



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

BEYOND ROJAVA: NORTH AND EAST SYRIA'S ARAB REGIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The political project popularly known as the 'Rojava revolution' started in Kurdish-majority (though ethnically diverse) regions of Syria, but soon spread to Arab-majority regions as a result of successive campaigns by the YPG, YPJ and allied forces against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Victories against these forces in Arab-majority cities and regions led to the creation in 2016 of what was then known as the Democratic Federation of North-Eastern Syria (DFNS) and is today united as North and East Syria (NES) under the leadership of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

Of the seven official regions of NES, four (Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor) are now almost entirely populated by Arabs. Though there is no official census, it is likely that Arabs – not Kurds – now make up the majority of the population of NES, particularly following the loss of key Kurdish population centers to Turkey's 2018 and 2019 invasions and ongoing occupations, and the subsequent flight of Kurdish refugees out of these regions.

A basic tenet of the political paradigm of the Kurdish movement in NES is that it does not seek to establish a Kurdish-nationalist state or statelet of its own, but rather aims to establish a decentralized political system that embraces the cultural and political rights of all people. This means that Kurds, Arabs and other minorities should aim to achieve understanding and co-existence. Practically speaking, this means a decentralization of decision-making power, guaranteed political representation of all religious and ethnic groups, and promotion of these values in the education system and beyond. (In a previous report, 'Beyond the Frontlines',¹ Rojava Information Center (RIC) looked in-depth at this political program in theory and practice.)

This idealistic political vision is at loggerheads with the perception of the AANES that some opposition groups and the Government of Bashar al-Assad (GoS) seek to promote, variously framing the political project in the north-east as Kurdish domination of Arabs; Kurdish-nationalist secessionism; the imposition of communism; a beach-head for US expansionism; and an unwanted imposition of liberal and feminist values onto a conservative region. While some of these claims leave room for doubt, others speak to truths about the major challenges facing the AANES governance.

¹ <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2019/12/report-beyond-the-frontlines/>



AANES' efforts to build a democratic and inclusive alternative in the north-east face a major challenge in the Arab-majority regions which now make up the bulk of NES' territory, and where AANES is struggling to build a system able to embrace all communities and religions. In the course of RIC's research for 'Beyond the Frontlines', it became clear that the true test of the AANES' utopian vision would be in these conservative, under-developed, war-scarred communities, where those already suspicious of the AANES are subjected to pressure and coercion by the GoS, ISIS, Iran, Turkey, and other actors.

In general, we can say that the level of development and success in a given region is strongly correlated to the time that has passed since its liberation from the hands of ISIS. This applies to Manbij, liberated in August 2016, through Raqqa and Tabqa in 2017, to Deir ez-Zor in April 2019. RIC ground teams have visited all these regions, and have had a chance to witness the struggles being experienced by the populations of the Arab majority regions, and the political and cultural contradictions which have arisen as the AANES tries to promote and establish its political project.

The present report will provide an overview of the security, humanitarian and political challenges in these troubled regions; analyze political as well as other reforms implemented to date by the AANES; and assess the extent to which it has been possible for the AANES and associated political actors to implement its political program in these regions.

0. METHODOLOGY AND REMIT

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITS OF THE INVESTIGATION

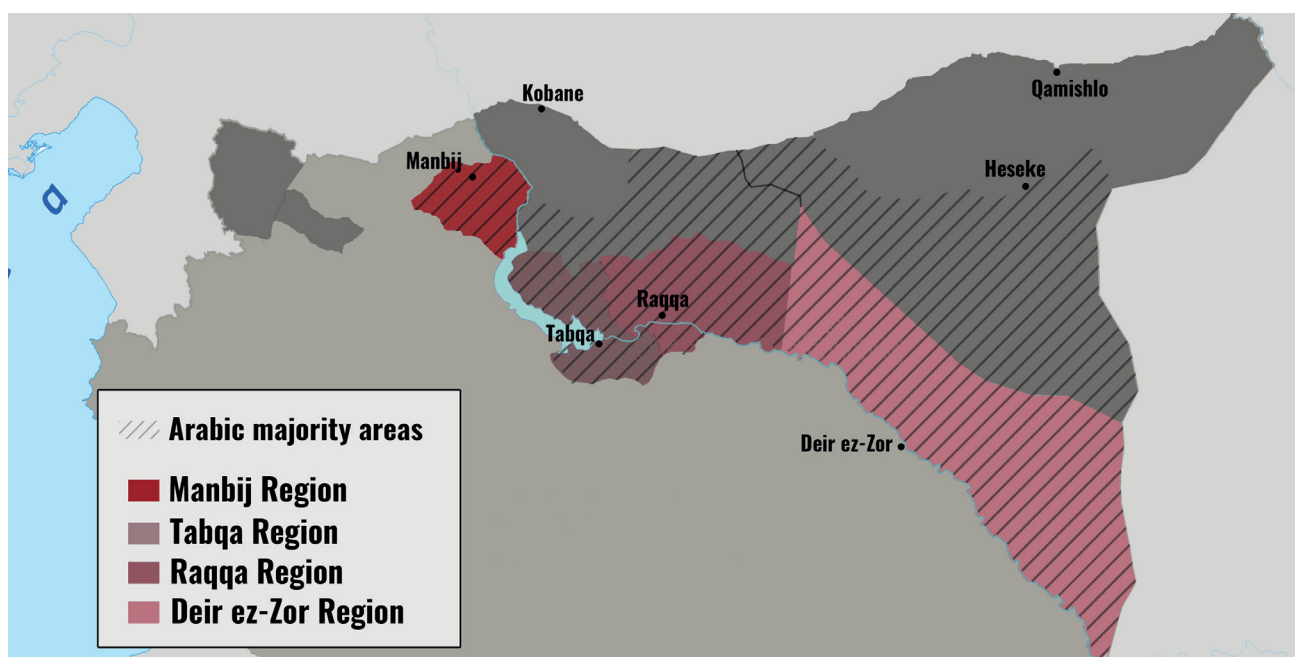
This report was conducted on the basis of field research in all four majority Arab regions of NES, as well as interviews with Arab politicians; civil-society actors; and IDPs living outside of these regions, either in the Kurdish-majority regions of NES or further afield. Our research was primarily on the ground, but due to the fact we are unable to travel into areas controlled by the Government of Syria we gathered our information on the city of Deir ez-Zor through secondary research and testimonies of people from Deir ez-Zor city now residing in areas of the Autonomous Administration. We conducted 46 in-depth interviews with local residents and members of the AANES and affiliated institutions to understand how the new system has been implemented and which difficulties it faces. A key goal was to find critical voices within the new paradigm, in order to achieve a complete and accurate overview of the situation in Arab-majority regions. Public consultations launched across NES throughout 2020 in response to unrest in Deir ez-Zor (see below) also provided a rich seam of opinion from a wide range of political and civil-society actors.

AUTHORS

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

KEY FINDINGS

- After several protests throughout the year 2020, the decentralization and newfound political autonomy for Arab communities in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Tabqa and Manbij is increasingly being realized as more time since their liberation from ISIS' rule passes and AANES can gain more of a foothold.
- AANES is trying to strike a balance between meeting historically-marginalized local communities' expectations and improving the situation of ordinary people in these communities, particularly women.
- This has led to a number of reforms, even when these seem to oppose the AANES' wider political aims, and major public consultations throughout 2020.
- An ongoing and bloody ISIS insurgency targeting Arabs working with the AANES has been a severe obstacle to the AANES' political project, particularly in Deir ez-Zor.
- The Syrian Government (GoS) also seeks to destabilize, cajole and threaten Arab communities to prevent them from working with the AANES, but is struggling to make major inroads.
- Despite complaints many believe the AANES is able to offer better security, humanitarian and rights conditions than any other actor in Syria, granting it time and space to keep building its political project. If it can find a balance between maintaining these standards and introducing more regional autonomy, only another Turkish invasion has the potential to disrupt gradual progress in the Arab regions.



Arab-majority areas of North and East Syria as of June 2021

1 OVERVIEW OF THE REGIONS

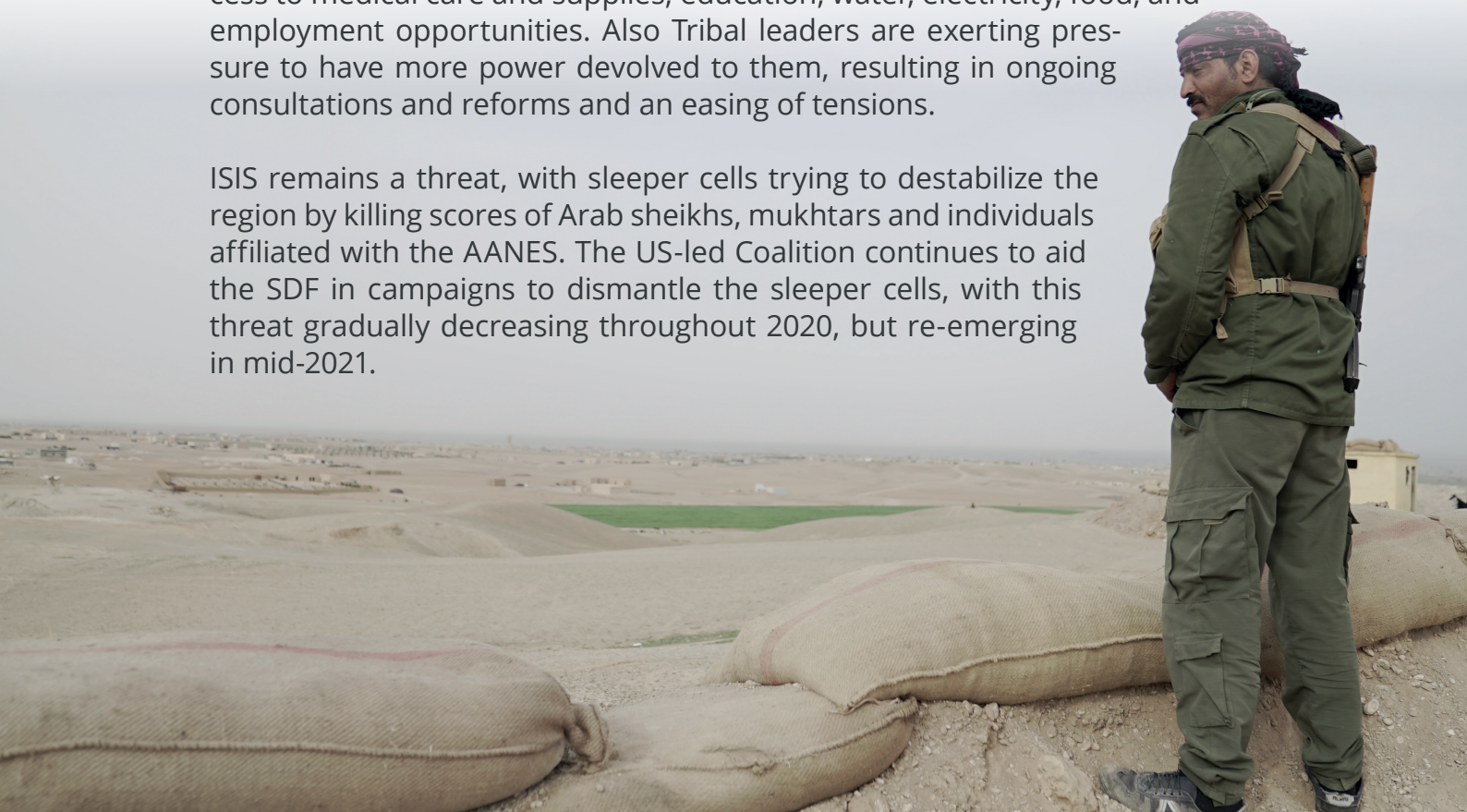
This section will provide a brief background of the character of the four Arab regions of NES.

1.1 DEIR EZ-ZOR

Under the old GoS system, Deir ez-Zor was an eastern governorate covering 33,000km². According to a 2004 census it had a population of 211,857 people. The city and its rural surroundings are a fertile and prosperous farming area due to the water of the Euphrates river, which runs through the region. Today the Euphrates River constitutes the border between GoS-controlled land to the west, including the city of Deir Ez-Zor, and AANES-controlled land to the east, which runs down to the Iraqi border. As such, references to 'Deir ez-Zor' as being under the control of the AANES and SDF refer to the eastern countryside between the Euphrates and the border, rather than the city itself.

The AANES governance model has created significant tensions as some members of local communities resist AANES reforms and call on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to ensure better security standards. Frequent critiques were made concerning the humanitarian resources of the region, such as access to medical care and supplies, education, water, electricity, food, and employment opportunities. Also Tribal leaders are exerting pressure to have more power devolved to them, resulting in ongoing consultations and reforms and an easing of tensions.

ISIS remains a threat, with sleeper cells trying to destabilize the region by killing scores of Arab sheikhs, mukhtars and individuals affiliated with the AANES. The US-led Coalition continues to aid the SDF in campaigns to dismantle the sleeper cells, with this threat gradually decreasing throughout 2020, but re-emerging in mid-2021.



The region is a staging-ground for great-power conflict, with the US maintaining a presence in the region with the objective of cutting Iran’s land route through Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Iranian militias are heavily present along the west bank of the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor, while Russia keeps a lower profile.

Like the oil fields in Kurdish regions, oil fields in Deir ez-Zor are exclusively controlled by the AANES, with the revenues used across all regions of NES to provide infrastructure and humanitarian services, pay salaries, and fund the defense of NES against ISIS, Turkey and other aggressors. This status quo is unlikely to change.

1.3 RAQQA

The city of Raqqa is located on the northeast bank of the Euphrates River, upstream from Deir ez-Zor towards the west of present-day NES. With a population of 220,488 based on the 2004 official census, Raqqa used to be the sixth-largest city in Syria. By December 2019, the population was estimated to be 299,824 people, 30% of whom are IDPs.²

According to some interviewees, before the arrival of ISIS Raqqa was a relatively modern and open-minded city. But this is not to say that conservative Islamism had no foothold in the city prior to the war. Meryam Mihemmed Ibrahim, co-chair of the Raqqa Women’s Council, says: “before the war, women did not wear niqab. But the population was heavily indoctrinated day after day, with films and [religious] speakers that brainwashed them.”

Raqqa suffered massive destruction during the campaign to liberate it from ISIS, with 80% of the city destroyed, but reconstruction efforts are steadily advancing. Despite complaints over the pace of reconstruction and standards of governance, according to our experiences on the ground, most locals prefer AANES to other options and are willing to work within the new political paradigm.

The city is a strategic target for the GoS due to its location and size. Damascus is therefore trying to create dissent within the city and among tribal actors, but meeting with limited success

² https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IMU_En-Raqqa-Panoramic____.pdf

1.3 TABQA

The city of Tabqa, also known as al-Thawrah, is located approximately 55 kilometers west of Raqqa and has a population of 131,500 people, 33% of whom are IDPs. The name al-Thawrah means The Revolution, in reference to the 8 March revolution of 1963 which led to the seizure of power by the military committee of the Ba'ath Party.

Tabqa suffered relatively little destruction during its liberation, and reconstruction is more advanced here than in other regions. The new political system is also meeting with more social acceptance in this historically more liberal city.

The Tabqa dam, most commonly known as the Euphrates Dam, is the largest dam in Syria. It was constructed between 1968 and 1973 with the help of the Soviet Union. The town remains somewhat technologically advanced due to the large number of engineers and technicians resident there.³



The Tabqa Dam was built in 1968 with the help of the Soviet Union

Originally, the Tabqa Dam was conceived as a dual-purpose dam. The dam was intended to power a hydroelectric power station with eight turbines capable of producing 880MW per hour in total, and to irrigate an area of 640,000 hectares on both sides of the Euphrates. The dam has not reached its full potential in either of these objectives, but despite of the damage caused by ISIS on its turbines, it supplies most of NES electricity.

³ <https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/197401/last.boat.to.tabqa.htm>

1.4 MANBIJ

Manbij is a city in the northeast of Aleppo Governate, 30 kilometers west of the Euphrates river. Per the 2004 census, Manbij had a population of nearly 100,000. The population of Manbij is primarily Arab, with Kurdish, Turkman, Circassian and Chechen minorities.

Relative equilibrium has been reached. The AANES make slow but steady progress rebuilding the city and humanitarian infrastructure after ISIS' occupation, and short of a Turkish invasion it is unlikely this progress will be disrupted. Manbij is also affected by the regular Turkish water cuts, being unable to provide sufficient water and electricity to its population.

Manbij serves as a border-crossing to GoS-controlled areas via Aleppo region, as well as AANES-controlled pockets in Aleppo region's Sheikh Maqsud and Ashrafiyah neighborhoods, as well as the Shehba exclave. This makes the city a strategic point that both the GoS and Turkey would like to take over, with Manbij mooted as a possible site of the next Turkish invasion.

1.5 THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION IN NES

The Syrian revolution started in March 2011 as part of the 'Arab Spring', with peaceful demonstrations calling for reform of Bashar al-Assad's repressive Ba'ath government. But it was quickly transformed into a widespread popular uprising demanding the 'fall of the regime', as one well-known slogan had it. Repressive measures employed by the GoS, its Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and associated militias in an attempt to put down the growing calls for change were the principal catalyst for the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The FSA began as a number of heterogeneous, discrete, small-scale armed groups tasked with protecting demonstrators. "The FSA didn't enter our city; the people themselves became FSA," an IDP from Deir ez-Zor tells RIC.

In the following section we will provide a brief sketch of life for local civilians under different forces as the war progressed.

FREE SYRIAN ARMY

In many cities the GoS rapidly lost control and began using assassination and shelling against the civil protest movement which caused a massive population displacement.

Clashes with the FSA at demonstrations and FSA raids to secure small arms soon spiralled into running battles, as the FSA's ranks were bolstered by SAA deserters. It was "a moment of chaos where everyone was armed," Sheikh Talat from Raqqa tells RIC. The city of Raqqa was the first governate capital where the GoS entirely lost control. This drew the opposition's attention to the possibility of moving all political and service bodies there.

As the months wore on, the FSA organized itself into larger brigades that began to engage in large-scale military confrontations. By the summer of 2012, the FSA had taken control of cities like Manbij, the rural areas surrounding the city of Deir ez-Zor, and most of the neighborhoods within that city. The territory in the hands of GoS and SAA shrank to just three of the city's neighborhoods, as well as military outposts on the city's outskirts controlled by the army, and the airport.

AL-NUSRA FRONT

In August 2012, the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda linked Salafist jihadist organization, began to take part in military operations against the GoS alongside FSA units. "Their troops were more experienced because many of them came from fighting the US invasion of Iraq," a Manbij resident tells RIC. Together with Ahrar al-Sham, a dominant faction within FSA, al-Nusra implemented Islamic law in the towns they captured. Later, Al-Nusra would try to take advantage of ISIS's rise by presenting themselves as "moderate" in comparison. While they had the same aim of establishing sharia law and a caliphate, al-Nusra intended to implement this aim in a more gradual manner and did not openly challenge the West in the same fashion. The rise of Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra marked a more general shift toward varying degrees of Islamist radicalism among armed FSA factions, with groups subscribing to a jihadist ideology benefiting from greater financial support, greater firepower and more committed fighters, including experienced foreign veterans.

ISIS

ISIS' emergence dealt a critical blow to the secular opposition in northern Syria. On 15 August 2013, clashes between some armed opposition factions and ISIS began in Raqqa city and ended with the faction's withdrawal from the area, leading to ISIS' emergence as a prominent force. Its strict application of Islamic law brought Raqqa into a period of repression, assassinations and torture.

“ After some of the former FSA members joined ISIS, they were able to fight very well because they knew all the roads, they knew the terrain, they knew everything about the land and were able to fight for a long time. - **Anonymous, IDP, Deir ez-Zor**

At the beginning, ISIS members were not harsh. They claimed they were protecting the region from oppression by the FSA, and they used religion in order to win over people. Many people thought ISIS would be the ones to survive, so they supported them. They came in large numbers and had advanced weapons and vehicles. When they completely controlled everything, they revealed their true face. - **Mohamed Driss, resident, Raqqa** ”

By the beginning of 2014, ISIS had declared itself to be the 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant', giving an indication of the scale of the terror group's aims. ISIS took over Manbij after ousting local FSA groups. The city became a hub for trading in looted artifacts and archaeological digging equipment. In Deir ez-Zor, open fighting broke out between ISIS and al-Nusra, leaving hundreds dead on both sides, civilians in the middle, and finishing with the expulsion of Al-Nusra from Deir ez-Zor.

A number of SAA fighters remained besieged in a small area of the city of Deir ez-Zor for approximately 3 years. From 10 April 2016 to 31 August 2017 the World Food Program supplied the city with food and basic relief items through a high-altitude airdrop service.

Meanwhile, ISIS seized rural territory across present-day NES, including many smaller Arab towns such as Hol, Shedadi and Tel Kocher. ISIS then began to advance on the major Kurdish population centers of Heseke and Kobane, by that time under the protection of the Kurdish YPG and YPJ (People's Defense Units and Women's Defense Units).

SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

YPG and YPJ were able to slow ISIS' advance in the city of Kobane, and as the US-led Coalition to Defeat ISIS began to launch airstrikes in support then Kurdish forces and allied FSA units were able to push ISIS back, as the tide turned against ISIS for the first time.

After the liberation of Kobane, the YPG and YPJ and their allies set up a multi-ethnic force with Coalition backing – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In June of 2016 the recently-created SDF and the Coalition launched an offensive to capture Manbij. By June 8th, they had fully encircled the city and after a two-month fierce battle the SDF established full control over the city. But the SDF's aim of uniting the eastern regions under SDF control with Afrin in the west, in order to unite the three original 'cantons' of Rojava in one contiguous territory, was frustrated by the Euphrates Shield operation launched by Turkey in Jarablus.

