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The Transformation of Kurdish Party Activity in Syria:

**From Political Representation to the Militarization of Influence and  
Transnational Organizations — and Its Repercussions for National and Political  
Security**

## **Introduction**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Syrian arena has undergone profound structural transformations across its political, security, and social spheres. These shifts have led to a reconfiguration of the balance of power within both the state and society, alongside the emergence of new non-state actors that have assumed increasingly influential roles in shaping the trajectory of the conflict and the future of Syria's political entity.

Within this context, the Kurdish political and military movement in northeastern Syria has emerged as one of the most prominent of these actors. It has moved from a position of political and organizational marginalization to an advanced standing within the Syrian equation, capitalizing on the security vacuum, regional shifts, and varying degrees of international support.

The rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the establishment of the Autonomous Administration, and the subsequent announcement of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015 represented a pivotal turning point in the trajectory of the Syrian Kurdish movement—both in terms of political and military organization, and in terms of its relationship with the Syrian state and with the regional and international actors engaged in the Syrian file. The Kurdish role was no longer confined to demands for cultural or political rights; rather, it evolved into a *de facto* self-governance project, supported by an organized military force and a network of administrative and security institutions exercising control over vast geographic areas of strategic and economic significance.

However, this structural transformation in the trajectory of Kurdish party activity was not merely a shift from the margins to the center. In some experiences, it was accompanied by a

growing drift toward the militarization of party work and the emergence of a complex overlap between political activity and armed organization. This development led some parties to evolve from instruments of political representation into organizational frameworks with a transnational military–security character. In this context, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) stands out as a central model of this transformation, both in terms of its ideological and organizational structure and its regional extensions, as well as its direct and indirect influence on shaping the armed Kurdish experience within Syria.

This pattern of political–military organization has contributed to the production of forms of organized violence and practices that, in certain contexts, have taken on a radical character. This has been directly reflected in Syrian national security and the regional security of neighboring states, through the destabilization of internal stability, the complication of border balances, and the reintegration of the Kurdish issue into regional and international security frameworks, rather than addressing it as a political and rights-based issue that could be resolved within the framework of the nation-state.

The repercussions of this transformation have not been limited to the security and regional levels alone; their effects have also extended into Kurdish societies themselves. The militarization of political demands and their linkage to transnational organizational agendas have contributed to weakening the political and moral legitimacy of the Kurdish cause, distorting its rights-based dimension, and gradually transforming it from a matter of citizenship and rights into a problematic security file—inflicting significant long-term harm on the interests of Kurdish communities.

This study derives its significance from its attempt to analyze Kurdish political life in Syria within its broader historical, political, and security context, with a focus on the transformations of Kurdish party activity from peaceful political engagement to armed organization, and on examining the repercussions of this shift on the structure of the Kurdish movement itself, on the Syrian state, and on the surrounding regional environment, away from ideological approaches or justificatory narratives, and through a multidimensional critical analytical approach.

*Within this framework, the study poses its central research question:*

To what extent has the transformation of Kurdish party activity in Syria—particularly through the rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the establishment of the Autonomous Administration—contributed to producing a pattern of overlap between the political and the armed spheres, and what are the implications of this for Syrian national security, regional stability, and the future of the Kurdish cause itself?

From this main question stems a set of subsidiary questions, most notably:

- What is the historical and political context in which the Syrian Kurdish movement took shape, and what factors paved the way for some of its parties to shift toward the militarization of political activity?
- What is the organizational and political nature of the relationship between the PYD and the Kurdistan Workers' Party

(PKK), and how has this relationship been reflected in the party's practices and structure within Syria?

- How were the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) formed, and what is the nature of their military structure and their political and security functions within the Syrian and regional landscape?
- To what extent has the Autonomous Administration succeeded in building a stable governance model, and what has been the impact of its security and military policies on local Kurdish and non-Kurdish communities?
- What are the future security and political implications of the continuation of this model for the unity of the Syrian state and for the Kurdish cause in its political and rights-based dimensions?

This research aims to provide a comprehensive and balanced analysis of Kurdish political life in Syria by tracing its historical development, analyzing the roles of its principal actors, and assessing its political, military, and social impacts on Syria and the surrounding regional environment. The study also seeks to offer a strategic reading that assists decision-makers in understanding the dynamics of the Kurdish movement, the limits of its power, its points of weakness, and the potential scenarios for its future within the framework of the Syrian state.

**These issues have been addressed through three main axes:**

**First:** The historical and political context of the Kurdish movement in Syria.

**Second:** The Syrian Democratic Forces and the Autonomous Administration: structure, roles, and interactions.

**Third:** Strategic assessment of roles, future impacts, and proposed recommendations.

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### **First: The Historical and Political Context of the Kurdish Movement in Syria**

The Kurds constitute the second-largest ethnic group in Syria after the Arabs, and their demographic and cultural presence has been a constant element in the social structure of the modern

Syrian state. However, the evolution of the Kurdish movement within the Syrian framework was not limited to the pursuit of political and cultural rights; rather, it has witnessed, over successive stages, structural transformations that in some instances led to an increasing overlap between party activity and armed engagement. The security-oriented approach adopted by the Syrian state toward the Kurdish issue, alongside the restrictions imposed on political activity, contributed to pushing a number of Kurdish organizations to seek alternative organizational frameworks, which later paved the way for the militarization of party work and its linkage to organizational structures with transnational regional extensions<sup>1</sup>.

With the outbreak of popular protests in Syria in 2011, which later evolved into a multi-party armed conflict, the Syrian Kurdish movement entered a new phase characterized by a redefinition of its political and security roles and functions. In the context of the withdrawal of state institutions from several Kurdish-majority areas, filling the vacuum was not limited to the establishment of local governance structures; it was also accompanied by the formation of organizational frameworks that combined military control with political administration. This represented an actual transition from traditional party work to an integrated political–military model that went beyond the nature of peaceful political activity<sup>2</sup>.

In this context, the Syrian Democratic Forces emerged as the broader military framework that reorganized armed power in northern and eastern Syria. However, this rise was not isolated from deeper transformations in the nature of the Kurdish movement itself. The integration of political and military dimensions within a single organizational structure contributed to consolidating a model of overlap between party work and

armed activity—a model that carried internal and regional security implications, particularly given the transnational organizational and ideological affiliations and their consequences for reintegrating the Kurdish actor into regional national security approaches.

Building on this, this section addresses the historical and political context of the development of the Kurdish movement in Syria, with a focus on the transformations that Kurdish party activity has undergone, from limited political engagement to organizational models with a political–military character. It also highlights how these transformations contributed to reshaping the position of the Kurdish movement within the Syrian equation, and to producing patterns of organized action that went beyond the local framework, directly impacting the stability of the Syrian state and its regional balances.

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“An Extraordinary Tale: The YPG/PYD Rises | Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist.”  
Clingendael.org, 2021,  
[www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/the-yppgyd-during-the-syrian-conflict/1-an-extraordinary-tale-t he-yppgyd-rises/#:~:text=A%20first%20element%20of%20the,Syrian%20society%20in%20w hich%20Kurdish](http://www.clingendael.org/pub/2021/the-yppgyd-during-the-syrian-conflict/1-an-extraordinary-tale-t-he-yppgyd-rises/#:~:text=A%20first%20element%20of%20the,Syrian%20society%20in%20w hich%20Kurdish).

