The Kurds of Syria: Towards Self-Governance

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive examinations of the self-styled Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or AANES, are scarce not only due to the opacity of the entity's history and governance structures, but also the recency and context of its emergence as a significant actor in the Syrian civil war. This paper therefore attempts to contribute to the growing literature on the Administration, and the Syrian Kurds who are primarily responsible for its existence.

Through historical and qualitative analyses, this paper describes what set of conditions facilitated the emergence of a Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northern Syria, how the unique nature of this administration's governance approach has influenced its ability to secure political and geographic security in the region, and finally, what significant factors (both regional and international) continue to either bolster its legitimacy or undermine it.

What this paper finds, is that following a tumultuous history of French governance, new state formation, and years of ethnic persecution, Syrian Kurds were anxious for change. Under the pragmatic leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), they were able to effect such change within the window of opportunity provided by the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, creating for themselves a de facto autonomous zone, encompassing significant territory in the north and east of the country.

In the years since, through its: i) federalist approach to governance, ii) war with ISIS and the strategic partnerships this yielded, iii) clandestine arrangement with the Syrian regime, and iv) effective use of force, the PYD-led Administration has so far been able to ensure its own survival.

Ultimately, the central argument offered here is that persistent aggression from Turkey in the north, a lack of formal recognition and international legitimacy, and a Syrian regime which appears increasingly capable of – in light of the ostensible easing in domestic tensions – moving to reclaim the territory it lost to the Kurds, means that the Administration's grasp on self-governance remains profoundly tenuous.

Contents

Acronyms

AANES – Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

AKP – Justice and Development Party

CJTF-OIR – Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve

FSA – Free Syrian Army

HTS – Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham

KCK – Kurdistan Communities Union *(Koma Civaken Kurdistan)*

KDP/PDK – Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*)

KDPS/PDK-S – Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria

KRI – Kurdistan Region in Iraq

KNC – Kurdish National Council

KNK – Kurdistan National Congress (*Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê*)

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

PYD – Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*)

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)

SDC – Syrian Democratic Council

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

SNA – Syrian National Army

SNC – National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces

TAF – Turkish Armed Forces

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

YPG – People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)

YPJ – Women's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*)

Introduction and Methodology

On the 9th of October 2019, Turkey launched a military offensive into Syria, oxymoronically code-named Operation Peace Spring, with the intention of reinforcing the buffer zone between its southern border and the Kurdish occupied territories of Syria's northern region. This operation, one of several since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, was primarily driven by Turkey's national security concerns regarding the growing power of the Kurd's Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the YPG. The PYD has for several years been the de facto ruling party of what is known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES, or just the Autonomous Administration), which governs a geographic zone in which the Kurdish people have created for themselves a collection of independent enclaves. Sometimes known also as Rojava or 'West Kurdistan', this area has historically been populated primarily by the Kurds but has, only since the outbreak of the civil war, exhibited any real signs of self-governance outside of the Syrian government's explicit jurisdiction.

It is with this region and its people that this dissertation primarily concerns itself. Only in recent years have the Syrian Kurds been thrust into the international spotlight, largely through their actions in battling the Islamic State, often to a standstill, if not outright victory. Historically however, there has been a great dearth of mainstream literature regarding their history and the evolution of their political identity since the end of World War I, and what effect this has had on the current self-governance project in northern Syria. This is an attempt, therefore, to contribute to the steadily growing body of work on the Kurds of North and East Syria – specifically, the obstacles and drivers they have encountered in their struggle to create for themselves a zone of autonomous governance in the region.

The structure of this paper is designed as such in order to provide an assessment of three separate timeframes which roughly correspond to three separate, but fundamental, questions this paper intends to answer. The first, consisting of Chapter One, traces the evolution of Kurdish political identity since the end of WWI, dealing with partitioning of the Ottoman Empire, the subsequent implementation of new international borders, Kurdish migration from Turkey into Syria, the French Mandate, and policies of Arabisation in the years following Syria's independence. This chapter also examines the effect these initial events had on the development of Kurdish identity in Syria. Note that this this dissertation in no way presents some reductive, homogenous idea of Kurdish identity. The nature of Kurdish struggle and

independence is fundamentally reliant on what it means to be Kurdish, as the Kurds themselves are often at odds regarding not only the term itself, but also whose freedom is being fought for (if it is being fought for at all), and to what end. What this means, is that while this paper's explicit focus is on Kurdish self-governance in Syria, it also asserts that this cannot be understood in isolation of a broader understanding of the history and formation of Kurdish identity in Syria.

Upon this initial outline, an analysis of the more fervent, more systematic, Kurdish struggle since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war is presented – this takes place in Chapter Two, Three and Four. First, Chapter Two addresses the initial catalysts of revolution in the Middle East and North Africa with a specific focus on rising tensions between Syrian Kurds and their own government. This includes an overview of what first facilitated a Kurdish political and military breakaway in northern Syria and how this was initially maintained. Further, this chapter explores why no such breakaway had occurred before and what factors and historical conditions aligned to facilitate the change – this can be understood as the first question this paper explores.

Chapter Three then presents a theoretical assessment of statehood and autonomy in the context of the Kurdish project in Syria. This is crucial as it provides insight into the nature of the project and how it is both similar to, and decidedly different from, other projects of its kind around the world. This chapter also establishes a foundational analysis of Syrian Kurdish politics over the past several decades and fully details the emergence of the Kurdish autonomous zone since the outbreak of the civil war. An exhaustive analysis of the intricacies of intra- and inter-Kurdish political intrigue and turmoil is beyond the scope of this dissertation, so only select and salient Kurdish political groups are dealt with – specifically, the PYD. The goal of this examination is to assess the successes and failures of these groups in securing Kurdish self-governance in the context of extensive conflict and political strife – at times against the Syrian state itself, or foreign powers and powerful non-state actors such as ISIS. This can be understood as an assessment of 'push and pull' factors – or those things which have either aided or inhibited the Kurds in their establishment of an 'Autonomous Administration'. Notably, this examination is restricted to the northern region of Syria. This is important as the Syrian war is so complex, with such an inordinate number of state and non-state actors that to locate the conflict within a specific geographic zone is not only beneficial but crucial. This chapter corresponds to the second fundamental question addressed in this

paper: following the establishment of Kurdish self-rule, how did the Administration derive and maintain its legitimacy in the context of civil conflict, and its own approach to self-governance?

Chapter Four, while set within the same broad timeframe, deals with more contemporary events and literature, right up until the time of writing. Specifically, recent obstacles to successful self-governance – largely in the form of foreign and internal aggressors, as well as the vicissitudes of Kurdish fortune in terms of international support and allegiances. This includes an analysis of the recognition, or lack thereof, enjoyed by the Administration. This chapter explores the final question posed: what major obstacles to the Administration's internal and external legitimacy still remain?

Ultimately this paper concludes that while the Kurds of Syria have experienced unprecedented success in forging institutions of self-governance since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, their hold on this autonomy remains tenuous – especially in the face of mounting aggression from Turkey and a lack of clarity on its legitimacy both regionally and internationally.

The methodological approach employed in this paper is quite simple and adopts classic qualitative assessment procedures. The complexity of the conflict is such that no accurate (or honest) statistical or quantitative estimation can be made regarding the future outcomes of the Kurds of Syria. This is not to say that there are no clear futures which *could* emerge: for one, the complete dissolution of the AANES, or the successful and long-term consolidation of Kurdish power in the north, or even the creation of a new state. However, this dissertation does not offer any predictive forecasts regarding these outcomes, instead, following Collier's (2017:823) framing of process tracing, this paper conducts a "systematic examination of diagnostic evidence" in order to construct a compelling case for the causal inferences made with regards to the questions posed above. Process tracing is an apt methodological tool to apply here, as Collier (2017:824) goes on to further outline that its use is "often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena". This paper has already set out its three core questions within a chronological framework, and thus conducting its analysis through the lens of typical process tracing techniques makes sense.

Generating first-hand evidence on the Syrian conflict is not only a complicated enterprise, but an extremely dangerous one. As Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019:4-6) note, even though

they managed to gain entry into the country to conduct their research, they were often reliant on armed protection from groups such as the YPG, and were at times unable to access certain towns and villages due to ongoing fighting. The implications of this extend to most of the reporting on the war, in that corroboration of events by external parties is difficult, and producing original research sometimes impossible. Therefore, this paper draws on both first- and second-hand evidence gathered by other researchers, without the addition of any original research conducted by the author.

Chapter One: History and Identity

In the wake of WWI and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire into its many constituent parts, the geo-cultural region known as Kurdistan, which is spread across the borders of the modern states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, was permanently fractured (Owtram, 2019). While the area itself was never officially recognised as a state, the amorphous nature of the borders meant that some semblance of socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic identity could be maintained across the region. As McDowall (2014:5) notes, "(t)here is both a practical and mythical interpretation of political Kurdistan" and this has persisted through the current iteration of formalised states in the Levant and the Middle East more broadly. However, the implementation of strict geographical boundaries has meant that novel restrictions on movement, and the resurgence of nationalist identities, radically changed the developmental path of Kurdish cultural and socio-political community.

This becomes relevant when examining the Kurds of Syria in particular, as they are a group who have been uniquely affected by the interactions of their own ethnic identity and Arab nationalism. This paper is not an investigation into the intricacies of ethno-political identities; however, understanding Syrian Kurdish identity is crucial as it is this concept which informs much of the current movement for self-governance in northern Syria. In opposition to the Ba'athist rule of Bashar al-Assad, the Kurds have created a (largely) unified movement based on policies and politics of pluralism and ethnic diversity, which also celebrates a distinct Syrian Kurdish identity (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:13).

As such this chapter's focus is on developing a coherent historical framework within which the modern Kurdish struggle for autonomous rule in Syria can be understood. This includes an examination of the creation of new nation states and how this influenced Kurdish displacement, the enduring influence of the French Mandate (and its dissolution), as well as the emergence of a Syrian Kurdish identity in the 20th century in the context of increasingly pervasive Arab nationalist rhetoric.

1.1. Fall of the Ottoman Empire: Post-WWI Restructuring, Migration, and the French Mandate in Syria

The partitioning of the Ottoman Empire began with the signing of the Treaty of Sèvre in 1920 between Istanbul and the Allied powers (McDowall, 2014:200). However, the process

was complicated by resistance from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his supporters, who noted the deeply punitive nature of the treaty and the levels of capitulation – whether through loss of land, financial controls, or political concessions – it would require of Turkey (Radpey, 2016:471). Leading the Turkish nationalist movement, Mustafa Kemal offered such successful resistance (Danforth, 2015) that, after several years of conflict, a revised treaty was drawn up at the Conference of Lausanne in 1922. The Treaty of Lausanne was signed on the 24th of July 1923, preceding the official establishment of the Republic of Turkey that same year (Radpey, 2016:470).

These are just two of many treaties signed in the first decades of the 20th century which have come to define the modern territorial delineations of the Middle East. However, these two in particular offer an insight into the first of the great struggles the Kurds would face over the next 100 years. What separates the Treaty of Sèvre from its successor, is that special accommodations were made for particular ethnic groups who formed part of the Ottoman Empire's population – including the Kurds. Articles 62 and 64 of the treaty "promised the [Kurds] possibility to form an autonomous region" (McDowal, 2014:234) with the potential of securing complete independence at some later date if they could prove to the Leage of Nations that they had the institutional capacity. Whether these promises would have been delivered upon the successful ratification of the treaty is not clear; however, that question becomes largely irrelevant when noting that the revised treaty drawn up in Lausanne scrapped most provisions related to the Kurds anyway (Radpey, 2016:469). In fact, one of the only concessions granted to Turkish minorities in the agreement was that no impositions would be made on the speaking of native languages (McDowall, 2014:242). Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal however, it quickly became apparent that not even this minor concession would be realised.

