

## **IIST/AUB Conference Talk, Beirut**

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Before the Arab Spring reached Syria in early 2011, the expression of Kurdish identity and culture, and political organisation as Kurds was criminalised. The Syrian government used Arab nationalism and ideas of external threat to legitimise its rule. The constitution defined citizens as Syrian Arabs and the territory as part of the Arab homeland. The Kurds, therefore, had to assimilate: to deny their identity in favour of another, or had to hide it, or they would be considered a threat to the state and its territorial integrity.

Yet the Kurds have continuously organised around protecting that identity and promoting democracy in Syria. And since the 1950s, organisation within political parties has produced a distinct Syrian-Kurdish identity.

In March 2011, Kurds - and in particular Kurdish youth - joined the Syrian protest movement. But the movement militarised and sectarianism increased, Kurdish political organisations adopted a position distinct from both the government and the dominant Syrian Arab opposition groups.

In 2012, government forces withdrew from northern Syria and one Kurdish political party – the Democratic Union Party, the PYD – stepped into the governance void left by it. The PYD took over government institutions and control of resources. Policies and laws that had marginalised the Kurds and criminalised expression of this identity could not extend beyond the reach of the state and lost their negative influence. And for the first time, Syrian Kurds experienced a sort of self-rule and representation.

That self-rule came in the form of ‘Democratic Autonomy’ – a model of bottom-up, direct democracy, built around local communes. It is a model based on the philosophy and theory of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the PKK. These governance structures have steadily expanded through the fight against ISIS and in 2016 a multi-ethnic federal system was declared for northern Syria.

Through the implementation of Democratic Autonomy the PYD-led Administration has

- secured territory and resources and protected Kurdish majority areas from the worst of the conflict in Syria.
- It has maintained services and offered successful local strategies for coping with security issues, economic chaos and internal disunity.
- it has provided effective security, and through its forces the Kurds have increased their agency and come to the forefront of local, regional and international relations.

The institutionalisation of ethnic and religious rights and equalities has allowed people to think about their identity differently:

- of those people we surveyed in Syria, 92% identified themselves as Kurdish. 52% said that this had changed since the start of the crisis, due to threats to identity, to an awakening/mobilisation, and to the new freedoms to express kurdishness.
- Through this an overwhelming consensus has developed amongst Syrian Kurds that federalism a system that could secure Kurdish representation and that local decision-making should be part of that.

These tangible gains were recognised as positive by the population, and rights and security had clearly boosted popular support for the administration amongst Kurds. Looking at this situation – at the Kurds in Syria – through the lens of identity and representation, allowed us to assess its popular legitimacy and identify the main problems for representing Syria’s Kurds. What we noticed was a split in opinion about the PYD administration – about whether people thought it democratic and representative, or not – and that representation and participation were not commonly associated with it.

The reasons for this relate to the domination of one party and ideology over governance and social organisation and to the political and social tensions that have developed because of this.

Looking at northern Syria and at the autonomy that has developed, it might be easy to forget that there is a host of other Kurdish political parties that trace their origins to the first Syrian Kurdish party, founded in 1957, which are in no way connected to the PYD and have always been at odds with it. There were almost twenty of these parties on the eve of March 2011. The KNC umbrella now represents the majority of these. Despite their long historical presence, it is the PYD, formed in 2003 and a relative newcomer to Syrian Kurdish politics, that guides all institutions and structures of self-government in the region. Whilst a multitude of organisations and parties operate within the PYD-led system, those that do not accept and legitimise the governance, social, economic and security structures developed by the PYD have no legal status and their activities are restricted, and even forcibly suppressed. The political pluralism that the system contains internally is, therefore, limited to those parties that have acquiesced to it.

At the centre of this political divide, (which also manifests regionally between the PKK and KDP) is ideology and distinct understandings of Kurdish society and identity. According to Abdullah Ocalan, the realisation of the democratic autonomy project should involve a social revolution to produce a moral society stripped of hierarchies and capable of autonomous governance. In comparison the 1957 genealogy of parties, which organise around distinct Kurdish rights and broad definitions of democracy are rooted within existing social structures.

The nature of Syrian Kurdish society, and of Kurdish politics regionally, therefore, limits the PYD-administrations capacity to represent Kurdish society and highlights further problems for extending its legitimacy beyond those tangible gains mentioned already.

Kurdish society is, at the same time, both fragmented and cohesive. It is fragmented demographically across Syria and also fragmented by the many sub-state identities and channels of representation that have been preserved and developed to prevent state intervention into local and Kurdish affairs. These include tribal or kin identity, local

communities and political parties. It is cohesive and united by the Kurdish identity itself, and the idea of a common interests of Kurds in Syria, and Kurds regionally; it is united by a belief in a shared history and future for Kurdish people and territories. The local and the national identities are not mutually exclusive, but are often intertwined.