<sup>2</sup> “The PKK and the PYD: Comrades in Arms, Rivals in Politics?” Turkeyanalyst.org, 2016,  
[www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/535-#:~:text=Until%20the%20 outbreak%20of%20the,own%20authority%20over%20the%20area](http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/535-#:~:text=Until%20the%20 outbreak%20of%20the,own%20authority%20over%20the%20area).

## **1. The Emergence of the Kurdish Movement in Syria and the Trajectory of Its Political Development**

The features of Kurdish activity in Syria gradually emerged since the 1920s, within a framework characterized by the predominance of cultural and social aspects over direct political organization. This early pattern established the particularity of

the Syrian Kurdish experience, which for a long period remained distant from militarization or armed activity, before later undergoing profound transformations that pushed toward redefining party work, its limits, and functions<sup>3</sup>.

During this period, Kurdish activity in the first decades of the twentieth century was primarily cultural and social rather than politically organized. It was largely limited to cultural initiatives, civil society work, and efforts to revive language and heritage, without evolving into a clear party format. A qualitative shift toward political party organization did not occur until the second half of the twentieth century, when the first Syrian Kurdish parties began to take shape, reflecting a gradual development of political awareness and responding to accelerating internal and regional changes.

During the post-independence phase, Kurdish demands in Syria were characterized by a degree of political pragmatism, focusing on cultural rights and political participation without adopting radical projects or armed paths.

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<sup>3</sup> عبد الوهاب المرسي، اتفاق تاريخي بين أكراد سوريا وحكومتها.. هل يطفئ نيران التاريخ؟، الجزيرة دوت نت، 11 2025م: <https://url-shortener.me/8UM8>

However, the failure of this approach to achieve sustainable gains, alongside escalating security restrictions, later contributed to creating an environment conducive to more intense transformations within the Kurdish movement.

This phase was not without structural challenges within the Kurdish movement itself, as party fragmentation and

organizational divisions weakened civil political action and opened the way for the rise of alternative organizational models that were more disciplined and capable of mobilization. This would later constitute one of the primary pathways for the transformation of party work toward more militarized and organized forms<sup>4</sup>.

The establishment of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria marked a key transition toward organized party activity; however, its trajectory was soon affected by ideological divisions and leadership disputes, leading to the disintegration of its organizational structure and the emergence of multiple splinter parties. This fragmentation contributed to weakening civil political action and gradually paved the way for the rise of more disciplined and organized forces that were later able to fill the leadership vacuum by combining political organization with military structures<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Al-Kati, Mohannad. "The Kurdish Movement in the Arab World: The Syrian Kurds as a Case Study." *AlMuntaqa*, vol. 2, no. 1, Apr.–May 2019, pp. 45–61. Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies. JSTOR: [www.jstor.org/stable/10.31430/almuntaqa.2.1.0045](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.31430/almuntaqa.2.1.0045)

<sup>5</sup> Kurdistan Democratic Party, from a base for "unity" to an arena for division, Enab Baladi, 10 May 2017: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2017/05/kurdish-political-movement-syria/#:~:text=After%20the%20announcement%20of%20its,and%20cultural%20groups%C2%A0such%20as%20the%C2%A0Kurdistan%C2%A0Democratic>

In this context, party disputes revolved around ideological and organizational issues related to the nature of the Kurdish struggle and the boundaries of its relationship with the Syrian state, without leading to the establishment of political frameworks capable of overcoming structural division. This situation resulted in the continuation of internal competition, rather than the emergence of a unifying political project able to

represent the Kurdish community within the Syrian national framework.

Additionally, multiple attempts emerged to reorganize Kurdish political activity through popular frameworks and grassroots organizations. However, these initiatives remained limited in their impact and failed to overcome fragmentation or establish a unified central leadership, which deepened the political representation crisis within the Kurdish movement<sup>6</sup>.

With the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Kurdish movement entered a new phase of political realignment, represented in attempts to unify party discourse through inclusive frameworks. Yet these efforts quickly confronted persistent structural divisions and the inability to enforce a unified political leadership capable of managing the transitional phase imposed by the war.

Despite these attempts, political pluralism and ideological division remained structural features of the Syrian Kurdish movement.

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<sup>6</sup> Sirwan Kajjo, Christian Sinclair, “The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria - MERIP.” Middle East Research and Information Project, 31 Aug. 2011:

<https://www.merip.org/2011/08/the-evolution-of-kurdish-politics-in-syria/#:~:text=Salah%20Badreddin%2C%20an%20early%20member,8%5D%20The%20left%20was>

This reality weakened civil political action and created conditions conducive to the rise of new forces with a political–military character, which were able to fill the leadership vacuum and assert themselves as the most organized and influential actors in Kurdish areas during the subsequent years of conflict.

Prior to 2011, Kurdish political activity in Syria remained confined to a narrow margin due to the state's treatment of the Kurdish issue as a security matter, along with strict restrictions on party and organizational activity, which prevented Kurdish parties from developing as institutional political actors within the state.

State policies toward the Kurds were characterized by exclusionary practices of a legal and security nature, which contributed to entrenching political and social isolation and weakened the potential for the development of civil party work, creating an environment that later facilitated the shift of some actors toward more disciplined and stringent organizational forms.

In contrast, the Syrian regime adopted a dual policy in its approach to the Kurdish issue, characterized by internal restrictions on Kurdish political activity, while simultaneously leveraging certain armed Kurdish organizations regionally—most notably the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—within national security calculations and the regional conflict, thereby introducing a cross-border armed dimension into the Syrian Kurdish equation.

Within this constrained context, the demands of the main Syrian Kurdish parties remained limited to issues of cultural identity and recognition of ethnic specificity, without advancing major political projects related to the redistribution of power or the redefinition of the state. This approach reflected the parties' awareness of the limits of available action and their attempt to avoid direct confrontation with the central authority under an unfavorable balance of power.

At the international and regional level, some Syrian Kurdish organizations received limited support from Kurdish forces beyond Syria's borders, particularly from certain Iraqi Kurdish parties, within the framework of transnational ethnic solidarity. In contrast, key regional states—most notably Turkey—displayed high sensitivity to any movements that could lead to the emergence of an independent or semi-independent Kurdish model in northern Syria, which imposed additional constraints on the development of the Syrian Kurdish issue and linked it to complex regional balances that extended beyond Syria<sup>7</sup>.

Following 2011, the Kurdish issue in Syria underwent fundamental transformations due to its increasing intersection with regional and international geopolitical dynamics, no longer being treated solely as an internal matter but evolving into an active factor in regional security equations, particularly in the context of the war against extremist organizations.

Within this framework, U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces constituted a decisive factor in strengthening the military–security character of the Kurdish experience in northern and eastern Syria, linking its political trajectory to security functions that extend beyond the local framework, within a complex system of regional and international alliances<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> “An Extraordinary Tale: The YPG/PYD Rises,” previously cited.

<sup>8</sup> “The PKK and the PYD: Comrades in Arms, Rivals in Politics?,” previously cited.