Turkey claimed that the campaign was to help Syrian rebels capture ISIS territory, but the timing and geographical location of the operation meant it was clear that the Kurds, and their aspirations of autonomy, were the principal targets of this operation.⁴



Over the following months, the SDF advanced with support from the Coalition, initiating the Wrath of the Euphrates Operation to liberate Raqqa from ISIS. They took over ISIS' capital city in October 2017. The SDF's secondary goals included capturing Tabqa city and its dam, and the Baath Dam further downstream. International observers including Amnesty international denounced the Coalition's tactics in this operation, stating that "the Coalition launched strikes likely to cause excessive harm to civilians and failed to distinguish between military targets and civilians."⁵ For its part, the Coalition claimed to have taken all necessary measures to spare civilians.

“Before SDF came to Raqqa, there were many rumors that the Kurds were coming to occupy and repress us. Later we realized that this was not true. We realized that our people, and our men, are also among their ranks.” — **Sheikh Talal Haj Hilal Al-Siday, Arab Tribal Leader, Raqqa**

Two separate military campaigns against ISIS were waged in Deir ez-Zor province. The first began in June 2017 and was led by the SAA, with significant support from its Russian and Iranian allies. The second was spearheaded by the SDF, with Coalition backing. This was seen by many observers as a race between Russia and the USA to establish a presence in such a key region, due to its oil reserves and proximity to the Iraqi border. On one notorious occasion in 2018, Russian contractors and US forces would come into open conflict at the Conoco oilfield, resulting in at least one hundred deaths among Russian and SAA fighters⁶.

By the beginning of 2018, the two separate campaigns had divided Deir ez-Zor geographically, militarily and politically. The SDF came from the north-west taking the eastern side of the Euphrates river and the SAA from the south-west, taking over the western bank of the river, including the city of Deir ez-Zor proper.

“With strong belief, trust and bright hearts we supported the SDF. What created this desire to join? It was the AANES ideas and philosophy. From our childhood, we liked the ideas of autonomy and equality. Obviously there is a lot more work to be done, and more steps can be taken”.— **Ameer Jedan, civilian, Deir ez-Zor**

⁴<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/09/07/10-new-wars-that-could-be-unleashed-as-a-result-of-the-one-against-isis/>

⁵<https://raqqa.amnesty.org/briefing.html>

⁶<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html>

2 PRESENT-DAY SITUATION

2.1 GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION

The United States of America (US) and Russia are involved in what many observers view as a localized 'cold war' for predominance in northern Syria, including in the Arab regions of NES.

Following the US-Russia clash at the Conoco oil field in 2017, the two powers refrained from further open clashes, and the US remained the predominant foreign power present in NES, continuing its successful collaboration with the SDF to finally eradicate ISIS' geographical control over Syria in March 2019. Relations between the SDF and Russia, meanwhile, had been frayed by Russia's acquiescence to a devastating Turkish invasion of the Kurdish-majority enclave of Afrin at the beginning of 2018.

Until 2019, this status quo remained in place. Manbij, Raqqa and Tabqa were part of the hub for Coalition training of new SDF recruits to participate in the fight against ISIS.⁷ Only Deir ez-Zor remained divided between Russian and US influence on either side of the river. Reconstruction was underway in Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and to a lesser extent Deir ez-Zor, along with USAID-led programs centered around Raqqa. Despite efforts many complain that progress is not being made fast enough, and the reconstruction of the regions should be given higher priority. The security situation in these regions was steadily improving.

But then the region underwent another major power shift during October 2019, when US and other Western forces withdrew to the regions of Jazira and Deir ez-Zor, allowing Russia to enter their former bases – and Turkey to launch another devastating assault on the border regions.

⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-military-aid-is-fueling-big-ambitions-for-syri-as-leftist-kurdish-militia/2017/01/07/6e457866-c79f-11e6-acda-59924caa2450_story.html

DEPARTURE OF US FORCES AND SDF-DAMASCUS DEAL

“The Russians and the Syrian regime have made proposals that could save the lives of millions of people who live under our protection,” SDF commander Mazlum Abdi wrote in an op-ed published five days into Turkey’s bloody ‘Peace Spring’ offensive against NES. “[But] we do not trust their promises. To be honest, it is hard to know whom to trust.”⁸

In a desperate bid to prevent further “ethnic cleansing” by Turkish-backed forces then sweeping through the region,⁹ SAA units would be returning to SDF-held areas for the first time since the 2012 establishment of autonomy in the Kurdish border regions and its subsequent extension to the Arab population hubs.

The SDF-Damascus deal was poorly-understood from the outset, with locals and international observers alike struggling to grasp what the agreement would mean in practice. Foreign press and NGO staff scrambled for the border as unfounded panic spread about an instantaneous return of GoS control to NES. For their part, locals expressed rather more realistic concerns over the collapse of regional autonomy, violent reprisals, and a dreaded return of SAA military service.¹⁰

In fact, the GoS-SDF agreement is yet to significantly affect the administration of NES on the civilian, political or internal security level. SAA deployment has been limited in geographical scope and impact, while contrary to some gloomy prognostications the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has consistently been able to maintain political control, service provision and internal cohesion throughout its territories, including the major Arab cities. Negotiations between AANES and Damascus on a putative political settlement are all but stalled, with diplomatic sources describing Damascus as “not serious” in coming to a meaningful settlement with NES’ political representatives.¹¹ An uneasy status quo prevails.

Nonetheless, both Damascus and Russia are attempting to benefit from the new realities on the ground by exerting soft and hard pressure on the SDF and AANES. This is particularly true in the Arab regions which border the

⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/13/kurds-assad-syria-russia-putin-turkey-genocide/>

⁹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/13/kurds-assad-syria-russia-putin-turkey-genocide/>

¹⁰ Multiple RIC interviews with civilians in NES, October 2019 through to the time of writing

zones under GoS control, and where Damascus is now eyeing a return to power. As such, it is important to understand where Russia and the SAA now have a foothold.

SAA RETURN TO NES AND ARAB REGIONS UFIS

Following the SDF-GoS agreement, and the subsequent Turkish-Russian ‘Sochi Agreement’, new frontlines have more or less settled around the new zone of Turkish occupation.¹² This zone constitutes a 5000km² box stretching from west of Tel Abyad to east of Sere Kaniye¹³ along the Turkish border, and down to the M4 highway at its southernmost extent. The two bottom corners of this box are located just north of the cities of Ain Issa (itself directly north of Raqqa) and Til Temir, and it is on the frontlines around these two cities that the bulk of military engagements still take place.

SAA troops numbering up to 10,000 have been newly deployed along the border; along the frontlines of the zone of Turkish occupation; and in garrisons outside Manbij, Tabqa and Raqqa, and along supply lines leading from GoS-controlled Syria up to the front with Turkey.

In practice, it is SDF units who do the bulk of the fighting, particularly when it comes to close-quarters combat, rather than the often poorly-equipped SAA units. Nonetheless, SAA units do engage with Turkish-backed units on these frontlines, primarily in the form of back-and-forth shelling and heavy weapons fire. In Til Temir, as in Qamishlo and Heseke, tentative SAA attempts at expanding their areas of control have been swiftly shut down by SDF.¹⁴

The logistical situation has improved dramatically for SAA units, however. Earlier in the year, some SAA units were all but starving, resulting in instances of theft and looting. But since the start of this summer, Russia has been ensuring a better flow of rations and military supplies to SAA units in Ain Issa and elsewhere. These units now have good-quality ATGMs and thermal sights,

¹¹ RIC interviews with AANES diplomatic officials, January & February 2020

¹² For an overview of the GoS-SDF and Turkish-Russian deals, and how these were put into place in the opening days of the war, see: <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2019/10/explainer-shifting-power-plays-in-north-and-east-syria/>

¹³ Also known as Gire Spi and Ras al-Ayn, respectively.

¹⁴ RIC researchers have visited Til Temir and Ain Issa and spoken with SDF fighters and commanders on multiple occasions throughout 2020

improving their ability to engage with Turkish-backed units.¹⁵

Formally, control of the M4 highway between Til Temir and Ain Issa was handed over to the SAA and Russian Military, with SNA and Turkish units officially pulling back from the road. In practice, however, SNA units still sometimes fire on or obstruct vehicles attempting to traverse this road, and have not withdrawn to the distance agreed in Sochi. The M4 is not safe for civilian traffic, trade or humanitarian deliveries. Engineers working on the Mabruka electric station, for example, can only travel on the M4 to the adjacent station with a Russian Military Police escort.¹⁶

As part of the October 2019 deal, SAA units were allowed photo-ops in key Arab cities like Manbij and Raqqa, but this has not been repeated since the very first days following the agreement.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ In Manbij, Tabqa and Raqqa, as well as Kobane, SAA troops are banned from entering the cities themselves, and confined to ‘frontline’ positions on the contact line around Manbij and the Turkish border, or outside of the cities themselves, as a brief review of the situation in these cities will illustrate.

MANBIJ

Manbij Military Council (MMC) spokesperson Sherwan Derwish told RIC: “We let [SAA] come and go to our shared positions on the frontlines, that’s it. They are trying to organize support in the countryside, but they haven’t been able to achieve any change on the ground.”¹⁹

In another interview, Mr. Derwish explained that “coordination centers” have been set up with both Russian and GoS troops. Russian forces entered a former US base near Arima in October 2019, which has allowed “the same level of coordination” that the MMC enjoyed with the American forces. “Our joint efforts [with the Russians] have been positive,” Mr. Derwish said, while adding that locals remained fearful of further violence.

¹⁵ RIC interviews with SDF fighters in Ain Issa and Til Temir, passim

¹⁶ RIC interview with Ziyad Rustem, co-chair of Energy Bureau of the AANES, March 2020

¹⁷ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/return-northeast-syrian-army-deployments-against-turkish-forces>

¹⁸ RIC interview with Sherwan Derwish, Manbij Military Council spokesperson August 2020

¹⁹ RIC interview with Sherwan Derwish, Manbij Military Council spokesperson August 2020

As with most of the Arab-majority regions, Manbij experienced a spike of insurgency-style attacks following ISIS' defeat and before the US withdrawal. On 16 January 2019, a bombing at a popular Manbij restaurant killed 19 people, including four Americans. Although American forces withdrew from the northern Syrian city of Manbij in October 2019, local officials say the city has been relatively stable both before and after the invasion.²⁰ Nonetheless, Turkish-backed SNA militias in regions Turkey occupies in Al-Bab and Jarabulus often shell positions of the Manbij Military Council (MMC), while the MMC regularly detains sleeper cells with links to Turkish intelligence services and Turkish-backed militias, illustrating Turkey's continued interest in this strategically-located city. Mr. Derwish himself survived an assassination attempt on June 2020. He was struck by a landmine while in a car on the road between Manbij and the Tishrin Dam. Derwish had previously been targeted in attacks in 2018 and 2019.²¹

RAQQA AND TABQA

While there are still occasional attacks in the countryside, the security situation in Raqqa and Tabqa cities is much better than in Deir ez-Zor, with ISIS sleeper-cell attacks largely stamped out by the SDF and NES' Asayish (internal security forces). (see below) The departure of the US-led Coalition did not lead to major changes in these cities, with the SDF able to retain control of the security situation.

Nonetheless, the US' departure has destabilized the region, as Sheikh Talal Haj Hilal Al-Siday, a tribal leader in Raqqa, explains: "if the United States withdraw again we are afraid that the previous tragic [events] will repeat themselves. The Russians might step in. They are recruiting, and paying well, and they will facilitate the regime's return to the region. We no longer trust the international actors, specifically those coalition members that supported SDF."

South of Raqqa, there is limited low-level intelligence sharing between the SAA and SDF as these two forces conduct operations against a strong ISIS insurgency in this desert region. The relationship between SAA and SDF along this contact line is in general less hostile than in Deir ez-Zor, where the situation remains tense.²²

²⁰ <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c4572684-6b20-4e23-8619-25df3e1296f9>

²¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-manbij-sdf-shervan-derwish-assassination-attempt>

²² RIC interview, SDF commander, Raqqa, July 2020; see also reports such as: <https://www.difesaesicurezza.com/en/defence-and-security/syria-sdf-are-preparing-a-maxi-anti-isis-operation-in-raqqa/>

The SAA and Russian forces took control of Tabqa airport on 14 October 2019, for the first time since 2014, following the deal with SDF. Tabqa's airport was heavily damaged by ISIS fighters before the city and its airport were liberated by the SDF and Coalition 2017. (It was later used by US forces as a military air-base). SAA now use this route for resupplying their troops on the frontlines.

The border between SAA/SDF control is south of Tabqa, where some of the busiest crossings between AANES and GoS-controlled territory are located. Likewise, there are some SAA bases on the road north toward Ain Issa and the routes which they use for resupplying the frontlines – such as the former Coalition base at Tel Seman, now under Russian/SAA control.²³ The presence of SAA checkpoints on roads between North Aleppo and Raqqa has reportedly opened the door for ISIS to bribe SAA units to facilitate the movement of fighters between north-west Syria and the interior.²⁴

In terms of Tabqa's key hydroelectric dam, Russia now has an input on the distribution of electricity, while GoS are also employed there alongside an AANES administrative team. Power from this dam is now being routed into GoS-held areas as well as AANES areas - a contributing factor to frequent blackouts in AANES territory. When RIC recently visited the dam, only AANES-employed individuals were present.²⁵

AIN ISSA AND THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE WEST

The town of Ain Issa has been the key flashpoint in winter 2020/21, as Turkey attempted to press its advantage and seize this strategically-located, Arab-majority town in the window before US President Donald Trump leaves office. The situation here serves as a microcosm for the whole region.

Turkey has been launching increasingly bold assaults against Ain Issa, bombarding the town and driving out thousands more IDPs while having its proxy militias in the 'Syrian National Army' (SNA) launch ground assaults. The SDF fight back while the SAA stand by, but ultimately the town is reliant on the presence of Russian bases meaning that Turkey cannot deploy its strike drones and airpower which are the decisive factor in Turkish operations

²³ <https://t-intell.com/2020/02/23/evacuation-shattered-glass-the-us-coalition-bases-in-syria-part-2/>

²⁴ <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/strengthening-and-expanding-isis-central-syria-campaign/>

²⁵ RIC interview, Tabqa Dam administration, July 2020

against SDF. Without Russian acquiescence, Turkey cannot advance: Russia, meanwhile, uses this to try and exact further concessions from the SDF, and see the town restored to GoS control.

Speaking to RIC on the Ain Issa frontline, Riyad Khalaf, the commander of SDF's Tel Abyad Military Council, said: "When Russia arrived in Ain Issa their role was to stop the attacks. But as we can see, until now, they don't do anything. Even when a Russian military base was struck by a Turkish attack, three days ago, the Russians remained silent."

At the time of writing, differences between Russia and Turkey and the SDF's refusal to capitulate to either side mean the two state powers have not been able to come to an agreement over the town. Nonetheless, civilians continue to be caught in the crossfire. The same is true for all the key Arab population centers to the west, particularly Manbij. 2020 did not see a further Turkish operation, with Russia and Turkey yet to come to a different agreement and the frontlines in Idlib frozen. But another operation is expected in due course, with Turkey standing by and allowing Russia and the SAA to advance against HTS in Idlib in exchange for fresh Turkish gains against NES regions where Russia has a presence.

As will be seen below, this uncertainty contributes to difficulties in rebuilding infrastructure and communities, and developing a new political system, in the Arab regions. As will be seen below, with many locals expecting the balance of power to shift again, with either a fresh Turkish assault (in Manbij) or the return of actual GoS control (in Raqqa and Tabqa) as a quid pro quo to prevent such an assault, it is difficult to generate engagement in the new political project.

"Ain Issa is important for geographical reasons. It is right next to the M4 highway. The attacks aim at taking full control over this part of the highway, so the connection between the cities of NES is cut off. The way to Raqqa is cut off, and to Kobane as well. This is why this road is of strategic importance. This is why there are constant attacks to take the M4.

Russia is not playing its role. It remains silent. There is an agreement between Russia and Turkey, while the Coalition just watches, and says nothing. They are pressuring us, but our position is clear. We will not abandon our project." - **Ilham Ahmed, Syrian Democratic Council co-chair**

DEIR EZ-ZOR

The situation is different in the Deir ez-Zor countryside, the only Arab-majority region of NES where the US retains a significant presence. While the US-led Coalition does continue to support regular, successful anti-ISIS operations in this region, as noted above then their presence also serves as a bulwark against Iranian ambitions of uniting Iranian-dominated Iraqi territories with Syria to create an easy land bridge from Tehran through to Damascus.

Iran does already have a strong foothold here, but is prevented from consolidating these gains by the US presence. GoS holds power in the city of Deir ez-Zor, in the west bank of the Euphrates. This side of the river, from the city down to the Iraqi border further south is controlled by pro-Iranian groups associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The town of Bukamal (Abu Kamal) is the fulcrum of the so-called “Shiite corridor” that links Iran through Iraq with Syria and Lebanon.²⁶ This region also hosts Afghani militias, Hezbollah and Shia Muslim militias from Iraq, all backed by Iran, plus Russian Wagner Group mercenaries. The presence of the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) is very small in this area.

As far as ISIS is concerned, Deir ez-Zor was (and is) the main gate to Iraq and the last bastion of the caliphate. Vast expanses of desert make the region a difficult place to control fully, with some locals living in fear of continued lethal retribution from ISIS and others collaborating with the organization’s sleeper cells. Nowadays the East bank of the Euphrates river from the city of Deir ez-Zor through to the border with Iraq is a very unstable area, with regular assassinations committed by ISIS sleeper cells targeting AANES employees and tribal sheikhs and mukhtars who are seen to be collaborating with the AANES.

To stabilize the area, the SDF and international Coalition conduct almost constant anti-ISIS operations, broken only by the Turkish invasion. In July 2020 they announced the end of the 2nd phase of a major security campaign, “Deterring Terrorism,” which saw at least 151 suspected ISIS members captured.

²⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/syria-clashes-russa-us-sdf-arab-tribes-assad-deir-conoco.html>

Meanwhile, pro-Damascus and Iranian forces have sought to accelerate and extend the impact of ISIS's campaign in NES regions by conducting their own insurgent attacks, including assassinations, since at least mid-2018. The SAA does not take responsibility for pro-Damascus insurgent attacks, creating uncertainty regarding the extent to which ISIS' actions are being aided and abetted by Damascus or Tehran.²⁷

The GoS and its backers are actively recruiting tribal members to join their militias while soliciting defections from the SDF. Pro-GoS forces have also recruited "scores" of the Baggara tribe in Deir ez-Zor and Aleppo to join the Iran-backed Liwa al-Baqir militia in opposition to the SDF. Liwa al Baqir declared jihad against US forces in Syria in April 2018. Nonetheless, pro-GoS forces have had little success securing defections from the SDF, despite Russian attempts to support these endeavors. This is due in large part to better pay, conditions and support on the SDF's side.

THE IMPACT OF THE SDF-DAMASCUS AGREEMENT IN THE ARAB REGIONS

AANES retains the same de facto political authority and autonomy throughout the majority-Arab regions NES as it did before the October 2019 invasion. SAA units are confined to those frontlines and border-posts described above, and are no more visible in major cities or on the roads than they were prior to October 2019. Despite the continued closure of the M4 highway, travel from the Semalka border crossing through Derik to Qamishlo, Heseke, Til Temir and on to Raqqa, Kobane, and Manbij does not entail any interaction with SAA units or checkpoints.²⁸ As before, it is the AANES-controlled Asayish (internal security) which operates checkpoints throughout the 'buffer zone' on the border and down into the Arab interior.

In October 2019, both pro- and anti-Syrian government protests in Raqqa, Manbij, and elsewhere attracted scores of protesters, with the SDF dispersing some protests but allowing others to go ahead.²⁹⁻³⁰ Neither pro-government nor Islamist opposition networks could muster any significant support among the Arab population even at this critical time, indicating an at least pragmatic acceptance of the AANES and SDF.

²⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/anti-isis-coalition-begins-losing-tribal-support-syria>

²⁸ RIC researchers have driven this route on multiple occasions throughout 2020 without encountering the SAA on any checkpoints, though SAA/Russian bases are visible beside the road.

²⁹ <http://middleeastdirections.eu/new-publication-wpcs-surviving-the-aftermath-of-islam-ic-state-the-syrian-kurdish-movements-resilience-strategy-patrick-haenni-and-arthur-quesnay/>

³⁰ RIC interviews, civil society activists in Manbij and Raqqa, October 2019

While recognizing the significant shifts underway in the region, it is therefore important to recognize that the SDF and AANES still retain significant advantages in NES and will not be supplanted overnight. That the GoS is yet to make any open move against the AANES or attempt to re-impose its rule by force in the Arab regions where it now has a new military presence is testament to this reality.

As some researchers have observed, it could be argued that “far from being a capitulation by the SDF seeking protection from Damascus, the ‘return of the regime’ turns out to be a concession by Damascus,”³¹ as Russia pressured Damascus into accepting what the AANES had been seeking all along – the return of the SAA to the border, but continued SDF and AANES control in the Arab regions, and on the political level.

2.2 GOS PRESSURE ON ARAB REGIONS OF NES

Nonetheless, the new realities in NES have of course prompted renewed interest in Damascus over a return to the region. While the population of Kurdish-majority regions to the north looks uneasily over the border at Turkey, the Arab-majority regions to the south are being pressured by GoS. Strongman SAA figurehead Suhail al-Hassan last year visited the areas south of Raqqa, along with Russian propagandists, in what was in part a veiled threat to the people of Raqqa.³² GoS officials have also been meeting with Raqqawi tribes to try and draw them onside, though reportedly meeting with little success, as tribal leaders continue to keep their cards close to their chest.³³

In both Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, local officials accuse GoS agents of conducting destabilization operations including bombings and armed attacks as well as starting crop-fires in the context of Damascus-AANES disputes over the wheat harvest, plus spreading social misconduct by promoting drug use and prostitution and attempting to convince young men to join their security forces rather than those of the AANES. Though social tensions in these cities cannot be waved away as solely the work of Damascus’ agents, it is true that GoS is likely to try and exploit such tensions.