As with all things, the exact history is not as simple as this, as many Kurds in fact fought with Mustafa Kemal in opposition to the Treaty of Sèvre as they were loath to accept British rule – as the treaty stipulated they would (Danforth, 2015) However, it is still a useful point to articulate because it marks a turning point in Kurdish history. Not only were they not to be granted any land of their own, the Kurds of Turkey were now faced with an increasingly antagonist government set on promoting a strong Turkish national identity above all other ethno-linguistic or religious affiliations (Zardykhan, 2006:67-68). In fact, the fomenting of anti-Kurdish sentiment in Turkey after the Kemalist takeover in the 1920s has influenced much

of Ankara's contemporary policy focus on the Kurds in Turkey as well as those in Iraq and northern Syria (Zardykhan, 2006; Allsopp, 2015). This will be further explored in Chapters Three and Four, but the relevance of the Turkish government's history of antagonism towards the Kurds, as it relates to the current political climate in northern Syria, cannot be overstated.

In the years that followed Mustafa Kemal's rise to power, increasingly violent clashes took place between Kemalist forces and Kurdish (as well as other minority) tribal opposition groups (Gunter, 2014; McDowall, 2014). The details of this conflict are not of concern here; however, what is relevant is the extent to which the conflict drove many Kurds – fleeing the violence – south into Syria. This influx of Kurds of a predominantly 'intellectual' bent (Tejel, 2007:27), was an important first step in the development of modern Syrian Kurdish political history. Allsopp (2015:40) elucidates the relevance succinctly: "[t]he main orchestrators of [the Kurdish nationalist political movement in Syria] were not Kurds native to the Kurdish areas encompassed by Syria, but Kurds who had fled from repression by the government of the Turkish republic".

By this stage Turkey had recognised the French Mandate in Syria – initially established through the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, but only affirmed by Turkey with the signing of the Ankara Agreement in 1921 – which ended hostilities between France and Turkey in the region (Halhalli, 2018:28). The extent of the displacement of tribespeople and other Turkish Kurds into northern Syria from 1925 onwards however, was such that in 1937 France sought to generate population estimates of the Upper Jazira region in the northeast of the county (McDowall, 2014:669). The results indicate the Kurds made up the largest single ethnic group in the area – up to 82 000 people. Further, according to Tejel (2007:95), where "before 1927 there were only forty-five Kurdish villages in this region […] by 1939 there were between 700 and 800 villages with a Kurdish majority". However, migration and population estimates are not especially reliable as it took the French administration nearly ten years just to make contact with the Kurdish communities living within the new, but still not clearly defined, Syrian borders. The exact proportion of Kurds who arrived from Turkey is therefore difficult to say, but in the four decades following the Turkish War of Independence it numbers at the very least in the tens of thousands (Tejel, 2009; Gunter, 2014; McDowall, 2014).

The French Mandate in Syria is a useful period to examine when building a historical framework of Kurdish political development not only due to its relatively rigid timeframe but

also because it provides the first major examples of an organised Kurdish push for autonomy. For the sake of brevity, this section will explore two specific events that do well to represent the political climate of this period as a whole: the implementation of the Terrier Plan and the formation of the Xoybun league. While these two political processes share a similar timeline and intersect at points, they are important in this paper for different reasons. The Terrier Plan, for example, represents part of the core of France's political strategy in Syria – both in its 'divide and rule' tactics and in its attempts to build a buffer zone between Syria and Turkey's shared border (Tejel, 2009:14). In the first, the High Commission (the seat of France's authority in the region) thought the best way to deal with Syria's "diverse oppositional issues" (Tejel, 2009:16) was to stoke existing rivalries between elites, minorities, and Sunni Arabs. It is not unlikely that this strategy – at least in part – laid the foundation for the worsening tensions between Arabs and Kurds in the latter half of the century. In the second, French authorities, particularly the Intelligence Services, found that cooperation with the growing Kurdish population in Upper Jazira allowed them to reinforce Syria's northern border, and through the granting of safe haven to Kurdish refugees, exert "diplomatic pressure" (Tejel, 2007:97) on Turkey during border negotiations. While the objectives of the French are quite clear, the consequences for the Kurds are less so. On the one hand privileging certain minority groups such as the Kurds over Syrian nationalists and granting individuals authoritative power – by employing Kurds to police their Arab counterparts for example – fostered a deep and enduring suspicion amongst Syrian Arabs (Allsopp, 2015:40). On the other hand, tacit and explicit support from the French authorities (both financial and military) allowed the Kurds to consolidate a semblance of autonomous authority in the north (Tejel, 2007; McDowall, 2014; Allsopp, 2015. This was manifested, for example, in the formation of a Kurdish-Christian block (with support from French officers) who successfully managed Upper Jazira for several years (Tejel, 2007:102). Although political autonomy in Jazira could not be maintained for very long after the withdrawal of French troops from the region, it is reasonable to assume that the initial support, coupled with increased sedentarisation – which itself aided in agricultural development (Tejel, 2009:38) – beginning in the 1920s, contributed to the emergence of a fairly powerful Kurdish landowning class in the area.

Analysis of the history of the Xoybun not only contributes to an understanding of the intersection between French and Kurdish interests, but also illustrates a fundamental shift in Kurdish political aspirations and strategy. As Tejel (2009:27) points out, prior to the influx and

organisation (in Syria) of Kurdish intellectuals fleeing Turkey, cooperation between the French and the Kurds was driven by Kurdish tribes' desire to secure French support – not for "any specific cultural or political rights". This changed with the establishment of the Xoybun League, which adopted a more nationalistic rhetoric and espoused notions of the Kurds as a collective (Allsopp, 2015:43). Despite the French quickly banning the party due to Turkish security concerns (McDowall, 2014:635), it is clear that authorities were aware of the League's activities and could have, if they wished, undermined them completely (Tejel, 2009:18). This included the Xoybun League's involvement in the failed Ararat revolt of 1930 which ultimately forced Kurdish leadership to revaluate their political strategy, moving away from armed insurgency towards more of a cultural and intellectual resistance (Tejel, 2009:21). What this demonstrates is that, ironically, it was not the Xoybun League itself that had the greatest lasting impact on Kurdish political and cultural identity, but rather its failure. Although the party was reasonably successful in its promulgation of early Kurdish nationalist ideology in Syria, its political shift in the 1930s had a more enduring influence. As McDowall (2014:635) notes, following the collapse of the Ararat revolt, Xoybun leader Jaladat Bedirkhan began to favour "cultural activism" over military force and initiated a great flourishing of "Kurdish linguistic and literary activity" through his magazine publication, *Hawar* (The Calling). McDowall (2014:27) argues that this cultural and linguistic 'revolution' undoubtedly helped foster the idea of a shared identity amongst Kurds. Although this Syrian Kurdish identity was by no means homogenous or without its own internal inconsistencies, confronted with years of ethnic persecution (as they would be), targeting the very concept of a 'Kurdish ethnic identity', the Kurds had effectively no say in the matter of their own diversity.

1.2. The Rise of Arab Nationalism: Kurdish Identity in Syria

In the decades following Syrian independence, and especially with the ascendancy of the Ba'ath Party and Hafiz al-Assad in the 1960s and 70s, the Kurds found themselves facing levels of persecution and disenfranchisement not witnessed since the early stages of the 1900s. Where the French had, at least to a degree, operated on a philosophy of "structural pluralism" (Tejel, 2009:41), the post-mandatory period saw a powerful shift towards intolerance for minorities – with the Kurds becoming the primary target. Certain scholars (Tejel, 2009; Allsopp, 2015) argue that in many ways, the consolidation of a relatively uniform Kurdish identity in Syria during the 20th century was not necessarily due to a binding history of shared religious, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics, but rather was in response to the imposition of a clear

divide between an Arab nationalist identity and a Kurdish one. In essence, Kurdish identity coalesced because the Syrian government forced it to. However, as the previous section indicates, this did not occur in isolation but was also in partial response to the 'divide and rule' tactics of the French who, through the privileging of certain Kurds, vilified the group as whole in the eyes of Syrian Arabs. Moreover, some of the foundations for a collective Kurdish identity had already been laid with the cultural and intellectual "renaissance" in the early decades of the 20th century.

The "rationale" of the Syrian government's approach to the Kurds in the 1960s and 70s is aptly conveyed in Muhammad Talab Hilal's 1963 report on Jazira. In it, he labels Kurds "enemies" and "infiltrators", and ultimately calling for their "excision" (Tejel, 2009:60-61). While the twelve-point policy proposal of the Ba'thist lieutenant was never made official policy, it does reflect the government's general sentiment. In 1962, for example, a year before the report was published, the state conducted a census in the province of Hasakah in the northeast. Driven by the largely unfounded belief that thousands of Kurds had entered Syria illegally, authorities demanded that residents submit proof that they had lived in the region since before 1945 (Allsopp, 2015:20). The entire census was conducted in a single day and many Kurds were either not home or did not participate for fear of taxation or conscription. The result was that as many as 150 000 Kurds were summarily stripped of Syrian citizenship and listed as either foreigners or as "concealed/unregistered people" (Allsopp, 2015:20). With this denial of citizenship, these Kurds were without any of the rights typically enjoyed by 'legal' residents. To this day they are unable to legally own or rent property, work, or travel. Moreover, this population of 'stateless' Kurds has only grown larger as any child born to a Kurd without citizenship is not registered as a citizen either (Allsopp, 2015:21). While the physical ramifications for the affected Kurds are quite clear, the census also represents a political and social 'othering' of a group which staunchly resisted Arabisation. Thus, the regime was able to implicitly characterise Kurds as a dangerous, subversive force in an otherwise united Arab world, labelling them as "hired agents in the service of powerful foreign enemies of Arabism" (Tejel, 2009:41).

This action by the Ba'thist government was only one in a long line of anti-Kurdish policies enacted over the next several decades. The implementation of the Arab Belt, for example, was another step in the process of disenfranchisement (Gunter, 2009; McDowall, 2014). Through the expulsion of thousands of Kurds from agriculturally productive land in the north, the Ba'ath

party sought to simultaneously undermine the Kurdish landowning class and increase the Arab population in the region (McDowall, 2014:651). The re-population of specific areas with Arab citizens was also thought to be a strategy in disrupting contiguous regions of Kurdish control, both within Syria and with potential allies in Turkey and Iraq (Gunter, 2014; Allsopp, 2015). Not only were thousands of Kurds stripped of citizenship and dispossessed of their land, 'Kurdishness" itself effectively became a crime. The speaking of Kurmanji, a northern Kurdish dialect, was banned in the workplace and other public spheres – as well as the teaching and learning of it (Allsopp, 2015:22). Kurdish cultural and musical expression were criminalised, and notable Kurds were erased from national textbooks – with the names of many historically important Kurdish sites changed to Arabic. Such was the degree and threat of this ethnocide that, as Allsopp (2015:23) points out, it provides "the fundamental purpose of the Syrian Kurdish political parties".