In parallel, Russia adopted a more flexible approach in its dealings with the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, maintaining channels of communication and dialogue with its political leadership in an attempt to leverage the Kurdish card

within its broader strategy for managing the Syrian conflict. However, this Russian openness remained constrained by a clear ceiling represented by official support for the Syrian state and its institutions, reflecting Moscow's concern not to undermine the principle of Syria's territorial integrity or weaken its ally in Damascus. In contrast, Turkey adopted a sharply confrontational stance toward the Kurdish project in northern Syria, considering the political–military structure leading it as an organizational extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and a direct threat to its national security. This stance contributed to the militarization of the conflict and the incorporation of the Kurdish issue into regional security calculations.

Iran, meanwhile, followed a different approach, focusing on supporting the central authority in Damascus as the primary guarantor of Syria's territorial unity, regardless of the local populations' ethnic or national identities. The Iranian role was centered on maintaining the cohesion of state institutions and preventing any pathways that could lead to the fragmentation of the Syrian entity, including the emergence of autonomous or semi-autonomous entities. This position reinforced divergences among regional powers regarding the Kurdish issue, linking its future to complex regional and international balances, which continue to cast a shadow over the trajectory of the Syrian conflict and the prospects for its political resolution<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> “An Extraordinary Tale: The YPG/PYD Rises,” previously cited.

#### **4. The Parties of the Kurdish National Council (ENKS): Between Civil Political Representation and the Crisis of Effectiveness**

The establishment of the Syrian Kurdish National Council (ENKS) in 2011 represented an attempt to reorganize Kurdish party activity within a civil political framework, responding to the changing dynamics imposed by the Syrian uprising, and restoring the significance of peaceful political representation as a fundamental tool for defending Kurdish national rights within the Syrian state. The Council included a number of traditional Kurdish parties whose roots date back to the 1960s and 1970s, historically characterized by a reformist, non-armed political discourse focusing on cultural demands, constitutional recognition, and administrative decentralization.

In terms of political reference, the Kurdish National Council adopted a discourse closer to the model of Iraqi Kurdistan, based on pluralistic political work, engagement within national opposition frameworks, and linking the Syrian Kurdish issue to the broader political resolution process. This was reflected in the Council's joining the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and its attempt to present itself as the legitimate representative of the Kurds within the official opposition, in contrast to the political–military project led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

However, this civil political approach, despite its alignment with the logic of the nation-state, confronted a set of structural constraints that limited its effectiveness. The Council suffered from **weak organizational structures and internal divisions** among its components, in addition to **the absence of a military or security wing** capable of establishing an actual presence on the ground, particularly as the Syrian uprising evolved into an armed struggle where balances of power were determined by territorial control rather than political legitimacy alone.

In this context, the Kurdish National Council found itself outside the equation of actual control in Kurdish-majority areas, where the Democratic Union Party, supported by its military units, imposed a monopolistic political–security model, reducing the public space for competing political forces. This was reflected in the closure of ENKS offices, the arrest or prosecution of some of its cadres, and the prevention of its political activity within Autonomous Administration areas, effectively **marginalizing the Kurdish civil political current** from the local scene.

Beyond security pressures, the Kurdish National Council also faced the challenge of **relative dependence on regional support**, particularly from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which brought accusations of weak political independence or subordination to external agendas. This undermined its ability to build an independent popular base within Syria, in contrast to the Democratic Union Party, which benefited from its on-the-ground presence and mobilizing discourse tied to protection and security.

## **2. The Rise of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)**

### **A. Party Establishment and Ideology:**

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) was founded in the early 2000s within a regional context marked by the rise of transnational Kurdish organizations. From its inception, the PYD represented a model distinct from traditional Syrian Kurdish parties in terms of its strong organizational structure and its intellectual and organizational connection to the experience of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which later

paved the way for the party to become a central political–military actor within the Syrian arena.

The party’s ideological framework is based on concepts known as “Democratic Federalism” and “Democratic Nationhood,” a theoretical approach that seeks to transcend the traditional nation-state model and replace it with a decentralized system of governance based on local administration, grassroots councils, cultural and religious pluralism, and broad political participation. This vision emphasizes the local community as a fundamental political unit and the redistribution of power from the center to the periphery, limiting the dominance of the central state and promoting self-governance mechanisms without pursuing political secession.

Within this framework, the PYD has consistently presented itself as a political actor not seeking to establish an independent Kurdish state but proposing an alternative model for managing diversity within the Syrian state, based on political and administrative decentralization while maintaining Syria’s territorial integrity. This discourse has been used to underscore the non-separatist nature of the party’s project and to provide political legitimacy to the Autonomous Administration model later implemented in areas under its control.

This ideological reference has been reflected in several policies and practical applications adopted by the party within the institutions of the Autonomous Administration. Notably, the party implemented the principle of co-leadership in executive and legislative positions, ensuring equal representation of men and women in power structures. It also adopted multilingual educational policies that respect the cultural and ethnic specificities of local communities and sought to expand the

participation of women and religious and ethnic minorities in decision-making positions, as a core component of the political model it promotes.

At the same time, the PYD maintained a clear intellectual connection to the theoretical system formulated by the founder of the PKK, treating this reference as a guiding framework for its political and organizational work. While this connection contributed to shaping a cohesive ideological identity for the party, it also sparked broad debate regarding the independence of its political decisions and the nature of its relations with regional Kurdish organizations, especially given the high regional sensitivity to any cross-border ideological or organizational extensions<sup>10</sup>.

### **B. Relationship with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK):**

The relationship between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is a key factor in understanding the transformation of Kurdish party activity in Syria toward political–military models. The ideological and organizational overlap between the two has facilitated the transfer of armed experience and security organization to the Syrian context, extending beyond local political work and integrating the Kurdish actor into transnational organizational networks.

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<sup>10</sup> Ahmed Suleiman, “The Role of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) on the Anniversary of Its Establishment,” Democratic Union Party Newspaper, 18 September 2025: <https://url-shortener.me/8VBX>

The ideological similarity between the two organizations, particularly regarding their intellectual reference and the political model based on community-level decentralization, created a common ground for coordination and cooperation. Additionally, the organizational backgrounds of several PYD founders and cadres played a role in deepening this intersection, as accumulated organizational and security expertise from the PKK experience was transferred to Syria, especially after 2011, when the security and military structures in northern and eastern Syria were reorganized.

During the early years of the Syrian conflict, leadership elements and military cadres from the PKK moved into Syrian territories to support and develop the People's Protection Units (YPG) as the primary military force linked to the Syrian Kurdish project. This coincided with forms of security coordination and exchanges of combat and organizational expertise, which enhanced the capabilities of Syrian Kurdish forces for territorial control and military organization<sup>11</sup>.

At the same time, multiple analyses indicate a division of roles between the two organizations: the PYD focuses on managing political and organizational affairs within Syrian territory, while the PKK retains its primary role in armed operations directed against the Turkish state, occasionally utilizing Syrian geographical depth.

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<sup>11</sup> "An Extraordinary Tale: The YPG/PYD Rises," previously cited.

This functional overlap has reinforced the perception of a close relationship that goes beyond mere intellectual alignment to include practical coordination at security and military levels.

These links have drawn repeated accusations from Turkey and several international actors, who view the PYD as an organizational extension or Syrian branch of the PKK, based on the nature of field cooperation and ideological overlap. In contrast, PYD leadership officially asserts its organizational and political independence, emphasizing the distinctiveness of its Syrian project and the differences in objectives and operational arenas compared to the PKK. This debate remains a key factor in understanding regional and international positions toward the Syrian Kurdish experience, as well as the scale of political and security pressures imposed on the PYD and the institutions of the Autonomous Administration<sup>12</sup>.

