



A Visit to the Jazeera Canton: Report and Assessment

By AYMENN JAWAD AL-TAMIMI

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi is a graduate from Brasenose College, Oxford University, with a degree in Classics and Oriental Studies. His research interests primarily concern Iraq and Syria, focusing on armed groups on all sides of the conflicts therein. He is also the Jihad-Intel Research Specialist at the Middle East Forum. His website is <http://www.aymennjawad.org>.

This report is published by The Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis (MECRA) aims to bridge the gap between field reporting and analysis in the region through working with scholars, experts and journalists. For more information visit <https://www.mideastcenter.org/> @MidEast_Center

This report is based on the author's trip in January 2018 to the Jazeera Canton area of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria in the northeast of Syria. The visit particularly focused on the city of Qamishli on the border with Turkey. All featured photos are the author's own.

Introduction

The central conflict that has defined the Syrian civil war has been the struggle between the Damascus-based government under Bashar al-Assad and the predominantly Sunni Arab insurgency. This conflict has been 'central' in that it has determined who will rule from Syria's capital and centre of government in what has essentially been a zero-sum game. Either Assad's regime would remain in power, or a new government would assume its place in Damascus, brought to the capital by the successes of the insurgency. At this point, that central conflict has effectively been resolved in favour of Assad. It is true that his government still does not exert control over many insurgent-held areas

like large parts of Idlib province, the Turkish-backed 'Euphrates Shield' zone in north Aleppo countryside, the East Ghouta enclave and parts of Deraa and Quneitra countrysides. It is also true that the regime has repeatedly emphasized retaking control of the entire country.

However, with the overt Russian military intervention that began at the turn of October 2015 and the insurgency's loss of the eastern half of Aleppo city in December 2016, there is no longer a serious basis for the insurgency to push for Assad's removal, whether militarily or through some form of negotiation. Since the original goal of the revolutionary protests and insurgency was to overthrow the regime, the insurgency has lost in the bigger picture, even if fighting between it and the government continues for many years.

The rise of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and the associated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) presents a different dynamic. The federation, the SDF and their predecessors represent third-way actors that first gained significant power in 2012 as the regime largely withdrew forces from predominantly Kurdish areas to prevent them from being spread too thinly across the country. The vacuum was largely filled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD is the chief component of the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM) and is linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). In addition, the PYD has an armed wing in the People's Protection Units (YPG). On 21 January 2014, the 'Democratic Autonomous Administration' (*al-Idarat al-Dhatiya al-Dimuqratiya*) was formally declared, with three autonomous cantons in Afrin, Kobani and Jazeera.ⁱ

Initially, there was no connection of contiguous territory between the cantons, but U.S. support for the YPG that was tied to the campaign against the Islamic State in light of the latter's assault on Kobani led to a significant expansion of areas under PYD and YPG control. As a result, the Kobani and Jazeera cantons have become connected. In contrast, the isolated Afrin canton is currently under assault by the Turkish army and allied Syrian rebels. In October 2015, the SDF was established with U.S. support as a broader framework to bring together the YPG and allied forces.ⁱⁱ In March 2016, a federal region was declared for northern Syria.ⁱⁱⁱ

Of the three cantons, the Jazeera canton is the most important. It contains the most important cities within the territory of the federation (namely Qamishli and Hasakah) and has oil resources. It also has the main point of access with the outside world in the form of the Fishkhabur-Semalka border crossing with the Kurdistan region in Iraq.

This author visited the Jazeera canton in the period between 15th and 21st January 2018, focusing on Qamishli. Of particular interest to this author were issues of administration, the nature of the Syrian government's presence in Hasakah province and relations between it and the canton. These matters, are highly relevant in light of indications from the Trump administration that it plans to keep a small contingent of troops within the SDF areas for an open-ended commitment. In a speech at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlined a number of objectives behind continuing American engagement in Syria, including the prevention of the resurgence of the Islamic State, countering Iranian influence and bringing about a political settlement in Syria that would lead to a transition away from Assad.^{iv} Therefore, the issue of how the SDF areas fit within the wider framework of Syria is crucial to analyzing the validity of the Trump administration's strategy and end-goals.

Qamishli: Overview of the Main Players

Currently, Qamishli is a predominantly Kurdish city with significant Arab and Christian minorities. The streets can be observed to be full of life during the day with functioning shops, restaurants, businesses and even some hotels like the Asiya hotel in the city centre, where this author stayed at a rate of \$25 per night. Proximity to the border with Turkey means there is relatively good access to the Internet, though the service is expensive. For example, at the hotel, the price was \$3 per gigabyte of data. There is little hint of the widespread destruction that has afflicted other parts of Syria like the cities of Aleppo and Homs. The most glaring site of destruction in the city is the site of an Islamic State suicide bombing that hit Qamishli in July 2016.^v



Site of the July 2016 bombing in Qamishli.

The city is largely under the control of the Autonomous Administration, but the regime maintains a notable presence in a section known as the Security Square (*Murabba' Amni*). The Syrian flag and posters and placards featuring Assad's portrait are on display in the area. Traffic policemen affiliated with the Syrian government can also be seen in the area and in proximity to it. In addition, the regime controls Qamishli airport and the road leading to it. Outside the Security Square, a militia called Sootoro that is aligned with the regime can be found in a Christian neighbourhood of the city. It should not be confused with the Sutoro that works with the Asayish (police/internal security apparatus) of the Autonomous Administration and is affiliated with the Syriac Union Party (SUP) and in turn the Bayt Nahrain National Council. The SUP is aligned with the Autonomous Administration. Also under the Bayt Nahrain National Council is the Syriac Military Council, which is part of the SDF and has a base inside Qamishli.

Among the notable auxiliary forces present inside the regime-held parts of Qamishli are the National Defence Forces (NDF), *Ansar Amn al-Dawla* ('Supporters of the State Security') and *Ansar al-Amn al-Askari* ('Supporters of the Military Security').^{vi} As the latter two names imply, these formations are affiliated with the Amn al-Dawla and al-Amn al-Askari intelligence agencies of the Syrian government. More controversially, in the vicinity of the airport, it has been said that there is a Hezbollah presence. This point was affirmed to the author by Abu Aboud, the former leader of the regime-aligned Deir az-Zor militia Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidin.^{vii} Abu Aboud, who has spent time at Qamishli airport, said that the official for the Hezbollah presence in the area is one al-Hajj Jawad, and that the airport is used by the 'friends' (i.e. foreign allies of the Syrian government) for transfer of weapons.^{viii}