The events following a football match in 2004 in the town of Qamishli in northern Syria serve as a useful representation of the culmination of tensions between the Kurds and Arabs as a result of the regime's policies over the decades. Although reports vary, it seems that insults hurled between a group of Kurdish fans and predominantly Sunni Arab fans devolved into a full-blown riot (Tejel, 2009:115). Violence quickly spread and the security forces were authorised to open fire by the governor of Hasaka, killing six Kurds, three of whom were children (Tejel, 2009:115-116). As protests erupted in response, the government opted to engage with a surprising level of brutality – detaining, torturing, and killing Kurds and Arabs alike who were suspected of participating in any form of demonstration (Gunter, 2009:36). The regime's tactics here should have perhaps given greater pause to those groups who went on to participate in the far more widespread uprisings of 2011 – and arguably did in the case of Kurdish leaders as the following chapter will show. Despite the state-sanctioned violence, protests continued for weeks while the death toll continued to rise. It was not until many Kurdish parties united to proclaim deference to, and support of, the Assad regime (Tejel, 2009:118) that the state was at once mollified, and the popular support of the protests swiftly undermined. Although any suspicion of foreign influence in the Kurdish uprising was denied unequivocally by the state, "anti-Kurdish opinion flourished across the country" (Tejel, 2009:117). Clearly, decades of rhetoric aimed at painting the Kurds as seditionists and the tools of insidious foreign powers was so successful that even with the government changing its (public) stance, Syrian Arab sentiment remained distinctly distrustful of the Kurds as a whole.

So even as the Kurds sought to make one of their first great strides in modern Syrian history towards equal rights and freedoms, the result was just further alienation.

While this early historical analysis is in no way comprehensive, it does illustrate several important (if indirect) 'push and pull' factors which this paper proposes significantly influenced the Kurds current political project in Syria. While 'identity' may at first seem irrelevant in the discussion of self-governance, in the case of the Kurds, the consolidation of a shared Syrian Kurdish identity was instrumental in driving the broader political movement (Allsopp, 2015:171-172). The Autonomous Administration – while now a predominantly federalist experiment – is largely informed by a political philosophy inseparably intertwined with the modern Syrian Kurdish identity (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). In contrast, state formation in Syria has been fundamentally linked to Arab identity, with it being "enshrined in the Syrian constitution and its laws" (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:201). With the explicit exclusion of the Kurds from this early attachment of Syrian Arab identity to sovereignty and citizenship, it is reasonable to frame Kurdish identity in as significant a light when it comes to the formation of the Administration.

However, as this section has illustrated, it was not just identity that formed part of this early 'push and pull' dichotomy, but also the interaction of extensive economic development in predominantly Kurdish areas and the associated ethnic and political persecution faced because of it. So, having provided a rudimentary historical insight into some of the early contributing factors to what would later become a push for self-governance, the following chapter examines two key catalysts which signalled the beginning of the current Kurdish project in democratic autonomy.

Chapter Two: Revolution in the Middle East: Catalysts for Self-Governance

The Syrian civil war and the struggle of the Kurdish within this grand arena is better understood in the context of the revolutionary climate of the early 21st century. In fact, this paper proposes that the popular uprisings of the 2010s, beginning in Tunisia, ultimately facilitated the development of a political climate in Syria that was ideal for the Kurds to establish a semblance of autonomy there. This is not to say that the Kurds would never have been able to achieve the level of political control they did without these catalysts; rather, the Arab Spring proved a key factor both in setting the stage and accelerating the process itself (Taspinar, 2012). While it is a difficult task to *conclusively* demonstrate causal links within political science due to the sheer number of variables at play – especially in the context of civil conflict – in the case of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war there exists an intuitively clear and illustrative chain of events leading up to the establishment of a Kurdish-controlled autonomous zone in northern Syria. This chapter therefore serves as a roadmap, outlining the two great catalysts that have so profoundly influenced the political evolution of the Kurdish political project in Syria.

2.1. The Arab Spring

On the morning of 17 December 2010, a street vendor stood in traffic outside the governor's headquarters in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, drenched in gasoline (Uzzel, 2012:1). Having had his wares confiscated earlier that day by the police (a routine occurrence for him), and then been denied an audience with local authorities to query the confiscation, he found himself helpless and with little recourse to restitution. At around 11:30am he set himself on fire (Uzzel, 2012:1). This event may seem as far removed from the question of Kurdish self-governance in Syria as possible. However, it was following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation that a wave of anti-regime protests swept throughout not only Tunisia, but the rest of North Africa and the Middle East as well (Campante & Chor, 2012:167). Discontentment with dysfunctional, venal, and autocratic governance had reached a tipping point – and this Tunisian street vendor's final act of defiance proved enough to shift the balance. Within a year, what came to be known as the Arab Spring oversaw the downfall of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and the spread of rampant political violence and social upheaval throughout the region more broadly (Campante & Chor, 2012:167-168).

In terms of the significance of events it is difficult to compare the Arab Spring to the civil war in Syria. One could argue that while the Syrian war has been more quantitatively devastating and continued for so much longer, it might not have occurred at all without the influence of the Arab Spring. As such, the causal chain of events presented in this chapter are not judged on their severity, or the extent of their direct impact on Kurdish affairs in Syria; rather, they are presented as sufficient, if not necessary, conditions which facilitated the initial political manoeuvring of the Kurds in the north of Syria.

Notably, the spread of the popular uprising was not unchecked or random. Although extensive, it was primarily in those countries where enduring political resentment existed that the populace rose up (Dugulin, 2011). It was no coincidence that a similar rhetoric was co-opted wherever anti-regime protests erupted, as it was in those countries where decades of authoritarian rule had fomented pervasive notions of dissatisfaction and rebellion. The same was true for the Kurds of Syria (Leenders, 2012:421) As the last chapter demonstrated, tensions between the Kurds and the Syrian government had been escalating for decades; however, for reasons which will be explored in the following chapter, Kurdish leadership sought only to maintain the status quo and thus took no direct action for themselves, or against the government (Allsopp, 2015; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). This changed when the tenets of the Arab Spring were finally taken up in Syria in March of 2011. Important to note here that had it been only the Kurds who were disillusioned with the Assad regime, the civil war very likely would not have erupted at all. Although a significant minority, they are still a minority, and so would have been unable to present the kind of threat to leadership faced by those in Tunisia and Egypt for example. However, it turned out that the political climate in Syria was profoundly tense – with a history of Alawi Muslim "domination" (Hinnebusch, 2012:97), poverty, unemployment, and agricultural collapse (Worth, 2013; Werrel et al., 2015; Selby et al., 2017) coinciding to create a pervasive sense of anger amongst the (Sunni) majority of Syria's population.

So, as political unrest spread from North Africa into the Middle East, Syria was uniquely poised to experience at least some form of anti-regime protest. Few predicted the extent to which these protests would come to define the Syrian political landscape over the next decade (Leenders, 2012:421-422).

2.2. The Syrian Civil War

As news of the protests in Tunisia and Egypt spread "Syrians of all walks of life held their breath" (Leenders, 2012:419). The sheer scale of the uprisings was such that – with Syria's political climate as it was – revolution seemed almost inevitable. However, despite sporadic protests throughout the country since the beginning of 2011, no sustained uprising seemed to have taken hold at the time. It was not until the arrest of 15 schoolchildren in the small town of Dar'a that popular resistance began in earnest. Having adopted the same anti-regime slogans made famous in Egypt, the schoolchildren graffitied the walls of their school in protest over the detention and arrests of several others who were heard discussing the potential downfall of the Assad government (Leenders, 2012:419-421). When authorities were approached by concerned parents and citizens they were rebuffed in a manner reminiscent of Mohamed Bouazizi's experience months before. This example, as with many others in those countries most affected by the Arab Spring, serves to highlight a key point: it was not just discontentment with the incumbent leadership that led to such extensive and enduring political violence, but the response of the regimes to the expression of this discontentment (Leenders, 2012; Selby et al., 2017). In the case of Dar'a, following the lack of engagement from the local authorities, protestors marched on the governor's mansion, only to have security forces open fire on them, killing two (Leenders, 2012:421). State-sanctioned violence only escalated from there with the often wanton killing of civilians throughout the town and its bordering villages. Although Bashar al-Assad might have thought that the failure of his contemporaries in Tunisia and Egypt was a result of not *enough* force (Gunter, 2011), it is likely that excessive violence perpetrated by the government was, at least in part, responsible for the rapid spread of antiregime protests throughout the country, and ultimately the emergence of armed resistance.

But the question of the role of the Kurds in this uprising and to what extent they were affected by it must still be addressed. As the previous chapter suggested, the Qamishli riots of 2004 were the largest and most sustained Kurdish protests in recent Syrian history, yet no significant positive outcomes for the Kurds were realised. This was in part due to the disunity and largely toothless nature of the Kurdish political leadership in Syria at the time (Allsopp, 2015:721). An unspoken understanding existed between the state and the Kurdish leadership wherein the Kurds could (to a degree) campaign for their rights and freedoms, just never in open defiance of the Assad regime (Gunter, 2014; McDowall, 2014; Allsopp, 2015). This was most obviously displayed as Kurdish parties united, at the height of the Qamishli revolt, to

"reaffirm[ed] their loyalty to President Bashar al-As'ad" (Tejel, 2009:118), thus undermining the popular protests and bringing an end to the violence. This ideology of passivity quite understandably frustrated the younger generation of Syrian Kurds (Allsopp, 2015:722-723), who perhaps could not fully comprehend the fear of reprisal which so infected the old guard. It was in this context of national unrest and an indecisive leadership that a single party came to prominence – The Democratic Union Party, known more commonly by its acronym, the PYD.

The PYD and its fundamental role in orchestrating a Kurdish political takeover in the north will be fully explored in the following chapter. What is relevant here is understanding that a functional Kurdish leadership did emerge in the early years of the civil war and, most importantly, it was able to capitalise on the weaknesses this war created in the regime's reach of control (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). Perhaps most significant in the broader context of modern Kurdish history in Syria, was the withdrawal of Syrian troops in 2011 and 2012 from Kurdish majority areas in the north and northeast (Caves, 2012; Federici, 2015). With organised resistance mounting in other parts of the country, the regime was forced to divert military resources to areas most at risk of being overwhelmed. As such, with what amounted to tacit approval from the state (Gunes & Lowe, 2015:3) Kurdish forces swiftly converged on those areas abandoned by the government, consolidating their position, and ultimately securing for themselves a geographic region which – other than for some significant exceptions – they still control to this day (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:91). In some ways then, the Syrian civil war is important as a catalyst to the Kurds not because of its first-order effects, but rather more indirectly. In distracting the government from its northern territories, the war served to create a near-perfect window of opportunity for the Kurds in the region to establish an enclave protected from both state aggression and control. Further, as this paper will go on to describe in detail, the war forced a level of collaborative engagement between the Kurds and the regime (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:16) – despite the long history of animosity that still defines much of their relationship today.

This is in no way a full summation of the Kurds' involvement in the early days of the civil war. Protests and demonstrations were joined by Kurds throughout the country (Allsopp, 2015:20); however, in discussing the Arab Spring and the civil war as catalysts, this chapter has sought to frame these as crucial, if indirect, 'push and pull' factors which have influenced the Kurdish self-governance project specifically. To define them exactly as either 'push' or 'pull' is difficult because not only is any delineation between them as distinct events nearly

impossible, but they also facilitated opportunities to act in certain cases, while forcing action in others. Regardless, this paper asserts that without acknowledging these phenomena as fundamental to the current iteration of Kurdish self-rule in Syria, no politically cogent understanding of the emergence of the Autonomous Administration can be achieved.

Having established a preliminary background of what this paper proposes are some of the major factors which precipitated the creation of a Kurdish-led de facto autonomous region in northern Syria, the following chapters explore the internal and external political conflicts and governance approaches which have, and continue to, shape the Autonomous Administration.