### **C. Organizational, Political, and Media Approaches:**

The PYD is characterized by a highly disciplined organizational structure that integrates political, military, and security wings, contributing to a governance model based on field control and strict organization, positioning the party beyond the traditional party framework into an integrated political–security entity.

Politically, the party has pursued a strategy of consolidating control over the public sphere in its areas of influence by limiting the operational space of other Kurdish political forces, particularly parties within competing opposition frameworks.

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<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, “The PKK and the PYD: Comrades in Arms, Rivals in Politics?”, previously cited.

This was evident in its refusal to involve the Kurdish National Council, established in 2011 with regional support, in administering the areas under its control, which resulted in the consolidation of internal Kurdish political division and the emergence of parallel representative frameworks operating outside the PYD system. This exclusionary approach reinforced the party's dominance over local political decision-making but also drew broad criticism regarding political pluralism and freedom of party activity within the Autonomous Administration areas.

On the media front, the PYD has placed significant emphasis on building an integrated media system serving its political and security objectives, establishing official and local media institutions, including television channels, radio stations, and digital platforms broadcasting in multiple languages, reflecting the cultural diversity of the areas it controls. These platforms have been used to produce a coherent media narrative promoting the party as a protector of local communities against extremist organizations, particularly ISIS, and presenting itself as a reliable partner to the international community in counterterrorism efforts.

This integration of a solid organizational structure, political control, and media effectiveness contributed to strengthening the position of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as the most influential and powerful Kurdish actor in northern and eastern Syria. However, despite the effectiveness of these methods in consolidating authority, they also created challenges related to the nature of local governance, the limits of political participation, and the future of pluralism within the Kurdish community, making them a central element in any critical assessment of the party and the Autonomous Administration<sup>13</sup>.

### **3. Political and Security Practices of the Kurdish Movement in Syria:**

#### **A. Security Control Strategies:**

After 2012, the PYD was able to impose its control over wide areas in northern Syria through organized military and security tools, benefiting from international alliances. This strengthened the security-oriented character of the Kurdish experiment and linked the Autonomous Administration project to functions related more to conflict management and security stability than to civil political work.

At the regional and international levels, the party established security alliances with the United States and the international coalition against ISIS, enabling it to receive air and intelligence support that contributed to the liberation of several key cities. These alliances provided the PYD with additional capacity to consolidate military and security control, enforce order within its organizational framework, and reinforce its position as a key actor in the Syrian Kurdish landscape<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> أحمد سليمان، دور حزب الاتحاد الديمقراطي PYD في ذكرى تأسيسه، مصدر سابق

<sup>14</sup> Wladimir van Wilgenburg. “Syrian Democratic Forces (Syria) – European Council on Foreign Relations.” ECFR, 10 Nov. 2020:

<https://ecfr.eu/special/mena-armed-groups/syrian-democratic-forces-syria/#:~:text=Wladimir%20van%20Wilgenburg>

## **B. Previous Experience in Local Governance:**

On the civil side, the PYD, in cooperation with its allies within the so-called “Movement for a Democratic Society” (TEV-DEM), established an Autonomous Administration covering the main Kurdish areas in northern Syria, officially declared in January 2014 as three cantons known as Rojava. This system relied on local popular councils in villages and towns, including representatives of various ethnic and religious components, operating under electoral or representative principles, with a broader People’s Council at the top of the structure and co-chairs (male and female) to ensure gender balance.

This experience also contributed to the drafting of a provisional constitution that emphasizes pluralism and fundamental civil rights, including freedom of expression, education, and women’s participation. On the military front, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were established in 2015 as an umbrella encompassing the YPG units and other Arab units, aiming to enhance popular legitimacy and defensive capacity. This allowed the PYD to integrate the civil and military dimensions into a unified institutional framework for managing the areas under its control<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## **C. Political Assessment and Impact:**

Many analysts indicate that the Kurdish movement, particularly the PYD, succeeded in northeastern Syria in building cohesive security and civil institutions and achieving a level of relative stability, alongside important military gains in confronting ISIS. This experience helped create a quasi-state reality, where public services and order were maintained in Kurdish areas despite the weakness of the central state or the presence of terrorist threats during certain periods<sup>16</sup>.

On another level, some security practices have sparked human rights criticisms, including limited cases of arrest or displacement of Arab residents and minorities, or retaliatory actions linked to combating armed groups. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of systematic targeting of these communities, while the Autonomous Administration defended its security measures as responses to wartime conditions, emphasizing that its international partners, particularly the United States and the United Nations, support maintaining public order and essential services in its areas of control<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Christou, William. "Syrian Army Takes Control of Detention Camp for Islamic State Suspects." The Guardian, 21 Jan. 2026:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/21/syria-army-al-hawl-camp-kurdish-withdrawal-islamic-state>

<sup>17</sup> مقال بعنوان "أبرز انتهاكات حزب الاتحاد الديمقراطي الكردي وقوات الإدارة الذاتية الكردية"، الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان، 18 يناير 2016م: [/https://snhr.org/arabic/2016/01/18/5462](https://snhr.org/arabic/2016/01/18/5462)

Politically, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration contributed to strengthening an advanced decentralized model within the framework of a hypothetical Syrian state, replacing narrow

nationalism with an inclusive slogan emphasizing “unity of peoples – friendship of peoples.” This model included extensive participation of women in decision-making positions through the co-chair system and the integration of female cadres within YPJ units, reflecting a practical implementation of an alternative democratic ideology. The administration also encouraged the participation of other components, including Arabs and minorities, in local governance institutions and political discourse, without adopting discriminatory policies in principle<sup>18</sup>.

On the military front, coordination with the United States, and in some cases with Damascus, enabled the PYD to maintain control over most of its territories, despite losing specific areas such as Manbij and Ras al-Ain due to Turkish strikes and interventions by Ankara-aligned factions. At the same time, the conflict with the Kurdish National Council marginalized the latter and reduced its popular influence, reinforcing the PYD’s position as the sole primary actor in political and military affairs in northeastern Syria<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> مقال بعنوان “أكراد سوريا يطالبون بدولة ديمقراطية لامركزية” تضمن حقوقهم، الجزيرة نت، 26 أبريل 2025  
<https://url-shortener.me/8VE9>

<sup>19</sup> US signals end of military support for Syria’s Kurdish forces, urges integration, by Al Arabiya English, 20 January 2026:

<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2026/01/20/us-signals-end-of-military-support-for-syria-s-kurdish-forces-urges-integration>

## **Second. The Syrian Democratic Forces and the Autonomous Administration**

## **1. Establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Origins, and Strategic Motivations:**

The Syrian Democratic Forces were established on 10 October 2015 in a highly complex security–strategic context, marked by the collapse of state authority in northern and eastern Syria and the rising threat of transnational jihadist groups, particularly ISIS. This establishment was directly supported by the United States as part of the international coalition, not only as a temporary response to a security vacuum but also as part of restructuring local actors to serve regional and international security priorities.

Although officially presented as a multi-ethnic force, the leadership and military structure of the SDF were effectively centered around the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), reflecting the Kurdish movement’s shift from political–party activity to an organized military model with transnational extensions, ideologically and organizationally linked to the experience of the PKK.