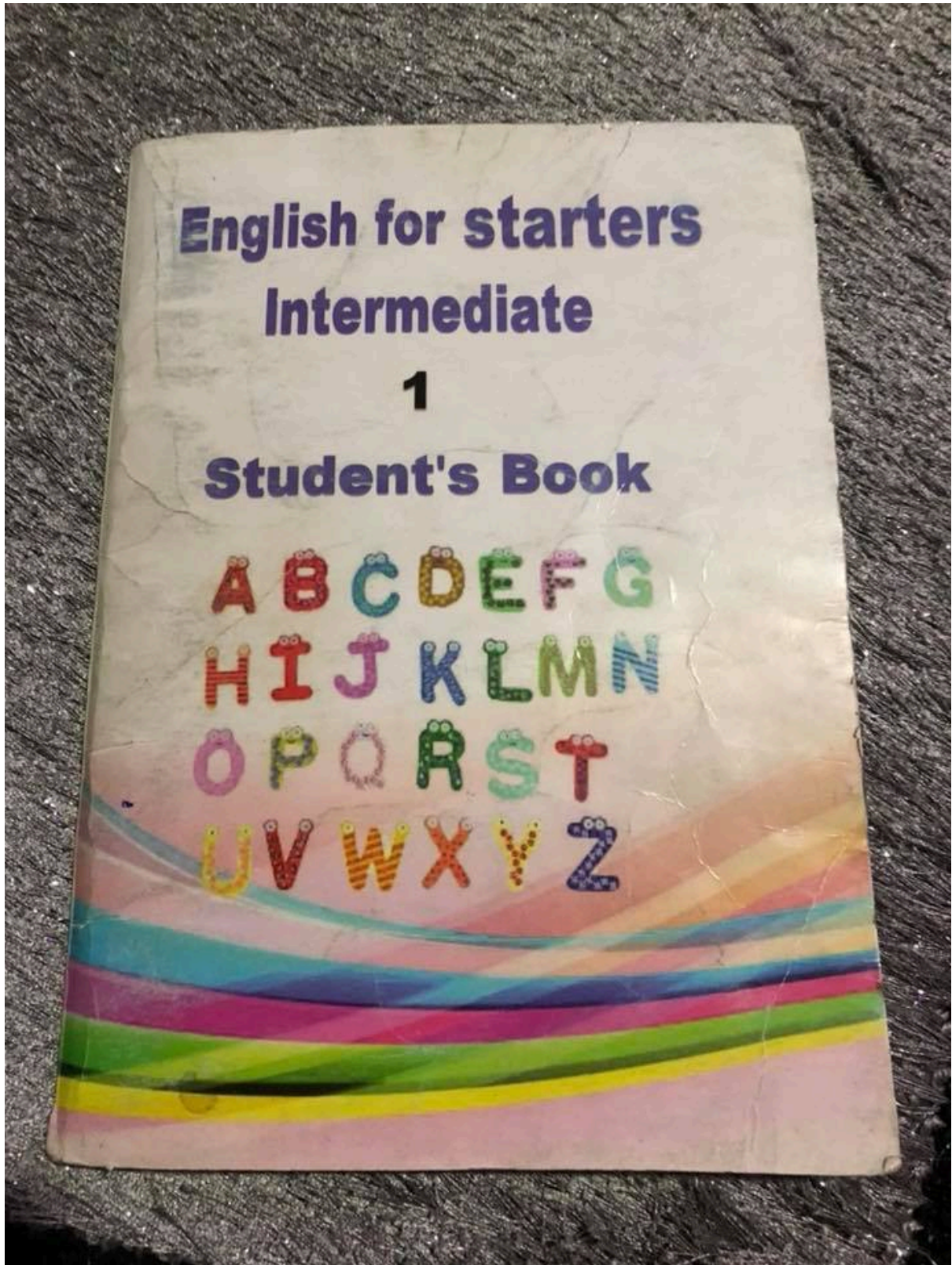
Governance: The Autonomous Administration and the Jazeera Canton

Introduction

The Autonomous Administration has developed a number of institutions to administer various aspects of life, such as the Power Commission that manages electricity and oil resources, the Financial Commission that manages financial matters of governance, the Education Commission that manages schools and the Commission of Local Administration and Municipal Offices that manages local services provision and municipal offices. The system is such that each autonomous canton has its own Power Commission, Education Commission, and so forth. These institutions provide a variety of employment opportunities at the higher administrative level and for more ordinary personnel. The Autonomous Administration is responsible for financing the salaries of most of these positions.

Education

The Autonomous Administration's influence has increased over time at the expense of the Syrian government. The development of education is one example of this trend. According to Samira Hajj Ali, the joint head of the Education Commission in the Jazeera canton, new curricula were introduced for schools by the Autonomous Administration in the area beginning in 2015, initially covering grades 1-3 in primary school.^{ix} In 2016, the new curricula were extended to the entirety of the primary school level, and then in 2017 to the secondary school level (grades 7-9), with grade 9 being the level up to which education is compulsory. A foundational idea of education from the Education Commission's perspective is that each component of society should have the right to education in its own language. Currently in Jazeera canton, this means that there is education in Arabic and Kurdish up to the secondary level, whereas Syriac education only goes so far as the primary level. For an Arab pupil, for example, teaching from grades 1-3 would be in his/her mother tongue exclusively. From grade 4 onwards, that pupil would also learn Kurdish as a second language.



School book for teaching English. This book, like other school books used in the Jazeera canton, was printed in Sulaimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In total, the Autonomous Administration in Jazeera canton claims that 2119 schools so far are affiliated with it, with 188,134 pupils studying under its primary school programs, while 29,264

pupils study under its secondary school programs. The school day runs from 8 a.m. until 12 p.m., with the school week running from Sunday until Thursday. The starting salary for a teacher working under the Autonomous Administration is 60,000 Syrian pounds per month, subject to increase based on experience. This salary is said to be higher than that for a teacher working under the regime system. Higher salaries serve as a financial incentive to incorporate people who previously worked under the regime into the Autonomous Administration education system, even as the government has threatened to cut the salaries of those qualified teachers and staff who choose to work with the Autonomous Administration.

In principle, the Autonomous Administration is open to accepting anyone who worked with the regime and wants to work in the Autonomous Administration, but that person must study the new curricula and appreciate the differences in approach to school life. For instance, in schools affiliated with the Autonomous Administration, it is not allowed to hit pupils. There is also an ideological rift, as the Autonomous Administration schools do not teach the ideas of Arab nationalism and the Ba'ath party, but rather Abdullah Ocalan's conception of the *umma dimuqratiya* ('democratic nation'). Ocalan was the original leader of the PKK until his arrest in 1999. He remains imprisoned by Turkey.



A Christian private school next to a Syriac Orthodox church in Hasakah city. Though the church and school are right next to a Sutoro base, the school flies the Syrian flag (visible in this photo but slightly obscured by the wind) because it teaches the regime's curricula.

In the realm of pre-university education in Jazeera canton, the regime still maintains influence in

that the high schools (*thanawiya*) in Jazeera canton are still affiliated with it and teach the regime's curricula.^x Likewise, the staff and teachers in those schools receive their salaries from the regime. In addition, there are some private schools that teach the regime curricula. These private schools enjoy some popularity even among Kurds as they are a means to gain access to Syria's universities that enjoy international accreditation,^{xi} unlike the Rojava University that is affiliated with the Autonomous Administration and has multiple colleges (e.g. petroleum engineering and history). Two notable private schools in Qamishli are the Sa'ada school and the Ittihad school. The Autonomous Administration intends to switch the affiliation of the high schools away from the regime and to close private schools, considering the latter to be contravening its vision of society.