Chapter Three: Rojava Ascendant

Within the broader arena of the Syrian conflict, another uprising took place: originally overshadowed by the civil war it came to be known as the Rojava Revolution, and it would fundamentally alter the political landscape of Syria's northern region. This chapter's focus is on this revolution, the Autonomous Administration it helped create, and the implications of this not just for the Kurds of Syria but all those groups who fall under the purview of the political powers at play in the region. Although this paper regularly refers to 'self-governance' and 'autonomy' in the case of the PYD-led Administration in northern Syria, it is important to note that this should not be understood as an assertion of the Administration's sovereignty– in fact, the PYD has itself disavowed any claims that the Kurds wish to break away from the nation of Syria (Van Wilgenburg & Allsopp, 2019:182). Rather, the democratic project in the north is characterised as a radically different form of governance, outside the typically Western notions of sovereignty, independence, and statehood. This is important to understand as it is this political philosophy which informs the actions and behaviour of the Administration and its military forces. Moreover, one of, if not the most important, factor that will shape the future of the autonomous region is the legitimacy it can derive from external actors. Therefore, legitimacy and recognition could act as either the defining "push" factor or "pull" factor for the Administration, depending on not only the image it can present to the international community, but how useful it can prove itself to be in maintaining regional security. This chapter therefore explores both the guiding principles of the Administration, and how they relate to modern understandings of self-governance, statehood, 'de facto autonomy', and international recognition. Furthermore, an in-depth examination of the formation of the autonomous zone is presented, with an analytical focus on the PYD during the Syrian civil war: its alliances and adversaries, its political and military exploits, and its viability as a ruling party in the region. Note that the PYD is so intrinsically bound to the history and development of the Autonomous Administration and its associated "political, civil and armed organisations" (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:63), that it is problematic to present an analysis of the PYD wholly divorced from an analysis of the region and its peoples. Therefore, while this chapter does present distinct sections on the PYD and the Autonomous Administration, the former's actions and history are (with as minimal repetition as possible) woven throughout the chapter's narrative as well.

3.1. The PYD: Origins and Associations

The PYD is arguably the most powerful single actor in the Autonomous Administration as well as Syria's northern region more broadly (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). But how was it able to achieve this supremacy in as short a time as it did, and how does it continue to hold on to this power? This brief section attempts to provide insight into the first question through an analysis of the PYD's early political tactics and history, and hopefully with that examination, provide enough context to begin answering the second question. Again, the sheer complexity of the civil war in general, and the inter-Kurdish political and military conflicts in particular, makes it difficult to present a clear timeline of events with specifically defined actors. The constate state of conflict, combined with ever-changing alliances, territorial expansion and reduction, practically amorphous governance structures in the Administration, and conflicted reporting of events, means that this paper's analysis is not exhaustive.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) owes its origins, at least in part, to a rapprochement between Damascus and Ankara in 1998, following which Hafez al-Assad agreed to ban the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and expel its leader Abdullah Ocalan from Syria, where he and the PKK had been based for several years prior (International Crisis Group, 2014:1). This decision likely influenced the PKK's decision to help establish a 'proxy' in Syria in 2003 – the PYD. Whether or not the PYD is in fact a proxy for the PKK is highly contentious (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019: Netjes & Van Veen, 2021); however, links between the two organisations are undeniable, as evidenced by the former's adoption of Ocalan's political philosophy on 'democratic confederalism', its inclusion in the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) established by the PKK to link politically affiliated groups from Kurdish areas (Wuthrich, 2018 101), and extensive reporting on cooperation between the two through training, funding, and the movement of military resources across borders (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:9). The PYD's affiliation with the PKK has also been one of the most significant drivers of tension between the Autonomous Administration and Turkey (Kasapoğlu & Ülgen, 2018). Classified as a terrorist organisation by both Turkey and the United States, the PKK has long acted in opposition to the Turkish government, waging what amounts to a low-level guerrilla war with the country (Taspinar, 2012). The origins of the profound animosity between the two political entities owe themselves in part to events described in the first chapter. However, they are extensive and complex enough that to discuss them exhaustively would

require a separate paper entirely; therefore, for the purposes of this examination, all that needs to be understood is that Ankara considers the PKK to be the biggest single threat to its national security (Kasapoğlu & Ülgen, 2018), and so the latter's links to the PYD has meant the Autonomous Administration is regarded by Turkey with a similar level of hostility – as this paper will demonstrate throughout this chapter and the next.

Initially enjoying little success in the face of the more established Kurdish political groups at the time, the party rose to prominence during the Syrian uprising of 2011, establishing itself as the dominant force amongst the Syrian Kurdish political leadership and ultimately instigating the formation of an autonomous zone in northern Syria (Lowe, 2016:5). A key factor in the PYD's initial success was its decisive action in response to the fragmentation of broader Syrian society, in stark contrast to the hesitancy of its Kurdish political peers (Khalaf, 2016:9). Seizing on the instability, the PYD, through its armed wing the YPG (People's Protection Unit), began establishing checkpoints throughout Afrin and Kobani (and later in the Hasakah province), effectively establishing itself as the primary source of security for those in the areas it assumed control over (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:91). It was not only the PYD's ability to provide protection which reinforced its authority, but also its willingness to negotiate with the regime (Khalaf, 2016:8). While this 'cooperation' precipitated significant divisions between itself and other Kurdish groups in the region and abroad, it also mitigated potential violence between itself and the state (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:1). In line with its focus on 'democratic autonomy' the PYD established the umbrella organisation TEV-DEM (Malik, 2019), in order to begin building administrative infrastructure in the enclaves it governed. Although this will be further explored in the following sections, note here that the PYD's approach to governance has evolved and adapted extensively since its initial acquisition of power, which means that in the first years of the civil war, the PYD was less inclined towards cooperation and inclusive engagement than it is attempting to be now (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). For example, although it espoused notions of pluralism and active political participation, in the early years of the revolution it was prolific in its squashing of factional attempts to undermine its authority (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Khalaf, 2016; Sary, 2016). Both because of, and despite this, the PYD was able to consolidate control over a massive range of Kurdish-majority territory in the north, relying not only its ability to provide security, but also its explicit identification with the Kurds and their struggle (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:89-90).

However, initial tensions between Kurdish groups were not insignificant, and although the PYD ultimately came to dominate in the region, the repercussions of this victory continue to pose a threat to the Administration as a whole. Although disagreement and division were, and continue to be, extensive within the Syrian Kurdish political sphere, the contemporary delineation which emerged following the Syrian uprising can be roughly categorised as the PYD/PKK-bloc on the one side, and the KNC/KDP-bloc on the other (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Halhalli, 2018; Özçelik, 2019). As with much of political action that has played out within Syria since the outbreak of the civil war, the tensions between the PYD and the KNC can, at least in part, be attributed to external actors. The Kurdistan National Council (KNC) was formed in 2011 as a coalition of several Kurdish parties of what Allsopp (2015:184) terms the "1957 genealogy"; and with backing from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Van Wilgenburg, 2013) – the two leading parties in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq – became the PYD's principal opposition in Syria (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). While this may seem an unlikely source of conflict considering that the KRG is itself the most successful example of Kurdish autonomous rule in the modern era, historical tensions between the KDP and the PKK filtered through into relations between the PYD and the KNC. The source of these tensions is varied and complex, with differing views on Kurdish identity, nationalist ideology, alliances, and methodological perspectives on violence, all contributing (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:168). The manifestation of these differences in Syria played a significant role not only in the early years of the PYD's rise to dominance, but as will be explored in the final chapter, continue to present major challenges to the Administration's legitimacy. After the outbreak of the conflict, although the PYD was the most decisive of the Kurdish political groups in moving to control territory in the north, its popular support was not universal, nor was its authority uncontested (Özçelik,2019:693). In 2012, the KDP attempted to broker some form of power sharing between the KNC and the PYD through the 'Erbil declaration'; but this ultimately failed as the PYD was reluctant to relinquish any of its power and insisted that not only was it better suited to provide security and stability to the region, its potential allies in the KNC/KDP bloc were "inept" and "apathetic" (International Crisis Group, 204:3). The Barzani-led KRG and its allies were quick to denounce the PYD/YPG as authoritarian and accused them of a series of arrests and killings – primarily targeting Kurdish political leaders from rival organisations (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:38-39. While these accusations have been categorically denied by both PYD and YPG officials, cooperation broke down and the PYD was able to assume primary authority of the

region (Khalaf, 2016:5). Although tensions would not end here. Accusations have been regularly hurled between the groups over the years – with the PYD accusing the KNC and its allies in the KRG of consorting with Ankara and ultimately betraying the Kurdish struggle (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:173), and the KRG (along with several other political factions in Syria) labelling the PYD as either an ally or a tool of the regime, with equally bad implications for its moral character (Hossino & Tanir, 2012:4). According to several scholars (Khalaf, 2016; Sary, 2016; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021), the truth of this second accusation is not only undeniable but serves as the most convincing explanation of the PYD's unprecedented success in the early years of the revolution. Although the extent of the PYD's involvement with the regime is disputed, some overlap of strategic interests has prompted a degree of cooperation at points during the civil war (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021) – despite the organisation's own repeated denials – and thus as an argument for the PYD's initial political gains, appears persuasive. This will be further explored in the following sections because the political stalemate between the two continues to affect the Administration's international and external legitimacy.

As with any conflict though, political relationships cannot be so easily simplified, and the case of the PYD and the KRG is no exception. In fact, strategic cooperation between the two since 2011 has been of profound importance to the Administration's survival, particularly in the context of its conflict with the Islamic State (Rudaw, 2014). However, due to the inseparability of the PYD from the governance infrastructure of the Administration as a whole, this relationship is better understood within the context of the Administration, and thus will be further explored in the following sections. The PYD's primacy within the Administration means that this paper proposes any assessment of the latter's history and political evolution can be implicitly understood as a reflection of the PYD's own influence. It is impossible to overstate the inseparability of the party from the region. Therefore, having offered a brief overview of the PYD, this paper now moves to a discussion of the Autonomous Administration itself.

3.2. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

This paper has up till this point referred to the Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Syria and the array of political and military organisations which make up its governance apparatus as the 'AANES', the 'Autonomous Administration', or simply the 'Administration'. However,

the self-rule project in northern Syria is difficult to classify definitively, not least due to the extensive reformations and revisions regarding names and governance structures which have taken place since the PYD-led takeover of the region in 2011. This is further complicated by the fact that these changes were "internal processes, not subject to public scrutiny or explanation (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:90). Not only this, but the recency of its emergence, the rapidity of its development, and the revolutionary (by its own account) nature of its governance framework, has meant formal or in-depth characterisations of the project remain limited. Despite this, the AANES can be broadly defined as an autonomous region encompassing three decentralised (but predominantly Kurdish) cantons or 'areas': Afrin, Kobani, and Jazirah, which adhere to a Social Charter and follow a bottom-up approach to governance (Van Wilgenburg & Allsopp, 2019:13). While initially governed exclusively by the PYD, these regions now fall under the purview of TEV-DEM (itself formed by the PYD in 2011), which acts as a central parliament, made up of a coalition of Kurdish and non-Kurdish political groups (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:92). However, according to TEV-DEM these cantons are functionally autonomous; able to govern their own citizens, pass their own laws, and administer to their respective territories independently – within the spirit of the charter (Khalaf, 2016:11).

Geographically these cantons span most of Syria's northern region even if there are gaps between areas which continue to frustrate the Administration's aspirations of political contiguity. These aspirations were further undermined by the Turkish-backed takeover of Afrin in March of 2018 (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:126) which effectively severed the Administration's control over the canton. This means that while Afrin is still considered a part of the Administration within its own charter, the reality is that Turkish-backed rebel groups and the Syrian Interim Government (based in Turkey) are responsible for its day-to-day management and security (Rudaw, 2018).

The order of the following sub-sections is arranged as such to provide not only a chronological examination of the Administration's political development, but also a coherent analysis of its sources of legitimacy and how they have evolved since the 2011 uprising. Therefore, there are points of overlap, particularly with regard to changing approaches to governance and conflict with the Islamic State.