In its founding statement, the SDF declared adherence to a political project based on building a “democratic, secular, and decentralized” Syria. However, in practice, this political discourse accompanied the militarization of party activity, integrating political goals with a military–security trajectory that established itself as the primary tool for managing public affairs in the controlled areas.

This intertwining of political and armed structures reflects the Kurdish project’s shift from rights-based demands to establishing de facto authority backed by armed force, enabling the implementation of a self-administration model rooted in

local councils, yet simultaneously subject to the logic of security control and centralized leadership<sup>20</sup>.

The SDF's military structure features a unified central command overseeing a wide network of local units and brigades, with the YPG and YPJ retaining their role as the core nucleus within this framework. This organization has contributed to creating a highly disciplined military force capable of managing large-scale operations while simultaneously maintaining internal security control.

This model represents one of the most prominent manifestations of the structural intertwinement between the political organization and its military wing, as the SDF was not presented merely as a temporary defensive tool but as a permanent actor in the power equation of northern and eastern Syria<sup>21</sup>.

The strategic motivations behind the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces centered on leveraging the war against extremist groups as an opportunity to reshape local balances and enhance the Kurdish actor's position within the regional national security equation.

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<sup>20</sup> مقال بعنوان "نهاية داعش تضع "قسد" أمام تحدي جديد"، مركز الروابط للبحوث والدراسات الاستراتيجية، 5 أبريل 2019م: <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/86599>

<sup>21</sup> Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Democratic Forces (Syria) – European Council on Foreign Relations," previously cited.

The security vacuum, coupled with international backing, allowed the emerging military force to become a political bargaining tool with international and regional powers.

In this context, the Kurdish project was no longer confined to Syrian domestic affairs but integrated into a network of transnational organizations, which heightened the sensitivity of the experiment for neighboring states, particularly Turkey, which perceived this transformation as a direct threat to its national security.

The alliance with the United States enabled the SDF to achieve significant military gains and control strategic resources, especially oil and gas, granting it unprecedented capacity to position itself as a quasi-state actor. However, this external linkage simultaneously exposed the project's fragility, as its continuity became contingent on shifting international priorities and regional conflict dynamics, particularly in light of repeated Turkish military interventions.

This reality compelled the SDF to adopt a pragmatic policy, opening negotiation channels with Damascus, reflecting an awareness of the limits of military power in the absence of sustained regional and international political recognition<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Sewell, Abby. "A US Shift Marked Kurdish-Led Forces' Fall from Power in Syria." AP News, 21 Jan. 2026:

<https://apnews.com/article/syria-sdf-kurdish-washington-military-islamic-state-dcf6869b06e95931a7a40fa4494006c2>

## **A. Military Organization and Control Units**

The SDF's military structure is centered around a unified command, represented by the General Military Council and its

executive office, which supervises major operations and coordinates with the international coalition. The People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) form the core Kurdish nucleus, qualified and trained to execute key tasks in decisive battles, while the SDF also includes Arab and ethnic formations such as the Sanadid Forces and the Raqqa and East Euphrates Brigades, reflecting the integration of local factions into a unified structure.

The Syrian Democratic Forces also established local military councils and security bodies such as the Asayish and local police to maintain internal security in major cities including Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Manbij, and al-Hasakah. This multi-component structure enabled the SDF to impose effective security control over a vast area of the Syrian Jazira, while ensuring the deterrence of any remaining ISIS cells. At the same time, it reinforced coordination with the international coalition, which provided weapons, training, and air support, making the SDF a key Western partner in efforts to restore stability and combat terrorism in the region<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Grokipedia. "Syrian Democratic Forces Military Councils." Grokipedia.

[https://grokipedia.com/page/Syrian\\_Democratic\\_Forces\\_military\\_councils](https://grokipedia.com/page/Syrian_Democratic_Forces_military_councils)

## **B. The Relationship with the International Coalition and the War Against ISIS**

The Syrian Democratic Forces constituted the primary local force in confronting ISIS in northern and eastern Syria, benefiting from U.S. and international coalition support through air cover and logistical supplies. Coordination with the United States enhanced their combat capabilities and the organization of their military operations, enabling them to liberate vast areas that had been under the group's control<sup>24</sup>.

Units of the SDF, including the YPG, YPJ, and allied factions, played a decisive role in liberating major ISIS strongholds such as Tal Abyad, Kobani, Manbij, Raqqa, and al-Bukamal. This military success contributed to consolidating the SDF's position as one of the most powerful and influential regional forces within the Syrian context, while highlighting its role as a strategic Western partner in counterterrorism efforts and the stabilization of liberated areas<sup>25</sup>.

With the collapse of ISIS at the end of 2018, the Western partnership with the SDF witnessed a limited shift, prompting the SDF to diversify its alliances to secure its strategic position. The United States announced changes in the nature of its support and urged the SDF to integrate its forces into Syrian state institutions, amid the emergence of a new government in Damascus<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> معاذ الحمد، التحالف الدولي في سوريا: من الحرب على «داعش» إلى هندسة توازنات جديدة، 10 NPA Syria نوفمبر 2025م: [/https://npasyria.com/226228](https://npasyria.com/226228)

<sup>25</sup> كميل الطويل، من كوبياني إلى الباغوز... كيف ساهم الأكراد في هزيمة «داعش»؟، صحيفة الشرق الأوسط، 21 يناير 2026م: <https://url-shortener.me/8VG4>

<sup>26</sup> "US Envoy Calls for Syria Truce to Be Upheld." Reuters, 22 Jan. 2026: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-envoy-calls-syria-truce-be-upheld-2026-01-22/>

In parallel, the SDF entered into a temporary alliance with the Syrian government during the Turkish escalation between 2019

and 2020, while maintaining its political autonomy as an active Kurdish force. In the post-ISIS phase, the SDF's role continued to include managing and securing prisons and camps holding ISIS detainees, in addition to consolidating a unique model of local governance in liberated areas, reflecting the Autonomous Administration's experience based on pluralism and decentralization<sup>27</sup>.

## **2. The Autonomous Administration (the administrative branch of the SDF)**

### **A. Administrative Structure and Autonomous Administration Councils**

The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria was announced in January 2014 as the civilian-administrative framework complementing the military control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, in a model reflecting the integration of security authority with political administration. Although this structure was founded on the principle of “power-sharing,” the principle was implemented within a centralized system that effectively remained under the dominance of the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

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<sup>27</sup> Christou, William. “Syrian Army Takes Control of Detention Camp for Islamic State Suspects.” *The Guardian*, 21 Jan. 2026:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/21/syria-army-al-hawl-camp-kurdish-withdrawal-islamic-state>

This model reflects the Kurdish movement's transition from a political actor into a de facto governing authority possessing legislative, executive, and security enforcement tools, without undergoing a comprehensive national consensus process<sup>28</sup>.

Within this structure, the administrative apparatus of the Autonomous Administration manages local governance comprehensively, from infrastructure, education, and healthcare services to the distribution of essential resources. Data from the Syrian Democratic Council indicate that seven regional administrations covering cities and rural areas in North and East Syria handle these responsibilities on a daily basis, reflecting the regularity of administrative operations. Under the supervision of the Autonomous Administration, these councils have been able to provide education, electricity, water, and sanitation services to residents, demonstrating a clear capacity to manage liberated areas more efficiently than the central state institutions were able to during that period.