Public Services

As mentioned earlier, the Autonomous Administration also has a commission that manages public services. This author was able to visit the Qamishli municipal office, located in what was once a hotel,^{xii} in order to inquire further into public services. According to a media official for the municipal office,^{xiii} the Qamishli municipal office was established in 2013, with the aim of covering public services such as cleaning and water.

While some personnel from the regime-affiliated municipal office have come to work with the Autonomous Administration, many others have refrained from doing so and continue to receive salaries from the regime. The municipal office is tied to an elected Qamishli city council, which is responsible for choosing the leadership of the municipal office. Speaking in general terms, the media official did mention a "supervisory" role for PKK members in matters.

The most notable claimed accomplishments for the Qamishli municipal office in 2017 were the broadening of the eastern and western entrances of the city, as well as building a new slaughterhouse for meat and new offices and shops in the tourism and Nawruz garages. While describing the services situation in general as "very good," the official acknowledged that there were shortcomings, such as use of old vehicles for cleaning services that the municipal office took from the prior municipal office that was affiliated with the regime. He also noted that there have been complaints from residents regarding sewage and water services, which he traced to problems of very old infrastructure and drains in disrepair.

Réveberiya Xweserîya Demokratî
Desteya Réveber a Kantona Cêlê - Sûriya
Desteya Réveberîyên Heremî û Şaredariyan
Şaredariya :
Dirêk :
Hîmar :



الإدارة الذاتية الديمقراطية
المجلس التنفيذي لقاطعة الجزيرة - سوريا
هيئة الإدارة المحلية والبلديات
بلدية : قامشلي
التاريخ : ٢٠١٤ / ٥ / ١٧
الرقم : /

بلدية قامشلي الكبيرة

تعميم رقم /١٧/

النظافة اخلاق وحضارة فلنتعاون على نظافة بلدنا

الى كافة الأخوة المواطنين واصحاب المحلات في الشوارع العامة
التقيد بمواعيد رمي القمامة

بين الساعة ٧ — ٨ صباحاً

بين الساعة ١١ — ٥ مساءً

وكل من لا يتقيد بهذا التعميم يتعرض للمخالفة والمسائلة القانونية

الرئاسة المشتركة لبلدية قامشلي الكبيرة

رائيا محمد معاذ عبد الكريم



Statement for distribution issued by the central Qamishli municipal office. Translation in the Appendix.

The municipal office charges taxes for services, though the media official described these as “symbolic” in nature, putting them at 300 Syrian pounds per month. Such a fee is applied to the

ordinary household. The monthly fee imposed on shops and businesses are larger but vary according to profession: for example, a restaurant might pay \$3 per month, while a clinic might pay \$4-5 per month. These fees of course cannot provide sufficient income for the municipal office to undertake the necessary infrastructure improvement projects. Nor is the financial situation of the municipal office good enough to provide sufficient salaries for the municipal office’s workers to meet living costs, with a salary of \$110 per month for a worker, whereas according to the media official’s estimate, the average worker in Qamishli needs \$500 per month for a decent livelihood.



Services receipt of 500 Syrian pounds for a resident, issued by the west Qamishli municipal office. Dated November 1, 2017.

While salaries for workers in the regime’s municipal office might have been lower in absolute terms, the living cost was previously much cheaper. The services situation was of course much better under the regime before the war as well, with electricity and water available throughout the day. Thus, as the media official put it, the services situation “has regressed a lot, regrettably” since the outbreak of the war, despite the fact that Qamishli has not faced the level of war damage seen in other parts of the country. The isolation of the region (e.g. the border with Turkey being closed) adds to difficulties in maintaining and improving services. In addition, outside aid to try to improve services in Qamishli has been very limited, with some aid organizations having provided assistance to develop water services.

Electricity

Although most public services in Qamishli city are covered by the Autonomous Administration at the expense of the regime's ability to provide public services, the matter is more complicated when it comes to electricity. There is the Power Commission affiliated with the Autonomous Administration and it regularly advertises its activities in Jazeera Canton on social media. However, the regime's Electricity Ministry is also active in the Jazeera Canton area, maintaining offices in Qamshli and Sweidiya. This author was able to visit the Qamishli office, located in close proximity to the border with Turkey. The Electricity Ministry employees who were seen at the office were all Kurds and continue to receive salaries from the regime, including the director of the Sweidiya power station, who mentioned that he has been working in the electricity sector for 39 years.^{xiv}

Presently, there is some national grid electricity being supplied to Qamishli, amounting to a total of around 6 hours per day. From 2013 until 2016, the national grid electricity situation for Qamishli was not good. Qamishli's electricity sources have chiefly derived from Deir az-Zor and Raqqa provinces via substations in the Hasakah and Mabrukah areas, as well as the Sweidiya power station. The fact that the rebels and then the Islamic State initially seized most of Deir az-Zor, Raqqa and Hasakah provinces meant that these sources of electricity were lost, and some of the units at the Sweidiya power station, which relies on oil, went out of service.



Outside the regime-affiliated electricity station and office in Qamishli



Inside the regime-affiliated electricity office in Qamishli

Improvements to the situation began to come in 2016 with SDF advances against the Islamic State in Raqqa province in particular, as the Islamic State lost the Tishreen Dam in December 2015 and then the Tabqa Dam (Euphrates Dam) in May 2017.^{xv} Some repairs were made to infrastructure that had

been damaged by the Islamic State. For example, the Syrian government sent some technicians to repair lines that had been damaged after the recapture of the Tishreen Dam.^{xvi} There had also been damage to substations in the Tel Hamees and Mabruka areas that required repairs.

In general, there has been some cooperation between the Electricity Ministry and the Autonomous Administration in Hasakah province, but there have also been problems, though these were not specified in nature.

Ziyad Rustum, a senior official in the Power Commission in Jazeera canton working in the electricity sector and originally from the town of Qahtaniya to the east of Qamishli, gave the Autonomous Administration's side of the story on the issue of electricity in an interview with this author.^{xvii} According to him, employees of the Power Commission receive a monthly salary of 62,000 Syrian pounds per month (a rate he says applies to all employees of the Autonomous Administration), whereas deputies and heads of commissions receive a monthly salary of around 90,000 Syrian pounds.

Rustum denied that there was cooperation between the Power Commission and the Electricity Ministry at the level of institutional bodies. However, he did admit that the Power Commission worked with some employees of the Electricity Ministry who could provide relevant expertise when necessary. As he put it:

"They [the employees with the Electricity Ministry] are employees and children of the region and there is no disagreement between us such that we should demand that the [regime-affiliated] offices should be closed, and in the end they have salaries that they are taking and they are a source of livelihood. But as I told you, there is coordination because they possess expertise and there are many personalities who are not miserly in expertise in helping our personnel."