3.2.1. The Self-Governance Model in Syria: Theory and Practice

While its rough geography has been defined, no assessment of the actual form of self-government the AANES represents has so far been offered. Initial governance structures after the PYD-led takeover of the region in 2011/2012 were less clearly defined than they are now, both because of the urgency required to implement them and because single-party-dominance was not as obvious as it is now (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). However, after the PYD became the de facto authority in the region, through the TEV-DEM the organisation implemented a new model known as 'democratic confederalism' (Gunes & Lowe, 2016:11). Developed by Abdullah Ocalan (primarily after his imprisonment), his writings on democratic confederalism inform the underlying mechanisms of the Administration's approach to governance in the region – both in its pluralistic ethos and its shunning of classical conceptions capitalism and the nation state, which all fall under the 'Apoist' approach (Jongerden, 2019). One can argue that democratic confederalism is uniquely suited to addressing the issue of Kurdish unity across disparate political borders. One of the primary justifications of its application as guiding political framework in the Syrian context is that it does not seek to supplant existing nation states in pursuit of a unified Kurdistan (Leezenberg, 2016; Jongerden, 2019). Rather, as a decentralised 'democratic autonomy' project which promotes community-led organisation it can *theoretically* link Kurdish groups across Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and without raising suspicions of secession or sedition. The reality is that suspicion of ulterior motives abounds, particularly in Turkey (Çakmak, 2018:121). Understanding this is crucial to understanding the self-governance project in Syria because it cannot be viewed through typically applied frameworks of autonomy or self-governance.

But what are these *typically* applied frameworks? For example, Bird (2000:564) outlines a fairly basic criterion which can be used to identify self-government: "the apparatus of the government and administration is operated exclusively by individuals […] from within". This also implies that the governing authority's legitimacy is derived from members within the group. Due to the highly non-stringent conceptualisation of self-government presented in this framework, it can be used to characterise the political context of the Autonomous Administration. However, what complicates the analysis is that self-government processes are being enacted within the borders of an officially recognised state, meaning that one cannot just apply an arbitrary level of analysis. If viewed at the state-level, one sees that there is a breakaway region pushing for autonomy and self-determination, making it fundamentally

illegitimate in the eyes of the state, and by extension, any other entities which view the state as legitimate (Coppieters, 2018; Almqvist, 2019). However, viewed at the regional level, its internal legitimacy is theoretically sound as it conforms to Bird's basic conception of self-government. The Apoist framework foresees this conflict and attempts to reconcile the inconsistency by avoiding separation from the state itself (Jongerden, 2019; Van Wilgenburg & Allsopp, 2019). In the case of the Administration, it seeks to present itself as an autonomous region in which its peoples have a right to self-determination, but that is still fundamentally part of Syria. This is also one of the primary sources of division between the PYD and the KRG-backed alliance. In following the Apoist movement, the PYD has departed from the driving political aspiration of the government in Iraqi Kurdistan – the formation of an independent nation state for the Kurds (Jongerden, 2019:66). Such a fundamental divide in ideology has meant that reconciliatory engagement between the political blocs has been fraught for years, as this paper will continue to demonstrate.

This non-statist approach to reconciling the existence of an autonomous region within Syria's territories has not been met with a positive response from the regime and its allies. As Jongerden (2019:62) notes, "the common sense view is that social life is somehow 'naturally' a life within states [and] that these are inevitable". The perspective of Assad's government is not only similar but is also reinforced by a history of authoritarian rule and a violently disciplined hold on power (Hof & Simon; 2013). Therefore, despite the Administration's goals of cooperation alongside autonomy, achieving recognition from the Syrian regime as a legal, self-governing entity remains a significant hurdle. However, as this chapter will later demonstrate, outright recognition by the regime has so far not been necessary for the Administration's survival, as its interests, and that of the Syrian government's, have aligned often enough since the outbreak of the conflict that no major violent engagement between the two has yet been necessary.

Regardless of the Administration's purported non-statist aspirations however, its existence within the international community may be regarded as functionally identical to that of any political entity vying for statehood. For example, the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States proposes that a state can be recognised as such if it has a politically organised society within a clearly defined territory, is able to abide by international law, makes clear its intention to act as a member of the international community, and is "independent of any other existing state" (Almqvist, 2017:6). Further, as Palani et al (2019:2272) argue, a 'de

facto state' is simply an entity which possesses all the qualities of what is typically understood as a state but lacks legal recognition. In line with this, the Autonomous Administration could be reasonably characterised as a de facto state. However, by its own insistence, it does not seek secession. As this paper has already pointed out, the Administration frames itself as a self-governing region of Syria, not a new state. It is this contestation which illustrates a profound problem for the Administration – it does not matter how it wishes to define itself, but rather how it is defined by the international community. Despite its own characterisations, its existence will be assessed in relation to how it affects the established order – not only in Syria and the Middle East, but in the broader international context as well. This creates a complication not only for the Administration, but for those political entities which might consider its recognition in the future.

Moreover, the reality of the governance structures in the autonomous region are not necessarily in line with those philosophies which inspired them. For example, although the grassroots approach of building and organising local communes within which decisions can be made and passed up through the administrative pipeline is acceptable in theory, there are many reports that participation is low, and adherence to the PYD-led central authority supersedes any expression of local community grievances (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:98). This varies widely across cantons and is often influenced by geographical proximity to centres of Kurdish power. For example, interviews with citizens in Jazira yielded results which indicate greater sympathy for the model of governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq which it borders, whereas citizens from Kobani (initially a PKK stronghold) indicate more adamant support for the PYD whose ties to the PKK are extensive, if not explicitly advertised (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:98-99). What this indicates is that although the Administration's rhetoric seemingly embodies the Apoist approach, the process of its implementation is neither perfect, or complete. Leezenberg (2016:683) goes so far as to argue that the PYD-led project is simply another example of party vanguardism and that the "heavily militarized and highly hierarchical character of one-party rule" ostensibly on display in northern Syria is a reality quite removed from the PYD's propaganda. This is not a fringe judgement either, as evidenced by Netjes & Van Veen's (2021:33-34) in-depth examination of the 'YPG-dominated PYD', wherein they argue the organisation can be characterised as a "hybrid coercive […] paramilitary" group, which has relied on tactics of "intimidation, repression, [and] assassination". Although many such accusations of political repression and authoritarianism have been lodged against the PYD

since its rise (Özçelik, 2016; Gutman 2017), this paper proposes that characterising the Autonomous Administration as definitively 'authoritarian' or 'repressive' can be misleading, not only because of the varying reactions to its leadership in different parts of northern Syria, but also because it has only ever existed during a time of war. Therefore, one could argue (as the PYD and its allies do that many of the actions it has been criticised for were actions taken in justifiable self-defence of a 'legitimate' self-governance project or were otherwise publicly and conclusively investigated (Tax et al., 2017). Note that, at the time of writing, the only official external recognition of the AANES's legitimacy has come from the Catalonian Parliament (Kurdpress, 2021), itself an example of a complicated attempt at autonomous rule. This paper does not offer an assessment of the moral legitimacy of the PYD-led Administration's actions since its establishment; rather, it emphasises the fact that regardless of any regional or international judgements on legality and legitimacy, the Administration does exist, and with it, the practical realities of its governance approach. And while external assessments of legitimacy might ultimately come to determine the future of the Administration (as will be discussed in the final chapter), its authority within the region is largely determined by these practical realities – most important of which are arguably economy and security.

3.2.2. Economy and Security

In terms of economy, the PYD was fortunate in that many of the Kurdish majority regions in Syria are some of the country's most agriculturally productive and oil rich (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:102). In line with the Administration's governance philosophy, "a new form of economy independent of both capitalist and feudal relations of exploitation" (Knapp, 2015) was implemented following the PYD-led takeover in the region. This new system banned any form of monopoly and encouraged cooperative, ecologically sound economic practices wherein "[l]abour rights and sustainable development are guaranteed" (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:10-102). Despite its Apoist ideals however, the Administration still required actual revenue. Oil in particular was of significant strategic importance to the Administration, as their control over the Karatchuk, Souedieh, and Rumailan oil fields in the Hasakah province granted them a substantial source of income as well as a negotiating tool when it came to engaging with the regime (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:48). Moreover, the regime itself entered into a cooperative effort with the Administration to restart production in Rumailan after a critical pipeline was sabotaged during the second year of the war (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:104). With the government's help, the Administration was able to (by 2016) boost

production of oil to 25 000 b/p (Almohamad & Dittmann, 2016:32). Oil distribution contradicted much of the accepted framework of political tensions at the time as nearly every actor engaged in the war, both domestically and regionally, was involved in the purchase of oil from these fields. For example, key buyers included the regime itself, the Barzani administration in the KRI, and at times, ISIS (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:104-106). Further, black market trade formed a significant part of the PYD's revenue as wartime obstacles, particularly in the form of political and military pressure from Turkey, vastly restricted the Administration's ability to trade legally (Almohad & Dittman, 2016; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). One manifestation of Turkey's involvement was reticence on the part of the KRG to engage in trade with the Administration, and at times closing the border entirely (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:105). For the KRG, Turkey's continued support is a key factor in its ability to exist outside of Baghdad's control (Van Wilgenburg, 2014), and thus Ankara has been able to exert significant influence over the KRG's actions in the Syrian civil war.

Oil, although the primary source of income for the Administration, was not the only resource upon which it relied. As already shown, in Jazira and Hasakah more generally, oil was present in abundance; however, the region, pre-war, had also been known as the 'breadbasket' of Syria (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:101) and although fighting drastically reduced the agricultural production in the region it remained a key source of wheat for the Syrian government, and therefore revenue for the Administration (Darwish, 2016). In Afrin, olive and textile factories were dominant, whereas Kobani was well known for its livestock, cotton and wheat production" (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:106). Although geographically distinct, with unique economies of their own, the Administration was still able to draw on taxes in these areas in order to fund infrastructure development, such as the construction of dams and flour mills in Afrin (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:106), or the expansion of medical and sewerage services in Jazirah (Perry, 2015). The Administration itself also acts as a significant source of employment in the region, paying the salaries of "an estimated 35 000 people, excluding the YPG and the SDF" (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:107) However, economic development has been routinely undermined by the ongoing civil conflict in the region, with the Administration purportedly spending up to 70% of its budget on "security and the war", which amounts to roughly $20 million dollars per annum (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:207). This meant that although many citizens within the Administration still had

functional infrastructure available to them, economic hardship was still pervasive and forced many Kurds to migrate in search of alternative forms of income (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:107). Economic hardship therefore had two related consequences on the Administration's legitimacy and its ability to rule. Not only does economic insecurity undermine trust in incumbent leadership, but outmigration in this specific case impeded the YPG's recruitment capabilities, damaging the Administration's ability to provide security (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:114).