³¹ <http://middleeastdirections.eu/new-publication-wpcs-surviving-the-aftermath-of-islam-ic-state-the-syrian-kurdish-movements-resilience-strategy-patrick-haenni-and-arthur-quesnay/>

³² <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/59076/why-did-suheil-al-hassan-visit-raqqa.html>

³³ RIC interview, Raqqa Civil Council spokesperson, August 2020

Similarly, the GoS has allowed thousands of individuals to pass through crossings under its control without undergoing coronavirus checks, with official and unofficial crossings in Deir ez-Zor, Tabqa and Manbij all busy throughout 2020. This policy has certainly been a key driver of the new coronavirus outbreak in NES, with officials further asserting that this open-door policy is a deliberate attempt on Damascus' part to create pressure on the AANES by spreading coronavirus into areas under their control.³⁴ The GoS has also been making use of the regular passage of young people into GoS-held areas for their exams to threaten and arrest those accused of working with the AANES. Recently, the sister of a young woman employed in the AANES' Raqqa Women's Office was arrested when travelling for her exams and detained for a week in the Filastin prison in Damascus, with security officials accusing her of 'working with the Kurds' and 'betraying her state.'³⁵

2.2 HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

Establishing better humanitarian conditions is a basic precondition for political, community-building efforts. But destruction and poverty as a result of a decade of war has left these regions experiencing severe hardship.

Across the Arab regions of NES, it is the city of Raqqa which suffered the heaviest destruction in the war. Raqqa saw heavier fighting than either Manbij or Tabqa. The UN estimates that 80% of Raqqa was destroyed in the conflict, while the city was also littered with landmines by ISIS. The Coalition, which has played a part in the defeat of ISIS, haven't taken full responsibility for the reconstruction and put sanctions hardening the economic situation.

In 2020, reports indicated that 40% of the city's 150,000 private homes remained destroyed – showing both the progress that has been made, and how much remains to be done. Raqqa Civil Council has been removing 25,000 cubic meters of rubble from the city every month, and most roads are now clear, but massive destruction is still evident around the city.

³⁴ https://npasyria.com/en/blog.php?id_blog=3143&sub_blog=4%20&name_blog=Syrian%20government-held%20Qamishli%20airport:%20epicenter%20to%20coronavirus%20outbreak%20in%20north-east%20Syria

³⁵ RIC interview, Farouz Khelil Mohammed, co-chair of Raqqa Women's Office, August 2020

On the other hand, Raqqa's symbolism and notoriety as the 'capital of the caliphate' attracted a great deal of attention from international NGOs and governments. As such, essential services such as hospitals, electricity and water distribution were relatively quickly reestablished. Since the liberation of Raqqa, the Raqqa Civil Council (see below) has received support from both the AANES and the Coalition. Layla Mustafa, co-chair of the Raqqa Civil Council, explains: "We requested aid in some fields such as agriculture and health, and received good support. But now it's not like before. We only receive a little support and people here still have many needs. There are many projects that we cannot complete."



Many buildings in Raqqa need to be demolished and rebuilt

In the most recently-liberated areas of the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside, basic water and electricity supplies still present a problem. Here as elsewhere, the FSA, al-Nusra and ISIS have looted even the most basic infrastructure such as electricity cables, pipes and pumps, meaning total reconstruction from the ground up is necessary. Reconstruction programs, including those funded by USAID, have focused on rebuilding irrigation channels reaching thousands of hectares of arable land around the Euphrates and reconnecting water and electricity to local communities.

On the other hand, the region's proximity to the Euphrates means many residents have suffered less from ongoing water shortages and electricity black-outs when compared to the Kurdish-majority cities on the border. As a rural region, less massive reconstruction is needed in Deir ez-Zor as opposed to Raqqa, but the region is also harder to access and poses greater security threats, with civil engineers and technical officials among those targeted and assassinated by ISIS.

According to Tariq Rashid, co-chair of the NGO Coordination Office in Deir ez-Zor: “We’ve tried hard, and some organizations have come to Deir ez-Zor. But it’s still not enough to provide humanitarian services and developmental projects on a large scale... supporting farming and agricultural development will create an economic cycle that will have a positive effect in these areas and on its local communities.”

“There is no real reconstruction process in Deir ez-Zor, as every new crisis delays any real rebuilding. If we use the term ‘reconstruction’, we will be talking about large projects that start from Heseke and Raqqa down to Baghouz. There are civil society organizations trying to begin projects, but they are not sustainable. These projects are better than nothing, but what Deir ez-Zor needs is large projects in all sectors. Such projects help defeat extremism by eliminating unemployment, reconstructing the area, and sustaining stability and security.” — **Omar Abu Leyla, Journalist, Deir ez-Zor**

Locals report shortages in all areas, from water, pharmacies, electricity, food, and housing through to employment. A common complaint is that the AANES is not putting enough effort into the rebuilding of Arab-majority regions in comparison with other regions. This can in part be explained by the poor security situation and relatively short time that has elapsed since the liberation of regions like Deir ez-Zor from ISIS, plus the size of cities like Raqqa compared to Kobane, with the Kurdish city no more than a quarter of the size of the Arab metropolis. Nonetheless, in both interviews with RIC and the public consultations run by the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) many locals have expressed frustration with the slow pace of redevelopment in their regions.

“When the SDF came, we were optimistic about the fact that it would bring democracy and spread democracy, equality, justice and brotherhood. We were very surprised that we were just as marginalized as we were before. Today we have no pharmacy, no school, no drinking water pipes, so we have to buy water. Employment opportunities are scarce.

We have nothing, not even drinking water. I have dug a well of water but its water is salty and not suitable for drinking. We ask those responsible to look at our situation. We do not ask for financial support or food aid. These things we do not want, but we want services such as a pharmacy, We have to pass through five other villages to find a pharmacy, a clinic, jobs for the youth, and salaries for them. Until now there is not a school for our children, who cannot read or write.” — **Armenian resident, Deir ez-Zor**

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

Alongside the infrastructure and humanitarian support provided by AANES, a number of international actors are also working to help improve the situation in the Arab regions. However, these programs meet with some challenges in meeting humanitarian needs in these regions.

USAID is the United States stabilization organization which coordinates the aid programs of the US government and different NGOs. Through the Syria Essential Services (SES) campaign, it partners with a variety of Syrian entities to restore essential services, jump-start economic recovery, and build local capacity to respond to community needs. Working with local officials, civil society organizations, and private sector actors, SES tries to ensure essential services are restored and managed equitably. The inroads made by this program have been particularly visible in Raqqa.

Following the US withdrawal from western regions of NES, however, the USAID stabilization program in Raqqa has been brought to an end.³⁶ USAID is now focusing on eastern regions such as Heseke and its environs. This may well create further opportunities for the GoS and other actors to make inroads in Raqqa, where, despite a poor security situation in the surrounding countryside and continued infrastructural challenges, significant progress has been made on the humanitarian, infrastructure and security fronts across the past two years.

UN agencies are also active in these regions. For example, under ISIS, women lacked access to basic reproductive health services and supplies. After the liberation of Deir ez-Zor in September 2017, the UNFPA provided supplies to an estimated number of 93,500 people in the city, including 20,000 sanitary napkins and 4,000 dignity kits for women.³⁷ "Distributing hygiene kits and sanitary napkins directly impacts the dignity, health mobility and security of women and girls," Massimo Diana, UNFPA's representative in Syria said.

³⁶ RIC interview, USAID-funded stabilisation coordinator, May 2020³⁵ RIC interview, Farouz Khelil Mohamed, co-chair of Raqqa Women's Office, August 2020

³⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/statement-ali-al-za-tari-un-residenthumanitarian-coordinator-syria-un>

But the UN can only work with the approval of the central GoS. International NGOs have criticized UN agencies for electing to co-operate with the GoS and to consider it a “genuine partner,” in spite of its record of massive human rights violations and politically motivated obstruction of aid distribution. Refugees International has gone as far to say that “The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)... cannot perform its function in the northeast” due to being registered in Damascus. As such, the UNFPA cannot work directly in the areas under control of the AANES, meaning it must operate through partners or other non-governmental organizations; resulting in shortcomings and problems with supply lines. This can be seen in the UN’s provision of ‘aid bags’, according to Tariq Rashid, co-chair of the NGO’s Coordination Office in Deir ez-Zor: “These bags are given by charities to the local councils, then they give the bags to the commune which gives it to the people. But there’s a huge difference between what’s needed and what’s provided. What we receive is only 20% of what we need.”

As a result of Turkey’s 2019 invasion, the situation has only deteriorated. Not only were many NGOs forced to withdraw or reduce staff, but in January 2020, Russia was able to use its position on the UN Security Council to force through the closure of the sole crossing bringing UN aid into NES, arguing that the GoS was now the de facto victor of the Syrian conflict. Some crossings into regions held by al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir-al-Sham and Turkey remained open, though these are also facing total closure in the future.

This means all UN aid into Syria is now sent into areas controlled by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), factions under the control of the Turkish intelligence service, or directly to the Assad government. The AANES is forced to try and access UN aid via Damascus, but the reality is that most aid sent to Damascus lines the pockets of those close to the Assad government, or at most is distributed in areas loyal to Damascus. Some small deliveries have been made to NES via Damascus and the Damascus-controlled pockets of land in NES.

Challenges in delivering aid to the Arab regions have been particularly clear with regards to the ongoing coronavirus crisis. A 2020 report by UN agency OCHA indicated the decision to close the aid crossing into NES will seriously reduce NES’ ability to combat coronavirus, particularly in the Arab regions. According to the Health Committee of NES, seven health centers in Raqqa faced facing severe shortages of medicines and supplies as a direct result of

this decision, while the health center in Hol Camp was also severely affected.

Local and international NGOs have been working alongside NES to deal with coronavirus and other humanitarian issues in the Arab regions of NES, but a combination of political obstacles and lack of infrastructure mean these regions remain underdeveloped and at-risk.

2.2 INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE (IDPS)

Internally displaced people (IDPs) have arrived to Arab-majority regions of NES from all parts of Syria. The last wave was during 2020's offensive against Idlib, following a previous wave of Kurdish and other IDPs fleeing southward following the Turkish occupation of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad in October 2019. According to RIC observations on the ground, tens of thousands of civilians live in informal settlements and damaged buildings, in very poor conditions.

Nonetheless, many people are managing to return to their homes in the Arab regions. One recent assessment found that: "Despite widespread damage to shelter and infrastructure and a complex security environment in the city, residents continue to return to Raqqa in large numbers as conditions are increasingly being regarded as habitable. Since conflict ceased in October 2017, there has been ongoing progress in access to many services such as electricity, water, healthcare, and education."³⁸ The same report noted ongoing problems with access to bread and sewage pollution, while another report estimated that up to 95% of families returning to Raqqa were food insecure.³⁹

The fact that hundreds of thousands of civilians have returned to their homes in Raqqa and other Arab regions of NES in a relatively short space of time following these regions' liberation illustrates the gains that have been made in these regions on the one hand, and in particular the security that SDF is able to guarantee. But it also points to the lack of other alternatives, with many people preferring to return to bombed-out homes in unsanitary conditions rather than remaining in IDP camps.

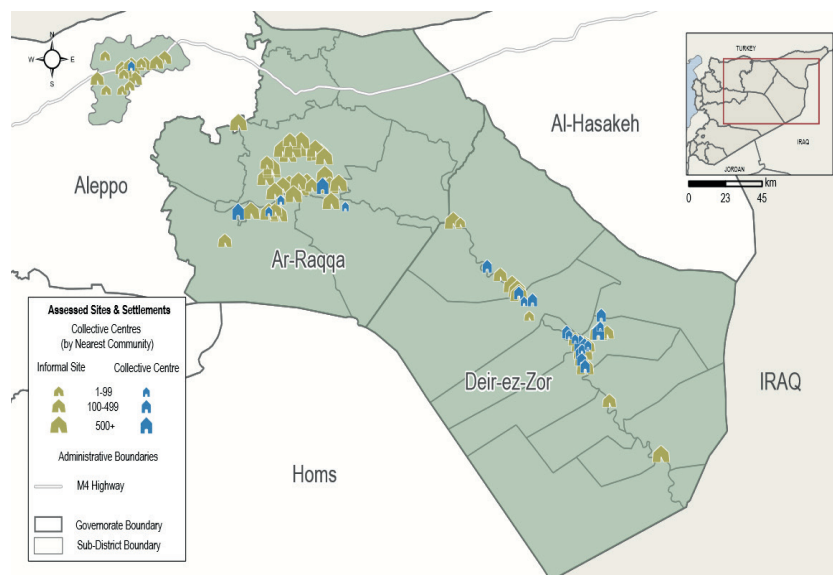
³⁸ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_syr_situationoverview_raqqa_aba_june2019.pdf

³⁹ <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2018/6/25/raqqa-avoiding-another-humanitarian-crisis>

REFUGEE CAMPS

In Deir ez-Zor, most of the IDPs in refugee camps are originally from the region itself, along with some more recent arrivals from Tel Abyad. In Raqqa, Manbij and Tabqa IDPs have also recently arrived from Tel Abyad.

These cities are also home to many IDPs from other cities in Syria such as Daraa, Hama and Aleppo, who fled from the GoS as it retook Arab population centers.



MAP- settlements across Arab-majority areas. Source OCHA

The two main refugee camps in Deir ez-Zor are Abu Khesheb, situated in the northern countryside and home to more than 6000 IDPs,⁴⁰ and Mihemeeda refugee camp which is still under construction but is intended to house 300 families. Outside of Tabqa, Mahmoudli camp hosts 8000 IDP's from Tel Abyad and Ayn Issa. Tel Samen and Dahan Camp near Ain Issa host 3500 and 1500 IDPs from Tel Abyad respectively.⁴¹

In June 2020, UN agency REACH assessed 165 settlements in Arab-majority areas with a population of 80,450 IDPs. Of these 165 settlements, 108 are tent settlements while 57 are collective centers, primarily repurposed schools.

⁴⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-north-east-syria-displacement-18-december-2019>

⁴¹ <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2020/05/six-months-on-political-security-and-humanitarian-outcomes-of-turkeys-2019-invasion-of-north-and-east-syria/>

Case Study: Vegetables cooperative in Tel Samen Camp

Malik Himeri is an IDP who fled from Deir ez-Zor and was living in Tel Abyad when Turkey's 2019 invasion forced him and his family to flee again. "We had no choice but to leave. We are stuck in this camp," he explains. Nowadays they live in Tel Samen Camp, where Malik has taken the lead in setting up a cooperative to grow vegetables and supply all the camp. Naron Ebid Erhman, co-chair of the Til Seman camp, explains: "Our arrival in the camp doesn't mean that we sit here without saying anything. We don't accept defeat. Everyone worked in building the cooperative because they saw it as something good for them and at the same time because they are refugees and everything from outside is expensive. For example if (in the normal market) tomatoes cost 450 SYP, in the cooperative they cost 150 SYP." As well as keeping prices down for people in the camp, the cooperative also provides regular employment and a small profit to scores of families involved in the project.

During ISIS' rule of Arab majority regions, many citizens fled to zones within the control of the AANES and built a new life there. There are many positive examples of integration and acceptance. This is the case of the Mukhtayi family from Deir ez-Zor, who fled to Sere Kaniye during the war against ISIS only to be again displaced during 2019's Turkish invasion. They fled to Newroz Camp in Derik, and from there they went to Kaniya Jin (women's spring), a cooperative village in the Heseke countryside. There, they built a new house and are now participating in a vegetables cooperative with the help of the Cooperatives Committee of the AANES. "We greatly thank the help given by the AANES, because of this we called our first son Öcalan" the family told RIC.



Women working in the Tel Samen vegetables cooperative

But prejudice between Kurdish and Arab communities remains a fact of life in NES, with historic oppression of Kurds by an Arab-nationalist government fol-

lowed by the reign ISIS meaning that many Kurds view Arabs in a negative light. At a recent public consultation in Raqqa, an Arab sheikh jokingly asked the SDC's Ilham Ahmed why she was able to go on diplomatic missions to Europe, while he was questioned by security services after traveling throughout regions of his own country.

One IDP from Deir ez-Zor now residing in Qamishlo tells RIC: "Well, I have been living here for a long time. And of course the hardest

thing is leaving your own country, your home. But difficulties I have faced here in Qamishlo? I have to say the stereotypes. If you say you are from Deir ez-Zor you are automatically viewed as ISIS, or the Regime (GoS), or FSA.

And the worst part is everywhere we go the people in charge say the same things about us. This isn't just the view in Qamishlo or of the Administration, this is how the world sees us. The regime is the same: They view us as terrorists. They think every Deiri person is working with the SDF, FSA or ISIS.. There is no other option. When ISIS was in charge they said all Deiri people were SDF or regime. It is very difficult to try to live a normal life and not be affected by stereotypes."

Many Kurds express doubts or misgivings over their Arab neighbors, holding Arab communities responsible for the rise of ISIS. NES has certainly managed to avoid the worst of the sectarian and ethnic violence which has plagued Syria and the wider region in recent years, with Arabs and Kurds peacefully co-habiting across much of NES. But building a truly inclusive culture, with every group playing an equal role in the political process, in a region riven by sectarian divides is a colossal task, requiring the construction of an entirely new political paradigm.



This couple from Deir ez-Zor established themselves in a cooperative village in Heseke countryside

3. NEW PARADIGM

A core idea of the ‘new paradigm’ is that Kurds should not seek to establish a state of their own, but should instead fight for a political system which embraces the cultural and political rights of all people.

This new political program in NES is driving major political and societal transformations in terms of direct democracy and gender equality. “We want to build a multi-ethnic democracy, so that people can live together in peace, and that people accept one another,” Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) member Amina Omar tells RIC. “All ethnicities and religions should be able to live together in Syria. This is what we believe in.”

But implementing this program has been challenging throughout NES, including Kurdish-majority regions, due to conservative attitudes among the population as well as poor humanitarian conditions and the impact of successive wars against ISIS and then Turkey. As noted above, tribal culture and conservative Islam are possibly more entrenched in the Arab regions, which are also still reeling from the impact of the war against ISIS and an ongoing ISIS insurgency.

“Every few days there are attacks. This prevents us from building a stable system,” — **Hiya Ahmed, head of one of the 12 Mala Jin [women’s houses] in Deir ez-Zor**

As such, establishing this new political paradigm in the Arab regions constitutes the greatest test of the new ideals and practices being promoted in NES, and in many instances has required a reconsideration or re-calibration of laws, principles and practices to fit the context in these areas. In this section we will review how this political program is being implemented and developed across the Arab regions of NES.

3.1 POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

“These events have broken our society, but our belief in society has not been broken. This society is now in a process of building itself up again, educating its children, and rebuilding both its agriculture and its mentality. After a crisis lasting eight years, we have been working here for a year. It will take a lot of work to undo the last period.” — **Amina Omar, SDC member**

Following the successive liberation of the regions under ISIS’ control, civil councils and communes were established to manage affairs in each city. These councils and the communes which feed into them have focused on the provision of basic services, due to the critical situation in the regions in question, with the councils managing affairs on the city and regional level, and local communes handling service provision through empowerment and implication of the local communities. The city councils have constituent committees working on different issues in each region (health, justice, education, defense, economy or culture) united in a federal system which governs the different regions under the umbrella of the AANES.

The AANES encompasses the most local decision making bodies (the commune) up to the highest level of federation across the seven regions of NES. The intention is for as many decisions as possible to be devolved to the most local level, and the inter-region level only concerns itself with issues affecting multiple regions, such as security, development, the unification of customs duties and fuel prices, or roads. At the inter-region level, most of the administration involves coordinating and organizing work between the different regions. Each level works via committees and councils, with a quota for women (40% minimum of either men or women) and representation for each ethnic, religious and cultural group present in that area. A parallel women’s system exists alongside the mixed gender structures.

A main difference between the Arab regions and other regions of NES is that the system of communes was not built up from the ground up, but established as ancillary to the city councils. (To find out more about how the system works across NES, see RIC’s dossier 'Beyond the Frontlines'.⁴²) Because AANES is not recognized by the international community, there cannot be any official funding for the work of civil councils in the Arab regions (nor to any

⁴² <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2019/12/report-beyond-the-frontlines/>

civil council in NES) from the United Nations or other international bodies, creating an obstacle to the provision of aid in some instances.

The strength of these councils is their ability to determine local policy based on local need. There are a host of issues – from food, aid and utility distribution through public health policy to price controls in the markets – where these councils are able to exercise autonomy, based on the specific needs of their region. Corruption has also been dramatically reduced and is much less of an issue than under the GoS or other regional actors in Syria, though it remains an issue in some cases.

Nonetheless, there are complaints about the competence of these councils in delivering services; their lack of funding, and unwillingness or inability to divert it where it is needed most; their lack of professionalism; and the fact that they form a non-elected leadership.

In terms of the make-up of these councils, AANES must strike a balance between recruiting those local powerbrokers who are needed if they are to be taken seriously, particularly tribal sheikhs, and finding experts with the ability to oversee the governance of cities. This is a problem throughout NES, where many professionals have fled to Europe or elsewhere throughout the course of the war. At recent public consultations held in the Arab regions of NES, there was a general sense that many of the attendees would prefer to see more lawyers, doctors and teachers in their city councils. But tribal sheikhs and local power-brokers are sometimes needed to ensure a base of support and engagement in the rural hinterland. Local elections planned for 2021, and an ongoing attempt to establish a new system of hyper-local councils in the Deir ez-Zor countryside made up of mixed tribal representatives and technocrats, should go some way towards alleviating these concerns. (See 'Social Acceptance' section below for more on these ongoing reforms.)

As will be seen in subsequent sections of this report, local councils are generally managing to achieve a lot with limited resources, but there remain major gaps in terms of the humanitarian situation, education provision, health services, and reconstruction. It is to be hoped that the AANES will be able to divert more funds to the local councils to meet these urgent needs, but this will require a cessation in military hostilities so the AANES does not have to

continue spending the majority of its revenues on defense funding and can focus on developing the local economy, principally its war-ravaged oil fields. Greater peace and stability would also encourage the return of trained professionals who could assist with redevelopment and service provision, and who are currently in short supply across the Arab regions of NES.