## **B. Local Governance Policies and Resource Management**

The Autonomous Administration adopted what is known as the “Social Contract” as an alternative constitutional reference, enabling it to exercise broad sovereign powers in the absence of the central state. However, despite its rights-based language, this framework consolidated a new political reality based on legitimizing security control through local legal instruments, thereby reproducing the dilemma of the relationship between revolutionary legitimacy and legal legitimacy.

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<sup>28</sup> مقال بعنوان: “الإدارة الذاتية في الشمال السوري: إشكاليات الشرعية والهوية”، مركز عمران للدراسات الاستراتيجية، 9 يونيو 2018م: <https://syrianoor.net/article/20955>

The administration translated the concept of self-rule into practice through the establishment of elected local and village councils representing area residents, granting them broad regulatory and service-related powers. For example, the Local Administration Law allows these councils to manage and establish schools and hospitals and to finance local facilities, under the direct supervision of the Autonomous Administration to ensure that policies and services are implemented in accordance with principles of justice and community participation<sup>29</sup>.

Control over natural resources, particularly oil and gas, constitutes one of the main pillars of the Autonomous Administration's sustainability. These resources have become instruments of economic and political leverage that extend beyond the local dimension into regional security equations. This factor has turned Autonomous Administration areas into arenas of indirect competition among regional and international actors and has contributed to complicating the prospects for a comprehensive political settlement<sup>30</sup>.

In addition to oil, the administration relies on seasonal agriculture in the Jazira plain, especially grain and cotton crops, as well as commercial activities including vehicles, real estate, food commodities, and currency exchange.

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<sup>29</sup> العقد الاجتماعي للإدارة الذاتية لشمال وشرق سوريا، طبعة 2023: <https://url-shortener.me/8VGO>

<sup>30</sup> Annual report of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Official page of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, 22 July 2020: <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2020/07/annual-report-of-the-autonomous-administration-of-north-and-east-syria/>

These resources are managed through the Oil and Natural Resources Commission Affiliated with the Executive Council, alongside the establishment of specialized bodies to regulate prices and collect local taxes. This framework enables efficient management of the regional budget and ensures sustainable funding for public services and local projects<sup>31</sup>.

### **C. Strategic Objectives of the Autonomous Administration and Its Regional Role**

The Autonomous Administration seeks to consolidate a model of self-governance grounded in the pragmatic democratic approach adopted by the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), within the framework of a shared Syrian state. Its strategic objectives include strengthening local institutions across administrative, educational, and security sectors, enabling it to institutionalize its new governing system and expand its influence beyond the traditional control of Damascus. Its leaders also aim to secure both domestic and international political recognition for their decentralized project, while expressing ambitions to generalize this model across other Syrian regions within a future constitution that guarantees participation and pluralism<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> مقال بعنوان "محاولات وعقبات.. اقتصاد الإدارة الذاتية بين مد وجزر؟"، وكالة نورث برس إيجنسي، 3 أكتوبر 2023م: [/https://npasyria.com/168920](https://npasyria.com/168920)

<sup>32</sup> حسين فقه، "الإدارة الذاتية وقسد: نموذج ديمقراطي يجمع المكونات السورية"، حزب الاتحاد الديمقراطي، 8 أغسطس 2025: <https://url-shortener.me/8VHE>

At the regional level, the Autonomous Administration has emerged as a local power center in northeastern Syria, currently

controlling approximately one quarter of the country's territory and around one third of its oil revenues. This region has become a hub for local governance and development amid the deterioration of central state institutions, allowing the Autonomous Administration (AANES) to provide public services and improve living conditions for residents, including paying employee salaries at levels reportedly higher than those of the central government.

Externally, some analysts view the Autonomous Administration as a factor of relative stability in a highly volatile region. It has expanded its diplomatic and economic relations, including the supply of gas and electricity to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq prior to 2021. Conversely, its presence has generated regional controversy: Turkey regards it as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), while Damascus and other states express concern that the Autonomous Administration could evolve into a regional power similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government experience in Iraq, potentially reshaping the balance of power in northern Syria<sup>33</sup>.

### **3. Political and Ideological Dimensions of the SDF and the Autonomous Administration**

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<sup>33</sup> Syria: Country focus: Country of Origin Information Report, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), July 2025, p.102.

#### **A. The Role of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) as a Political Driver**

The Democratic Union Party plays a central role in directing the political and military trajectory of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Autonomous Administration, as it represents the most organized actor capable of integrating ideology with security practice. This role has contributed to transforming the party from a vehicle of political representation into a central governing framework that monopolizes strategic decision-making and restructures the public sphere in accordance with its intellectual and organizational vision.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) expanded its influence through both military and political mobilization. It established the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and began implementing its administrative and political project in the "Rojava" region, with partial support from the United States and Russia. Researchers describe the party as the dominant faction in northeastern Syria, having come to control the institutions of the Autonomous Administration through its organizational superiority and territorial control. The establishment of the Autonomous Administration under the sole leadership of the PYD led to the marginalization of other Kurdish parties and the formation of new alliances with Arab and local factions. Ideologically, the party derives its legitimacy from the principles of "direct democracy," which emphasize the distribution of power to local councils and the promotion of equality among components. Through this central role, the PYD was able to consolidate its control over governing institutions and impose unified policies. However, its opponents accuse it of attempting to impose a monopolistic character on the Syrian Kurdish movement and of sidelining rival forces<sup>34</sup>.

## **B. The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and Its Political Role**

The Syrian Democratic Council (MSD/SDC) constitutes the highest political body of the Autonomous Administration. It was established in 2015 as an umbrella framework bringing together diverse political and societal forces. The Council embodies the aspirations of civil opposition movements in the region and functions as a form of regional parliament or “expanded council” responsible for approving general policies and coordinating the Autonomous Administration’s external relations.

The SDC includes various parties and components advocating democracy and popular representation. It oversees the drafting of the internal regulations of the Social Contract and supports the formation of periodic local councils that are intended to reflect the demographic diversity of the population. The Council also plays a key role in local politics by formulating official agreements and statements and by engaging with international actors, including the United States and European countries, to defend the region’s rights and ensure that its interests are represented in Syrian political negotiations<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> “Kurdish Leader: The PYD and the Assad Regime Neutralized the Kurdish Component of the Syrian Revolution,” Syria TV, 22 January 2026.  
<https://url-shortener.me/8VHP>

<sup>35</sup> SyriacPress, “Syrian Democratic Council Strongly Criticizes Composition of New Syrian Government, Says It Lacks on All Sides,” 30 Mar. 2025.

## **C. Relations with Other Kurdish Factions and Civil Society**

Relations between the Autonomous Administration and other Kurdish factions are marked by complexity and divergence. Tensions are particularly evident with the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which includes parties backed by Erbil and Ankara and rejects what it sees as the PYD's dominance over Autonomous Administration institutions, accusing it of monopolizing political decision-making. In contrast, the PYD presents itself as the comprehensive representative of the Kurdish movement, reinforcing its call for local democracy while maintaining alliances with Russia and the Syrian government. These tensions have contributed to fragmentation within the Kurdish political sphere, with some factions potentially aligning with the Syrian government or regional powers to counterbalance the PYD<sup>36</sup>.