The concept of democratic autonomy, (which is at the centre of PYD governance,) involves a social revolution. Through it, what Ocalan called, a moral society – liberated from social hierarchies should develop, in which individuals are re-organised around the local communes and a communal identity. It is this society, committed to autonomous communal organisation that should, in theory, form the base of the governance structures that guide it.

So, as well as being connected to one political party, many Kurds also believed that this social project threatens pre-existing organisational and identity structures – tribal, family, and political. It was these local sub-state and traditional social relations and modern political ones that formed a basis for local self-representation and a buffer between society and the state before 2011. Indeed they had been woven into Syrian Kurdish nationalism through early political organisation around the Kurdish identity.

So, for the PYD, not being rooted in traditional socio-economic relations was an advantage that allowed it to extend beyond territorial dimensions of these relations, which had historically hindered other Kurdish political parties' ability to develop mass political movements in Syria. The PYD's attempts to breakdown these traditional social orders in the midst of crisis in Syria has, however, caused tensions and provoked criticism from within Syrian Kurdish society and from other political parties.

Reorganisation around the commune, which is fundamental to the success of the democratic autonomy project, had not been entirely successful. Participation in the communes was lower than we expected - and much lower than implied by the Administration. Although it does vary across the Kurdish regions: In Efrin, control is total and no alternative to the communal organisation exists. In Kobani, the destruction in the town has left the PYD the dominant power but lacking physical infrastructure and much of the population had left. In the Jazira PYD control is weakest, and participation appears to be low and opposition more prevalent.

Certainly, ample space was open for involvement in the commune system and many participants in our surveys believed it gave them a voice and role in decision-making on local issues. But a large number chose not to attend commune meetings. Criticism about the communes included claims that they were dominated by PYD supporters; that others' opinions were not listened to; and that decisions had already been made. And new hierarchies of loyalty to the PYD/PKK party and ideology had developed.

So whilst local support and legitimacy had been gained through its provision of rights, services and from decentralisation, there was still significant resistance to the transformations – to the social revolution - that the PYD envisages, and to the state-like powers assumed by it. And, although there was ample opportunity for participation in direct democracy and, (barring Efrin), in most areas there was freedom of choice about involvement, there was little real space to canvass for political alternatives.

Outside the region, the PYD had not gained any political support – only military support for its role in the fight against ISIS. This had increased its agency and local legitimacy and security featured as a primary reason why people said that they were satisfied with the Administration. But assuming that some settlement of the Syrian conflict will be found, providing security against external threat cannot be relied upon as a source of legitimacy. Already it is less reliable than it was.

The expansion of the PYD project beyond Kurdish areas provoked criticism from Kurdish society because it has expanded and moved away from legitimacy claims defined by the Kurdish identity and the territories associated with it. So in attempts to consolidate its expansions into non-Kurdish areas and to attract international military assistance, it has formed alliances, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015. It is this expansion of territory and political and military alliances in non-Kurdish areas that formed the basis of the Federal entity in northern Syria. This expansion has also led to changes to its policy and rhetoric, which have steadily de-ethnicised and re-orientated around an identity defined as by the democratic nation and by the moral society. Because Kurdish identity is strong in Syria and the PYD is still considered by most to be a Kurdish political party, criticisms about this policy shift have increased.

If and when ISIS is removed from Syria and the Syrian government continues to increase its control, and the USA rolls back its military assistance, the governance void that allowed for PYD state building in 2012 and subsequent expansion is likely to contract.

It is also unclear if local alliances with non-Kurdish groups will endure post-ISIS and whether they can translate also into common position towards the Syrian government. But it is almost inevitable that these alliances will be challenged or interests will diverge as that strategic resources again become a point of tension between different groups.

So, to conclude, whilst the PYD administration had successfully institutionalised its autonomous governance structures, this had been achieved in a governance void caused by the retreat of central government from northern Syria. There was not, however, a corresponding void in sub-state and pan-state organisation and representation and identity construction. The PYD's state-like powers and ideological project had produced, what appeared to be, irreconcilable tensions within Kurdish society and with other political forces.

Social and political opposition to the domination of the PYD and its ideology is identifiable in Syria, but it was either not effectively organised or it is hindered by its exclusion from the PYD-led system. It is also hindered by the wider conflict in Syria, insecurity and the fear of losing the positive gains in Kurdish rights and freedoms and decentralisation that have been made, and which all parties will seek to retain. For the Administration itself, in the long-term, rights and security are likely to prove an insecure basis of legitimacy amongst Syria's Kurds, if it cannot deliver more widely accepted forms of representation and democracy. These forms would also have to accommodate pre-existing identities and representative structures, as well as alternative political views.