“AANES has been working [in Raqqa] for three years and done many positive things, more than anyone has done here before, But AANES is not like God and cannot do everything.” — **Mohammed Nur al-Deeb, co-chair of the Raqqa Civil Council**

“Often there are grammatical errors in the laws published by AANES. It’s clear they are written by uneducated people. AANES should offer better salaries to attract educated people.” — **Arab civilian during a public consultation in Heseke**

“People with diplomas and educational qualifications were not here when Raqqa was destroyed, and we – people without a good education – took responsibility for the rebuilding of our city. It’s easy to speak critically now about the lack of qualified people but those who remained here and took responsibility were the under-educated and the women.” — **Arab civilian during a public consultation in Raqqa**

Case Study: Manbij Civil Council

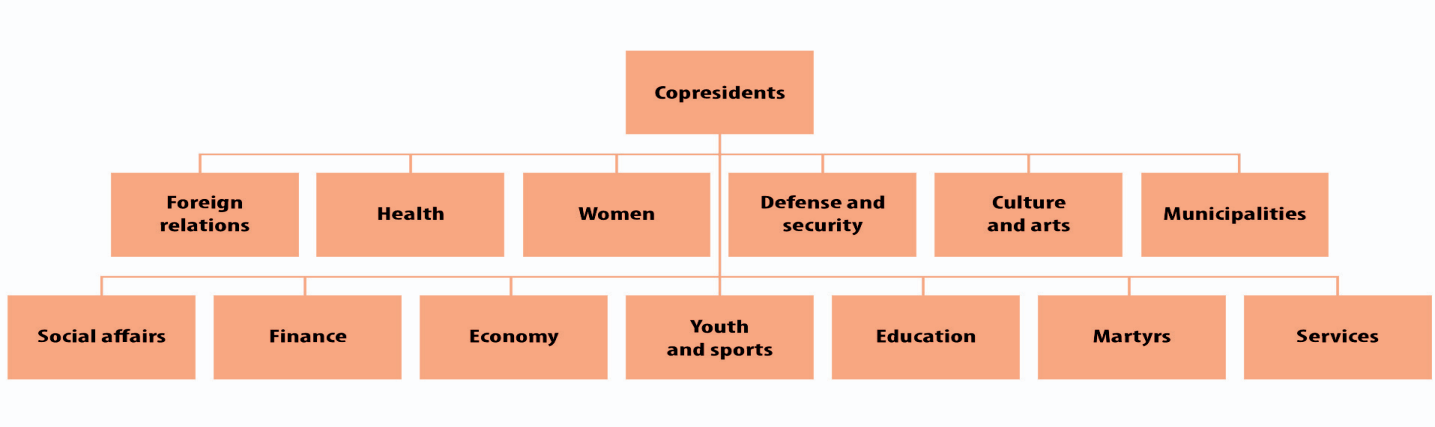
After the liberation of Manbij, the Manbij Civil Council (MCC) was created with male and female co-chairs (one Arab and one Kurd) Sheikh Farouk al-Mashi and Salih Haji Mohammed. The civil council oversees up to thirteen committees (also overseen by male and female co-chairs) with various subcommittees and membership levels under them. In addition, one of the precepts of this organization was ensuring all ethnicities were represented in proportion to their respective percentage of the population to ensure a truly representative governing body. While not democratically elected, personnel were selected by a representative vote conducted by tribal elders who voted on behalf of their respective tribes.

When speaking to Mihemed Kher, a member of the Manbij Civil Council, he explained which projects have been successful, what they are currently working on and struggling with. According to Mihemed Kher, the Council oversaw the rebuilding of the Euphrates hospital, which had previously been burned but is now fully functional. Pharmacies, clinics and testing facilities have also been constructed and reorganized throughout the city and surrounding countryside. The education system is also in a process of improvement, with 7 of 340 schools severely damaged and currently under construction. This is part of a wider effort to ensure every child has access to quality education.

“

“Concerning the humanitarian situation, there are two refugee camps here; we want to provide everything for people who have fled from war, but still their situation is very difficult. More help is needed to fully provide for them. Also, we are in the middle of an economic crisis which has negatively impacted many people here. Because of the Caesar sanctions, and inflation. We are also unable to provide for communities here due to the repeated Turkish water cuts. The unreliable water supply is a huge obstacle for people here, especially considering corona and peoples inability to practice good hygiene.” — - **Mihemed Kher, Civil Council Member, Manbij**

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Structure of the Democratic Civilian Administration of Manbij

SYRIA'S FUTURE PARTY

Syria's Future Party (SFP) is a political party working in the framework of the democratic system of NES, with some of its members participating in the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the top representative and diplomatic political body in NES, as well as in other political structures. In practical terms, it can be understood as an alternative to the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (PYD) for those Arab population that see PYD as an exclusively Kurdish party. The SFP therefore adopts a more moderate and reformist political line than the PYD, which has spearheaded the political project in NES from the outset. It also aims to build a base of support across Syria, rather than focusing solely on NES.



The SFP was founded in Raqqa in 2018. On 27 March of that year, a large congress was held with more than 1000 attendees. Two heads for the party were elected, a man and a woman, as well as committees for every region of Syria and for Europe and the Middle East. Mohammed Rejeb, co-chair of the SFP in Deir ez-Zor, describes the SFP's political alignment:

"When the Syrian conflict started, there were those who worked for those who occupied this country, and we saw the need for another force which worked for the benefit of the people. We had to overcome many obstacles, like the old mindset which developed under oppression, the fear that the regime will return, or support for ISIS. These mentalities make it very difficult for us but we started from the very smallest point, building up committees and offices. We have to establish a strong basis for the AANES, and at the same time the way must remain open for dialog with the regime."

It was not until June 2020 that the first SFP conference in Deir ez-Zor was held, to prepare a general conference. The general conference took place in Raqqa, and was attended by 300 local SFP representatives. Ibrahim Qaftan and Seham Daoud were elected as co-chairs of the party. Daoud replaced the previous Secretary General, Hevrin Khalef, who was killed on October 12th, 2019 by Turkish-backed fighters.

Moaz Abid al-Kareem, Head of the Office of the Syria's Future Party in Qamishlo, describes its relation with the AANES: "The AANES is one thing, and Syria's Future Party is another. We see the need for a popular party with the aim of building up a political base. Once the current war situation is resolved, we are preparing ourselves to hold elections: because political work is very different from administrative work."

But this new political project also faces major challenges. A number of the SFP's members have been assassinated by ISIS or Turkey. Some of the most prominent were:

- Omar Alloush was killed with a silenced firearm in his house in Tal Abyad in March 2018 by Turkish intelligence.⁴⁵ Alloush was the co-chair of the Raqqa Civil Council's Public Relations Committee, a member of the SDC, and a leading light in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts in Raqqa. He helped mediate discussions to establish SFP, but was shot dead just days before its launch.
- Merwan Qiteyf, also known as Merwan Al-Fateh, was a member of the SFP as well as of the AANES' Legislative Council in Deir ez-Zor. Mr. Qiteyf was shot to death in an ambush while driving from Heseke to Deir ez-Zor.
- Hevrin Khalef, secretary-general of the SFP and a leading member of the women's movement in NES, was targeted during the Turkish invasion of Sere Kaniye and Tal Abyad. She was murdered by the Turkish proxy militia Ahrar Al-Sharqiya while driving along the M4 highway during Turkey's 2019 invasion of NES.⁴⁶
- Other members have survived attacks. Hezifa al-Ahmed, SFP co-chair in Deir ez-Zor, was seriously injured in one assassination attempt.⁴⁷



First conference of the Syria Future Party in Hajin, Deir ez-Zor

⁴⁵ <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/03/17/omar-alloush-murder-turkey-syria-arabs-kurds/>⁴⁴
<https://npasyria.com/en/?p=45978>

⁴⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-51068522>

⁴⁷ <https://anfenglish.com/rojava-syria/syrian-future-party-regional-chair-surives-murder-attempt-44080>

3.2 MILITARY STRUCTURES

Military Councils were also established in Arab-majority cities after their liberation, with the highest ranks filled by officers from each city with experience of fighting with the SDF. At the same time, the Asayish internal security forces and their all-female branch, the Asayisha Jin, were established.

These councils are an example of the autonomy that is promoted in the system in NES, but also the challenges that this devolution can bring. Some, most notably the Manbij Military Council (MMC), are based on experienced local FSA units who have since joined the SDF, and maintain a high level of professionalism and autonomy. But the Deir ez-Zor Military Council (DzMC), in particular, is perceived as unprofessional and corrupt. The SDF must therefore tread a fine line between being criticized as an occupying power bringing Kurdish units into Deir ez-Zor to conduct operations, and relying on local units who have not had access to the high-level training YPG units have seen.

The DzMC is led by Ahmad Abu Khawla of the Aqidat tribe's Bakir clan. Mr. Khawla is a powerbroker who has a strong local following among members of his tribe, but also strands accused of corruption and failing to adequately control his forces. On the other hand, some of these accusations emanate from other tribal actors seeking to supplant Mr. Khawla, who has also recently survived an assassination attempt by unknown actors. Reform of the DzMC, specifically the removal and replacement of Mr. Khawla, a key demand during last year's protests in Deir ez-Zor (see below), is therefore easier said than done.



Member of the Asayisha Jin from Deir ez-Zor during the funeral of Kadikha al-Abbas, an Asayisha Jin member assassinated by ISIS

3.3 ECONOMY AND RESOURCES

The economy in the different Arab-majority regions was hard-hit by the Syrian conflict, with most of its industry now nonoperational. Botan Judy, an employee of the Deir ez-Zor Economy Office, explains: “when the FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS left they looted every single building. There was nothing left that was operational.” Shortages of water, gas, oil and electricity have affected these regions from the time of ISIS’ control until the present day.

Moreover, given that regions like Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor border on GoS-controlled areas, their economy is even more intertwined with the wider Syrian economy than the rest of NES. The whole region has suffered from runaway depreciation in the value of the Syrian Pound (SYP), driven by GoS’ economic mismanagement and corruption, the financial crash in Lebanon, and US financial sanctions on Syria.



The economy in Deir ez-Zor is based on agriculture

From the start of the revolution in 2011 until the present day agriculture has been badly affected in Deir ez-Zor. This changed when SDF entered the region. Once the agricultural and economic committees were established, they could refurbish the canals to irrigate the crops. In 2018, farmers could make use of an estimated 20% of the agricultural potential of the region. According to the Deir ez-Zor Economy

Office, in 2020 it increased to 80%. Local staples are purchased at a fixed price by the AANES and distributed at subsidized or cost price among the civil population. Tariq Rashid, co-chair of the NGOs Coordination Office in Deir ez-Zor, explains: “supporting farming and agricultural development will create an economic cycle that will have positive effect in these areas and its local communities.”

The Economy Office is also trying to re-open pre-existing industries like sugar refineries, wheat silos and cotton-ginning plants that were destroyed or

looted in the course of the war. Despite the crisis Syria is facing, Mr. Judy evaluates the economic situation as “at 60-65% of its capacity.” Another key aspect of the economic program is the creation of local cooperatives to meet all kind of needs, as is being done in Kurdish-majority areas, though this goal remains relatively underdeveloped in the Arab regions.

The Economy Office is also opening subsidized markets across the different cities of AANES, including Arab-majority areas to provide daily essentials such as sugar, cooking oil, flour or salt at a subsidized, controlled price.

In Raqqa, likewise, incomes are at no more than around \$17 a month, and child labor is endemic. All the region’s large cotton and wheat-processing facilities, as well as the city’s industrial district, were totally looted during the war.⁴⁸ Rehabilitation of the city is seen as fundamental to re-building the city’s economy, but as noted above this remains an uphill struggle.

In a recent annual conference, the Raqqa Civil Council’s Local Administration and Municipalities Committee cited the collapse in the SYP, the coronavirus crisis, and the Turkish invasion of 2019 as factors contributing to “uneven” process in development. They highlighted their failure to build a new bridge across the Euphrates in Raqqa – one of their key aims in 2020 – as well as challenges in reconnecting the water grid. The committee further noted a lack of technical expertise as a further obstacle to development.⁴⁹

The economic situation is also linked to the electric power that NES is able to generate. According to Welat Derwish, head of the Dams and Energy Committee of the AANES, 80% of the electricity in NES is hydroelectrically generated, alongside a small fuel-generated output in Rimelan, where natural gas created as a byproduct of the region’s oil industry is used to generate electricity. For this reason, the region is very reliant on dams, namely the Tishreen [or ‘Rojava’], Euphrates and Baath [or ‘Hurriya’/‘Azadi’] dams.

The Euphrates Dam in Tabqa (see above) was liberated from ISIS in 2017, and is the main source of power for the mains grid in NES. Welat Derwish explains: “ISIS laid mines in all eight of its turbines, and detonated them. They also burned the electrical station.” Four turbines could be restored within a year and a half by the AANES. There are four more turbines waiting to be repaired, but due to its lack of international recognition the AANES is unable to purchase the necessary parts – with the heavy industrial parts that are needed only available for government purchase, and not the open market.

⁴⁸ <https://www.solidarites.org/fr/appel-d-offres/terms-of-reference-livelihood-program-planning-and-assessment-syrie/>

⁴⁹ <https://npasyria.com/en/52236/>

On the basis of the waterflow which it receives, which is about 300M/s, the water dam can produce 200MW of electricity. These 200MW must supply for most of the cities of NES, covering Manbij, Kobane, Tabqa, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and most of the Jazira region too, including the cities of Qamishlo, Heseke, Dirbesiye and Amude. This means the grid is stretched to capacity, with people in the Arab regions and elsewhere relying on private generators to supplement a few hours of daily electricity.

As noted above, Turkey's 2019 invasion of NES resulted in a new GoS and Russian presence at the dam. This led to further cuts across NES, as electricity is now also being diverted into the GoS-controlled Aleppo countryside.

The Baath Dam was liberated two months after the Euphrates Dam. It has three turbines, two of which are now functional while a third cannot be repaired. As such, the Euphrates Dam remains the main electricity source for NES.

Alongside damage incurred during the war, another factor is that these dams rely on waterflow from Turkey. The waterflow from Turkey is often reduced, or diverted away, resulting in lower waterflow in 2020 than in previous years. This creates a further negative impact on the amount of energy that can be generated.

3.4 OIL

NES' oil fields are split between the Arab region of Deir ez-Zor and Kurdish regions further north. Oil is the basis of NES' economy, providing the majority of the AANES' revenues (followed by import and export duties). Like the oil fields in Kurdish regions, the major oil fields in Deir ez-Zor are exclusively controlled by the AANES, with the revenues used to provide infrastructure and humanitarian services, pay salaries, and fund the SDF to defend NES against ISIS, Turkey and other aggressors.

The US justified its continued presence in NES on the basis that it is 'defending the oil fields' from ISIS, but this justification was only introduced in order

to convince then-President Donald Trump to retain a number of troops in NES in lieu of his planned total withdrawal. As noted above, the US presence in oil-rich Deir ez-Zor is in fact primarily focused on maintaining an anti-Iran bulwark in this strategic region. Unsurprisingly, the oil fields in Deir ez-Zor have been a political talking-point in recent years, and the moment of writing this dossier Biden announced that will not renew the license to Delta Crescent, the small-oil company operating in Deir ez-Zor.

Oil is traded within Syria, both within NES and with the GoS via middle-men, as well as (to a lesser extent) with HTS-controlled Idlib and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). AANES also provides free or subsidized oil to communities across NES for use in winter heating, and for powering vehicles and generators year-round. The US policy towards these oil-fields has long been inconsistent, pressuring NES to stop its trade with GoS while failing to provide NES with the waiver that would allow it to engage in oil trade with the outside world without being affected by sanctions on Syria, despite repeated requests to this effect by NES' political representatives. As such, NES has been left with no choice but to continue its trade with the GoS, even as relations between the two remain extremely strained.

2020's mooted 'oil deal' between an oil company with links to the US security establishment and the AANES was in part an attempt to push through a shift to greater trade with the neighboring KRG in lieu of trade with Damascus, with the 'Delta Crescent' company granted an exclusive waiver to trade outside of Syria. The deal appears to have been an attempt to cement the US' presence in NES ahead of the 2020 election. In mid-2021, the Delta Crescent's license seems unlikely to be renewed by the new Biden Administration. While Delta's impact was up to date minimal, the consequences of being unable to export their crude might be serious for the AANES. Though a limited clandestine trade with the KRG continues, the bulk of oil sales will have to remain de facto within Syria bar a deal with a Russian company.

The GoS has sought to use the oil as a talking-point, framing the US presence in NES as primarily motivated by oil profits. It's a narrative which has resonance in the West following the US' 2003 invasion of Iraq, but does not match up to the reality on the ground, with the GoS still reliant on oil from NES regions. Whether the oil is primarily being traded with the KRG or the GoS affects local communities in Deir ez-Zor insofar as they have concerns

over the extent of cooperation between NES and Damascus (see below), but in general local communities' concern is more about how much of the oil revenues flows back to them, rather than to whom it is sold.

Tribal actors – particularly those under GoS influence – have occasionally called for the wholesale transfer of control of the oil fields to them, but such an eventuality is no more realistic than it would be equitable. The US may have distanced itself from any ambition to draw the AANES into a closer trading relationship with the KRG, but the status quo of AANES control of the oil fields and distribution of their profits across NES will remain, as the basis of the AANES' ability to care for all regions under its control. But so too will tribal and other community leaders in Deir ez-Zor continue agitating for a greater share of the profits to be diverted to their region.

3.5 JUSTICE

The justice system in the Arab regions is undergoing significant reformation. While the GoS, Al-Nusra and ISIS all implemented varying forms of punitive justice, the AANES aims to implement a form of restorative justice.

Mohamed Al-Addras, an employee of the Deir ez-Zor Court of Justice, explains: “before, people were suffocating under a feudal system, up to the point where they endured consistent killings, theft and looting, property damage, and so on. The different groups, FSA, Al-Nusra, ISIS, would declare something lawful or unlawful according to their whims.”

Justice reform in AANES has seen a dramatic shift away from the GoS penal system, where some individuals are handed the death penalty and others disappear into a brutal and opaque prison system, never to be seen again. The new justice system in NES is marked by the rule of law and relative transparency. 20 years is the maximum sentence which can now be handed down for any crime in NES. Visitation rights for visitors and reduction of sentences for good behavior are also now implemented across NES.

As well as making these top-down reforms, the AANES has also sought to implement bottom-up justice to reduce the number of cases which ever require judicial intervention or a prison sentence. One of the first steps taken was the establishment of regional Reconciliation Committees, “as a vanguard of the society, coming together to take responsibility,” per Mr. Al-Addras. “Then the

society began to see the importance of the AANES' role, and took big steps toward progress. Of course not everybody trusted this new model of justice, because at that time it was something new."

RECONCILIATION COMMITTEES

Reconciliation Committees were established across the Arab regions as they were liberated. They aim to enable people to resolve their issues from the village and neighborhood level up. These committees mostly deal with two kinds of problems: land disputes and debts. Several murders have occurred, and the Reconciliation Committee has mediated between both sides and helped find a peaceful solution and bring both sides together," Mr. al-Addras says.

One of the pillars of the new political paradigm is that people must be empowered to solve their problems on their own. As such, the members of the Reconciliation Committees are locally elected. Each council consists of three people, two men and a woman, that work on a voluntary basis. This is a point of difference with the Kurdish regions, where reconciliation committees are at least 50% women. But in some regions, it is difficult to find women able to participate. When a given incident cannot be solved by the reconciliation committees, it is transferred to the justice office.

The committees work by bringing disputants together with respected members of the local community to discuss and find a solution. Dawood Khaled, co-chair of the Coordinating Committee for Reconciliation Committees in Deir ez-Zor, explains: "We use the method of reconciliation and finding a solution amicable to both parties, provided that both parties are satisfied with the resolution that's reached. This method is successful, to some extent. The experience of reconciliation committees has been good, unique and successful, and people have accepted it."

A member of the Reconciliation Committee in Kesra, rural Deir ez-Zor, says: "we tried all we could to involve the tribal leaders, notable persons, people that are appreciated by the society and so on. Because they play an important role within their communities, they can be helpful in solving disputes."

Efforts at justice reform are still ongoing, however. Abbas al-Ali, a former employee of the Justice Committee in Deir ez-Zor, says that locals retain a bureaucratic approach to justice as a hangover from Ba'ath rule: "When the people came to us, they just wanted a piece of paper with a stamp on it. We told them, it's not necessary, let's sit and discuss and find a solution together. But they just wanted an official form – it didn't matter what it said!" Moreover, in some instances then people continue to take the law into their own hands, settling familial or property disputes through violence, particularly where these disputes cleave along tribal lines.

COURTS OF JUSTICE

The Reconciliation Committees work on solving disputes on a local level, but when the dispute cannot be resolved then cases are transferred to the Courts of Justice. Mr. Al-Addras told RIC a particularly interesting case: "law students took the initiative and established a small Court of Justice as a beginning in the village of Djazra. This caught people's attention, because they saw how students from their own region were able to solve problems great and small, and find solutions." These students have participated in a training course on social justice organized by AANES, since the studies that they undertook in GoS universities proved insufficient for dealing with both the realities on the ground in Deir ez-Zor and the new political paradigm being promoted in NES.

The Courts of Justice function on the basis of committees which take collective decisions on guilt and punishment – a halfway house between the GoS system of a single judge on the one hand, and a full jury system on the other. "We changed the system in which one person judges and decides," explains Fayez Al-Beik, a member of the overall NES Justice Council. The committees are made up of from three to seven persons, contingent on the nature of the case. "The decision is thus more likely to preserve the rights of the person judged. When just one individual decides, this creates the possibility for people to exercise pressure on the judge, so it's difficult to call this type of decision objective and positive," Mr. Al-Beik says.

TYPES OF CASE

The courts rule on both criminal and civil cases, as well as religious matters. The most common cases brought before the courts are related to property disputes and divorce, particularly due to polygamy and underage marriage, with some girls being married off at 13. The heaviest penalty handed down to date was for a man who killed a small girl, and was sentenced by the Deir ez-Zor Court of Justice to 20 years in prison.



