northeastern Syria and the Future of the Kurdish Question

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Northeastern Syria—which encompasses three governorates: al-Hasakah, Raqqqa, and Deir ez-Zor—constitutes a complex geopolitical flashpoint, where the interests of local, regional, and international actors intersect. The Kurdish question presents itself as one of the most prominent determinants of the future of both the region and Syria as a whole. The region has witnessed radical transformations since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, and later with the emergence of the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria" and the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF), supported by the international coalition to combat the Islamic State. This analytical article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the internal dynamics in northeastern Syria and the role of regional and transnational actors—particularly Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—in shaping the future trajectory of local governance and military structures in the region. It also seeks to assess the prospects for the relationship between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the new Syrian administration in Damascus.

Internal Dynamics in Northeastern Syria

The northeastern region of Syria is characterised by extensive ethnic and religious diversity, including Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Syriacs, and others. These communities have historically coexisted in relative harmony, built on mutual social and economic relations. However, the successive policies of the Syrian state since

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the mid-twentieth century have led to broad marginalisation of the region, which manifested in the absence of sustainable development, a severe lack of services, and the deterioration of infrastructure. Additionally, failed agricultural policies resulted in the depletion of water resources and an intensification of drought, peaking in the first decade of the twenty-first century, prompting large-scale migration from the region to major cities⁽²⁾.

Successive Syrian governments since the 1950s have adopted systematic marginalisation policies specifically targeting the Kurds. Notable among these were the 1962 census, which stripped thousands of Kurds of their citizenship, as well as the "Arab Belt" policy, which aimed to alter the demographic structure of Kurdish-majority areas by settling Arab families within them. These policies also involved restricting the use of the Kurdish language and the expression of Kurdish culture and banning the celebration of Kurdish national holidays, especially Nowruz. Despite temporary appeasement efforts for political purposes, such as supporting Kurds in neighbouring countries, appointing a limited number of Kurdish individuals to senior government positions as a token gesture of equality and integration, or granting citizenship to a small number of Kurds after the 2011 uprising as a form of "political bribery" intended to dissuade them from joining the revolution⁽³⁾.

As a result of these policies, a sense of isolation and alienation developed among the Kurds, reinforcing nationalist and political tendencies, which became especially evident during the events of the Qamishli uprising in 2004—a pivotal moment in the crystallisation of Kurdish political identity.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the considerable diversity in northeastern Syria gave rise to complex relationships among local components, oscillating between cooperation and alliance on the one hand, and tension and friction on the other. These internal dynamics significantly affected the region's stability and modes of governance.

As Syrian state institutions collapsed and gradually withdrew from towns and cities in northeastern Syria, a self-administrated region led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) emerged as a local governance entity, gradually asserting its control over large parts of northern and eastern Syria (first through the declaration of

2 Balanche, Fabrice. *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, 56–58.

3 Human Rights Watch. *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*. November 26, 2009. <https://2u.pw/Hs3zL>.

local administrations, then the "Federation of Northern Syria", and later the "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria"). This administration sought to establish a local governance model based on the narrative of the "Democratic Nation", drawing inspiration from the ideological foundations of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). From its inception, those in charge of the Autonomous Administration were keen to adopt a discourse of pluralism and inclusive representation, establishing local councils and bodies that included representatives of Arabs and Syrians alongside Kurds, and recognising three official languages—Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac—across its institutions.

Despite these symbolic attempts, the reality on the ground indicated a clear imbalance in power distribution, with PYD cadres exercising near-total control over civil and military decision-making. Local forces that do not align with the project are marginalised, and the civil and military councils operating in areas under the Autonomous Administration have limited authority and subjected to tight security oversight from parallel structures affiliated with the PYD and PKK. This has significantly undermined their representative effectiveness. The accumulation of marginalisation and discontent—particularly in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa—led to several tensions, most notably protests in cities such as Manbij and Raqqa between 2020 and 2022, as well as sporadic demonstrations in Deir ez-Zor since 2019. These protests centred on demands to end the forced conscription imposed by the SDF, release detainees, halt arbitrary arrests and abuses against civilians, improve Arab representation in the structures of the Autonomous Administration, and ensure a fair distribution of resources and services⁽⁴⁾.