Although fundamentally related, security is arguably a more important source of legitimacy for the Administration, both internally and externally. Once the PYD had consolidated control over the three Kurdish cantons in 2012, it had effectively demonstrated a monopoly on the use of force in the region (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:115). The PKK-trained YPG were – and are – a highly disciplined fighting force whose creation was announced in July 2012 by PYD leadership (Rashid, 2017:15). The YPG, or 'People's Protection Units', are often referred to as the military wing of the PYD, which, while a practical explanation, is somewhat misleading as the two organisations are technically separate entities which serve the same social contract (Rashid, 2017; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). In the case of the YPG, the stipulations of the contract require that they act in defence of the people of the Autonomous Administration against external threats (Rashid, 2017:14-15). Although the YPG was only formally institutionalised as the Administration's "sole military force" in 2014, it has acted in defence of the region since its inception two years before (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:116). Alongside the YPG, acting at times independently or under the umbrella of the YPG, are the YPJ, or 'Women's Protection Units' (Rashid, 2015:15-16). A significant fighting force themselves, the fact that the YPJ is exclusively made up of women has been a symbol of the Administration's commitment to progressive ideals as well as the Kurdish self-governance project's inclusive character (Labott, 2021). With an estimated fighting force of around 50 000 (accurate data on the group is scarce due to its own hesitancy in disclosing information regarding its resources) the YPG has achieved considerable success in maintaining the Administration's territorial integrity (Rashid, 2017:16), and as the following sections will demonstrate, has been instrumental in facilitating cooperative engagement with foreign powers – and through this, enhanced legitimacy for the Kurdish project. However, the YPG has also faced significant criticism for its recruitment policies, particularly the forced conscription of children (Rashid, 2017; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). Not only is the recruitment of children a

war crime (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:42) in the case of the YPG, and therefore the PYD-led Administration more broadly, but such practices have also damaged their image amongst those they purport to govern.

While the YPG acts as the Administration's equivalent of a national defence force, the Asayish perform all the region's internal policing functions (Rashid, 2017:37). Members of the Asayish are typically drawn from within the canton or area they are responsible for, meaning the ethnic diversity of the group varies from region to region – with, for example, half the Asayish members in Jazirah reportedly being Arab (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:11). Although the group's mandate requires it to serve the social good, accusations of partisanship are common, with detractors claiming the Asayish is simply a tool the PYD uses to enforce its internal control (Rashid, 2017:39). This includes the arrests and extended detention of members of the political opposition, such as the KDPS (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

3.2.3. War with Daesh: Deriving Legitimacy Through Force

In the case of the PYD/YPG specifically, and the Kurd's self-governance project more broadly, the fight against the Islamic State continues to be the "foremost driver of legitimacy" (Khalaf, 2016:12). Although skirmishes between the YPG, rebel and jihadist forces such as al-Nusra and the FSA, and even the regime itself (George, 2013), had been common since the PYD filled the power vacuum in northern Syria in 2011/2012, the Administration had not seen sustained conflict on the level it did until the Islamic State's invasion of Syria in 2014 (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Khalaf; 2016; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). As this paper has already illustrated, the PYD did not explicitly align itself with anti-regime rhetoric or engage in active armed insurgency against the government, and thus remained somewhat peripheral to the civil war not just in terms of the conflict itself, but also within the media and popular narratives of the uprising. However, the success of the YPG-led counterinsurgency against ISIS's expansion both enhanced the Administration's internal popularity and thrust the Kurds of Syria into the international spotlight (Gunes & Lowe, 2015:9).

The Islamic State, ISIS, ISI, ISIL or simply IS as it is also known, can trace its origins back to the jihadist organisation, Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, founded in the late 1990s and led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Kirdar, 2012; Hashim, 2014). Initially based in Jordan, Jama'at became a powerful force in Iraq during the US-backed invasion of 2003. Through extensive financial, logistical, and tactical engagement with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi's

organisation came to be known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI (Kirdar, 2012; Hashim, 2014).) Following prolonged involvement in the Iraq war, and significant expansion of the organisation's network of allies and supporters, the group would eventually emerge as one of, if not the most, significant non-state actor in the Middle East (Hashim, 2014; Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). The group, however, became most relevant to the Kurdish question in Syria when, in 2014, then leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of the global caliphate and launched an invasion into Kobani in northern Syria (Sary, 2016:10). Note that ISIS already had bases in Syria by this point and had been expanding its territory since the second half of 2013; however, it was only after its capture of Mosul in 2014 that it found itself "[a]wash with equipment and cash" and able to engage in much larger offensives in Syria and Iraq (Netjes & Van Veeen, 2021:27-28). Although this paper's focus is explicitly on Kurdish self-governance in Syria, this invasion must be understood in the broader context of the civil war. Up until this point, the narrative of the conflict had been framed as one between the Assad regime (and its allies) and the anti-regime forces (and its allies, of which 'the West' – especially the United States – was notably part of) (Gunes & Lowe, 2015; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). However, the extent of the threat the Islamic State posed to the region necessitated new strategies of cooperation between parties who would otherwise have found any form of alliance inimical to their own interests. For the PYD, the Islamic State was thus "a perfect enemy" (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:26).

The initial encircling of Kobani by ISIS forces was swift and comprehensive for several reasons, chief amongst which are that at the time the YPG did not enjoy US ground or air support and was therefore ineffective in its initial defence of the town, and Turkey was reluctant to allow KRG's Peshmerga forces to cross its borders into Syria (Filkins, 2014; Netjes & Van Veeen, 2021:28). However, once Turkey begrudgingly allowed Kurdish forces to move south into Syria (Reuters, 2014), and the United States had struck up a strategic alliance with the YPG – in which US airstrikes were directed via the YPG's ground forces – the hurriedly formed coalition engaged in a sustained offensive against ISIS in Kobani, ultimately leading to the latter group's defeat and expulsion from the town in January 2015, in what is classified as a "transformational moment" (Gunes & Lowe, 2015:7) in Syrian Kurdish history and one which has had a defining impact on the PYD-led self-governance project in the region (Khalaf, 2016; Sary; 2016; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). The success of the YPG in what is now known as the 'Siege of Kobani' had a "galvanizing impact" (Gunes &

Lowe, 2015:7) on Kurds in Syria and the region more broadly, firmly establishing a narrative of heroic self-defence in the face of unimaginable odds, where both Kurdish men and women were martyred in a cause that had an unprecedent impact on Syrian Kurdish nationalist idealism (Gunes & Lowe, 2015:7). On the tail end of declining internal popularity, the PYD now enjoyed an immense boost in approval amongst Syrian Kurds (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:28). Moreover, the success of the offensive – even if it was a collaborative effort – demonstrated to the United States that, of its available options, the YPG was the most effective tool it could utilise to combat ISIS (Khalaf, 2016:10), without having to commit to the deployment of a significant force of ground troops – as had been suggested by high level US officials (Ohlers, 2017:196).

This relationship, even if it was borne out of perceived necessity on the part of the US, has had a profound impact on the Autonomous Administration, in terms of both its international legitimacy and the direction of change of its governance apparatus – as the following section will explore.

3.2.4. Federalism and Changing Narratives

Although initially (and primarily) a Kurdish-led project, the Autonomous Administration has come to control a highly diverse region consisting of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, and a range of smaller minority groups (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:123). This was in no small part due to the Kurd's fight against ISIS. What some label as liberation (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:123), and others as authoritarian subjugation (Leezenberg, 2016; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021), many of the towns and villages which YPG-led forces rid of ISIS fell under the Administration's authority. This territorial expansion is perhaps the single most important action the Administration has taken in terms of the ramifications for not only its own governance approach, but its authority in the region as well (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). Although driven by war on the one hand, and a desire to establish contiguous control between the three Kurdish enclaves on the other, incorporating non-Kurdish areas has forced the Administration to reshape its governance model in order to appease not only its Western allies who would ostensibly disapprove of any kind of ethnic dominance (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; 124), but also those groups which now found themselves under the Administration's control. Where the early iteration's of the PYD-led governance project were committed to pluralism and multi-ethnicism in theory, expansion into non-

Kurdish territories necessitated a more practical approach (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:127). Shortly after its recapture of Tell-Abyad (a predominantly Arab town in Raqqa governate of northern Syria) from ISIS in 2015, the Administration announced the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a YPG-led military coalition of Kurdish, Arab, and other non-regime groups, as well as its affiliated political wing, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), a secular, federalist alliance which could (in theory) better administer to non-Kurdish territories (Sary, 2016; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). The SDC represented one of the first steps in the Autonomous Administration's political rebranding as a pluralistic, multi-ethnic governance project, as well as a move towards its current iteration of decentralised, federal governance. Further, the creation of the SDF not only allowed the Administration to bolster its own military force, it shifted the focus away from the YPG as the US's primary strategic partner in the region, allowing increased collaboration between the US and the multi-ethnic SDF (Barfi, 2016; Rashid, 2017). In fact, during his speech at the Aspen Security Forum in Colorado, now retired U.S. Army General Raymond Thomas claimed that U.S. support for the Kurds was partly contingent on a name change for the YPG, recounting that they (the United States military), had said (to the YPG) "[y]ou have got to change your brand" (Reuters, 2017). Within a day the Administration announced the formation of the SDF (Rashid, 2017:55). As this paper will illustrate in the following chapter however, formation of the SDF has done little to assuage Ankara's fears that the SDF is simply a tool of the YPG, and by extension the PKK, implying that no matter what efforts the Administration goes to in order to extricate itself (at least on a surface level) from its PYD/PKK associations, Turkey is likely to remain unmollified. Moreover, as Netjes & Van Veen (2021:44) point out, suspicions that the SDF is dominated by the YPG are not unfounded, as the YPG continue to enjoy operational control over the SDF. Therefore, even if Turkey is incorrect in its judgement of the level of influence the PKK has within the PYD/YPG, it is alert to the fact that this political bloc continues to enjoy de facto authority over the Administration and it military resources. Thus, following this first assumption regarding the PKK (whether true or not), the logic of Turkey's position requires that Erdoğan's AKP treat the SDF with the same level of animosity it does the PKK.

According to Dukhan and Alhamad (2021), the decision by the US to back the creation of the SDF was also driven by the high levels of fragmentation between Arab tribes in the region. This meant that unlike the example of the "Sunni Awakening" in Iraq, where the US was able

to employ local tribes as proxies in the fight against al-Qaeda, the American government regarded the Kurdish-led SDF as showing "unitary command" not demonstrated by its more disparate tribal counterparts and was thus the better option in dealing with ISIS in Syria (Dukhan & Alhamad, 2021).

In terms of the practical realities of governance in Arab-majority areas, Netjes and Van Veen (2021:68), describe the PYD model as one of "indirect rule via the co-optation of tribal figures" in order to legitimise the Administration's authority. While this move was certainly a strategic attempt to improve its internal and international appeal, it was also necessary in order to mitigate ethnic tensions and violence (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:123-125). The Administration's success in this regard has been varied. For example, in those areas more distant from the PYD's primary centres of control, such as in Deir ez-Zor, opposition to SDC/SDF governance is common (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:68-69), and despite persistent US encouragement to engage with SDC/SDF institutions, suspicion amongst Arab tribal groups endures (Dukhan & Alhamad, 2021). Not only this, in those cases where Arab tribes have expressed a desire for increased representation within the SDF, the organisation has done little to accommodate them (Koontz & Waters, 2020:9). However, in terms of the PYD's stated commitment to multi-ethnicism and gender equality, some of the local councils and committees set up were successful – such as in Tell Abyad for example, where institutions specifically designed to address social needs such as "women's affairs and justice" were established (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:127).