Committee of Social Justice in Kesra, rural Deir ez-Zor

REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN LAWS

Regional Courts of Justice that were established took their basis the laws issued by the AANES, which in turn started off by adapting the old GoS penal system but has since passed a host of new laws. “However, because each region has its own specific needs, we propose our own laws too, in order to adapt them to our region,” Mr. al-Beik explains. “When we see the need for a new law, and there is no decision to which we can refer, we propose the law, we send it to the Legislative Council and this Council studies and issues a law as appropriate.”

To take one obvious example, each region is able to determine and pass its own coronavirus restrictions, based on the rate and nature of infection and the specific challenges faced in each region.

Market regulations also differ from region to region, with western regions recently placing price controls on olives to enable locals to continue to afford this local staple. Another example is the issue of smuggling boats crossing the Euphrates between GoS-controlled regions and the AANES regions. There were no laws in place which the Justice Committee in Deir ez-Zor could refer to in order to deal with this issue. For this reason, the Justice Committee proposed a law to the AANES to enable it to sanction smuggling activities.

Conversely, some laws and decisions passed by the AANES are not implemented in Arab-majority areas. Notably, military service in the SDF (or 'Self-defence duty') is mandatory for young men in Kurdish-majority regions (whether the individuals in question are Kurdish or Arabic), but not in the Arab regions of Raqqa, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor. This is intended to allow these regions time to recover following recent conflict, and build trust between local populations and the SDF and AANES. (Due in part to the poor economic situation and lack of employment opportunities, as well as personal conviction, many young men in these regions nonetheless sign up to fight with the SDF.)

Destroyed ISIS tank in rural Tabqa



Case Study: Polygamy

Another key issue is family law, such as the AANES' move to ban polygamy. The mainstream interpretation of Sunni Islam as traditionally practiced in what is now NES states that men can marry up to four women. The AANES has promoted gender equality since its inception, and attempted to abolish the practice of polygamy on the basis that it results in child and forced marriage and women being treated like property, with subsequent marginalization of women within the home. These efforts have faced stiff resistance from communities in NES, due to the prevalence of tribal and conservative Islamic culture. The AANES' Mala Jin ('Women's House') network is sometimes referred to as the 'House of Divorce' or 'House of Destruction' by locals resentful of its efforts to reform marriage institutions in NES.

These efforts have been increasingly successful in the majority-Kurdish regions, but AANES officials have explained that communities outside of Kurdish-majority areas will require an adjustment period before such laws or drastic changes could be implemented.⁵⁰ Currently polygamy has not been outlawed in several regions including Deir ez-Zor, due to the fact it would not be accepted and would be continued to be practiced. A woman working with Mala Jin in Deir ez-Zor told the RIC "Obviously the end goal is to ban polygamy completely, but we know it will not be accepted yet, so for now we are part of several campaigns against polygamy and we are working against it. But we can not put it into law."

As such, there is a lack of consistency on this issue, which continues to be de facto accepted in Arab regions despite efforts by the AANES and local women's activists to change attitudes on this point. For example, Roshan Hami, the female co-chair of Tabqa Civil Council, says: "it is a misinterpretation of the Quran and an abuse committed by men. The Quran says you can marry four women – but only if you can be fair to them. [Men] only read half of the Quran." However, Sheikh Hamed al Faraj, her male counterpart as co-chair of the Tabqa Civil Council, told RIC that he accepts this practice. Other (male) AANES officials tell RIC that the practice "is a norm of life in Deir ez-Zor."

⁵⁰ <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/25e605d4-4a4a-40b7-a6a2-34611effe4a8>

Sentences handed down have ranged from a year's detention for those coerced into low-level, menial work; 1-5 years for those involved in auxiliary or administrative positions; up to 20 years for front-level fighters, emirs and so on; and life imprisonment for those guilty of atrocities or crimes against humanity. A survey of trials conducted using this law found that around 10% of suspects were found innocent and released; 10% were handed the maximum sentence: and the remainder were handed sentences somewhere in between.

In addition, Hol Camp hosts approximately 25,000 Syrian nationals and 30,000 Iraqi nationals. The figure includes some men, though most of these are women and children. Some of these have links to ISIS, are married to husbands who joined the terror group, and are actively involved in enforcing ISIS' ideology in the camp. Others have no links to ISIS, with some (particularly the Iraqis) having fled ISIS as they advanced. Rough estimates indicate that around half of the camp's Syrian and Iraqi population are supportive of or have links to ISIS, with the Syrian population in general more likely to be linked to ISIS. As of June 2021, it seems the Iraqi government is beginning to repatriate its citizens, with 381 returning in May of this year. (The camp also hosts around 10,000 third-country nationals, all women and children – and all of whom have links to ISIS.)

Former Al-Hol detainees packing their belongings to return to their homes in Deir ez-Zor



Up until summer 2020, thousands of Hol Camp residents had been released under a now-superseded program of tribal guarantees, with tribal sheikhs acting as sponsors to ensure that those released would not engage in any further involvement with ISIS – in an example of positive cooperation between the AANES and Arab tribes. Meanwhile, hundreds of suspects and ISIS members had already been released after being found innocent or serving out their sentences. Other former ISIS members were released after completing voluntary deradicalization programs, with some subsequently being re-employed by the AANES. Thousands more remained in captivity, serving out their sentences.

“We do recognize the risks associated to sponsorship. We do not sponsor anyone unless we are sure they would not pose any threat to the community. Many of those released have returned to their normal lives, some are also now employees within the local councils, and some have even some joined the police and military forces.” — **Sheikh Talal Haj Hilal Al-Siday**

2020 AMNESTY AND RELEASES

Summer 2020 saw tensions between the AANES and Arab tribes, particularly in Deir ez-Zor (see below for a more in-depth review). After several assassinations of tribal leaders by ISIS sleeper cells, the Aqidat tribe issued an ultimatum to the AANES demanding an improved security situation in Deir ez-Zor, among other reforms. Tribal leaders called for the release of the “oppressed” detainees, as well as the women and children in al-Hol camp.⁵¹⁻⁵²

The AANES was therefore placed in a difficult position, faced with conflicting demands for an improved security situation on the one hand and mass releases of ISIS-linked individuals on the other. The same demands were repeated by Arab tribal leaders in public consultations launched across NES in response to these tensions.

As such, in October 2020, SDC co-chair Ilham Ahmed used one such public consultation in Raqqqa to announce that all Syrian nationals being held in Hol Camp would be free to leave. Concretely, this means that the tribal guarantor program has been superseded. Now, any Syrian nationals resident in Hol

⁵¹ https://www.facebook.com/867413253401229/photos/a.867910620018159/1808013232674555/?_rdc=1&_rdr

⁵² <https://syriadirect.org/news/can-the-autonomous-administration-solve-its-tribal-problem-in-north-east-syria/>

Camp are free to leave without finding a sponsor – they can simply register their names and be transferred back home.

The AANES said it would redouble its efforts to have Iraqi nationals sent back home, and launched security operations in Hol Camp to identify and detain individuals suspected of continued, concrete involvement with ISIS.

Later in October, the SDC announced a general amnesty for prisoners in NES. The amnesty provided for the following:

- Those guilty of petty infractions and misdemeanors; the sick; and over-75s will be freed.
- Those guilty of serious felonies will have their sentences halved.
- Convicts fleeing justice have 60 days to hand themselves in to benefit from the amnesty.
- Those not included in the amnesty include those guilty of: espionage and treason; honor killings; drug trafficking; commanders in terror organizations such as ISIS; and those guilty of violent crimes.
- Low-ranking ISIS members will be released subject to good behavior.

Hundreds of individuals, including many low-ranking ISIS members who have served out their sentences, have been released under this program as well.

Officials said the move was intended to promote a new approach to justice, revitalize community relations, and relieve pressure in prisons dealing with the strain of more than 10,000 ISIS members, as well as responding to the demands of Arab tribal actors in Deir ez-Zor and elsewhere.⁵³ Reintegrating returnees under both programs, and ensuring those who were active members of ISIS do not return to the organization, will be difficult due to the stigma they face and the poor economic and living conditions in Deir ez-Zor and elsewhere.

Such decisions are not taken lightly, and of course come with significant security risks. Meeting Arab and tribal leaders' demands for releases is not a straightforward panacea to the crisis – releasing hundreds of ISIS-linked individuals back to unstable areas presents obvious security risks. At least one woman released from detention facilities in NES after serving a prison sentence for helping ISIS to organize people-smuggling out of Hol Camp has gone on to repeat the same offense and be recaptured.

⁵³ <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2020/10/translation-general-amnesty-for-prisoners-in-north-and-east-syria-aanes-resolution/>

Nonetheless, monthly RIC reports documenting sleeper-cell attacks in Deir ez-Zor do not indicate any correlation between releases and increased sleeper-cell activity, with major releases like the recent amnesty for ISIS fighters not resulting in any immediate uptick in attacks. Though violence has returned to Deir ez-Zor in mid-2021, with increasing sleeper cell attacks number compared to before.

As noted above, the new amnesties give a boost to Arab tribal actors who have long been pushing for such releases. Building a stronger relationship with Arab communities is among the primary aims of these releases, in order to foster stronger security and political cooperation, particularly in Deir ez-Zor. While imperfect, these broad-brush efforts at enacting a less punitive form of justice towards low-level ISIS suspects “should help bolster tribal heads’ credibility with their populations while also improving Kurdish relations with the tribes,” as the US Institute for Peace has concluded.⁵⁴ This will be crucial in stamping out ISIS’ sleeper-cells and working to diminish ISIS’ influence among the Arab population.

As a prison guard at one prison where hundreds of low-level ISIS members will shortly be released tells RIC: “We will give them enough money for a ticket to whichever city or region [in NES] they want to visit, and a note to show at checkpoints so they won’t be bothered. Many of these men, who are from regime-held or other parts of Syria, say they will settle here. They respect our system and the way they have been treated.”

3.6 EDUCATION

The purpose of the education system under the Syrian regime was based on Arabic and Islamic principles. The new paradigm, however, seeks to establish an education system where all children can be educated according to their culture, language and religion.

Across NES, 1 in 8 people are under the age of 5, compared to 1 in 10 in Damascus-held areas and 1 in 6 in Turkish-occupied areas. In Arab-majority areas nearly 50% of people are under 15, compared to 1 in 3 in Kurdish-majority Jazira. This means that a new education system has been one of the main pillars of the new paradigm. The AANES puts a strong focus on both establishing a new curriculum to replace that taught by the Ba’ath government, and adult education via a wide-ranging network of academies across NES. People working in councils and comunnes especially have the possibility of joining academies to improve their skills.

⁵⁴ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/can-syrians-who-left-isis-be-reintegrated-their-communities>

During the course of the Syrian Civil War schools across the Arab regions of NES were closed for long-time periods. The situation is worsened by high rates of child participation in the labor market across all of NES, where poverty and lack of education services mean many families rely on supplementary income from children working in agriculture, small businesses or light industry.

As regions have been liberated, so education services have been restored, implementing a range of curricula (see below). Across NES as a whole, there are a reported 825,000 students in the AANES education system, attending over 2000 schools, along with around 125,000 residents of NES attending 180 schools in GoS-held regions.

In Raqqa, to date at least 90 schools have been totally, and 200 partially, reconstructed.⁵⁵ 119,000 students are currently participating in the education system in the city. But in Raqqa as elsewhere, education services have been disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic, which stopped lessons from April to September 2020. An RIC team visited schools in Raqqa following their reopening in October 2020, at which point basic coronavirus preventative measures were in place.

In 2017, with the liberation of the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, the AANES and the local Education Council endeavored to re-open schools and prepare them for the students' return, while dealing with major shortages of supplies and destruction to schools and classrooms.

Across the Deir ez-Zor countryside, now controlled by AANES, there are 610 active and operational schools, with 520 other schools currently being constructed or reconstructed. Approximately 96 school buildings were completely destroyed and 240 schools are greatly in need of repair and reconstruction. Nearly 90 schools that were previously residential buildings are now being used as educational facilities.⁵⁶ Some schools were built in the Abu Khesheb and Mihemeeda refugee camps, as well as in other informal camps.



A school and a Mosque in Raqqa countryside

⁵⁵ <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/12/students-in-raqqa-schools-confused-by-three-different-curricula/>

“

“70% of the women of Deir ez-Zor have not received an education. This creates a negative impact on society.” — **Mohammed Rejeb, co-chair of the Syria’s Future Party in Deir ez-Zor.**

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LOCAL CRITICISM OF THE AANES EDUCATION SYSTEM

Despite these advances, parents and other interlocutors in Arab-majority regions of NES frequently voiced complaints over education service provision to RIC interviewers. This included parents in Deir ez-Zor lamenting that their children were illiterate due to a lack of nearby schools and a scarcity of materials, with students attending class in partially destroyed buildings with no doors, walls or desks; complaints about the disparity between the quality of private and public education from civilians in Raqqa; and protests against the planned implementation of the AANES curriculum in Deir ez-Zor schools (see below.) Many parents remain unsatisfied with the quality; quantity; and proposed curriculum of schools in the Arab regions of NES.

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“Education is key. I hope the private academies are shut down to provide better and more equal opportunities for all children, not just those who can afford the private sector.

“We have to give bread to the poor, get children in the streets into shelter. Then there will be more support in negotiations. Schools have to be organized and opened, teachers trained, and so on. Only teachers can combat ISIS’ mentality among children.” — **Female writer in Raqqa**

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Another issue common to both Kurdish and Arabic regions is that the education system as a whole, including the AANES-linked Rojava University, is not officially recognized or accepted outside of NES. This means certification issued by the AANES schooling system and university is not accepted by other universities or outside employers. As such, many families send their children to the AANES education system at primary or secondary levels, but switch into the GoS education system at secondary or tertiary level.

⁵⁶ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/08/interview-we-must-develop-a-common-view-of-the-curriculum-for-our-schools-kemal-musa-head-of-the-education-committee-of-deir-ez-zor/>

“

“The AANES education system needs to be open like in Europe and accepted on the international level. The schools of the AANES do not qualify you to enter an official university. For this reason, there are even many people working for the AANES whose children study in the regime’s schools. I don’t blame them, but this is a problem that should be solved.” — Arab civilian, Heseke

”

These practical and humanitarian issues are largely out of the AANES’ hands, with the AANES continuing to push for the international recognition it needs in order for its education system to be accepted abroad or in neighboring countries, and continuing to redevelop and re-establish schools across the Arab regions. The issue of the curriculum the AANES uses in its education system, however, has proved more contentious.

IMPLEMENTATION OF AANES CURRICULUM IN DEIR EZ-ZOR AND ELSEWHERE

Since the school year 2017-2018, the AANES has prepared an educational curriculum in Arabic for Arabs in the three Kurdish-majority three regions of NES, namely Afrin, Jazira, and Euphrates – home to sizeable Arab populations in towns like Heseke and Tel Abyad, as well as large numbers of Arab IDPs. The AANES has also prepared and delivered another curriculum in Assyrian, for Syriac Christians in these areas.

The curriculum marks a significant change from that taught by the GoS. As well as being delivered in the students’ own language (whether Kurdish, Assyrian or Arabic), its unique features include: the addition of second and third languages (with Arabic students learning Kurdish as they advance through school, and vice versa); sections on Kurdish and minority religious and ethnic history in Syria, where the GoS curriculum promoted Arab nationalism; coverage of religions other than Islam, primarily Christianity, Judaism and the Yezidi faith; and lessons on the ‘women’s science’ of ‘Jineology’, promoting women’s rights and a holistic conception of history and the natural sciences.

For the most part, this curriculum has not been implemented in the Arab regions of Raqqa, Tabqa, Deir ez-Zor and Manbij. Students in Manbij study the official GoS curriculum, while across Raqqa, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor most students are studying an emergency UNICEF curriculum. Though some students in the Raqqa countryside are also reportedly studying the AANES curriculum, while others are using the GoS curriculum, in a mark of the difficulties around this contentious issue.

This compromise has not been reached without some controversy, particularly in Deir ez-Zor. On 12 July 2020, following the announcement that the AANES curriculum would be used in the regions of Deir ez-Zor under its control, local teachers and parents protested in front of the Educational Academy in the village of Abu Hemam in Deir ez-Zor to show their disapproval. They held up signs claiming that the new curriculum would “poison” society and be rejected by local residents.⁵⁷

This strong reaction can be attributed to cultural and political differences between the tribal Arab regions and the Kurdish regions, with the promotion of women’s rights and multiculturalism anathema to many Arab tribes. It also points to a perceived lack of representation and involvement in political processes on the behalf of the people of Deir ez-Zor – who feel that the AANES curriculum has been imposed on them. “We categorically reject the curriculum AANES wants to impose... because it does not correlate to our faith, customs and traditions,” the protestors said.⁵⁸

Screenshots of the proposed textbooks were also shared on conservative news channels, including those linked to the jihadi opposition elsewhere in Syria, with complaints about the inclusion of women’s studies and religions besides Islam, alongside



Screenshot of an AANES textbook covering women’s rights, being shared by a radical Islamist channel opposed to NES

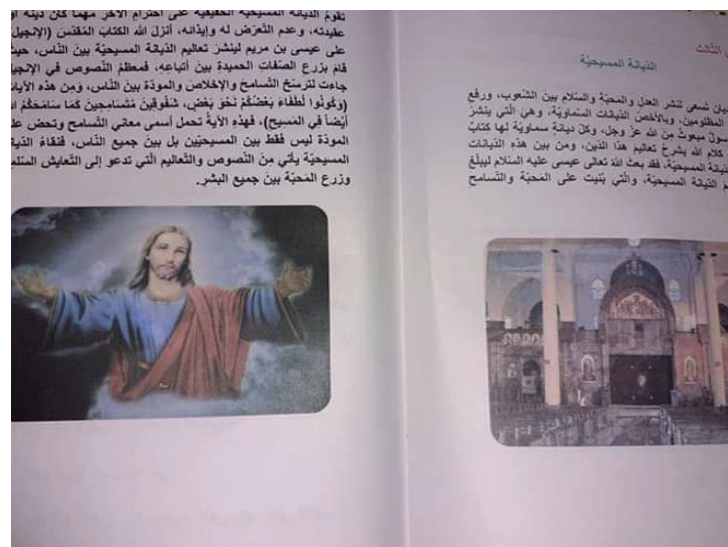
⁵⁷ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/175088/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OFowDsBXzI&t=5s>

a general opposition to the introduction of a secular curriculum. On this issue as elsewhere, genuine local concerns are mixed up with attempts by the GoS, ISIS and Turkey to destabilize AANES governance.

Specific complaints about the content of the curriculum, gathered by local news organization Deirezzor24, are as follows:⁵⁹

- The inclusion of the study of religions which have no presence in Deir ez-Zor in lieu of a sole focus on Islamic studies
- A lack of relevance to the history and culture of the region, with the curriculum claimed to include inaccurate information
- The inclusion of “alien, irrelevant or culturally incompatible” ideas, most notably the subject of ‘Jineology’ or ‘Women’s science’
- That the curriculum attempts to change the local values from the outside or top down, on the intellectual and spiritual level.
- That the curriculum promotes ideologies serving the interests of one political group at the expense of others, and was created for Kurds and not for the people of Deir ez-Zor.
- The lack of local involvement in the creation of the curriculum.



Textbook covering religions other than Islam

When the Education Council started to work in Deir ez-Zor,, there was no curriculum to form the basis of the educational system. As such, local educators started off by delivering an emergency UNICEF curriculum, which covers only the basics (Arabic, math, English and science), and is designed for delivery in crisis situations. “Of course UNICEF provided support but [they] only included the essentials, and not in a way which fulfilled all of our needs,” says Kemal Musa, co-chair of the Deir ez-Zor Education Committee.

When the new academic year came around in 2020, the AANES therefore sought to expand the implementation of their new curriculum. Kawthar Duku, the co-chair of the AANES Educational Committee, says that the AANES had received complaints about the lack of educational resources, and the continued use of the limited UNICEF program; and of course, it is no secret that the

⁵⁹ <https://deirezzor24.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Autonomous-Administration-decision-to-impose-educational-curriculums-in-Deir-Ezzor.pdf>

AANES curriculum intentionally promotes a different set of moral and ethical values to that commonly adhered to in the Arab regions of NES.

In the end, the AANES responded positively to the protests in Deir ez-Zor, and a decision was passed by the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council to continue using the limited UNICEF curriculum until the AANES curriculum has been adapted to Deir ez-Zor, or a new curriculum has been created specifically for the region. Mr. Duku stressed that the curriculum was only a proposal and was never imposed on the region, and that no curriculum would be imposed without discussion with the local population.

Here, as elsewhere, the ethical and political values promoted by AANES come into conflict with their principle of regional self-determination. Thus far, the AANES has shown itself willing to bend to local pressure on hot-button issues in the Arab regions, such as the teaching curriculum, even when this means taking a step back from the active promotion of their new political paradigm. The Educational Committee continues to meet with locals to try and find a compromise solution, and establish a comprehensive, unified education system across the region.

“There was a proposal that the curriculum of the AANES in use in other regions of North and East Syria would also be applied here. To this end, a committee comprised of residents of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Tabqa was set up, with the goal of researching curricula and determining which style or method would be most appropriate for the specific situation of these regions. After having discussed this proposal with the responsible teachers, we saw that many updates and corrections to the curriculum as proposed by the AANES would be necessary. As a result there is no AANES curriculum in use here, and also no lessons covering ‘Jineology’ (‘women’s science’).

What is most important to note is that the continuation of the education process here without a sufficient curriculum is not feasible. It is necessary to prepare a curriculum for every grade. As such, those responsible for the education system must develop a common understanding, for the future success of our education system.” — **Kemal Musa, head of the Deir ez-Zor Education Committee**

3.7 HEALTH SERVICES

When the AANES started to work in Arab-majority regions following their liberation from ISIS there were virtually no medical services available, and the situation was critical. Across NES as a whole, nine of eleven major health facilities were damaged at some point during the war, and the situation was especially critical in cities like Raqqa where ISIS used hospitals as military

staging points, resulting in massive destruction to these facilities. A University College London study of Syria’s capacity to handle coronavirus found that across the three former Syrian regions which make up today’s NES, there is capacity to deal with only 460 cases – 360 in the (majority-Kurdish) Heseke region, 100 in Raqqa region and none at all in Deir ez-Zor region, giving some indication of the general challenges in the health sector and how these are particularly concentrated in the Arab regions.