These ongoing protests have impacted the cohesion of the Syrian Democratic Forces, especially following the so-called "tribal uprising" in Deir ez-Zor that began in late August 2023. The uprising was triggered by the arrest of Ahmad al-Khabil, known as "Abu Khawla", the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council affiliated with the SDF. Armed clashes spread across the governorate and lasted for nearly ten days, resulting in dozens of casualties and eventually ending with the SDF restoring control⁽⁵⁾. The "tribal uprising" can be seen as a clear expression of accumulated tensions and the fragility of the local governance system established by the Autonomous Administration since its inception⁽⁶⁾.

4 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "Tension in Al-Tayyanah Town, East of Deir Ezzor, Following SDF Arrests of Protesters Amid Ongoing Demonstrations for the Fifth Day in a Row." April 28, 2019. <https://2u.pw/hC50UJC>.

5 Barish, Manhal. "A Major Tribal Uprising in Eastern Syria: Will Tribal Leaders Succeed in Turning It into a Political Victory?" Al-Quds Al-Arabi, September 2023. <https://2u.pw/Lvn17cz>.

6 Sheikh Ali, Osama. "The Arab Tribes in Eastern Syria: Dynamics of Influence and Control." Turkish Vision, no. 13 (2023): 63–78. <https://2u.pw/oVvXg>.

The Kurdish Political Landscape and Minority Relations

Within the internal Kurdish context, the political environment is marked by a profound division between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC)⁽⁷⁾. The KNC accuses the PYD of monopolising political decision-making, obstructing party pluralism, and suppressing its activities within areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration. This sharp division has weakened the internal legitimacy of the administration and widened the rift among Kurds themselves, negatively affecting regional stability and the effectiveness of governance.

Although there have been no direct confrontations, the relationship with the Christian component remains one of conditional political coexistence. Some segments of the Syriac and Assyrian Christian communities participate in the Autonomous Administration within defined limits. However, any tensions related to interests or the distribution of influence may jeopardise this fragile coexistence.

Despite the Autonomous Administration's relative success in establishing a degree of security, its internal dynamics reveal significant weaknesses in governance mechanisms. It faces serious challenges, including the need to ensure genuine participation for all communities, establish a clear separation between civil and military institutions, and reduce the ideological influence of the PKK. Without addressing these structural issues, the region will remain vulnerable to recurring tensions that threaten its stability and hinder the development of a sustainable local governance model.



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The Influence of Regional Actors on the Trajectory of Local Governance in Northeastern Syria

The complex dynamics of northeastern Syria cannot be understood in isolation from the influence of regional and transnational actors—most notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Turkey. These two actors, with their opposing agendas and conflicting interests, have exerted a profound and direct impact on the course of local governance, the formation of political and military structures in the region, and their future development.

⁷ Kurdish National Council. "A coalition of several Syrian Kurdish parties supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq." <https://2u.pw/4I6vS>.

The Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria is closely linked to the PKK, both ideologically and organisationally. The Democratic Union Party (PYD)—which dominates the administration—is considered the Syrian branch of the PKK and adopts the ideas of its leader Abdullah Öcalan regarding "democratic confederalism."⁽⁸⁾ Accordingly, the military structure of the SDF was shaped by a doctrine and discipline inspired by the PKK, albeit adapted to the specificities of the Syrian context. Moreover, many PKK cadres of various nationalities (including Turkish and Iranian) crossed the border into Syria to join the fight against the Islamic State and to train SDF fighters⁽⁹⁾. This relationship made the Autonomous Administration a target of Turkish pressure, as Turkey views it as a direct extension of the PKK and, therefore, an immediate security threat along its southern border.



the PKK and Turkey have functioned as opposing yet shaping forces for the Autonomous Administration project. The PKK provided the ideological framework and organisational backbone, but also drew it into perpetual conflict with a powerful neighbouring state.