Having officially and unilaterally declared a federal system in March 2016 (Goudsouzian & Fatah, 2016), the implications of the PYD's change in governance strategy for its relationship with Kurds both regionally and locally were complex. This move away from a 'Kurdish' project towards a multi-ethnic 'federalist' project has been divisive (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:134). Although the influence of Ocalan's political philosophy on Syrian Kurds (through the PKK) in the early 2000s was significant – which was what enhanced the PYD's legitimacy to begin with (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:61) – the Kurds were by no means completely united in their beliefs on governance, statehood, democratic autonomy, or Kurdish nationalism (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:150). The PYD-KNC division is just one example of this. Despite this, an important source of the PYD's legitimacy amongst Syrian Kurds in its early rise to dominance, was its ability to frame the self-governance project as a 'Kurdish' one (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). However,

in trying to accommodate non-Kurdish interests through processes of de-ethnicization for example, the Administration suffered a loss in local Kurdish support and elicited condemnations from KNC and KNC-aligned factions in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:152). These ideological tensions further illustrate the idea that ethnicity and identity have acted as fundamental drivers of both unity and disruption in Syria's northern region. Following developments in the war against ISIS as well as the Syrian war more broadly, in order to preserve its own legitimacy and security, the Administration has had to demonstrate its ability to act as a wholly inclusive governance alternative, not only to non-Kurdish groups and the international community, but to the Kurds themselves. Deriving its early internal legitimacy through its explicit association with Kurdish identity and struggle, the PYD-led Administration has had to pivot, again on the grounds of ethnic identity – but in this case with a focus on the practical implementation of ethnic pluralism – in order to preserve this legitimacy. The results, as this section has demonstrated, have been mixed. Regardless, the strategic implications of the Autonomous Administration's territorial expansion, and subsequent shift in governance approach, are extensive and continue to inform the level of legitimacy it enjoys locally, regionally, and internationally.

Chapter Four: Actors, Both Foreign and Domestic – What Obstacles Remain?

Although the PYD continues to assert control over significant areas in the north of Syria, while maintaining highly functional social and political infrastructure where it predominates – the challenges it, and the Autonomous Administration more broadly, faces are profound and unceasing. This chapter concludes the chronological examination of the Administration's emergence, assessing the viability of its current structure and what threats to its existence remain most serious. Dealing with reports published up to the time of writing (February 2022), the following sections focus primarily on international actors – both regional and global – and the Syrian government itself. While many pundits were quick to predict the Assad regime's downfall at multiple stages throughout the civil war, at present it seems the government has managed to fend off its most dangerous enemies (Taspinar, 2019) – even if it has not yet reconsolidated its old power. The Autonomous Administration arguably represents the regime's greatest loss of control, even if the PYD and its affiliates have not sought the downfall of the current government or even explicitly called for their own national sovereignty. This poses an interesting problem regarding standard theories of recognition or legitimacy. As this paper has already shown, the Administration's regional and international status is profoundly complex due to its relationship with the Syrian regime, its ongoing battle with ISIS, its muddled alliance with US, and the tensions its existence provokes in the region – especially with regards to Turkey and the KRI. In light of this, this paper proposes that the Administration's ability to achieve some form of enduring external legitimacy might very well determine the future of its existence as whole. But how, in the face of such complexity, can the Administration realise such a goal?

The European Union's approach to decision-making regarding state recognition and legitimacy offers a useful insight here. As Almqvist (2019) illustrates, the EU's strategy since the end of the Cold War has been one of pragmatism – as opposed to traditional legalism – when it comes to recognising the legitimacy of a region or territory declaring its own autonomy. Such a model made sense in the face of the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the moral clarity offered by post-colonial state recognition was no longer as obvious (Almqvist, 2019:4). This pragmatic approach centres two primary criteria: peace and security. In the case of the Yugoslav conflict for example, policies of recognition were considered effective in facilitating conflict resolution despite the fact that that there existed no legal foundations (as defined by

the UN Charter of 1945) for state recognition in that particular case (Almqvist, 2019:2). Where international law had, up until that point, only really considered state recognition in the case of previously colonized territories, the regional fragmentation in Eastern Europe demanded a revision to typically applied state recognition approaches (Newman & Visoka, 2018:768) in order to mitigate further violence and division Although the EU has, since then, largely adopted policies of 'engagement' over recognition when it comes to claims of self-determination – the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for example (Coppieters, 2018; Almqvist, 2019) – the pragmatic approach still informs much of these interactions. The implications of this for the Kurdish case in Syria are significant. While no official recognition of the AANES by any major power has been forthcoming, this paper has already shown that strategic cooperation between the Administration and key international actors is ongoing. Although this cooperation has so far been primarily restricted to military support, if the Administration can convince international actors, such as the EU, that it represents a force for peace and security in the region, over and above what the Syrian regime can, or did offer, it might, at the very least, be able to stimulate greater engagement based on the principles of the pragmatic approach. The likelihood of this occurring is a separate matter and is further complicated by the fact that the Administration is not technically a state actor, but rather (at least in the context of international law) a sub-state de facto authority (Jongerden, 2019). Further, although security is a fundamental factor in driving engagement, international law (and therefore major powers such as the United States and the European Union who ascribe to it) exhibits a preoccupation with human rights and democracy (Coppieters, 2018; Almqvist, 2019). This paper has already discussed the PYD-led Administration's track record regarding these factors in detail; however, the point here is that a lack of engagement – regardless of what drives it – is arguably self-reinforcing, as the Administration's ability to provide stability and security is hampered by the fact that it cannot participate in "multilateral and regional schemes of economic and political cooperation" (Almqvist, 2019:15). The COVID-19 pandemic provides a topical example of this. Reports in 2021 indicated that vaccine provision by the World Health Organisation to Turkish and regime-controlled areas of Syria was significantly higher than in areas administered by the AANES (Dri, 2021), likely contributing to an increased number of hospitalisations and deaths, and thus a greater overall strain on the region's medical infrastructure. Although just one example, it does well to illustrate the point that a lack of international engagement based on doubts of the ability of a region to self-govern, can easily undermine that ability.

What the rest of this chapter offers is not a predictive estimation of the Administration's chances of achieving recognition, legal legitimacy or even enhanced international engagement, but instead an assessment of what factors continue either to undermine or improve these chances.

4.1. On the Administration's Doorstep

4.1.1. Turkey and the KRG

Turkey is arguably the greatest physical threat to Kurdish-led governance in the north of Syria. As this paper has already alluded, the PYD's links to the PKK have permanently soured Turkey's view of the Administration's de facto ruling party. While the previous chapter detailed the heroics of the SDF and its allies in battling the Islamic State, and what this meant for the Kurds public image and its popular support around the globe, this section examines how Turkey's national security concerns regarding the Kurds did, and continue to, undermine the efforts of those in the north of Syria to rout any remnants of ISIS, and help govern the region more generally. Such is Ankara's obsession with the PYD, as this paper briefly outlined in the introduction, they have invaded and occupied large swathes of the northern Syria simply to ensure no unified Kurdish bloc can exist so close to its southern border. Turkey's fears are not unfounded, as Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019:174) point out that "[a] contiguous PYD/YPG- controlled territory […] had the potential to become a haven for the PKK from which attacks against turkey might be launched".

Since the outbreak of the civil war, Turkey has positioned itself firmly in the anti-Assad camp and, although the regime did not fall as quickly as expected, Turkey has continued its strategy of providing financial and material support to anti-Assad forces within Syria (Han & Özkan, 2017). The number of groups who receive Turkish support is extensive, and they do not all share the same ideological and religious inclinations; however, in practice they currently fall under the banner of the Syrian National Army (Aktürk, 2019; Iddon, 2021; Wilkofsky et al., 2021). In cooperation with the SNA and its subsidiary organisations, Turkey has conducted no less than three significant cross border military operations into Syria since 2016. Its enduring involvement in northern Syria can be explicitly characterised as a 'pull' factor in the Kurds self-governance project, and one which continues to pose a serious threat to the Administration's internal security. Operation Euphrates Shield (the first of three major operations), for example, was a Turkish-backed military campaign to ostensibly "remove

‘terror groups’ from the border” (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:177). However, the primary objective was to undermine the PYD’s contiguous control between the cantons of Kobani and Afrin by securing the town of Jarablus (Han & Özkan, 2017). Not only does this imply that Ankara likely regards the PYD-led Administration as a greater threat to its national security than ISIS, it also casts doubt on Turkey’s relationship with jihadists groups in general (Abdulkader & Reals, 2022). Suspicions regarding this relationship have been further roused by the fact that the most recent leader of ISIS, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, was located (and ultimately killed during a US-led operation targeting him) in Syrian territory very near to areas controlled by Turkish-backed rebel groups (Reuters, 2022; Schmit & Hubbard, 2022).

The two more famous offensives Turkey carried out were: Operation Olive Branch, which saw Turkish-backed rebels wrest control of the Afrin area from PYD-led forces in 2018, and was, according to analysts Kasapoğlu & Ülgen (2018:1), the most operationally intensive cross-border military operation the country had carried out since before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war; and the most recent, Operation Peace Spring in 2019, which involved further occupation of much of the Syrian Arab territory in the north, creating a 30km ‘safe zone’ which would “prevent the creation of a terror corridor across [Turkey’s] southern border and […] bring peace to the area”, according to Turkey’s President Erdogan (Aljazeera, 2019). The second operation drew extensive international coverage as it was alleged that Turkey’s invasion was conducted with the tactic approval of both the United States (which withdrew its military forces in the region just prior) and Russia (ANF, 2018). Moreover, there are extensive allegations of criminality and abuse perpetrated by Turkish-backed forces in the towns and villages they have come to control (Amnesty International, 2019; Wilkofsky et al., 2019; United Nations; 2020; Gall, 2021). This had led to widespread migration by both Kurds and Arabs into PYD-controlled territory, and into Turkey (Wilkofsky et al., 2019). Although Ankara’s motivations were more transparent in this final military offensive, the result was the same in that the Autonomous Administration could do little to maintain its territorial integrity and was ultimately forced to cede those areas to Turkish control. Although Turkey has (at the time of writing) initiated no operation of the same scale as the previous three, it continues its barrage of airstrikes in parts of northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, ostensibly targeting PKK cells and YPG forces (Osterlund, 2022). These airstrikes, coupled with a resurgence in ISIS activity in Syria puts enormous strain on the Administration’s security infrastructure and forces

the diversion of critical resources away from areas such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure development – severely undermining the Administration's ability to govern (Osterlund, 2022).

The threat that Turkey poses is not only physical. As a member of NATO, it enjoys significant international legitimacy and support. This means that so long as Turkey is opposed to the Autonomous Administration's existence, its allies will be disinclined to pursue policies of recognition and engagement for fear of marring their respective relationships with the country, or contributing to further destabilisation in the region. Although this is not the only barrier to the Administration achieving recognition, it is easily one of the most significant.

While the KRG is autonomous, as this paper has demonstrated its reliance on Turkey's support has made it hugely susceptible to pressure tactics from Ankara. This means that, in a regional analysis of the threats to Syrian Kurdish self-rule, understanding the KRG and Turkey together serves as a useful, if simplified, geopolitical heuristic (See Chomani, 2022). On numerous occasions throughout the civil war Turkey has been able to leverage its control over the KRG in order to inhibit PYD expansion in northern Syria: either through border closures resulting in economic hardship and restricted troop movements; or political pressure to undermine the PYD's legitimacy in the region (Reuters, 2014; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019). This paper has already explored the effects Turkey's relationship with the PKK has had on relations between the three political entities. What is proposed here is that so long as the KRG finds itself reliant on Turkish support to bolster its own legitimacy and internal security (Van Wilgenburg, 2013; Alaaldin, 2016), and so long as Turkey associates the Autonomous Administration with the PKK, the KRG's influence on the self-governance project in Syria will at best be marginal, and at worst, significantly detrimental. Essentially, the KRG's role in the conflict is – at least practically – informed by Turkey's interests.