Within civil society in areas under the Autonomous Administration, there is considerable diversity, including human rights and humanitarian organizations that have been active since the early years of the uprising, as well as prominent women's organizations such as Kongra Star, which has received institutional support. International organizations and Western diplomats have also been allowed to operate with a relative degree of freedom, while local researchers and independent organizations continue to monitor the Administration's policies and provide critical assessments.

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<sup>36</sup> أسامة شيخ علي، الديناميات الداخلية في شمال شرق سوريا ومستقبل القضية الكردية، معهد السياسة والمجتمع، 4 يوليو 2025. <https://url-shortener.me/8VID>

The Administration has sought to gain the support of local communities by improving public services and strengthening

security. At the same time, it has faced human rights criticisms related to arrests or the marginalization of certain civilian and political opponents. In general, the Administration's partnership with civil society has remained closely tied to its ability to provide stability and to expand the mechanisms of decentralization to include all components within its political and service-oriented system<sup>37</sup>.

### **Third: The Military and Security Forces of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)**

At its core, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance consists of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) as its military and organizational backbone, with Arab and Christian formations incorporated into a military structure operating under centralized Kurdish leadership. Despite its officially declared multi-ethnic character, effective control over military decision-making and strategic planning has remained in the hands of cadres affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), reflecting the transformation of the Kurdish movement from a representative political framework into a dominant military force with a semi-regular structure.

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<sup>37</sup> «سوريا: ينبغي أن توجّه حقوق الإنسان والقانون الدولي الخطوات التالية في شمال شرق سوريا»، منظمة العفو الدولية، 22 يناير 2026. <https://url-shortener.me/8VII>

This model enabled the SDF to extend its influence over vast areas of northeastern Syria following the defeat of ISIS. At the

same time, it entrenched a pattern of comprehensive militarization of public life, whereby military presence became a defining factor in organizing political and social life<sup>38</sup>.

With direct support from the international coalition, the SDF conducted large-scale military operations between 2015 and 2017 that marked a turning point in the conflict in northern Syria, particularly in the battles of Kobani and Raqqa. These military gains, however, went beyond the security dimension, leading to a redrawing of the political map by linking Kurdish-controlled areas into a contiguous geographic zone. This facilitated the expansion of the self-administration project, transforming it from a limited local experiment into a de facto regional authority.

This trajectory reveals a clear overlap between military objectives and political aims, as combat operations were used to produce a new administrative–political reality that went beyond wartime logic toward the reengineering of governance<sup>39</sup>.

The SDF faced significant military challenges in the form of direct Turkish interventions between 2016 and 2019, which led to the loss of strategic areas such as Afrin and Ras al-Ayn.

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<sup>38</sup> لارا سليم، "قسد" .. سلة غذاء ونفط سوريا تمد أغصان الاستقرار لـ"دمشق"، جريدة إيلاف، 18 فبراير 2026م، متاح على الرابط: <https://url-shortener.me/8VIW>

<sup>39</sup> ساشا العلو، نوار شعبان، "داعش" والفراغ الاستراتيجي... مأزق توزيع الأدوار "الرقعة نموذجاً"، مركز عمران للدراسات الاستراتيجية، 15 أيار 2017م، متاح على الرابط: <https://url-shortener.me/8VKZ>

These confrontations exposed the limits of the SDF's military power in the absence of consistent international backing and highlighted the vulnerability of the Kurdish project to regional

national security considerations—particularly those of Turkey, which views the SDF as an organizational extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Despite possessing relatively advanced weaponry and higher levels of training compared to other local factions, the SDF’s continued survival has become increasingly dependent on political maneuvering rather than military strength alone<sup>40</sup>.

Internal security constitutes a key pillar in sustaining SDF control. Specialized security bodies were established, most notably the Asayish and Self-Defense Forces, to handle societal regulation and monitor public space. However, these bodies have moved beyond conventional security roles to become instruments of political and social control, used to monitor civil activity, restrict media and political work, and contain potential opposition within areas under self-administration.

Human rights reports have documented repressive practices, including arbitrary detention and ill-treatment, reflecting reliance on a strict security model that prioritizes control over participation and legitimacy<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> “Ongoing Escalation | Clashes Erupt between SDF and Turkish-Backed Factions in Aleppo and Al-Hasakah Countryside.” The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 26 Feb. 2025, [www.syriahr.com/en/356803/](http://www.syriahr.com/en/356803/)

<sup>41</sup> مقال بعنوان “شمال شرق سوريا: استمرار تجنيد الأطفال”، منظمة هيومن رايتس ووتش، 2 أكتوبر 2024م، متاح على الرابط:

<https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2024/10/02/northeast-syria-military-recruitment-children-persists>

Despite the self-administration’s official commitments to end the recruitment of children, international reports indicate the persistence of this phenomenon within self-defense structures.

The administration has also imposed a system of compulsory military service, backed by stringent security measures including raids and checkpoints, further deepening the militarization of local society.

These policies demonstrate that security institutions operate within a formal legal framework but remain effectively subject to direct political dominance by the PYD, thereby turning security into a strategic tool for reproducing authority<sup>42</sup>.

## **1- Regional Expansion and Control of Territories**

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) managed to control a vast geographic area in northern and eastern Syria, including regions rich in natural and agricultural resources, which gave them an economic and strategic weight exceeding their size as a local actor. However, this control was not stable, as field developments demonstrated the potential for renegotiation or division of these areas, as occurred in some oil fields in Deir ez-Zor, confirming that military influence does not equate to permanent sovereignty under regional balances.

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<sup>42</sup> “UN / SYRIA SDF CHILDREN.” UNifeed, 12 Mar. 2024, [media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d241/d2416643](https://media.un.org/unifeed/en/asset/d241/d2416643).

The Autonomous Administration implemented limited service and development measures, contributing to a minimum level of livelihood stability. However, these policies remained tied to a strict security framework and did not translate into genuine

political participation, leaving local councils operating within a narrow margin of autonomy under direct supervision of security agencies<sup>43</sup>.

Administrative control was accompanied by intensive security oversight, including the widespread presence of Asayish forces, monitoring of media and political activities, and supervision of prisons and detention camps for ISIS members<sup>44</sup>. While this security presence helped reduce chaos, it also created societal tension due to restrictions on freedoms and prioritizing security suspicion over community trust<sup>44</sup>.

## **2- Political Dimensions of the Autonomous Administration and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)**

The Autonomous Administration adopts a governance model inspired by the ideology of the “Democratic Nation,” presented as a framework transcending ethnic identities.

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<sup>43</sup> مقال بعنوان “ماذا حدث خلال عام 2025؟ أبرز الأعمال التي قدمتها الإدارة الذاتية”، وكالة أنباء هاوار، 27 كانون الأول 2025م، متاح على الرابط: <https://hawarnews.com/ar/134256>

<sup>44</sup> مقال بعنوان “منظمات حقوقية تُدين استمرار الاعتقالات التعسفية للمدنيين في مناطق سيطرة الإدارة الذاتية”، شبكة شام، 2 ديسمبر 2023م، متاح على الرابط: <https://shaam.org/news/syria-news/mnzmat-hqwqyh-tudyn-astmrar-alaatqalat-altasfyh-llmdnyyn-fy-mnatq-sytrh-alidarh-althatyh>

In practice, however, political and security power has been concentrated in the hands of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), effectively emptying the concept of pluralism of its substantive meaning and turning the legal framework into a cover for organized political domination.