While also emphasizing that "we [the Autonomous Administration] do not prevent any employee who serves the service sector in electricity and others besides it," Rustum asserted that the Electricity Ministry has not provided meaningful financial support for electricity repair and development projects. As an example, Rustum referred to electricity delivered from the Euphrates Dam: "The electricity we have brought from the Euphrates Dam- I have presently arrived from there- and the cost of repair reached around 700 million [Syrian pounds] and the [Electricity] ministry did not offer a piaster of it." After the recapture of the Euphrates Dam, Rustum says that experts (i.e. personnel from the Electricity Ministry) came to the dam and said it was out of service and could not be repaired, but "what they helped us in was the restoration of the 230 KV line."

On the subject of the Sweidiya power station, Rustum noted that there are employees of the Electricity Ministry present at the station, but claimed that the ministry does not provide support for maintenance of the station, asserting: "We replaced the oil for turbine no. 1 at a cost of 18,000,000 [Syrian pounds] and the ministry did not offer a piaster."

Finance

Finance forms the backbone of the functioning of administration and responsibility for it comes under the Financial Commission. In an interview conducted following the author's visit to the Jazeera Canton, the Financial Commission in Jazeera canton defined its role as:

“Drawing up and developing the financial policies and plans and financing of projects in the Democratic Autonomous Administration, preparing the financial budgets for the commissions, guiding and regulating the expenditures of the administrative, service and development projects, developing economic activities and the means of obtaining taxes and developing their organization in what realizes the economic, societal and service aims.”^{xviii}

The Financial Commission says that its principal sources of income are taxes (the principal tax being the income tax), tariffs, fees for services and oil production. The income tax was implemented at the end of the financial year for 2017 CE.

The economic blockade by Turkey along the canton’s northern border and the existence of only one border crossing with Iraqi Kurdistan severely limit direct economic activity with the outside world. However, as is normal in the Syrian civil war, there are trade and business interactions with areas held by rival forces, most notably the regime and the rebel-held areas. For instance, goods from Turkey can reach SDF-held areas first by entering rebel-held areas in north Aleppo countryside, and from there entering SDF-held areas. For its part, the Financial Commission denies direct transactions with the regime: “There is no direct business between the regime and the Autonomous Administration, but rather there are business relations between businessmen in the regions of the Administration and the regions of the regime. And these relations are by virtue of the fact that we are a part of Syria and they are natural relations that answer the needs of the businessmen on both sides.”

The Controversy over Oil Resources

Unanswered by the Financial Commission in Jazeera canton was a specific question about whether there is an agreement with the regime regarding oil production income. Indeed, it seems that this particular issue is sensitive, but it appears that employees of the regime’s oil ministry still work in the oil fields in the Rumeilan area and receive salaries from it. In July 2017, the outlet Iqtisad claimed that the oil fields in the Rumeilan area were directed by a company affiliated with the regime, with the regime responsible for paying the salaries of the workers, while the Power Commission appointed staff to supervise the work of the company and paid the salaries of those staff. An unnamed official in the Power Commission, however, told the outlet at the time that there was an intention to pay the workers an additional salary from the Autonomous Administration, in order to keep hold of the workers in case the regime should act to obstruct work on the fields.^{xix}

In September 2017, some pro-regime social media pages claimed that a geological engineer called Ghassan Hassan al-Khalif of the geological directorate in Rumeilan was arrested. According to these pages, al-Khalif was “entrusted by the Syrian government with the task of officer of connection and coordination with the Kurdish militias regarding the oil wells and maintaining them.”^{xx} In January 2018, Iqtisad further reported that the Power Commission had increased its control over the management of oil in Rumeilan, expelling the director and appointing a new one in addition to new heads of offices.^{xxi}

In correspondence, the media page for the Ba’ath Party’s Rumeilan branch asserted that the workers receive salaries from the Syrian government: “Yes, they [the workers] are affiliated with the Syrian government and receive salaries from it. There are also special cars that take those whose homes are far away to the fields.”^{xxii}

Ziyad Rustum clarified to this author^{xxiii} that workers in the Rumeilan oil fields still receive salaries from the regime, but said that they receive additional salaries from the Autonomous Administration that exceed the salaries from the regime. However, he said that he did not know whether the regime and Autonomous Administration were sharing oil revenues. The Rumeilan oil fields officially come under the Rumeilan Oil Company. According to Rustum, this company is officially affiliated with the Power Commission, whereas when it was officially affiliated with the regime it was called the Rumeilan Fields Directorate.

Opinions on the Autonomous Administration and Wider Situation

Throughout the author's visit to the Jazeera canton, a variety of opinions were expressed about the Autonomous Administration and the wider situation in Syria. In general though, it is fair to say that the Autonomous Administration enjoys the most support among the population of the Jazeera canton, followed by the regime and last of all the opposition and the armed rebellion. This assessment makes no claim to determining levels of support in terms of exact statistics. Such an endeavor would require comprehensive polling data, and in this war environment it would be difficult to carry out such an initiative. Nonetheless, opportunity was given to hear out different perspectives, and some of these will be explored in more detail below.

Talking to TEV-DEM

As mentioned earlier, the PYD is the main component of TEV-DEM, the origins of which are traced back to 2007. This author had the opportunity to talk to Abd al-Salam Ahmad, a lawyer by training. He was born in 1961 in Hasakah city and studied at Damascus University.^{xxiv} He was among those who participated in the founding conference of the PYD in 2003. He is currently the joint head of the public relations office for TEV-DEM. He has two sons: one of them is in Britain currently, the other serves in the Asayish.

The PYD, in Ahmad's own words, is the "foundation that represents the political face for TEV-DEM." Ahmad explained in some detail the existing political system in the cantons. The smallest political body is called the commune, beyond which one there are councils at higher levels such as a city council and regional council. Note that the greater Jazeera canton is divided into two principle sectors: Hasakah and Qamishli.

To give a sense of the scale regarding the commune, the city of Qamishli would have multiple communes operating at the neighbourhood level. The communes help to deal with local complaints and cases in realms of life like services, security and health. They can also resolve certain matters before they should have to be referred to a court for arbitration. The communes can make suggestions and propose projects to higher levels of authority. The idea of communes traces back to the thought of Abdullah Ocalan, for whom TEV-DEM proudly expresses its reverence and admiration. In this context, it should be noted that Ahmad also affirmed that there is an ideological affinity with the PKK and that there are PKK veterans originally from Rojava who have utilized their experiences to provide assistance to the wider society.



Inside the TEV-DEM public relations office. Note the portrait of Abdullah Ocalan.

There have been elections at the levels of communes and city councils, but general elections for the federal region have not been held yet. In fact, they have been delayed for reasons such as the fact that in certain areas many of the original inhabitants have not yet returned and the environment is

not conducive to holding elections. For the elections that have been held so far, TEV-DEM claims good levels of participation, though critics such as the Kurdish National Council (about which more below) contend otherwise.