While the PKK's presence in the background of the governance scene in northeastern Syria has offered strategic depth to the Autonomous Administration, it has also created significant obstacles. On one hand, the SDF benefited from the PKK's combat experience and military tactics in fighting the Islamic State and building an effective security apparatus. On the other hand, this affiliation has prevented both the SDF and the Autonomous Administration from gaining the trust of broad segments of the Arab and Kurdish populations who oppose the PKK's policies. It has also constrained their political appeal both domestically and internationally.

Locally, the administration has faced criticism from Syrian Kurdish opposition forces such as the Kurdish National Council, as well as from broader Syrian political currents that accuse it of total subservience to the PKK and of suppressing political diversity in the territories it controls. Internationally, the strong connection to the PKK has posed a significant barrier to the acceptance of the Autonomous Administration's political project by many countries—particularly Western and Arab states—that continue to list the PKK as a terrorist organisation, despite their military cooperation with the SDF in the fight against the Islamic State.

Consequently, the PKK's imprint on the Autonomous Administration has cast a shadow over its legitimacy: from Ankara's perspective—and that of several regional capitals—the SDF is indistinguishable from the

8 Aloulou, Sasha. "The 'Autonomous Administration': A Judicial Entry Point to Understanding the Model and Experience." Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2021. <https://2u.pw/hZFji>.

9 "Mazloun Abdi: There Are PKK Elements within the SDF, and We Need American Mediation with Turkey." Syria TV, November 26, 2020. <https://2u.pw/wG9PE>.

PKK, whereas from Washington's standpoint, it is a valuable partner in the fight against terrorism, yet politically inconvenient due to its ideological and organisational affiliations.

As for Turkey, it has viewed the emergence of a local governance entity led by Kurds and dominated by the PKK along its southern border as an existential threat to its national security. Throughout the years of the Syrian war, Ankara has played a decisive role in shaping the boundaries and limits of the Autonomous Administration's experience through a combination of direct military intervention, political pressure, and economic blockade.

Since 2016, Turkey has launched a series of military operations in northern Syria aimed at undermining any independent "Kurdish entity." The "Euphrates Shield" operation (2016) cut off territorial continuity between the administration's cantons west and east of the Euphrates. The "Olive Branch" operation (2018) seized the Kurdish-majority area of Afrin from the People's Protection Units, affiliated with the administration.

Later, the "Peace Spring" operation (2019) established Turkish control over the stretch of territory between Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad east of the Euphrates, dealing a serious blow to the geographical cohesion of the Autonomous Administration's project. As a result, Ankara succeeded in depriving the administration of control over a significant portion of its border with Turkey and left the remaining areas dependent on Russian-Turkish-American security arrangements—as seen in Manbij and Kobani, where Turkish incursions were prevented in exchange for the SDF's withdrawal from border areas⁽¹⁰⁾.

Nevertheless, the influence of Turkey and the PKK cannot be reduced to a mere binary conflict.

Both actors have become decisive factors in the equation of local governance. The PKK, through its ideological and organisational presence within the SDF, shaped the contours of the Autonomous Administration, while Turkey drew the external red lines, set the limits of territorial expansion, and restricted the administration's ambitions for international recognition. Turkey continues to play a prominent role in the course of negotiations between Damascus and the Autonomous Administration, particularly regarding efforts to integrate the SDF into the new Syrian Ministry of Defence and define the future of local governance in northeastern Syria.

At the same time, the years leading up to the fall of the Assad regime witnessed a cautious Arab regional engagement in the northeastern Syria. Arab states, such as the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, have expressed notable interest in the balance of power in the region, opening channels of communication

10 Euronews. "Timeline – Turkish Military Operations in Syria and Iraq." November 21, 2022. <https://2u.pw/o0UvjUv>.

with the SDF and discussing ways to support Arab tribal initiatives. These efforts were part of a broader strategy to counterbalance Turkish and Iranian influence, particularly amid early signs of a potential US withdrawal⁽¹¹⁾.

Such Arab moves demonstrated that cross-border influences in northeastern Syria are not limited to Turkey and the PKK, but involve a broader spectrum of actors seeking to use the region as a proxy arena to advance their geopolitical interests. However, Turkey's role remains the most direct and dominant, given the extended shared border, deep historical and demographic interlinkages, and its enduring conflict with the PKK.