At the time of writing the situation in Raqqa, Tabqa and Manbij has stabilized to a certain extent. The AANES is working on providing more specialized services across these regions, to ensure people can access free or affordable healthcare. It faces ongoing challenges due to damaged or destroyed facilities; lack of trained staff, and professionals’ desire to work privately for higher profits rather than for the AANES; and lack of medicine and supplies. International NGOs may also struggle with access to regions like Deir ez-Zor due to ongoing security concerns.

The main problem cited by medical professionals across the Arab regions is the lack of qualified staff. In a meeting of the Raqqa coronavirus committee attended by RIC, local officials stated that the majority of residents with university qualifications had fled to Europe in the course of the fighting, while those who stayed to rebuild the city and the healthcare system were generally less qualified. Local and international NGOs supplement AANES and private health services. The AANES is working toward providing free universal healthcare, but is currently only able to offer a limited patchwork of services, with most serious or complicated cases requiring the intervention of private doctors (who may work in AANES facilities but require a fee for their services). In Raqqa, for example, there are three public hospitals and six private hospitals, while the Health Committee has also established 27 local centers and dispensaries across local neighborhoods and rural areas.

“The AANES should regulate the health sector, because private doctors and pharmacists are profiting from the peoples’ suffering.” — **Civilian resident, Raqqa**

In the health field as elsewhere, the AANES allows autonomy to the regional councils to establish Health Committees and determine their own public

health policies. This allows for policies like vaccination campaigns or coronavirus curfews to be tailored to the local situation, though international NGO workers also complain that a lack of consistency between regions makes it difficult to enforce effective coronavirus preventative measures.

Ahmed Al-Hassan, co-chair of the Health Committee of the Raqqa Civil Council, explains: “Work began with a strategic plan to rehabilitate the important centers. For example, we cooperated with international NGOs to rehabilitate the National Hospital.” This key facility was reopened in May 2019. Many centers in the countryside of Raqqa were built or rebuilt as mobile clinics to reach areas where there are no medical centers, especially formal and informal IDP camps. Vaccination campaigns have reached hundreds of thousands of locals. However, there is often a shortage of specialized staff and equipment, so medical authorities are forced to refer cases to Qamishlo, Kobane or to regions under the GoS. (This is true for all regions of NES, with most complex cases such as cancer treatment requiring referral to Damascus – high-risk or an impossibility for males aged over 18 wanted for military service, or anyone with ties to the AANES or SDF.)

The Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC) has many facilities in these regions, and works together with the local Health Committee. “Of course we have a presence in Raqqa, because when the city was liberated we were the only locals working here,” says Sherwan Beri, the KRC manager for NES.

Out of the Arab regions, Tabqa is probably the best equipped to deal with ongoing health challenges. The US funded program Syria Essential Services rehabilitated Tabqa Hospital and handed over the refurbished facility to the Tabqa Health Committee in May 2018. The hospital is able to serve up to 500,000 people in its catchment area. A derelict school located nearby has also been redeveloped into a coronavirus facility for moderate to severe cases. The National Hospital in Manbij has also been rehabilitated since its liberation, and provides services to the local population.

In Deir ez-Zor the situation is more difficult. Though the Kurdish Red Crescent built some health centers to deal with the coronavirus crisis, many residents complain about the lack of hospitals and pharmacies. “To find a pharmacy you have to drive through perhaps 5 or 6 villages,” says Amir Cedan Felah, a Deiri resident. Responding to these complaints, Dr. Beri says: “In many villages there are facilities, so the complaints of the population about the lack of facilities in Deir ez-Zor are not accurate. Maybe they have to travel to another village, but we are working on it.”

During 2020 and early 2021, the collapse of the Syrian Pound (which lost around 400% of its value against the dollar in the space of a year) led to an increase in the prices of medicines, wages and medical supplies. The AANES Health Committee is trying to overcome these difficulties by canceling customs duties on medicines. The Health Committee is also trying to enforce price controls on medicines, making supervisory checks on pharmacies and warehouses to ensure medicines remain affordable.

The Arab regions have also suffered since the closure of the sole UN aid crossing into NES in January 2020 (see above). Subsequent shortages have threatened health centers in Raqqqa, leaving them unable to adequately cope with demand, and also badly affected the health center in Hol Camp.

Overall, the health situation in these regions is slowly improving but remains in a state of crisis. There is no silver bullet besides greater funding and international support and engagement, even as international attention moves away from the ongoing crisis in NES.



This school in Taqba was used by ISIS as a military base. In 2020 it was restored and converted into a COVID-19 center

Case Study: Coronavirus threatening fragile stability in Raqqa

As the coronavirus pandemic arrived in neighboring regions, a plan to address the pandemic was developed across every region of NES. Local coronavirus committees were established to try and deliver a fast response to the crisis in each region. In Raqqa, this entailed:

- *Provision of prevention measures and education for health workers*
- *Awareness campaigns promoting prevention and methods of sterilization among the the civilian population*
- *Sterilization campaigns covering departments, streets, parks and children's playgrounds*
- *A center for coronavirus cases was set up and equipped by the local NGO Bahar NGO with ventilators, doctors, a pharmacy, a laboratory, and all the equipment needed to fight the pandemic.*
- *A precautionary quarantine center was established in the Kasrat area equipped with 30 beds, for people arriving from regions of Syria outside of AANES control. People are held in this center for a quarantine period of 14 days to ensure their safety, and if a positive result is suspected, they are transferred to the Raqqa National Hospital.*
- *Raqqa's infamous 'black stadium' - where ISIS detained and tortured suspects in a warren of cells - has been refurbished and turned into a coronavirus isolation center. The stadium now holds 100 beds for coronavirus patients.*

But Ciwan al-Dikhira, co-chair of the Raqqa Civil Council Medical Committee, told RIC that as of October 2020 the situation was far from resolved: "honestly, until now then there was very little support. It's good we have received support, but it's not enough. The number of cases is increasing, despite our best efforts." Mr. al-Dikhira noted that local people are asked to wear masks when they cannot even afford bread to eat, and when there are no free supplies of these basic essentials available to the local population, with even doctors and nurses suffering from shortages and being forced to reuse disposable masks multiple times.

The Director of the National Hospital of Raqqa complained that the hospital doesn't have enough masks for their medical workers. He himself refuses to wear one as an act of protest, saying: "People in the streets are eating from the trash. How are we supposed to ask them to wear a mask?" In such circumstances, it is difficult to enforce effective public health measures.

3.8 WOMEN’S AUTONOMY AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Following the liberation of the Arab-majority regions from ISIS by the SDF, the AANES has begun to implement radical changes for women in society. These changes are not only significant when compared to ISIS’ rule, with its notoriously brutal treatment women, but also when compared to women’s treatment by the GoS. Despite limited tokenism, under Assad then women were considerably discriminated against in law, particularly in the fields of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

While women’s movements and women’s rights activists in Syria have struggled for gender equality throughout the 20th century, women’s inferior status to men is still enshrined in Syrian law - especially in marital and family matters, to which Islamic law (‘sharia’) still applies.⁶⁰ In regions controlled by the GoS, polygamy is still legal. While the legal age for marriage is 18 for men and 17 for women, marriage is typically allowed from the age of 13. The Syrian judicial system also adopts a lenient approach to “honor killings,” or murders motivated by the conception that the victim harmed the reputation of their family or tribe, and mostly perpetrated against women. Nor is there any law that prohibits domestic violence.

Despite a relatively high literacy rate and access to education, women in Syria still have significantly less access to the labor market, thus to economic independence, than men.⁶¹ Since women played a central role during the civil uprising which started in 2011, GoS repression following the ‘Arab Spring’ targeted women with particular force and violence. Those who were and are imprisoned in GoS prisons suffer extreme torture and sexual violence.⁶²

Under ISIS, women’s situation went from bad to worse. They were stripped of virtually all rights, and their role was explicitly limited to that of a housewife or mother. They were considered the property of their husband, or that of another male member of the family before getting married, and enjoyed no autonomy whatsoever.

“During the reigns of ISIS, the regime, and the Free Syrian Army (now Syrian National Army), there was enormous pressure put on women. They had no rights. Women learned to live in fear, because of the strict traditions imposed upon them, the violence, forced marriage and even murder they have experienced.” — **Abdulraheem Shadia, Tabqa Women’s House Reconciliation Committee**

⁶⁰ <https://landinfo.no/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Report-Syria-Marriage-legislation-and-traditions-22082018.pdf>

⁶¹ <https://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Syria-Gender-Eqaulity-Profile-2011.pdf>

⁶² <https://www.dw.com/en/syrian-women-tortured-and-humiliated-in-assad-regime-prisons/a-43600204>

Nowadays, the AANES-linked women's movement is working across all fields of society in order to promote women's independence and active engagement in the new political process in the Arab regions. This includes opening all-female educational institutions; setting up a new justice system which challenges previous, patriarchal models of justice; supporting women to achieve economic independence; and creating the possibility for women to participate in all-female security and defense forces.

The women's movement must confront conservative gender norms across all of NES, but in the Arab-majority regions the implementation of these new institutions, norms and rules takes place in an especially challenging context. In the Kurdish-majority regions that first declared autonomy in 2012, the women's movement had already been organizing underground for a decade or more, and had established a strong base among local women won over during house-to-house visits and clandestine meetings. In contrast, in the Arab-majority regions then the ideas and institutions being promoted by the women's movement were totally new. Moreover, a tribal culture based on male authority remained even more predominant in the Arab regions than in NES' Kurdish communities – which also still suffer regular honor killings.

ORGANIZATION AND EDUCATION THROUGH WOMEN'S COUNCILS

Women's Councils are the primary local institutions through which women organize their integration into all spheres of society, and promote concepts of women's liberation and autonomy.

In Tabqa, for example, the overall Women's Council was established on the 19th of July 2017, just a few months after the region's liberation from ISIS. Since then, seven more women's councils have been opened in the region: two councils were opened to cover Mazraat Al-Safsafa, Hunaydah and the Bouassi district in the Al-Karin area, while four were opened in the al-Jarniya district to cover al-Suwaydiyah, Mahmoudli and Jarniya. The seventh council was opened in the Tuweina IDP camp.

"There are displaced people here from Hama, Aleppo, Daraa, and other areas, more than 2000 families, so it is necessary to have a council that follows

up on the problems and organization of [displaced] women,” explains Zahra Al-Hamada, spokesperson for the Women’s Council in Tabqa and administrative officer in the Tabqa branch of the Research Center for the Protection of Women’s Rights in North and East Syria.

In Deir ez-Zor, the first Women’s Council opened on the 14th of October 2017. Since then, four more councils have been established in the region to cover Jabhat, Kesra, Busayrah, Siwar and Hajin. Sheresta al-Jasimi, the head of Deir ez-Zor Women’s Council, says: “There were a lot of difficulties as the Councils were created. But slowly we are overcoming these difficulties. As a project for the future, we hope that the Women’s Council will increase the number of branch offices across the region.”

“Now there are 20 councils in Raqqa and the surrounding countryside, we build up these councils and found heads for every council, and constructed the committees connected to every council – the economic committee, education, media, archive, reconciliation committee... And we made a huge step, which has not been taken before – we created a women’s army in the middle east.” — **Maryam Ibrahim, Spokesperson of Women’s Council, Raqqa**

They are established on a regional and local basis, and organize their work via several sub-committees with responsibilities in different fields. Their number one aim, members say, is promoting education for women in order to transform public perception of women’s role in society. Organizing seminars, education programs and public awareness campaigns is the task of the education committee. According to Zahra Al-Hamada, their goal is to both “promote democratic thought, and address existing social problems. The education committee has led campaigns against social problems in the region, such as child marriage, polygamy, moral corruption, drug abuse, and misuse of the Internet.”

The content of the education sessions and seminars is decided upon after home visits and discussions with women from the region, where they have the chance to discuss their lives and the problems they encounter. This work is particularly important in the IDP camps, where the Education Committees build up relationships with the women and get to know the reasons behind their displacement and the hardships they currently face, while at the same time encouraging women to engage in seminars and to get involved themselves in the work of the Women’s Council.

The Relations Committee, meanwhile, is in charge of reaching out in a targeted fashion to female community leaders, to develop a dialog with them and to integrate them into the political process. Adapting to the local context, these committees primarily communicate with with the wives of tribal sheikhs; female intellectuals; and educated and professional women, in order to discuss the new political system with them. If these women are brought on side, they can reach many more women in the local community.

“The Relations Committee has also held several several forums for debate and discussion. Such forums are the first of their kind to be held in the region, especially the forum of female tribal leaders that gathered women from across all NES. Women from Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Manbij came together and expressed their opinion on the Turkish threat to our regions.” — **Zahra Al-Hamada, spokesperson for Tabqa Women’s Council**

The Women’s Councils are also in touch with women who have been released from Hol Camp under the tribal guarantee program, and the amnesty which has replaced it (see above for more on these programs). A majority of Syrian women in Hol Camp have ties with ISIS – either familial bonds, or in some cases more direct involvement. The tribal guarantee program had been criticized for releasing women to areas that they actually don’t belong to without adequate checks, and potentially facilitating their reintegration into ISIS - though there is no direct evidence of this occurring.

In spite of these critiques, for Ms. Al-Hamada then these programs allow the AANES to move women and children further away from ISIS’ ideology, which is still being taught and violently enforced in Hol Camp, and to bring them closer to a democratic way of thinking under the supervision of the Women’s Councils in their respective regions.

PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS

AANES is known for its progressive women’s laws. These laws were put in place to cover the original, Kurdish regions of NES, but are only partially or inconsistently applied across Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and Deir ez-Zor.⁶³ Indeed, applying such laws in regions in which practices like polygamy are still deep-

⁶³ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/12/2014-Womens-Law-Basic-Principles-and-General-Principles-for-Women.pdf>

ly rooted in the local culture is perceived as being too swift and radical a change, which would create a gap between the local population and the political institutions.

“The difficulties that we face include child marriage and polygamy with two, three or four wives, under the name of Islamic Sharia law. In some instances, men will even take a fifth wife, and divorce one of the others.”
— **Sheresta al-Jasimi, Head of Deir ez-Zor Women’s Council**

The same difficulty applies to the law on child marriage. Hiyam Mehmood Al-Ahmed, who works for the Deir ez-Zor Women’s Council, says: “The law on child marriage is still not always effective in practice because of this region’s traditions. In Deir ez-Zor, we cannot enforce new laws on people, but we have programs to introduce progress in these matters.”

Considering the limits of the formal law, the women’s movement has therefore established other mechanisms in order to protect and promote women’s rights through an alternative justice and conflict resolution system. This is a way of taking into account the strength of cultural norms, which can leave formal laws powerless. The Reconciliation Committees of the Women’s Councils and the Women’s Houses (Beit al-mer’a in Arabic, or Mala Jin in Kurdish) are part of this alternative conflict resolution system.

The Women’s Houses are in charge of settling family and marital conflicts outside of the court. In the Women’s Houses, the Reconciliation Committees follow up on resolving social issues and problems within the community. Helping women to overcome pressure from their partner, and feelings of shame, is an integral part of this work:

“At first, women were ashamed to tell us about the problems they were experiencing at home. But slowly and surely we built trust with them and told them, ‘if your spouses are hurting you, abusing you physically or emotionally, you can bring your case to us.’” — **Hiyam Mehmood al-Ahmed, Deir ez-Zor Women’s Council employee**

Ms. Al-Hamada, from the Tabqa Women’s Council, highlights the importance of overcoming shame so that women can actually make use of the institutions that are available to defend them in cases of abuse. She says: “In the beginning, and as a basic societal reality, women see it as shameful to complain about a man or to demand their rights. The Reconciliation Committee [of the Women’s Council] follows up on reported cases of violence in the court or at the prosecution office, and it is always the first to solve cases for women and to defend them.”

The Women’s Houses are also consulted in cases of underage marriage. Ms. al-Ahmed, of the Deir ez-Zor Women’s Council, says they have been able to help 13- or 14-year-old girls who have been married multiple times and treated as sexual property to be passed between men, before seeking assistance at the Women’s Houses: “We’ve seen girls get married to men with previous multiple wives, who divorce them after 20 days.”

The Reconciliation Committees also established the House for the Protection of Women, specialized in solving women’s problems and issues in terms of marriage, divorce and inheritance. The house serves as a port of call and safe harbor for battered women who need help fleeing their husbands, but also for other cases of abuse. It aims at releasing women from pressure that is exerted on them by abusive husbands or family members, whether through violence or through other means of coercion.

The House hosts women from across the four regions of Tabqa, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Manbij. Women can find refuge in these centers while the Reconciliation Committee opens channels of dialog with the husband or the family. Often, at the end of the process, the woman or girl returns to her family.



“

“As employees of the Women’s House and the Reconciliation Committee, we currently focus on the issue of child marriages and domestic abuse. In the future we plan to ban these practices in every way. Until now this has not been possible, because of the presence of strong tribes in the region, who will not accept this. But we will continue our work to make these things illegal.”

—Abdulraheem Shadia, Tabqa Women’s House Reconciliation Committee

”

Case study – Leyla and the Tabqa Women’s House

“My name is Leyla and I’m 18 years old. I am originally from Raqqa. I sought help from the Women’s house in Tabqa because the situation with my family became really bad. My parents died three years ago during the operation against ISIS in Raqqa. I have one sister but she was still a baby at this time. After the death of our parents, we moved to our uncle’s house, but his wife treated us very badly, so we moved to the house of our grandfather. He has remarried and is not living with our grandmother. But again, his wife mistreated us. She fed only small quantities of rice to us, and used to beat us. She also threatened to marry me off as soon as possible, or to throw me out of the house, and said I could beg on the streets just as well. When I was living with them, I had asked for help from an NGO and I received some money, but my family took all of it.

One day, I decided to run away. I took all the money I could find in the house and ran off to Tabqa, where I asked for help in the Women’s House. The Women’s House allowed me to live in the Women’s Protection House, and via the Reconciliation Committee tried to find an arrangement with my family. With regards to the money I’d taken, they decided that I could keep the amount of money the NGO had given to me, but that I had to give the rest back to my family. Now, I’m living in the Women’s Protection House, and working with the Women’s House. Because my sister is still so young, she stays with the family.”



Leyla is one of the dozens of cases attended by the Women’s house in Tabqa

SUPPORTING WOMEN’S FINANCIAL AUTONOMY

“Under the regime, it was impossible to find work as a woman. Women only found work as teachers, whereas men were free to do whatever kind of work they pleased. I do not wish to denigrate men, but women have a role in life as well. With the arrival of the AANES, there is equality between men and women in all civil society institutions.” —Sara Hilal, commander of the Women’s Asayish [Internal Security] in the Deir ez-Zor

The women’s movement in NES works on promoting women’s economic independence by integrating them into various kinds of professions.

The Women’s Councils contribute to this through the work of their Economic Committees, complemented by the work of Aboriya Jin (‘Women’s Economy’, a branch of the pan-NES women’s movement ‘Kongra Star’). The committee focuses on improving the economic situation of widows, divorced women and impoverished women, including IDPs. Divorced women face a particular social stigma, and many are at risk of, or are living in, extreme poverty. For example, Tabqas Women’s Council has developed a project called ‘Bayt al-Mouna’, or ‘the House of Supplies’, where women are employed to produce preserves, cheese and pickles and distribute them in the local area. Several agricultural projects creating employment opportunities for women, are underway as well.

“At the women’s bakery in the Kesra district of Deir ez-Zor, we are currently working on the preparation of food for winter. There is agricultural land where we plant vegetables with the intention to save for winter, we also have a mill, and in the future we want to expand our projects and build more trust with the local community.” —**Hiyam Mehmood Al Ahmed**

As is to be expected, similar projects are more advanced and on a larger scale in the Kurdish regions, where efforts have been underway for a much longer time – though many of the largest cooperative and women’s economy projects in the Kurdish regions have been lost during successive Turkish invasions.

At its annual conference in 2020, Aboriya Jin announced plans to start to make up this shortfall in the Arab regions by converting 1000 hectares of arable land into women’s cooperatives in the regions of Raqqa and Tabqa. Since the AANES has taken over large swathes of land previously held by the GoS, women’s economy is able to find most opportunities in the field of agriculture. However, a lack of funding prevents many plans from being fully realised, Ms. Al-Hamada says.

WOMEN IN SECURITY AND DEFENSE

With the advances of the SDF through the Arab-majority regions and the establishment of the new political system, women started to join the security forces. In the system of the AANES, women participate on all levels in the security and defence forces, within women’s only units.

This means the YPJ, or Women's Defense Units, in the military field (along with other women only-units, such as those in Christian militias or in FSA units now part of SDF, like Liwar Thuwar al-Raqqa); the Asayisha Jin, or women's internal security force; and the HPC-Jin, a women's neighborhood defence and community policing force.⁶⁴

Sara Hilal, the commander of the Asayisha Jin in the Deir ez-Zor region, explains how signing up to join the Asayish constituted a transformation of her place in society: "Because we wanted to claim our freedom, as women from Deir ez-Zor we took up posts in the civilian and military institutions in the region. With time, we no longer accepted to live as slaves, or under repression, and we can now see that women have an important role to play and must participate [in society] on the highest level."

In Arab regions as across NES, many women find joining the YPJ or another women's self-defense force is the easiest route available to them if they want to flee domestic abuse or marginalization in the home and live in a secure, all-female environment. The YPJ has training academies and bases across the Arab regions, and though the all-female force remains majority-Kurdish it now boasts a growing contingent of Arab members.