Ahmad had no positive words to say about the regime, which he dismissed as dictatorial, oppressive, the “foundational cause” for the scale of destruction and ruin in Syria, and dependent on its Russian and Iranian foreign backers. Nonetheless, he conceded that the regime’s presence in Qamishli and Hasakah has to be tolerated, since the regime enjoys a seat at the UN and has some level of international legitimacy, and as such residents need it to acquire things like passports. In addition, Ahmad noted that the Jazeera canton is “besieged,” and as such Qamishli airport needs to be kept open by remaining in regime hands.

The negative views of the conventional opposition were also evident. As Ahmad commented: “We do not offer all of these martyrs and sacrifices to replace Bashar al-Assad the Alawite with a Sunni path.” Potentially, Ahmad suggested, the federal region could become the host of a true, democratic and secular opposition that could change Syria’s political system, in keeping with American desires for a political transition away from Assad. The problem, however, is that “they [the conventional opposition] are still under the control and directives of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These states do not seek the interests of the Syrian people, but rather their own interests. Erdogan...has put the interest of Turkish national security above every consideration, therefore he sacrificed Aleppo city, and sacrificed the armed groups and all of them in Idlib, in service of Bashar al-Assad.”

Commenting on the American presence in the region, Ahmad stated: “We welcome it.” Though the Americans have their own interests, he argued that they coincide with those of the Autonomous Administration. As such, arguing that the American presence is a guarantor of stability and prevents scenarios like a Turkish attack on the Rojava area, he affirmed:

“We hope that the American presence continues in this region...We are in a hostile environment...Turkey, led by the Islamofascist AKP, the Ba’athist regime from the same school, the Hashd Sha’abi and Shi’i and the Iranian as well on the same form. Therefore, the presence of an international force [i.e. the Americans] controls the situation.”

Kurdish Support for the Regime

It may strike the reader as surprising that there are Kurds who are supportive of the regime, which has historically denied Kurds the right to learn their own language in schools and even deprived many of them of nationality until 2011. However, the existence of this support can be traced to a number of understandable reasons. One such reason has the same underlying cause as the reason why many Kurds have come to regard the Autonomous Administration as the most preferable system: namely, the perceived failure of an opposition that is seen as having become too entangled with extremism, whether jihadism or anti-Kurdish chauvinism.^{xxv} The ongoing operations against the Afrin canton led by Turkey have only aggravated these sentiments.

Other reasons for Kurdish support for the regime can be traced to the fact that some have been beneficiaries of the system in attaining employment and a livelihood. Others regularly go to regime-held areas for work and study. From these perspectives, education in the Kurdish language is not seen as being of great importance, as Arabic is considered to be a more useful language.^{xxvi} There is also a sense of realism in that there is no alternative but to have a functioning relationship of some

sort with the central state, which is controlled by the regime.

Kadar Rijjo was an example of these trends that the author encountered.^{xxvii} Rijjo is a lecturer in philosophy and graduate student at Damascus University. He was born in the village of Khazna Kabira in the Qahtaniya area but came to Qamishli to complete his secondary education and from there went on to study in Aleppo university. His parents currently live in Qamishli. His father, a retired teacher, still receives a pension from the regime. He had Syrian nationality before the Syrian civil war.

Rijjo portrayed life in Damascus as “very good,” asserting that “there is a nice social atmosphere, as well as a cultural atmosphere, you have spiritual, holy sites there...for all the sects there.” This is so, he said, despite the war: “A mortar may fall, but five minutes later and normal life goes on.” Given the choice between Damascus and Rojava, he said that he would rather live in Damascus, explaining that there is “civilization” in the capital and that “everything is available.”

Asked about his opinions on the initial protests and evolution of the civil war, Rijjo said that he was with the idea of some reforms and changes, but “if you come and you want to change all the understandings and values, and you don’t have a project from the outset, you are asking to destroy the infrastructure, to destroy the state.” Surely, though, the intelligence apparatus was oppressive and provided a basis for popular grievance? For Rijjo, there was no need for people to speak about politics, as life was good prior to the outbreak of the civil war: “In Syria, you could speak about everything except politics. Sure, brother, it’s not your business. Don’t speak about politics. Everything is available for you....In Syria, open heart surgery was done for 50,000 [Syrian pounds]. In which state of the world can you do open heart surgery for 50,000?^{xxviii} In Syria, all the citizens would go every week to eat lunch in restaurants: once a week.” The opposition, he argued, made a huge mistake in turning to armed rebellion. Rijjo spoke positively of Bashar al-Assad, claiming that he was “striving to ensure that every citizen should have a house, car, and a specific level of income, and that his [the citizen’s] children should have an education. The universities have been open, the schools free, all things available.”

Commenting on the Autonomous Administration, he argued that in the end it should not be dependent on foreign backers like the Americans or the British: “You [referring to the Autonomous Administration and Kurds more generally] must return to the Syrian state and have a discussion with the Syrian state.” Rijjo drew a comparison with the Kurdish experience in Iraq with regards to the problem of thinking that one can simply do without the central state: “In Iraq, when the problems arose along with the Kirkuk disagreement situation, no one stood with the Iraqi Kurdistan region.” That is, Rijjo’s point was that integrating the Autonomous Administration project within the framework of the Syrian state is the only real guarantee for its survival, noting also how supposed foreign guarantors for Afrin had abandoned it to face a Turkish assault.

The Kurdish National Council

The main Kurdish opposition-affiliated political body is the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which is currently an umbrella for multiple Kurdish parties and organizations opposed to the PYD. For people such as Abd al-Salam Ahmad of TEV-DEM, the KNC is little more than something under the sway of Turkish influence. The KNC was established on 26 October 2011. According to one of the members of the presidency of the KNC, the KNC considers itself “a part of this revolution [against the regime], a part of the Syrian national opposition, and the inheritor of the Kurdish national movement that was

established in 1957.”^{xxix} He described the KNC’s aims as putting an end to the regime and establishing a pluralist, democratic and secular state that is based on a federal system, which should guarantee Kurdish national rights. In 2013, the KNC joined what is today the main political opposition coalition: the National Coalition for Forces of the Opposition and Syrian Revolution. Currently, each town in the Afrin, Kobani and Jazeera cantons should have at least one local council affiliated with the KNC. In Qamishli, for example, the KNC has three local councils.

The KNC harbors multiple grievances against the PYD. Some of these grievances are more general such as complaints of arrests of journalists critical of the PYD. The high-ranking official asserted that the parties of the KNC and the PYD initially came to understandings as per the first and second Arbil agreements on the need for a Kurdish region within a federal Syria.^{xxx} However, the Arbil agreements failed, with the KNC holding the PYD responsible for the failure and accusing it of monopolizing military power and political decision-making. In October 2014, another agreement was signed- the Duhok agreement- under the supervision of Masoud Barzani.^{xxxi} According to the interviewee, the Duhok agreement stipulated that there should be a joint military force (with the KNC’s force being the Rojava Peshmerga), a review and restructuring of the Autonomous Administration that the PYD had established, and building a new political guidance leadership. However, he charges the PYD with going back on the agreement in the wake of the successful repelling of the Islamic State’s campaign against Kobani.