While Damascus insists on restoring full centralised authority, the SDF seeks to preserve a degree of autonomy within the state, ensuring political representation for Kurds and safeguards for their achievements.

In sum, the PKK and Turkey have functioned as opposing yet shaping forces for the Autonomous Administration project. The PKK provided the ideological framework and organisational backbone, but also drew it into perpetual conflict with a powerful neighbouring state. Turkey sought to weaken and dismantle the project, but in doing so also compelled it to evolve and adapt to emerging challenges.

With the recent peace talks between Ankara and Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's official announcement in May 2025 of its dissolution and end of armed struggle marked a strategic turning point for the future of local governance in northeastern Syria⁽¹²⁾. The PKK's dissolution removed one of the most formidable barriers that had restricted the Autonomous Administration's political reach and had forced it into constant confrontation with Turkey.

This development may open the door to redefining the SDF as an independent local defence force capable of gradual integration into the Syrian national army and assuming broader national roles beyond northeastern Syria. It will undoubtedly have a direct impact on the Autonomous Administration, granting it greater flexibility in negotiations with Damascus and enhancing the prospects for reaching agreements on the future structure of local governance in the region.

11 "Syria: A Race to Win Tribal Support in Eastern Euphrates." Al-Quds Al-Arabi, July 6, 2019. <https://2u.pw/v2je7>.

12 Al Jazeera. "PKK in Turkey Announces Its Dissolution and Disarmament." May 12, 2025. <https://2u.pw/RLA5x>.

Prospects for a Political Agreement between Damascus and the Autonomous Administration

With the fall of the Assad regime at the end of 2024, a new transitional phase began, breaking the deadlock that had long gripped the Syrian conflict and reshuffling the balance of power among local actors. Nonetheless, the reintegration of the country under the authority of the transitional Syrian government remains highly complex—particularly in light of the continued control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) over northeastern territories, and the existence of distinct local governance structures represented by the "Autonomous Administration," which had emerged and expanded in recent years.

Since its inception, the SDF has sought to position itself as a third force outside the binary of regime and opposition, relying on its pivotal role in the fight against the Islamic State and the military support it received from the US-led international coalition. Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration promoted its governance model by capitalising on the contest for legitimacy between the former regime and the internationally recognised opposition. However, this model failed to secure formal recognition—from the previous Syrian regime, and from the internationally recognised opposition, nor from Western governments, whose engagement with the administration remained limited to security and military dimensions.

Today, with the formation of a new transitional government in Damascus that has received initial acceptance from local and international actors, the Autonomous Administration finds itself at a critical crossroads. Ongoing direct negotiations between the administration and the Syrian government could determine the fate of its political and military structures, particularly as it faces continued pressure from Turkey and growing signs of a looming American withdrawal from the region.



Amid increasing regional and international pressures, and a declining level of Western commitment, Kurdish actors grow increasingly concerned that negotiations might ultimately undermine their political project rather than incorporate it into a comprehensive national framework

Despite the preliminary agreement signed in March 2025 between President Ahmed al-Sharaa and SDF Commander Mazloun Abdi—which outlined a framework for integrating the civil and military institutions of the Autonomous Administration into the structure of the Syrian state⁽¹³⁾—the pace of progress in negotiations has been slow. This is largely due to deep divergences over fundamental issues, most notably the future of military forces, the configuration of local governance, and the allocation of sovereign resources, particularly oil

13 Al Jazeera Net. "Full Text of the Agreement between the Syrian Government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)." March 10, 2025. <https://2u.pw/PMPNh>.

and water. While Damascus insists on restoring full centralised authority, the SDF seeks to preserve a degree of autonomy within the state, ensuring political representation for Kurds and safeguards for their achievements.

Given this complex reality, three potential scenarios can be envisioned for the future of local governance structures in northeastern Syria:

1. Gradual Negotiated Integration

This scenario assumes the successful conclusion of a political agreement between the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration, based on the principle of expanded administrative decentralisation within a unified state. It would involve the restructuring of local governance institutions to make them more inclusive and representative of all demographic components, along with the gradual incorporation of SDF forces into the framework of the Syrian army, preserving a complementary local role. The scenario also includes constitutional recognition of Kurdish cultural and political rights and guarantees for administrative specificity in Kurdish-majority areas. Success would require internal Kurdish consensus—particularly between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council—as well as regional and international support, notably from the United States and Turkey, to alleviate security concerns and balance geopolitical interests.