4.1.2. The Assad Regime

The Administration's relationship with the Assad regime has been shrouded in suspicion since the outset of the war. The PYD's alleged alliance with the state has been one the major factors in undermining Kurdish cross-party unity and allegiances (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). Although the PYD still enjoys significant support from the Syrian Kurds under its jurisdiction (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019), many other rebel groups in Syria, as well as the governments of Turkey and the KRG continue to cast aspersions on the legitimacy of the PYD,

characterising the organisation as the Syrian regime's ally (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:183). The reality is at once simpler and more complex. For example, many argue that the regime's tacit approval was evident when it allowed Kurdish forces to assume control over several key areas throughout the early years of the civil war (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). This could imply that an allegiance did exist between the two groups. However, what is more likely is that not only was the Syrian government forced to relinquish its hold on these areas to divert its military resources south to locations it considered more strategically valuable (Khalaf, 2016; Sary, 2016; Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019), allowing a Kurdish takeover in the north would also create a buffer zone between Damascus and Turkey (Radpey, 2016). So far there has a existed an unspoken agreement between the regime and the PYD-led administration which acknowledges the benefits of avoiding outright conflict between both groups but does not go so far as to indicate any real support for either entity (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). Moreover, as the civil war continues to lessen in its intensity and Assad is able to consolidate his own forces, the future of this implicit truce looks more and more uncertain. As already detailed, the Administration controls Syria's most productive oil fields as well as its most agriculturally fertile land, which the regime is unlikely to tolerate in the long-term (Taspinar, 2019; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021). Moreover, although the country has just endured a decade long civil war in which a considerable portion of the international community backed the incumbent government's overthrow, Syria, and by association Assad, enjoy *de jure* authority and the country itself is still recognised as a sovereign territory (Semenov, 2021). This means that the regime enjoys much greater legitimacy than the Administration, and if it came down to a war between the two groups, it is not clear that the Administration would find itself with significant international support, other than from the United States perhaps. The EU's position for example, is still one of non-recognition, even if it chooses to condemn certain acts of aggression against Kurdish groups in the region (Apelblat, 2019). What this means is that for the Administration, some form of official arrangement with the regime is crucial. While unconditional recognition by the Syrian government is unlikely, some form of recognition could be hugely beneficial, not just for its immediate security, but also for its international legitimacy. South Sudan for example, was ratified as a state without any significant protest from the international community largely due to the fact that, Sudan, the country it was seceding from, offered no objections (Almqvist, 2017:8). However, things are complicated by the fact that it is the Administration's relationship with the regime which acts as a major source of tension and instability, both amongst the Kurds and amongst the non-Kurdish groups who

are governed by the Administration. Regardless, this paper argues that compared to the benefits of a non-antagonist Syrian regime, the internal divisions caused by an arrangement between the two entities are not remotely comparable in terms of their effect on the Administration's authority in the region.

4.2. Looking Further Abroad

4.2.1. The United States and the West

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the tactical relationship between the United States and the Administration's YPG/SDF forces in the fight against the Islamic State was fundamental in maintaining the Administration's authority in the region. More to the point however, it was ISIS's rapid expansion in Syria that precipitated cooperation between the two groups in the first place. In fact, prior to the success of the YPG/U.S. offensive in Kobani, the United States' policy on the Syrian Kurds was far more in line with Turkey's position than it is now (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:187). Not only did the United States express concern over the possibility of Kurdish autonomy in the region in 2013, it prevented the then co-chair of the PYD, Salih Muslim, from entering the country to participate in a forum in Washington (Candar, 2013). According to an unnamed American State Department official, any reconsideration of the PYD's position was contingent on it severing ties with the Assad regime completely, and fully integrating into the Syrian opposition (Candar, 2013). What this demonstrates is how profound a policy shift actually took place with regards to the United States and the PYD in Syria after ISIS's invasion of Kobani. This policy shift follows the logic of the 'pragmatic approach' described previously.

In the years since the siege, the U.S. has delivered military equipment to the SDF (Middle East Eye, 2017) and regularly assisted the Administration's forces in combat against ISIS, HTS, Turkey and Turkish-backed rebels such as the SNA (Rashid, 2017; Netjes & Van Veen, 2021), Further, not long after its establishment, the SDF was officially included in what is now known as the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF – OIR) (Rosen, 2014), as close to an explicit proclamation of the group's legitimacy it has so far received. Although support has dwindled since the United States' decision to provide tacit approval of the Turkish-backed invasion of Afrin – when President Trump ordered his troops to withdraw allowing Turkish and rebel forces to attack (Williams, 2020) – a coalition still exists between the SDF as well as the United States and other key NATO actors. The reality of this was

confirmed during the ISIS attack and subsequent prison break in late January when the YPG and SDF engaged with fighters on the ground while the US provided air support (Dadouch & Loveluck, 2022). Moreover, some reports indicate that the withdrawal itself was not so significant as it was portrayed by much of the media (Williams, 2020), and that if a full withdrawal had actually taken place, Syrian regime forces might have attempted to expand northeast of the Euphrates, challenging "the core Kurdish areas of Syria" (Netjes & Van Veen, 2021:45).

Although ISIS was supposedly defeated in Syria in 2019 following the battle of Baghuz Fawqani (Glenn et al., 2019), the resurgence of the terror group has served as both a reminder of the SDF's value in containing the group, and of the importance of the US's support for the Administration's legitimacy and security. At present, containing ISIS and dislodging its remaining territorial holdings in northern Syria remains a key focus for the Administration. At the time of writing on the 21st of January 2022, the Islamic State launched what some consider to be its most brazen attack in years, precipitating a prison break in the town of Hasakah (Fox, 2022). The scale of the attack was such that scholars and pundits alike argue ISIS may have regained a greater foothold in Syria in the years since its defeat than was previously thought (Fox, 2022). While reporting is contradictory, with some accusing the SDF of human rights abuses towards prisoners kept not only at the al-Sina prison in Hasakah, but in many others as well (Fox, 2022) the retort is that despite no international recognition of the Administration, it is still being held responsible for the incarceration of thousands of ISIS soldiers without financial or infrastructural support (Dadouch & Loveluck, 2022). Although enduring conflict with ISIS may be one of the main sources of legitimacy the Administration derives, the strain it puts on the security infrastructure of the region is indisputable.

This raises perhaps the most important question regarding the continued existence of the Administration: what happens (assuming it is even possible) when ISIS has been 'decisively' defeated in Syria? Although the PYD-led Kurdish forces have not taken as antagonist a stance towards the Syrian government as other rebel insurgents have, their fight against ISIS has meant they have seen no shortage of violent conflict. Further, it is their ability to suppress the terror group which ensures that the US and many other crucial state actors remain invested in their success, and thus, their existence. Not only this, but even within the Administration, PYD leadership is viewed most unfavourably in those areas less exposed to conflict (Khalaf, 2016:13). What this implies is that the Administration not only draws much of its external

legitimacy from its ability to offset the Islamic State's advances, but much of its internal legitimacy as well. This paper proposes then that one of the most important strategic options the Administration has to guarantee some level of sustained legitimacy (and therefore continued autonomy in the region) is to convince both its own citizens as well as the international community that it, and its allied military forces, remain the most effective tool there is for containing ISIS.

4.2.2. Russia and Iran

Other than the United States, its partners in Operation Inherent Resolve, and Turkey, Russia and Iran are the two most significant international actors in the Syrian conflict (O'Conner, 2019; Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2020; Semenov, 2021). Coincidentally, they have also been Assad's most vocal supporters and the regime's most powerful allies in the war (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2020; Semenov, 2021). With regional interests often directed at limiting Turkey's power in Syria, both Russia and Iran have regularly deployed military resources against Syrian rebel groups and Turkish-backed militias (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019; Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2020). In much the same way that the relationship between the PYD and the Assad regime has been opaque, and at times completely inscrutable, the PYD (and the Syrian Kurds more generally) have had a complex political arrangement with Iran and Russia. Due to the PYD's putative, yet clandestine, truce with the regime, the Administration has not found itself in any kind of protracted confrontation with either of these two powers. However, because of Iran and Russia's explicit geopolitical interest in ensuring the integrity of the existing regime, there has been consistent pressure on the Kurds to accede to regime demands, particularly when it comes to territorial control (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:194). The sheer scope of political manoeuvring, however, has also led to shifting alliances amongst the region's key actors, which has often allowed the PYD to position itself in such a way as to either secure support where needed, or deflect attention when unwanted. As Netjes & Van Veen (2021:6) have pointed out, the PYD has demonstrated excellent deal-making abilities throughout the civil war, which has played a major role in ensuring the continued survival of the Administration as whole. For example, where tensions between Russia and Turkey spiked after the latter's downing of a Russian fighter jet in late 2015, Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg (2019:194-195), argue that the PYD was able to develop its relationship with Moscow simply due to its anti-Turkish position. Meanwhile, through the SDF, the PYD was expanding its collaboration with the United States; not just in opposition to ISIS, but also (at least in the eyes of Washington) as a way of limiting

Russia's strength in the region (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:188). On top of this, there have even been claims that the PYD's relationship with the Assad regime was in fact brokered by Tehran and key figures in the PUK, on the condition that the PYD limits its involvement in the Syrian conflict (Sinkaya, 2017).

Recall, however, that alliances shifted, and Russia and Iran's support for the PYD has always been in relation to its real ally, the Syrian regime. Iran for example, as one YPG official puts it "regards the Kurdish issue as a secondary and a trivial matter" (Omrani, 2015). Further, although Russia has regularly acted as a mediator in times of conflict between the YPG and the regime, or the YPG and Turkey (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019:195), it also made no move to prevent the Turkish occupation of Afrin (ANF, 2018) and, like Iran, has expressed disapproval of the Kurdish autonomy project (Hürriyet Daily News, 2016). Viewing Kurdish self-governance as fundamentally divisive, the two countries have so far approached cooperation with the PYD through the 'pragmatic' framework outlined already, and show no signs of supporting an arrangement contrary to the Syrian regime's stated objectives (Semenov, 2021). What this paper argues therefore, is that although the PYD has had some success in establishing strategic partnerships with Russia and Iran, which have bolstered its authority in the region, it is unlikely that the Administration will receive any kind of formal recognition regarding its status so long as it exists without the express permission of the Syrian regime. As Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister said in 2016 "[i]f, as a result of talks, consultations and discussions on Syria's future state order […] they come to an opinion that namely this [federal] model will work […] who will object to this?" (Reuters, 2016). Again, it appears that the Syrian government is one of the most important factors either in facilitating the Administration's continued existence, or its assured destruction.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to address three fundamental questions in the case of the Kurds of Syria. The first: what conditions (historical and contemporary) facilitated the emergence of a Kurdish-led autonomous administration in Syria? The second: how has the administration derived and maintained its internal and external authority in the context of the Syrian civil war? And finally: what major obstacles to this legitimacy does it still face? Following a rigorous qualitative analysis this paper offers several insights.

First, following a tumultuous history of French governance, new state formation, and years of ethnic persecution, the Syrian Kurds were anxious for change. Under the pragmatic leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), they were able to effect such change within the window of opportunity provided by the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, creating for themselves a de facto autonomous zone over significant areas in the north of the country. This paper argues that the interaction of a Syrian Kurdish identity with a rhetoric of Arab nationalism was fundamentally incongruent and resulted in the Kurds having many of their civil rights stripped from them by the Syrian government. This, coupled with the catalysing effect of the uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 provided the Kurds with a unique opportunity to secure the political freedoms they had so long been denied. The manifestation of this goal has been the creation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

In the years since, through its federalist approach to governance, its war with ISIS and the strategic partnerships this yielded, its clandestine arrangement with the Syrian regime, and its effective use of force, the PYD-led Administration has so far been able to ensure its own survival. This has required a significant overhaul of the governance infrastructure of the Administration, but, with the benefit of US support following the rise of ISIS in Syria, the self-governance project has so far endured.

Ultimately however, this paper argues that persistent aggression from Turkey in the north, a lack of formal recognition and international legitimacy, and a Syrian regime which appears increasingly capable – in light of the ostensible easing in domestic tensions – of moving to reclaim the territory it lost to the Kurds, means the Administration's grasp on self-governance remains profoundly tenuous.

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