The KNC considers the latest entity established under the SDF- the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria- not to be in accordance with the federal region that was originally intended: that is, a region particular for Kurds within a federal Syria, on the grounds that the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria includes areas of Arab majorities like Deir az-Zor that might not want to be part of that federation.

The KNC accuses the Autonomous Administration of closing offices of the KNC’s parties, arresting many of the leaders of those parties and barring large-scale activities for the KNC inside Autonomous Administration areas, especially in the aftermath of the collapse of the Duhok agreement.^{xxxii}

The interviewee claimed that the KNC “represents most of the Kurdish people” of Syria. He says that more than 50% of the people have left the region, partly out of the general circumstances of the region but also because of the PYD, fleeing policies such as conscription and the imposition of new educational curricula. Of those who left the Kurdish regions in Syria, he claims that 90% of them are among supporters of the KNC.

The KNC’s claims to represent most of Syria’s Kurds are highly questionable. The fact that the KNC continues to tie itself to the opposition coalition, which officially came out in support of the Turkish operations against Afrin, has only hurt its standing among many Syrian Kurds. This is so regardless of the KNC’s own condemnation of those operations and the legitimacy of some of its grievances against the PYD and the Autonomous Administration.^{xxxiii}

The interviewee himself acknowledged that the war against the Islamic State has increased popular support for the PYD. Moreover, he acknowledged that there are problems with the opposition, saying that “it has not been able to offer a clear program...for a future Syria.” He also criticized the militarization of the opposition (something he attributed to the regime), commenting: “When the revolution was militarized, the collapses began, a wide field arose for extremism and terrorism.” He

argued that the militarization has caused the opposition to lose the popular support it once enjoyed. For its part, the KNC has no military force inside Syria, and does not claim to have relations with rebel groups or a presence in areas like the rebel-held 'Euphrates Shield' area between Azaz and Jarabulus, even as there are many Kurdish villages in that area.^{xxxiv} Note that the KNC does not participate in the Syrian Interim Government.

Christian Divisions

The Christian population inside the Jazeera canton displays a notable division between those who work with the Autonomous Administration and SDF and those aligned with the regime. In Qamishli, this author was able to visit the SUP (which participates in the Autonomous Administration), the Syriac Military Council (part of the SDF) and the regime-aligned Sootoro.

Though Sootoro is aligned with a government that espouses Arab nationalist ideology, the group does not espouse an Arab identity. Indeed, the representative from Sootoro^{xxxv} interviewed by this author identified himself as a Christian of Armenian origin, and said that "we are citizens in the Syrian Arab Republic...but we are not Arabs." Indeed, the group espouses rejection of discrimination on ethnic and sectarian grounds. Hence, on the issue of the municipal office of Qamishli, the representative commented: "It does not matter to me if the head of the municipal office is Kurdish, Arab, Syriac, Armenian or anything, what concerns me regarding the head of the municipal office is his work."

According to him, Sootoro was officially established in March 2013 but had its origins in the 'Popular Committees' set up in Qamishli in 2011 in order to protect and secure the neighbourhoods from criminal activities amid a state of chaos. The Popular Committees were among the earliest forms of auxiliary pro-regime organization during the Syrian civil war. The representative explained that when Sootoro was officially established, the SUP was invited to become a part of it, but instead went its own way to form its own Sutoro that would work with the YPG and the Autonomous Administration.

At one point, Sootoro was part of the NDF establishment in Hasakah, and a battalion of Sootoro still works with it. However, at the present time, Sootoro claims to be independent. The representative affirmed that the group has received only limited financial support from the Syrian government, with more support having come from locals in Qamishli and exiles. Although it is claimed that there are good relations with both the Iranians and Russians, it is denied that any financial and military support for Sootoro comes from them.



The Gozarto Protection Forces is an affiliate of Sootoro. This plaque was kindly presented to this author by Sootoro.

Sootoro has not confined military activities to Qamishli city. Sootoro also participated in fighting against the Islamic State in Hasakah city during the 16-day battle in 2015 when the group assaulted the city, the recapture of Mahin in the Homs desert from the Islamic State in coordination with the Guardians of the Dawn group and other allies,^{xxxvi} and battles in Deir az-Zor, where Sootoro had a contingent in the area before the breaking of the Islamic State's siege. Moreover, Sootoro does not solely concern itself with military matters. It can also act as a fire brigade^{xxxvii} and emergency response force- as was the case when the Qamishli car bombing happened in 2016- and has provided aid relief. For example, when Yezidis from Sinjar were displaced, Sootoro prepared three trucks to deliver aid for the displaced Yezidis at the refugee camp in the Derik (al-Malikiya) area.^{xxxviii}

Politically, Sootoro does not claim to espouse any project. As the representative affirmed: "We do not possess a project, whether of independence, separatism or special status [e.g. Christian autonomy]. We are a people living in this area. We have only wished to preserve our presence...We work with all...We distinguish very well between the political project and the citizen. We are all Syrian citizens, whether we are Arab, Kurds, Christians in our different ethnic identities, whether Assyrians, Syrians or Armenians. But your political project, this is your business and aspiration...if you have a political project, it is not required for you to impose it by arms or force."

Commenting on the Autonomous Administration project, the representative gave an impression of simple disagreement rather than outright hostility: "They consider that they have a specific political

project serving the region and this is their point of view...We are not in this project...our connection is one of children of the land...Our aim is that there should not be a confrontation. You have your project, I have my project....But a person imposing a project on another, of course this is rejected.” Part of the disagreement relates to skepticism of the idea of federalism. If one starts proposing federal status for a region with a particular ethnic/sectarian majority, why should it not be applied to other regions, such as the Druze villages of Jabal al-Summaq in Idlib province, for example?



Despite a general prevalence of calm and cooperation, Sootoro clashed with the Asayish in January 2016. The poster is dedicated to one Kabi Henri Dawud, a Sootoro fighter who was killed in those clashes. The poster reads: “We, the Syrians, will only vouch for the Syrian flag because it is a guarantor for our national unity. Pray for us on earth and we will pray for you in heaven.”

In addition, the representative complained about problems caused by competition for influence between two administrative systems (i.e. the Autonomous Administration and the regime): “The citizen, in terms of services, is oppressed: he pays two taxes, because of the disagreement between the state and the Autonomous Administration in what concerns service matters. The citizen makes two permits for his establishment.” As a result, incomes are low but the cost of living is high: “Life is Dubai, but the income Somalia.” A further issue the representative noted regarding the Autonomous Administration is its lack of international legitimacy. As a result, for instance, the educational program it has imposed is not recognized, which creates a variety of problems.

Despite all these disagreements over the political project, there is cooperation where necessary between Sootoro and the Autonomous Administration’s security apparatus (e.g. the Asayish): “If a

terrorist comes...of course the security of the land is a shared responsibility for all.”