2. Temporary Local Governance under Central Supervision

This scenario involves the temporary preservation of certain structures of the Autonomous Administration as local executive bodies operating under the direct supervision of the central government in Damascus. This interim arrangement would gradually curtail the administration's powers while integrating the SDF administratively and security-wise into official state institutions. Some security and civil arrangements would remain in place until a new constitution is drafted to redefine the relationship between the centre and the periphery. This scenario offers a transitional solution aimed at containing the security situation, preventing administrative vacuum, and preparing for the eventual formalisation of decentralised governance in the new state.

3. Gradual Dismantling and Coercive Resolution

This scenario assumes the failure of negotiations between the two sides and the escalation of regional and international pressures—particularly in the event of a significant American withdrawal or a tacit agreement between Damascus and Ankara to dismantle the Autonomous Administration. In this case, the Syrian state would seek to reassert control through the gradual dismantling of the administration's civil and military structures, either through internal security tools or by fostering a political and popular environment hostile to the SDF within the local components (Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac). These areas would be reabsorbed into the central state.

However, this scenario carries grave risks, including the outbreak of civil war, the resurgence of armed violence, and the destabilisation of civil peace—particularly in the absence of a fair reintegration plan and comprehensive societal reconciliation.

In conclusion, from the perspective of Kurdish actors in northeastern Syria—most notably the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—the political future of the region constitutes a decisive test of their ability to preserve the gains achieved over more than a decade of *de facto* self-rule and to consolidate their position as a legitimate national partner in Syria’s reconstruction process. These actors view engagement in negotiations with the Syrian government as a necessary political and strategic option, yet they simultaneously harbor serious concerns about the possible reimposition of the centralized exclusionary system that historically marginalized the Kurds.

These actors believe that any sustainable political settlement must be based on recognition of the particularity of northeastern Syria—not only in terms of its ethno-cultural diversity, but also as a region that, since 2012, has developed a distinct model of local governance and civil and security institutions capable of administering its affairs. They insist that the integration of these structures into state institutions must proceed through a negotiated process that respects local specificities, ensures fair Kurdish representation, and includes constitutional guarantees for the protection of Kurdish cultural and national rights—thus preventing a return to previous patterns of exclusion.

Amid increasing regional and international pressures, and a declining level of Western commitment, Kurdish actors grow increasingly concerned that negotiations might ultimately undermine their political project rather than incorporate it into a comprehensive national framework. They recognize that their ability to safeguard their achievements hinges on several factors, foremost among them: maintaining internal cohesion, building cross-ethnic national alliances, and sustaining a carefully calibrated balance in their relations with international stakeholders.

From the perspective of these actors, the future of northeastern Syria should not be reduced to temporary administrative or security arrangements. Rather, it should be viewed as a historic opportunity to reshape Syria’s social contract on new foundations that guarantee participatory democracy, acknowledge diversity, and institutionalize meaningful decentralization. Any settlement that fails to incorporate these core principles, in their view, would constitute an existential threat—one that risks reproducing past crises and undermines the prospects of building a unified, democratic Syria that reflects the aspirations of all its constituents.

“ ABOUT PSI

Politics and Society Institute (PSI), is a Jordanian nonprofit, policy and research organization established to advance practical research, innovative ideas and realistic solutions toward building a more prosperous Jordan and a stable region.

The Institute is an independent organization that aims to deepen the understanding of public policy and decision-making processes and to build a better knowledge platform of domestic and regional dynamics that will define our future.

The Institute advances its mission guided by the values of the rule of law, civil society, good governance, and moderation. It provides an innovative, integrated, and global approach to its analysis of complex trends and transformations with particular attention to youth dynamics.

The Institute aims to provide practical solutions, based on up-to-date studies and research in political, economic, security, and social fields. The Institute hopes to define future trends for Jordan and the region through its analysis and projections, focusing on the impact of accelerating transformations on the politics and societies of the Middle East.

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