Girls aged sixteen to eighteen (or even younger) and fleeing violent home situations may also be housed in these academies and receive an education, but will not be allowed to receive military training or participate in combat until they turn eighteen. In other cases, young women may be returned home following mediation by the Women's Houses, Reconciliation Committees or wider women's movement, or rehoused elsewhere in civil society by these structures.

Arab members of YPJ have participated in military operations against ISIS and Turkey across NES. While fully participating in combat operations, YPJ members have also taken on special responsibilities like dealing with the tens of thousands of Arab women and children streaming out of ISIS' final checkpoint in Deir ez-Zor, providing first aid, humanitarian care and vetting women for the explosives they frequently secreted about their persons.

Today, women in the Deir ez-Zor branch of Asayisha Jin operate checkpoints on the roads and conduct security checks. "In particular, as women we are able to conduct checks and ensure security where there are women involved," Ms. Hilal explains.

⁶⁴ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/05/explainer-military-and-self-defense-forces-in-north-and-east-syria/>

The women also participate in security operations against ISIS sleeper cells. When it comes to raiding homes with female residents, the Asayisha Jin enter first, because it is not culturally accepted that men enter a house where there are women present. “To prevent any difficulties, we women play the leading role in this area,” Ms. Hilal says.

However, Ms. Hilal also points out several difficulties women of her profession face in the region. Social norms still constitute a barrier for women to join the security and defense forces, as they break with traditional women’s role. Also while carrying out their tasks, they struggle to be taken seriously.

Ms. Hilal says: “We have some problems here as a result of our tribal society. This society does not accept women. Women must remain at home and prepare food, that’s it. They must work to take care of their husband and their children, and look after the sheep. Women’s burden is heavy. They also had to work in the garden, and on the land. They were never accepted in any other capacity. Our tribes do not give any rights to women. They must remain at home, while the men go out.

“But now, many things have changed. When women started working on the checkpoints on the roads, no one took us seriously or gave us any importance. But through our willpower, we were able to affect major changes.”

What is more, women working for the security and defense forces are a prime target for attacks by ISIS sleeper cells. Two members of the Asayisha Jin were assassinated in 2020. One was killed in a car bomb while another, one of the first Arab women to join the Deir ez-Zor Asayish back in 2018 and a leading female figure in the region’s security forces, was assassinated by several gunmen.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS BEYOND LEGISLATION

The advancement of women’s rights in Arab-majority regions is not limited to formal, written laws. Several institutions and initiatives which promote women’s rights across multiple spheres of society have been developed and Arab women are participating in these endeavours and engaging with these services in small but growing numbers.

However, considering the conservative social context and the unstable security situation in which these efforts are taking place, Arab women are confronted with major hurdles. It is not only women working in the security and defense forces who are threatened, with Women’s Houses and other civilian institutions also targeted in regular, sometimes deadly, attacks.⁶⁵

“The security situation in the region of Busayrah is still very unstable, and it is a very good thing that we have many women working there in the Women’s Council. The Women’s Council in Busayrah has recently been attacked for the second time. The first time, the security guard was killed by someone who wanted to steal money from the Council. The second attack occurred at 4AM, when someone placed a mine before the door of the Women’s Council. This isn’t only about violence and death. These attacks also spread fear in order to weaken the determination and personal character of the women working in the Council” —**Hiyam Mehmood Al Ahmed**

The combination of a still-patriarchal society which is reluctant to allow the ideas of gender equality to shake the established social order on the one hand, with a very active ISIS insurgency which violently opposes women’s institutions on the other, constitutes a formidable barrier to the work of the Women’s Councils. Women who are actively engaged with these bodies are acutely aware of their role as pioneers of major and ongoing societal change – with all the challenges that this entails.

3.9 MINORITIES IN THE MAJORITY-ARAB REGIONS

Before the rise of ISIS there were minority groups present across all of the Arab-majority regions. Armenian Christians; Syriac-Assyrian Christians; Chechens; Circassians; and Turkmen communities all lived in these regions. (Check RIC’s report ‘After ISIS’ for a full picture of the ethnic and religious makeup of these communities, the violent assaults they faced from ISIS and other actors, and how they are engaging with the new forms of political autonomy and representation offered in NES.⁶⁶)

Some minority groups, particularly Christians (and Yezidis elsewhere in NES), faced severe violence and repression at ISIS’ hands, and many fled to other regions of NES or left Syria altogether. As a result, their numbers are much diminished across the Arab regions of NES.

⁶⁵ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/07/sweeping-sdf-and-coalition-raids-drive-fall-in-isis-sleeper-cell-attacks/>

⁶⁶ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/09/after-isis-ensuring-a-future-for-christians-and-other-minorities-in-north-and-east-syria/>

There are also long-standing Kurdish minority populations in the major Arab population centers of modern-day NES, particularly Manbij and Raqqa, where around 5% of the population is Kurdish. This percentage was significantly higher before the ISIS arrival, but during its rule most of the population fled.

ARMENIAN CHRISTIANS

One of the most prominent minority communities in the Arab regions was the Armenian Christian community in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, which still exists in small numbers in Deir ez-Zor.

Deir ez-Zor was the furthest destination reached by the forced marches of Armenian convoys during the Armenian genocide of 1915. The Ottoman authorities exterminated many of the Armenians through violence and starvation, but some residents in Deir ez-Zor stood up against this decision, prompting the mayor of Deir ez-Zor to protect the Armenians and provide them with food, housing and safety. This contributed to the growth of the city during the 20th century.⁶⁷ Most of the Armenians living in the Deir ez-Zor countryside were Arabized, but some Armenian families living in the city of Deir ez-Zor have retained their Christian faith.

“Armenians traditionally have their own churches, but what do we have here? Only a mosque. Where else can we go? We adopted the Muslim religion, because the number of Armenians here is very small, and we didn’t have a lot of power to keep our traditions, and therefore it was necessary for us to become Muslim.”
—Ali Garabet, Armenian resident of Deir ez-Zor



Ali Garbet and his brother, Arabized Armenians from Deir ez-Zor

⁶⁷ <https://archive.org/details/GreatBaqqaraTribe>

Under ISIS, the Armenians suffered persecution which forced them to flee. Most of the Christian churches in Deir ez-Zor city suffered bombing or shelling from GoS-aligned forces, as well as looting and destruction at ISIS' hands.⁶⁸

At the time of writing, a small community of 30 Armenian families has returned to the AANES regions of Deir ez-Zor. In November 2019, during Turkey's 'Peace Spring' operation against NES, ISIS sleeper cells claimed the assassination of Armenian priest Housib Petoyan and his father as they drove to Deir ez-Zor city to work on repairs to the Armenian church there.⁶⁹

There was also an adherent Armenian Christian population in Raqqa. During ISIS' three-year occupation, the city's churches were subjected to looting and destruction.



The Armenian Catholic Church of the Martyrs in Raqqa was taken over by ISIS and used as a center for indoctrination into their extremist interpretation of Islam (picture 1).⁷⁰ After being partially destroyed during the Raqqa offensive (picture 2) the church is currently being re-built by the Raqqa Civil Council (picture 3).

SYRIAC-ASSYRIAN CHRISTIANS

There was also a small presence of the Syriac-Assyrian minority, representing no more than 1% of the population, in Raqqa and Tabqa.⁷¹ The majority of this Christian community fled when the cities fell into ISIS' hands.

⁶⁸ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Targeting_churches_in_Syria_en.pdf

⁶⁹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/armenian-priest-murdered-by-isis-in-eastern-syria-33srl6jfh>

⁷⁰ https://youtu.be/cGQwTOsh__0?t=334

⁷¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/this-christmas-raqqas-churches-demined-but-deserted/>

By April 2013, several churches had been burned in Raqqa and hundreds of Syriac, Assyrian and Armenian Christians were displaced.⁷²

In Tabqa, the Catholic Church, Antiochian Orthodox Church and Assyrian Church of the East churches were turned into a parking garage, a weapons factory and a barn respectively, with ISIS militants destroying all Christian symbols on the three churches. After the liberation of Tabqa, members of the Religious Affairs Office in Euphrates Region sent letters to “our Christian brothers, invit[ing] them to return to their city. Tabqa will become again a mosaic where all [religions] live with one another in unity.”⁷³ Meanwhile, the Office also raised the Christian cross over Tabqa’s Orthodox Church once again. This cross was pulled down once again in October 2020 during a protest against French President Emmanuel Macron for his perceived slights against Muslims, in another indication of ongoing tensions and sympathy for a radical interpretation of Sunni Islam in the Arab regions of NES.⁷⁴

TURKMEN

There is also a significant Turkmen community in Manbij, Syrian citizens of Turkic origin who now have a distinct cultural identity and make up Syria’s third-largest ethnic group after Arabs and Kurds. Manbij’s Turkmen are united in the Turkmen Association, which provides a meeting place, language lessons for adults and children, history and culture lectures, and art and sports activities. The association also engages in political organizing in the local community, visits families, and holds meetings in Turkmen neighborhoods. Their goal is to introduce lessons in their ‘Turkmen’ dialect of Turkish (distinct from the Turkmen language as spoken in Turkmenistan and Central Asia) in schools in Turkmen neighborhoods and villages.

As a rule, however, the Turkmen community in Syria is not supportive of the NES. Turkmen fighters were among the first to join rebellions against the Syrian government, developing a close relationship with the Turkish state from the outset, and being given top posts in many of the Turkish-controlled armed factions. Some Turkmen-led battalions are now not only the most influential in the Turkish-controlled SNA, but also among the most ruthless factions to have carried out Turkey’s policy of forcible demographic change in Afrin and

⁷² <https://web.archive.org/web/20140714205718/http://syrianewsdesk.com/en/2013/09/26/news-islamic-state-torches-churches-al-raqqa>

⁷³ <http://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/christans-raise-cross-in-al-tabqa-city-muslims-congratulate-christians-cries-joyfull-h802.html>

⁷⁴ <https://twitter.com/HakimWisso80/status/1322272267984904192>

elsewhere. Nonetheless, Turkmen resident in NES have participated in the new political project, as well as forming a Turkmen battalion (the 'Seljuk Brigade') which has participated in SDF operations.

CIRCASSIANS

Circassians are descendants of Caucasian Muslims who fled to the Ottoman Empire following the advance of Russia and the brutal colonization of the Caucasus between 1763 and 1864, when Russian forces displaced between 1.5 and 2 million people. Only 100,000 of these people could escape to the Ottoman Empire. Before 2011, there were 700 Circassian families in NES. Now there are around 150 families, almost all of whom are resident in the Manbij and Raqqa countryside.

Wafai Mihsin Basha, a member of the Circassian community in Ain Issa who also works in that town's Women's Committee, explains: "we are originally from the Caucasus, but we live in Syria. We want to create a communal way of life that is multicultural and decentralized. Because like all peoples, we have our rights, as Syrians and as Circassians."

4. SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

“The SDF freed Deir ez-Zor from ISIS, with Kurds and Arabs fighting together. Our martyrs’ blood was spilled as one, and we are very grateful for this. But afterwards the security situation has remained very bad, with many assassinations. There is a 20KM corridor where everything is chaos, and external forces create ‘fitne’ [infighting] in order to attack the AANES and SDF. The indigenous forces here must be strengthened to deal with this. Moreover, poverty in the region must be addressed. The region has great [oil] wealth but local residents don’t receive the benefit of this.” —Arab tribal leader from Aqidat tribe, Deir ez-Zor

Throughout the sections above, we have touched upon different examples of political and social reforms which the AANES has tried to implement throughout the Arab regions of NES. Some, such as the establishment of a network of Women’s Houses and Reconciliation Committees to deal with cases of violence against women and other forms of abuse, are proving successful despite opposition to these policies in some sections of the community. Others, such as the planned introduction of a curriculum promoting values of women’s rights and secularism, have been cancelled following community backlash.

The following section will take a more global view to assess the extent to which the AANES’ political program – and the political leadership of the AANES and military leadership of the SDF – has been accepted in the region’s Arab communities.

Raqqa countryside



Though there are tensions across all the Arab regions of NES, it is in Deir ez-Zor where the AANES has faced the most opposition to its political program, at times boiling over into active unrest. This is due in part to the short space of time which has elapsed since this region's liberation from ISIS – infrastructure, trust and a new political system all take time to build. It is also due to the presence of both the GoS across the Euphrates and ISIS sleeper cells throughout the region, both of whom are exploiting and feeding into the lack of security, infrastructure and public trust. This constitutes a 'vicious cycle' in which ISIS create unrest, fuelling anger against the SDF and AANES, which in turn strengthens ISIS' base among the local population.

As such, though this section will take a global perspective it will also focus on Deir ez-Zor as the key flashpoint where AANES' political program is being tried by fire. On all of the points discussed, the situation is generally better, though by no means perfect, in the much larger Arab population centers of Raqqa and Manbij.

We will first look in general at complaints and concerns raised by residents of Deir ez-Zor and the other Arab regions during interviews with RIC, before looking in depth at 2020's protests against the AANES and SDF's Deir ez-Zor Military Council, and the reforms the AANES has since put into place in response to demands articulated by tribal leaders in August 2020.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT AANES SERVICE PROVISION

Political convictions are strong in Deir ez-Zor, which was one of the first regions to rise up against the GoS in 2011 but where ISIS also have a strong base of support. Setting aside the military and political spheres, the day-to-day life of many Deir ez-Zor residents remains plagued by difficulties. After nine years of war, siege and oppression the focus of the average family remains on survival and providing the best life they can for their children, in the face of multiple obstacles.

Nearly every civilian interviewed in Deir ez-Zor by RIC voiced a similar range of practical complaints, chief among which were:

- Lack of security and protection, specifically concerning the frequent assassinations.

“The SDF and YPG are not as active as they need to be, they are on their back foot and static. This is what the people of Deir ez-Zor are suffering, everyone sees us. They see our situation, that we are being killed, but they approach Deir ez-Zor according to their own needs, and play with us. No special measures are being taken to improve our situation, it is shocking. And I ask myself why? Why we don't even have paved roads that are safe to travel on, why we don't have schools but as soon as there is a problem, everyone is always ready to get involved in disputes and infighting with us.” — **Mervan Ali Selman, son of assassinated Sheikh, Deir ez-Zor**

- Lack of health infrastructure and well-equipped hospitals and very few pharmacies, requiring individuals to travel a significant distance to secure medicine.

“When our children are sick, we don't know what to do; what hospital to take them to. Even to buy them medicine we have to drive through many villages to just find a pharmacy. We can't take care of our children in this situation.” — **Armenian civilian, Deir ez-Zor**

- Lack of schools, with few materials and many children unable to attend school or going to school in destroyed buildings with no walls, no doors and no desks.



Library in Manbij

“Look at my child, he is 11 years old and he can not even write his own name. There is no school in this village for him to go to. They have all been destroyed, we can not provide our children with a good future. I have seen children in Deir ez-Zor go to schools with nothing. They sit on the floor or a destroyed building, literally buildings with missing walls and windows. How can I send my children to a place like this?” — **Civilian, Deir ez-Zor**

- Lack of employment opportunities outside of work with the AANES and/or the SDF and Asayish.

“We can’t find work. Even people who have gone to university and finished their studies, the administration doesn’t offer them attractive salaries, so they leave Deir ez-Zor to find better work. As a result, no one with qualifications stay here. We have the option to get work with the military, or the internal security forces, but this can not be the peoples only option.” —**Civilian, Deir ez-Zor**

- Lack of sufficient and affordable food and housing.

“The AANES has to take responsibility for economic crisis. It can’t just blame the crash in SYP. The roads are very bad and need maintenance.” —**Arab civilian in Heseke**

- Lack of infrastructure; in particular that the AANES is not putting enough effort into the reconstruction of Deir ez-Zor in comparison with other regions, and especially Kurdish-majority regions like Kobane.

“Many people have left Deir ez-Zor and then returned home, but we can’t even say this. Their homes are destroyed, and there is nothing to return to. A significant amount of time has past since the defeat of ISIS and still we have no place to call home, still we feel like we are living in a war. I don’t understand why.” —**Civilian, Deir ez-Zor**

On most of these practical points, there is no real panacea save time and investment. The security situation has generally improved month-on-month, though it was badly set back by the 2019 Turkish invasion. By the end of 2020, the region was experiencing its lowest-ever rate of sleeper cell attacks, though there has been a renewed uptick by mid-2021.

Looking at other Arab regions of NES, it can be seen that reconstruction and rehabilitation of utilities, health and education services go hand-in-hand with an improvement in the security situation. In Raqqa, for example, the gradual restoration of these services has accompanied a dramatic decrease in sleeper-cell attacks to the point where the city proper now sees only very sporadic security incidents.

It is to be expected that these complaints will diminish over time if sufficient funds are routed to Deir ez-Zor, and local military units continue to receive focused support and training. The US-led Coalition can also play a role here in working together with the SDF to train local units and commanders and professionalize the Deir ez-Zor Military Council.

The critical issue here for the AANES is the perception that Deir ez-Zor is being marginalized or overlooked, while similar grievances continue to be voiced by residents of Raqqa. That said, there are legitimate reasons for the slow pace of reconstruction in these regions, many of which are out of the AANES' control. As well as highlighting and acknowledging the difficulties in engaging in major reconstruction projects on a shoestring budget in the middle of ongoing conflict – like the Raqqa Civil Council did in its annual public consultation, where it provided concrete figures on the progress of reconstruction and acknowledged the challenges in meeting its targets – the AANES could also address this issue by publishing a more detailed annual breakdown of where its revenues are routed. Transparency is the simplest way to combat perceptions of unfair treatment.

COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE POLITICAL PROGRAM OF AANES

As we have seen throughout this report, elements of the AANES' progressive political program are unpalatable to local tribal sheikhs and many local residents. There is always a question as to whose voice is being heard when these complaints are raised – it may be that tribal sheikhs object to the promotion of women's rights in the classroom, but if their young daughters were able to effectively make their voices heard in the debate over the curriculum they might well have a different perspective on the issue. As such, it is important that the AANES and its associated entities continue to engage with the local community on multiple fronts, for example reaching out to young women in the community even if they have had to concede to conservative local pressure in the classroom.

At the same time, the AANES should continue to give the space to regional councils to determine their own policy. One recent example is Raqqa Civil Council's decision to prevent women from working in restaurants and cafes in Raqqa. This move at first appeared counter to the AANES' values, but local officials explained that these cafes were little more than fronts for sex-trafficking and the exploitation of female employees. The same ruling also banned the public consumption of alcohol. This example demonstrates how the Arab regions are in certain instances free to make their own decisions even if they are not in line with the ideology or the law as it is implemented in Kurdish-majority areas, where alcohol is freely available (albeit frowned upon by many ordinary locals) and there are no restrictions on where women can work (albeit that many traditionally male industries remain male-dominated).

Farouz Khelil Mohammed from the Women's Office of Raqqa Civil Council explains:

"We made this decision based on what the people wanted. They came to us and complained, saying that there are 'cafes' that have been opened in Raqqa where women are being manipulated and used for immoral work. Young children are being forced to work in these cafes against their will, and drugs are being sold.

Our enemies target women, and seek to prevent the women's revolution here from being successful. Such things are being carried out in Raqqa today. People connected to the regime have entered the city and have opened these cafes, where immoral acts are being conducted as they open after midnight. The civilian population complained to us about this, and so we wanted to take this step in accordance with their wishes. As the Women's Office of Raqqa Civil Council we finally took this step following a meeting with civilians in which there were many complaints about this subject.

Raqqa is organized along tribal lines, and politics in the city are highly connected to the tribes and sheikhs. And this decision we took made the sheikhs very happy, that as the women's movement we took these steps within our city to deal with these issues, which indicates that we respect the tribal culture."

On this issue, as with the question of the curriculum, the local council was free to adopt its own policy, with the result that it could take positive action to deal with a local issue and foster local support for its cause. But as will be seen below, sometimes local demands come into more serious conflict with the AANES' political program.

COMPLAINTS OVER REPRESENTATION OF ARABS IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

After having experienced several changes in governance and a near-constant power struggle from the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 until ISIS' final defeat in March 2019, residents of the Deir ez-Zor countryside are reluctant to trust any new political or military authority - especially one from outside of their region. This has affected the AANES and SDF's efforts in Deir ez-Zor, where both the SDF and AANES are often casually (and inaccurately) referred to as "the Kurds," giving an indication of the distance which remains between these bodies and the local population.

The issue of political representation is not just a local one, but also concerns Arab community's desire for representation at the negotiating table with Damascus or other external actors. "Arabs should be represented in negotiations with Damascus, not just the Kurds," one Arab tribal leader from Deir ez-Zor said, speaking at a public consultation in Heseke, while another tribal leader from Deir ez-Zor's Aqidat tribe added: "All sides should participate in dialog, there should not be any Kurdish-Kurdish dialog."

There are multiple issues at play here. For their part, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the region's top diplomatic and negotiating body, point out that they have an Arab imam from Deir ez-Zor (Riyad Darar) as one of their two co-chairs and top representatives, and further assert that members of every one of the region's major religious and ethnic groups are represented in their negotiations with Damascus. On the question of the ongoing Kurdish-Kurdish dialog between the PYD-led bloc of 'democratic confederalist' parties and the Kurdish nationalist opposition represented by the ENKS coalition, meanwhile, they point out that Arab tribes frequently meet for Arab-Arab dialog in order to create a united front in the wider political process.

“If Kurds are discussing together to find a solution, this is all very well; but if they want to cut Arabs out, this is problematic. People need information on the political negotiations being conducted by SDC so they can decide whether to support them.” —**Arab lawyer, Raqqa**

Their case is not helped by Western politicians, diplomats and officials who insist on referring to the SDF and AANES as ‘the Kurds’; on singling out individual Kurdish figures like Mazloum Abdi, rather than engaging with the official, representative political structures in NES; and on negotiating solely with the more Kurdish-dominated SDF while de-legitimizing their civilian counterparts in the more truly representative SDC. The US, in particular, has a vision for NES which is opposed to the AANES’ vision of multi-ethnic co-existence in a federal system. A Kurdish-nationalist north allied with the US-dominated KRG, and a tribal Arab south also under US dominance, would be far easier for the US to control. The US needs the SDF as the only actor capable of maintaining peace and security in the region, but this does mean it is not simultaneously exerting pressure to pull Kurdish and Arab communities apart.