The SUP offers a differing view. The deputy head of the party- Senharib Barsum- explained that the SUP was with the idea of the “Syrian revolution.” The SUP was one of the participants in the National Coordination Commission (NCC), an internal opposition body that was founded in 2011 and is to be distinguished from the more familiar external opposition coalition with which the KNC is affiliated.^{xxxi} The SUP eventually withdrew from the NCC in 2016,^{xi} following disagreements that began in 2013. The SUP was one of the founding parties of the Autonomous Administration.

Commenting on the relationship with Sutoro,^{xii} the deputy head of the party noted that:

“There is a political disagreement, in the first degree. They are considered among the supporters of the Syrian regime, and they are a tool in the hands of the regime. We consider that this orientation is not in the interest of our [Syriac] people. The interest of our people lies in having free will...The regime can play tricks with the peoples and create discord between the masses of the components. This has happened during the past years but we have always been able to control the situation generally, and not allow the development of any discord that the regime wants, especially between the Syriacs and Christians generally on the one hand and the Kurds on the other.”

The SUP traces the beginnings of its own Sutoro project to 2012, with the establishment of the first centre in the al-Wusta neighbourhood in Qamishli. Within the Autonomous Administration, the SUP has worked to promote education in the Syriac language for Christian children in the region. To be sure, some schools that teach the regime curricula have also allowed for teaching of the Syriac language to such children for approximately two hours a day on the basis that it is a liturgical language. The SUP’s efforts however aim to have the entire curricula taught in Syriac language, and encourage private schools that are affiliated with the churches and teach the regime curricula in particular to allow the introduction of the Autonomous Administration’s curricula.

The SUP deputy head contrasted the situation of the Syriac people in the Autonomous Administration areas with the complaints of marginalization and discrimination in Iraq. He asserted that “the Syriac component has very good representation” in the system: “We have our rights, just as the Kurds have their rights.” It became clear that he sees the Autonomous Administration as far more preferable than the regime in Damascus. Asked about the prospect of recognition of the Autonomous Administration by the regime, he expressed a pessimistic view, on the grounds that the regime is still convinced that it can still seize control of all of Syria and reconstitute a centralized government. However, he also said that the American presence in the area constitutes a form of “pressure on the regime” and that the presence helps to prevent a war being waged by the regime and Iran on areas like Raqqqa and the Jazeera canton. He commended the American military support for the SDF, but hoped the U.S. could provide political support for the Autonomous Administration project and work towards a political solution in Syria.

Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

This report cannot claim to provide an exhaustive study of the Jazeera canton or wider Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. The limited time frame of the visit made such an undertaking impossible. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this report can provide the reader with a more updated view of the functioning of the Autonomous Administration and a sense of the different local viewpoints on this project.

Considering the U.S. presence in the SDF-held areas, an immediate question arises as to whether the U.S. can achieve its stated objectives. The answer is only partially in the affirmative. Preventing a resurgence of the Islamic State is a reasonable goal, but it is hard to see how the mission as currently defined counters Iranian influence and can lead to a transition in the centre away from Assad. Indeed, the regime still has a presence within Qamishli and Hasakah cities, and it cannot be said that this presence is merely symbolic.

In fact, when this author asked on multiple occasions why the SDF does not simply expel the regime from these areas, it was pointed out that such actions would notably lead to the closure of Qamishli airport, which needs to be kept open for multiple reasons. For instance, the airport is crucial for supply of medicines to the Jazeera canton. In addition, residents use the airport for convenience of travel to places like Damascus, where they might study at the university or seek better quality treatment in hospitals. In a similar vein, the regime's presence in the provincial capital of Hasakah has to be tolerated in order for residents to carry out certain proceedings that cannot be managed by the Autonomous Administration, such as obtaining passports.

To be sure, conceptions of the Autonomous Administration as a parasitic entity mostly being financed by the regime are outdated at best and misleading at worst.^{xiii} Further, it is inaccurate to characterize the Autonomous Administration and the political powers behind it as somehow being part of the Iranian-led 'resistance' axis. Indeed, dislike of Iran was very apparent to this author from interviewees such as the YPG spokesman^{xliii} and the joint public relations director for TEV-DEM, the latter of whom characterized Iran as "constituting the other face for the Dawa'esh...the Shi'i face of the Islamic Caliphate."^{xliiv} However, the fact that the regime still controls Qamishli airport with a Hezbollah presence in the airport area is an obvious obstacle to notions of countering Iranian influence.

In a similar vein, the idea of pursuing regime change through a presence in the SDF areas is unrealistic. Whatever lofty notions one might have of the SDF areas as a democratic example for the rest of Syria, the reality is that the central conflict in the civil war has already been resolved. The nature of the regime's presence in Qamishli and Hasakah, together with the Autonomous Administration's own governing ideology, demonstrates that the SDF areas cannot be divorced entirely from the centre of power in Syria.

Perhaps the U.S. could engage in a unilateral effort to cut off the SDF areas entirely from the regime-held areas. The cost of such an effort would be considerable, requiring an extensive nation-building campaign that the U.S. is clearly not willing to pay for. One need only look at the reluctance to finance reconstruction in Iraq as a sign for comparison. Meanwhile, rolling back Iranian influence and pursuing regime change would require offensive operations against the regime and its allies. Such a campaign would need far more U.S. troops than currently stationed in Syria, and there is no sign of willingness to pursue offensive operations for understandable reasons, as going on the offensive entails far greater risks than mere forceful deterrence from encroaching on SDF-held areas.

However, simply withdrawing from the SDF-held areas is also not a viable option. In such a scenario, these areas will likely be exposed to attacks from Turkey on one front and the regime and its allies on another front. The fear of this outcome was noted by interviewees, and there is the risk of the creation of a new vacuum that the Islamic State can exploit. This does not necessarily mean that the Islamic State will rise again to its 2014-2015 levels of territorial control and influence in Iraq and

Syria, but it still makes sense to avoid the risk of a new vacuum and prevent a resurgence for the organization that can allow it to bolster its claims of being a state project.

Ensuring the preservation of the SDF-held areas is in itself a worthy goal. In the end, the SDF has proven to be a valuable ally for the U.S. in the fight against the Islamic State and does not deserve to be abandoned. Thus, policy should be oriented towards making these areas more economically viable and giving them a strong enough negotiating position to reach a formal status agreement with the centre of power in Syria. In this regard, the U.S. cannot simply ignore the problem of Turkey. Whatever one's views of the Turkish government, the reality is that Turkey controls most of the SDF-held areas' borders with the outside world. If these borders were to be opened, there would be significantly more economic activity that could reduce the need for business dealings with regime-held areas of Syria and improve the overall lot of the SDF-held areas. For instance, an opening of the borders could allow for importing medicines without reliance on Qamishli airport.

Hence, calls for U.S. policy just to 'ditch Turkey' and 'back the Kurds' are not realistic. Instead, policy should work towards creating a détente between Ankara and the SDF. In turn, considering that Turkey regards the SDF as an extension of the PKK, it would be helpful to encourage a restart of the peace process with the PKK.