Analytical studies indicate that the laws and institutions established in the areas of the Autonomous Administration lack competitive legitimacy. Most parties operate within the framework of political loyalty, while independent or opposition forces are marginalized. This reality reflects a centralized form of governance managed through formal alliances without genuine power-sharing.

The political reality in the Autonomous Administration's areas presents a stark dichotomy: either integration into the PYD system or facing security restrictions. This model has weakened the pluralistic political space and reproduced alliance-based governance patterns reminiscent of previous authoritarian models, albeit with new tools.

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) functions as a central political body representing this alliance. Meanwhile, independent Kurdish parties, such as the Syrian National Kurdish Council (KNC) affiliated with the traditional Syrian opposition, are unable to nominate candidates within the Autonomous Administration mechanisms or influence decision-making. Multiple reports document that the KNC, despite international recognition and participation in opposition negotiations, rejects legislation and laws issued by the Autonomous Administration, and its offices continue to face security harassment by the SDF. Assessments by the Omran Center conclude that the administration rejects any organized opposition attempts, thereby consolidating the PYD's dominance over the political scene in the region.

### **3- Social Dimensions and the Impact of the Autonomous Administration's Policies**

The Autonomous Administration sought to reshape the social fabric by integrating concepts of participation and gender equality, achieving some successes in this area. However, these policies clashed with local cultural particularities, especially in Arab-majority regions, where some ideological orientations were perceived as imposed from above rather than arising from the local social context<sup>45</sup>.

The imposition of cultural and educational policies with an ideological character created social tensions, reflecting a gap between the administration's rhetoric and practices and the local values of Arab and tribal communities, making social stability fragile and susceptible to disruption.

The policies of the Autonomous Administration produced diverse societal reactions, ranging from conditional acceptance to outright rejection. This was evident in the Deir ez-Zor protests of 2023, which highlighted the limited integration of Arab populations into the local governance system and the administration's reliance on a security-oriented approach to contain demands<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> طه علي أحمد، دراسة: تحرير المرأة وتجربة الإدارة الذاتية بشمال وشرق سوريا، مركز آتون للدراسة، 10 أكتوبر 2023م، متاح على الرابط: <https://url-shortener.me/8VM8>

<sup>46</sup> أيهم مرعي، سوريا: احتجاجات شعبية في ريف دير الزور ومنبج ضد فساد "فسد"، صحيفة الميادين، 24 تشرين أول 2022م، متاح على الرابط: <https://url-shortener.me/8VME>

#### **4- Mechanisms of Political Influence in Kurdish and Non-Kurdish Communities**

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) became the quasi-exclusive actor within the Kurdish community in the Autonomous Administration areas, marginalizing political pluralism and turning party life into a closed space under direct security supervision, which weakened internal political vitality.

In Arab-majority areas, the Autonomous Administration relied on selective partnerships with local notables without genuine transfer of power, making participation largely symbolic and reinforcing a sense of marginalization managed through security and economic tools.

## **5- Future Challenges and Risks of External Influence**

The Autonomous Administration project faces structural challenges, foremost of which is its organizational linkage to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), creating regional pressures, particularly from Turkey. Additionally, the fragility of international guarantees and the fluctuations in U.S. policy make the future of the SDF dependent on external balances beyond its full control.

At the international level, the SDF primarily relies on U.S. support to ensure regional and political balance. However, repeated shifts in U.S. policy—including partial withdrawals and reduced commitments—raise doubts about the sustainability of this support. Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration has sought to strengthen its relations with Russia and the Damascus government following Turkey's "Peace Spring" operation in 2019, which provided temporary cover but required political and security concessions. These dynamics also open the door to intervention by regional partners. Recent studies have shown

attempts by Saudi Arabia to leverage the Kurdish issue to pressure Iran, although Riyadh has refrained from taking direct action for fear of exacerbating instability on its borders.

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## **Conclusion**

In light of the analysis presented in this study regarding the trajectory of the Autonomous Administration in northern and

eastern Syria, and the role of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as a central military–security–political actor, it becomes evident that this experience represents a complex model of hybrid governance in the context of internal conflicts, where security imperatives and counterterrorism efforts intersected with projects of power and political identity restructuring in an extremely fragile environment. The Autonomous Administration emerged amid a sovereignty vacuum created by the Syrian war, relying on an organized military force that succeeded in establishing a degree of relative stability and combating ISIS. However, this military success did not translate into a fully participatory governance structure, but rather resulted in the reproduction of party–security centralization under a formal decentralized cover.

The study demonstrates that the administrative and political project of the Autonomous Administration exhibits a clear duality between rhetoric and practice. On the one hand, it promoted a model based on ethnic pluralism, gender equality, and community participation; on the other hand, actual practice revealed the concentration of political and security decision-making in the hands of a narrow organizational nucleus linked to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its institutions, with the exclusion or marginalization of independent Kurdish forces and limited, controlled representation of Arab and tribal components. This structural imbalance has manifested in growing social tension, local protests, and increased human rights criticisms, indicating that the existing stability remains fragile and susceptible to disruption in the absence of a broader political and social contract.

The study further shows that the future of the Autonomous Administration and the SDF is not determined solely by

domestic dynamics, but is critically influenced by complex regional and international factors. Chief among these is Turkey's rejection of any Kurdish entity with organizational or ideological ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), alongside the fluctuating commitment of the United States, and Russia's and Damascus's efforts to reintegrate these areas into the framework of central control. Within this context, the SDF's options are constrained to narrow margins, ranging from maintaining a temporary de facto administration based on shifting external balances, to engaging in a political settlement that redefines its position and function within the Syrian state.

The study concludes that the fundamental problem does not lie in the principle of decentralization itself, but in the method of its implementation and the tools used to enforce it. Decentralization managed through a security-party logic, lacking genuine partnership and mechanisms for accountability and authentic representation, transforms from a framework for managing diversity into a mechanism for reproducing conflict and mistrust. Therefore, any realistic approach to the future of northern and eastern Syria requires reorganizing the relationship between the center and the peripheries on clear constitutional grounds, balancing state unity with the rights of local components, and separating security functions from political representation to limit the militarization of public space and the monopolization of legitimacy.

In this framework, the study's findings indicate that opportunities for sustainable stability remain contingent on shifting from a logic of security dominance to a logic of consensual political settlement, whether through gradual and disciplined integration of local military structures into state institutions or through a redistribution of power and resources

that reflects the demographic and social reality of the areas under the Autonomous Administration. The economic dimension, particularly the management of natural resources, also emerges as a critical factor in building trust and reducing local grievances, provided it is managed through transparent and shared frameworks.

In conclusion, the experience of the Autonomous Administration in northern and eastern Syria constitutes a practical test of the possibility of building a sustainable local governance model in a post-conflict state. It can either evolve into a pathway for a national settlement based on disciplined consensual decentralization or remain a fragile exceptional case governed by security balances and volatile regional and international pressures. In either scenario, the future of Syrian stability depends on the ability of local and international actors to move beyond the logic of dominance toward a unifying political formula that restores the state as a shared organizational framework, rather than as a tool of exclusion or domination.

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