By strengthening the SDF-held areas economically, preventing the possibility of a Turkish attack on those areas, committing to deterring aggression by the regime and its allies on SDF-held areas through airstrikes and dropping rhetorical commitments to unrealistic goals of regime change and removing Iran from Syria, the U.S. can provide a better chance for the survival of the SDF-held areas as a formal autonomous region in Syria.

It may well be the case that the policies proposed here will not achieve the desired goals: perhaps an understanding between Turkey and the SDF cannot be agreed, and it may be that the government in Damascus will not grant any formal recognition of the SDF-held areas as an autonomous region. In these circumstances, there is an argument for simply continuing the status quo with a deployment of U.S. troops to deter attacks, but the ambitions must be realistic and clearly articulated to the U.S. public.

In short, U.S. policy needs to look beyond narrow lenses of counterterrorism and using areas where it wields influence as a mere pawn in a game of regional chess. Policy should also look to securing the SDF's future as an autonomous and improving the well-being of its inhabitants.

Appendix: Translation of Document

Democratic Autonomous Administration
Executive Council for Jazeera Canton: Syria
Commission of Local Administration and Municipal Offices
Municipal Office: Qamishli

Date: 12 May 2017

Greater Qamishli Municipal Office [i.e. central office]

Statement for distribution no. 17

Cleaning is ethics and civilization, so let us cooperate on cleaning our land.

To all citizen brothers and shop owners in the public streets, please comply with the following times for disposing garbage.

7-8 a.m.

8-9 p.m.

And all who fail to comply with this statement for distribution risk legal contravention and inquiry.

Joint leadership for the Greater Qamishli Municipal Office

Rania Muhammad

Muadh Abd al-Karim

Notes

ⁱ "The Autonomous Administration: The Nucleus Of Democratic Federalism," ANHA, January 21, 2017 (<http://www.hawarnews.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%8C-%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF/>). Note that not all areas under SDF control currently come under the three autonomous cantons.

<https://www.vedeng.co/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%85-%D9%81/>

^{xvi} Cf. “Electric towers by air to Qamishli,” Electricity Ministry in Damascus, February 20, 2016 (<https://justpaste.it/electricityminhaskfeb2016>). This post mentions substantial materials and costs for repairing the network components for supply of electricity to Hasakah.

^{xvii} Interview on February 12, 2018.

^{xviii} Interview on February 3, 2018.

^{xix} “In the framework of a cold war over oil, the PYD expects that the regime will pressure it through the leverage of employees,” Iqtisad, July 25, 2017 (<https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/17610>)

^{xx} Post by “Dir’ al-Jazeera in al-Hasakah,” September 7, 2017 (<https://justpaste.it/rumeilanengineersep2017>)

^{xxi} “Democratic Union seizes the administration of Hasakah oil fields,” Iqtisad, January 5, 2018 (<https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/18816/>)

^{xxii} Conversation on February 13, 2018.

^{xxiii} Interview on February 12, 2018.

^{xxiv} Interview on February 17, 2018.

^{xxv} Hujjar al-Sayyid, a journalist with whom the author worked in Qamishli, is one such individual: he previously supported the opposition and worked with the pro-opposition Qasioun news site, but is now supportive of the SDF.

^{xxvi} There are of course many analogies: e.g. the decline of the Welsh language during much of the 20th century.

^{xxvii} Interview on January 16, 2018. Another example of a pro-regime Kurd encountered on this trip was Hujjar al-Sayyid’s wife, who presently works as a teacher in the Autonomous Administration.

^{xxviii} That is, going by the pre-war value of the Syrian pound, which would amount to \$1000-1100.

^{xxix} Interview on January 17, 2018.

^{xxx} “Signing of the Arbil communiqué between the KNC and the West Kurdistan People’s Council,” KRG, July 11, 2012 (<http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=14&s=01010100&r=81&a=44646,&s=010000>); “Arbil 2: Will the path be paved for Kurds to Arbil 1?” Elaph, December 18, 2013 (<http://elaph.com/Web/opinion/2013/12/858693.html>)

^{xxxi} “Statement to public opinion regarding the Duhok agreement of the KNC and TEV-DEM,” Malpera Dimoqrati, October 23, 2014 (<http://www.dimoqrati.info/?p=18417>)

^{xxxii} That said, the Autonomous Administration does allow for some KNC activity that does not attack or criticize the administration. See, for example: “In video: the KNC holds a demonstration in Derik in support of Afrin,” Vedeng, February 4, 2018

(<https://www.vedeng.co/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%85-%D9%81/>)

^{xxxiii} For instance, it is true that some Kurds wish to avoid conscription and thus live abroad and are reluctant to return, even if that means difficulties in finding employment in exile. This author has encountered such people in Iraqi Kurdistan.

^{xxxiv} Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Afrin Operations: Interview with a Kurdish Activist of the Shami Front,” February 2, 2018 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/12/afrin-operations-interview-with-a-kurdish>)

^{xxxv} Anonymous by request. Interview on January 16, 2018.

^{xxxvi} On Guardians of the Dawn and the Mahin operations, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Usud al-Cherubim: A Pro-Assad Christian Militia,” Syria Comment, December 14, 2016 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/19468/usud-al-cherubim-a-pro-assad-christian-militia>)

^{xxxvii} E.g. Helping to put out a fire that broke out in the Centro restaurant in Qamishli, September 2014 (<https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/513447022096297984>)

^{xxxviii} Cf. Post from August 18, 2014: <https://twitter.com/ajaltamimi/status/501422708304121857>

^{xxxix} Interview on January 19, 2018. Cf. “Founding Statement for the Commission,” NCC, December 15, 2011 (<https://syrianncb.com/2011/12/15/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%80%D9%80%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D9%80%D9%80%D9%80%D9%80%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A9/>). The PYD was also among the initial participants in the NCC.

^{xl} “Four Syrian parties withdraw from the NCC,” January 8, 2016 (<http://www.almayadeen.net/news/820644/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A8->

<https://justpaste.it/sootoroqamishli>). The PYD also withdrew at this stage.

Among the causes of the withdrawal was the NCC's involvement in forming a joint opposition negotiations body in Riyadh (The Higher Negotiations Committee), which excluded the PYD and its main allies in the Autonomous Administration.

^{xli} Cf. Sootoro's criticisms of the SUP and its Sutoro in a statement issued in July 2014 (<https://justpaste.it/sootoroqamishli>)

^{xlii} Raja Abdulrahim and Dion Nissenbaum, "Kurds Carve Out a Home in Syria, Testing U.S. Ties with Turkey," Wall Street Journal, August 31, 2016 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-kurds-have-carved-out-a-statelet-adding-new-snags-to-a-complex-region-1472661321>)

^{xliii} Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Interview with the YPG Spokesman," January 24, 2018 (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/01/interview-with-the-ypg-spokesman>)

^{xliiv} Interview on January 17, 2018.