Nonetheless, local grievances about lack of representation are legitimate, and were a key driving factor behind the 2020 protests. The AANES’ vision for the region is highly ambitious – almost utopian in its rhetoric – but the onus remains on them to make this vision into a reality, even and especially in the Arab regions where it is being tested to its fullest. The SDF in particular faces a difficult balancing act between maintaining professionalism and high ethical and professional standards on the one hand (which entails greater reliance on Kurdish YPG units exogenous to Deir ez-Zor) and allowing locals to take the lead on the other (and thus opening the door to greater corruption and abuse).

That said, promising reforms are underway to transfer greater autonomy to Deir ez-Zor while still retaining control of the security situation in the troubled region. It remains to be seen if the AANES can find a compromise position with tribal actors in the region. The six months of relative calm following the resolution of the 2020 protests give reason for optimism, though the increase of ISIS sleeper cell attacks in the region by early to mid 2021 should give pause for thought.

“People from all parts of Syria have now been displaced to Raqqa. Kurds and Arabs, even Turkmen, they also have properties and lands. We all live peacefully and work together. I would say that more than half the local population and the tribes support the AANES and SDF. The AANES does listen to tribal figures and local communities about works projects and gathers their opinions on relevant issues. The Legislative Council, for instance, has representatives from all communities, and from local tribes. The same applies to the local councils.” —**Arab sheikh, Raqqa countryside**

Case study – Separation of Deir ez-Zor eastern countryside from Deir ez-Zor city

It is important to note that local demands can sometimes contradict one another. The Arab regions are not a homogeneous bloc. For example, many locals in Deir ez-Zor voiced complaints about the separation of the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside (under AANES control) from the city itself, still held by the GoS. The division of these two regions resulted in immense difficulty in traveling between the two, meaning that many individuals have lost their source of income, if they previously worked on the other side of the river, while many families have been separated and are now unable to see one another.

The AANES attempted to address these concerns with the opening of a new border crossing on the 16th of January, 2021, at Al-Salhiyah.

“We opened the border due to popular demand. Previously, people had to cross illegally by boat further east. It was really expensive to pay the smugglers. We opened this border crossing for this reason as well. People sometimes had to pay 50,000 SYP (15 USD). Now everybody can cross with 500 SYP (0.15 USD); it is cheap..” — **Zerdesht Fatime, border officer, Deir ez-Zor**

This is not to say that people want to see their region return to GoS control, since many individuals from GoS-controlled Deir ez-Zor have fled to the areas under the SDF.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ <https://deirezzor24.net/en/people-flee-assad-forces-areas-again-west-of-deir-ezzor/>

Those who have left cite harassment at the hands of Assad's forces, Iranian militias and Russian mercenaries as a key reason to flee, as well as high levels of crime including murder, theft and kidnapping. Rather, this issue highlights the conflicting challenges facing AANES. Though many locals in Deir ez-Zor are opposed to any form of dialog with Damascus, they also wish for safe travel to and from GoS regions – which necessarily requires some form of rapprochement with GoS. On this issue, as on others, what would appease some residents of the Deir ez-Zor region would likely anger others.

2020 PROTESTS AND DEMANDS FOR REFORM

Many of these issues and grievances came to a head in 2020, when Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor took to the streets to protest and later issued an ultimatum to the SDF and AANES, warning that there would be an armed response if their demands were not met. These protests, and the AANES' response, have set the terms of engagement between the Arab regions and the AANES political project throughout the past six months.

The protests were sparked by the assassination of Sheikh Mutshar al-Hifil of the influential Aqidat tribe on 2 August 2020. This assassination was carried out by masked individuals, believed to be ISIS sleeper-cell members, who fired at Sheikh al-Hifil and his companion from motorcycles as they were driving outside of Al-Hawayej town in the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside. The Aqidat is the largest tribe in Deir ez-Zor and one of the biggest in Syria, with its members and influence extending into Iraq, while Sheikh al-Hifil was an influential and respected regional powerbroker.

While Sheikh al-Hifil's assassination created shockwaves, in itself, it was not an unusual event. Since the beginning of 2020, as of February 2021 6 sheikhs and tribal dignitaries have been killed and 10 have been injured, the result of 12 assassination attempts, mostly at the hands of ISIS sleeper cells. In some instances, agents provocateur linked to the GoS or Turkey are also suspected, with Turkish-linked militias claiming some attacks in the region. (Consult here the database of assassinated sheikhs).

Those responsible for the assassination of Sheikh al-Hifil were not quickly apprehended, driving local perceptions that not enough effort and resources are being put towards the stabilization and the safe-keeping of Deir ez-Zor. The insinuation that SDF was directly responsible for Sheikh al-Hifil's assassination is baseless, having been spread by the GoS in an effort to exploit the tensions between the AANES and Deir ez-Zor tribes in order to create a power vacuum which they might fill. Nonetheless, many locals still blame the SDF for this and other security incidents, as the SDF are the sovereign military force in the region and it is seen as their duty to maintain peace and security in all regions with fall under their control.

The response provoked by the sheikh's assassination – days of protest in which shots were fired by both protesters and the SDF – indicates that Sheikh al-Hifil's death was only a short-term trigger. The protests were motivated by the poor security situation, lack of service provision, and a feeling of alienation from an administration perceived as 'Kurdish', liberalizing and exogenous to the region.

Omar Abu Leyla, CEO of local news organization Deir ez-Zor 24, tells RIC: "The primary cause was the deteriorating security situation in the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside. This lack of security is attributed to the corruption of commanders running the region, and neglecting risks that have claimed the lives of dozens of innocents, including tribal dignitaries. Residents of Deir ez-Zor agree that the Deir ez-Zor Military Council is totally corrupt, from Abu Khawla down to surrounding figures. The Military Council is notorious in the area because its administrators are involved in corruption and always resort to the media to hide corruption and other matters. It is the leaders of Deir ez-Zor who arrest civilians and allow ISIS groups to be active. As the people of Deir ez-Zor, we all know well how to differentiate between the groups, its members, and civilians. We appreciate Kurdish and Arab fighters who sacrificed their souls to eliminate ISIS; however, we do not want to suffer due to Assad, ISIS, and Iran groups more than we did over the recent years. Deir ez-Zor has always been the victim of these sides, unfortunately."

Fact box: understanding the tribal system in NES

The tribal system is crucial for understanding the situation in the Arab regions of NES, since the tribes constitute the main building-bloc of local society. They are top-down and patriarchal in structure, with loyalty to the tribe and bloodline superseding other concerns, resulting in frequent and deadly feuds between tribes. Some tribes are close to the GoS, while others have long had an antagonistic relationship with the central government.

Particularly following the collapse of central government in Syria, tribes have played a key role as local power-brokers, maintaining their own armed forces and providing for their members, though ultimately most tribes have been forced to bow to more powerful state and non-state actors as they have gained and regained control over the tribes' traditional territory. Weakness and competition within the tribal structure left the population extremely vulnerable to exploitation by jihadi Salafism, although ISIS was ultimately unable to rally lasting support from the tribes.

Tribes are a fact of life in Arab regions like Deir ez-Zor. Despite their top-down, patriarchal structure and conservative outlook, they can also play an important role in promoting ideas of local self-determination and community justice which are prioritized by AANES. If the AANES can bring tribal sheikhs onside, they will have a much easier time governing these challenging regions. Due to their size, many tribes have several components, and keep their cards close to their chest by negotiating with both the AANES and the GoS.



Sheikhs like Rakhib Al-Beshir from Deir ez-Zor are leading figures in NES' Arab communities

Tribes occupying the hinterland between Kurdish-majority and Arab-majority territories have helped to ensure continued practical contact between the GoS and AANES to keep utilities and oil flowing, while some major tribal militias (notably the al-Sanadid forces) have long been allied with SDF against ISIS and Turkey.

Khaled Al-Aifan, a tribal leader from Deir ez-Zor, explains: “our role as clan elders revolves around solving problems that society suffers from, and establishing reconciliation between people. These problems relate to topics such as agriculture or security. There is coordination between us and the AANES, and some of us work in the Civil Council.”

DEMANDS VOICED BY THE PROTESTERS

To the AANES’ credit, the protests were met with a swift and reasonable (if somewhat overdue) response. SDC and SDF leaders met with Arab tribal leaders in Deir ez-Zor, sometimes in the presence of Coalition or other US officials, and were able to quickly achieve a truce with the tribes who had been protesting. Nonetheless, the situation remained tense. The Aqidat tribe held their own meeting in Thiban, a Deir ez-Zor village, and released a statement addressing the US-led Coalition⁷⁶. Their demands included:

1- Controlling the security situation by preparing a plan to sustain stability and security

2- Investigating recent assassinations against tribal dignitaries and revealing and holding accountable the perpetrators

3- Empowering Arabs to run their own areas as security officials and in other offices

4- Releasing prisoners captured during the war against ISIS

5- Releasing women and children detained in refugee camps.

6- Sustaining the unity of Syria rather than dividing it, and achieving a political solution that guarantees all rights

⁷⁶ <https://twitter.com/OALD24/status/1293125377284603904>

Perhaps the key demand initially voiced by the tribes was to “devolve power to Arab tribes or face open conflict,” with the Aqidat tribe warning that they would take up arms if their demands were not heard.⁷⁷

It is important to note that the tribes at no point demanded a transfer of military control or the withdrawal of the SDF or AANES governance. This indicates both a pragmatic acceptance of the SDF’s presence as the sole force capable of holding back ISIS on the one hand and the GoS and Iranian militias on the other, and a willingness to work within the federal system proposed by AANES. Despite real grievances about both of these bodies as they operate in Deir ez-Zor, they remain highly preferable to the alternatives. As such, though this ultimatum expired while negotiations were still ongoing, the region has seen no repeat of the protests or violence which flared up in August 2020.

Another key issue raised by protesters is the need for joint SDF and International Coalition raids to be more surgical, as tribal sheikhs and other community leaders have frequently claimed that SDF raids sweep up innocents while allowing those who are behind the assassinations to run free. Similarly, the protesters’ demand was not for SDF to withdraw, but to improve and professionalize its operations against ISIS. They wanted the assassinations to stop and for Deir ez-Zor to become a peaceful place to live, so efforts can be made to rebuild the region.

RESPONSE: REFORMS AND PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

Following their initial meetings with tribal actors, the SDF and SDC put into place a multi-faceted response. Initially, the SDF released eight civilians from al-Shuhayl who had been arrested during an 8 August raid for suspected links to ISIS, followed by another release of dozens of detainees on 26 August. These releases were a direct response to the protests and a good-will gesture to local communities.

Conversely, the SDF has continued to conduct extensive anti-ISIS operations in the region (as it also had been doing prior to the protests), arresting many more ISIS suspects, however after a temporary trough, ISIS attacks have increased once more. The Administration should remain vigilant of these developments in order to prevent renewed protests.

⁷⁷ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/anti-isis-coalition-begins-losing-tribal-support-syria>

Nevertheless, the SDC put a major political process into motion in response to the 2020 protests, launching a series of public consultations across all of the contiguous regions and cities of NES. Local opposition figures, tribal heads, activists, and ordinary civilians were invited to these meetings in order to voice their criticisms, complaints and proposals concerning the SDC, SDF and AANES. When launching the months-long series of meetings, SDC head Ilham Ahmed said: “everyone must be listened to, whether supporters of the regime or the opposition. We aim to create a mechanism for criticism, and make AANES the best model of administration.”

RIC researchers attended several of the thirteen public consultations held across a series of months, including those in Arab-majority regions. The consultations marked the first time such a broad church of pro-AANES, Kurdish opposition, Arab tribal leaders and other civil society and political actors all gathered together under one roof. Attendees noted that the atmosphere was more positive and open than in some previous bouts of dialog, with the AANES hearing a wide range of criticism and suggestions from left-wing Kurdish parties through to conservative Arab tribal leaders.

On the administrative level, criticism focused on service provision and the security situation in Deir ez-Zor in particular. On the political level, all parties sought greater representation in any political negotiations taking place. SDC reps sought to dispel rumors over the ongoing Kurdish-Kurdish dialog, framed in some quarters as a conspiracy to divide Syria, by pointing out that Arab communities too have the right to internal discussions and that the SDC has refused both U.S. and Russian overtures to ‘settle’ for a pro-Kurdish settlement in the region in lieu of a new, more inclusive, political settlement.

In general, people were more critical on local issues concerning service provision and regional political participation than they were on the macro-political process, where attendees were broadly supportive of the SDC line.

Perhaps the main point of contention was the SDC’s continued willingness to negotiate with Damascus, with many residents expressing wariness or open hostility to the GoS due to its historic rights abuses. The fact that SDC leadership members themselves, as well as the Kurdish movement in general, have suffered violence, imprisonment, torture and repression at the GoS’ hands helped to legitimize the SDC’s continued calls for dialog with Damascus despite the GoS’ violent excesses against its people.

Speaking in Heseke, Ilham Ahmed summed up the SDC’s position: “The SDC always wants to resolve problems with dialog, not the gun. We can negotiate with anyone apart from those forces who behead people. It is not wrong to speak with other forces. We connect with everyone and trust no-one.” In any case, the issue remains somewhat academic, with no real prospects for entente between NES and the GoS in the short or medium term.

Practically speaking, then, the SDC’s position as set out in the consultations was that the best way forward is for different political and ethnic groups to set aside their differences and unite with a common voice to seek the region’s best interests. Certainly, all parties were united in a profound mistrust of Damascus and opposition to return of central Syrian control in the north-east. Damascus’ intractability means the SDC can hope to win greater support among local populations for its vision of a decentralized, democratic Syria. To achieve this goal, AANES must work to resolve people’s concerns about security and service provision, particularly in Arab regions such as Deir ez-Zor.

“The AANES invited us to come to this conference as representatives of our tribe, so that we can discuss together more. We have attended many such meetings before, and were often dissatisfied by the results. But on the basis of today’s discussions, we saw that significant changes have been made since our previous discussions. The discussion was more open, more views were shared. This is a major step for SDC, especially with the strong and genuine incorporation of Arab representatives in the discussions. We see this as positive and constructive.” —**Sheikh Muhammed Abdullah, from Shedadi, of the al-Aqidat tribe**

The consultations resulted in a number of concrete policy reforms on the pan-NES level, including⁷⁸:

- Regional elections across NES within the year
- Anti-smuggling, anti-bureaucracy and anti-corruption measures, including specialized observation committees
- A new economic plan focused on support for agriculture and local investment
- Separating NES’ courts from political influence
- Incorporating more technical experts into AANES

Other points address education, security and political dialog – themes raised throughout the 13 public consultations.

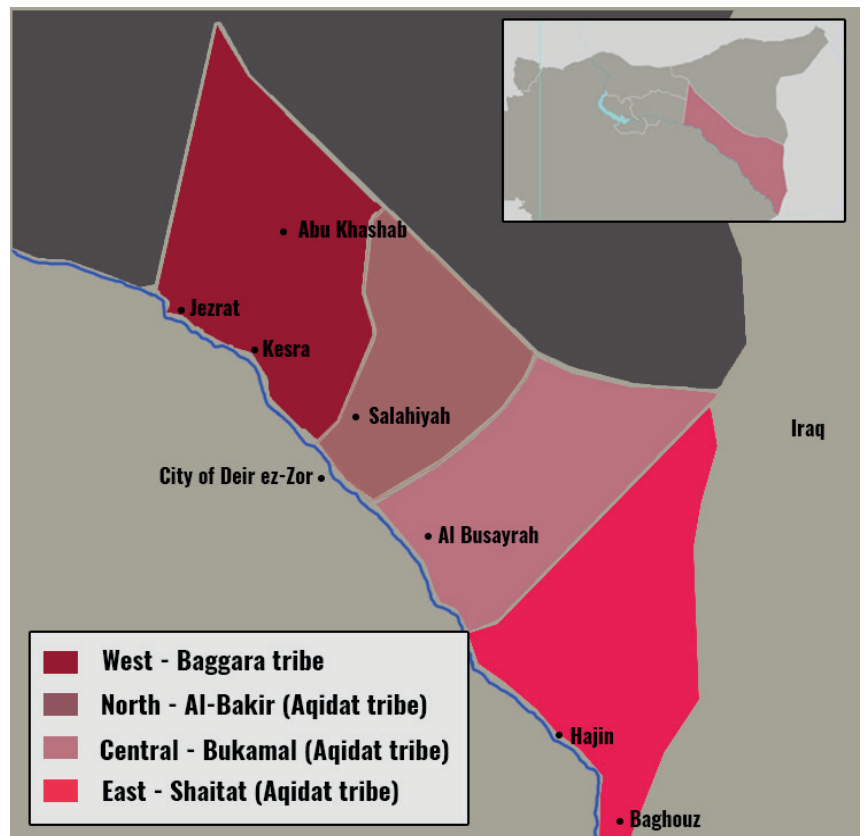
⁷⁸ <https://rojivainformationcenter.com/2020/11/translation-reforms-announced-in-response-to-syrian-democratic-council-public-consultations/>

Some of these points have already been put into practice, with scores of arrests of local officials suspected of corruption across the region in an ongoing campaign in winter 2020/21, in response to complaints about corruption heard across the Arab regions during the consultations. Such steps will build confidence and trust, and have been well-received locally.

One notable absence from the program of reforms was a concrete new political settlement for Deir ez-Zor. Tribal actors, the SDC and AANES continue to negotiate over an expected further devolution of power, which some local observers had expected to be announced at this conference.

Nonetheless, slow progress is also being made on the specific crisis in Deir ez-Zor. In late February 2021, the civil administration of Deir ez-Zor began the process of restructuring Deir ez-Zor districts and applying changes in the system of governance. These changes will be under the supervision of the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council, and will entail dividing the region into 4 districts, with assemblies made up of 42 people, made up of a mix of Arab tribal figures, intellectuals, and ‘professional’ community figures such as doctors, teachers and lawyers. These committees would establish local governance across the four districts, each under the influence of a particular tribe, with the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council remaining as a support and coordination body. West area district have been associated with the Baggara tribe, North with the Al-Bakir (part of the Aqidat tribe), Central with the Bukamal clan (the al-Hifil-led wing of the Aqidat tribe), and East with the Shaitat clan (part of the Aqidat tribe).

While it remains unclear how these administrative changes will manifest, this decision is seen in a positive light by local observers. With an improved security situation, the AANES could make room for further work towards a political settlement in the troubled region in 2021.



Deir ez-Zor's new districts (February 2021)

5. CONCLUSION

ROOM TO REBUILD

Arab communities' relationship with the AANES and SDF is more transactional than the strong bond Kurdish communities feel with these institutions. Some elements of Arab communities have enthusiastically participated in the AANES structures, while others are content with any force which will ensure security and provide services. There is therefore strong antipathy to Turkish control of the region, nor is there particularly strong enthusiasm for the return of GoS control. SDF and AANES' ability to retain popular support in the Arab regions is thus predicated on their ability to provide security and services, with the extension of regional autonomy a secondary but important concern.

Rebuilt bridge in the countryside of Tabqa



There is therefore a strong correlation between the time that has elapsed since each Arab region's liberation from ISIS, and the extent to which the AANES has been able to build up and entrench its new political model in these regions. In cities like Manbij, Tabqa and to an increasing extent Raqqa, the security and humanitarian situation is gradually improving, and the only factor that could change the status quo would be a fresh Turkish invasion greenlit by the GoS.

This does not mean that the whole population of Manbij has been won over by the ideology propounded by the AANES. Rather, despite the complaints outlined above, an equilibrium has been reached. Even locals apathetic to the AANES' political vision generally recognize that AANES and SDF are best equipped to provide them with services and defense; those actively antagonistic towards the AANES are prevented from posing a direct threat to civilians' security; while still others are getting actively involved with the new opportunities offered by this political program, at a rate which will only increase as time goes by and the situation stabilizes further.

ISIS, Turkey and the GoS are all deploying various tactics to prevent this. As noted above, the ISIS insurgency remains strong but is showing signs of being beaten back in Deir ez-Zor, and has been massively reduced in Raqqa and Manbij. The GoS, meanwhile, is using soft and hard pressure to try and benefit from its new foothold in these regions established following the dramatic geopolitical shifts of October 2019. It, too, is only meeting with limited success.

Like the Kurdish regions, Deir ez-Zor has faced historic marginalization by the central Syrian authorities, and there is strong resistance to a return of GoS control. The GoS has attempted to reap political gains from recent anti-SDF protests in Deir ez-Zor, framing the protesters' demands as calls for the return of Damascus' role and sending agitators to participate in the demonstrations.⁷⁹ However, the situation has calmed down in Deir ez-Zor, with the demands submitted by the protesting tribes framed in terms of (albeit significant) reforms to SDF and AANES administration, rather than calling for Damascus' return.⁸⁰⁻⁸¹

⁷⁹ See reports from GoS-controlled SANA news agency, such as: <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/59629/protests-calling-for-expelling-sdf-militias-and-us-forces-held-in-deir-ez-zor-villages.html>

⁸⁰ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/anti-isis-coalition-begins-losing-tribal-support-syria>

⁸¹ <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/180930/>

During some anti-SDF protests, photos of Bashar al-Assad have also been burned, in a message to the GoS that it will not be able to easily co-opt people's grievances about the security and economic situation in Deir ez-Zor.⁸²

As compared to Deir ez-Zor, AANES and SDF have been able to get a stronger foothold in Raqqa city. This is likely due to a combination of several factors; the population in Raqqa is less sympathetic to ISIS than in Deir ez-Zor, USAID funding has assisted more effective stabilization and reconstruction efforts, and the SDF has been able to establish a much better security environment, in the city proper.

Raqqa is now home to many IDPs from elsewhere in Syria, many of whom fled SAA/Russian as well as Turkish violence, and a majority of the population would prefer SDF and AANES control to a return of the GoS with concomitant violent reprisals and military service with the SAA. There is a strong minority base of support for the government in the city – estimated at 30% of the population by one local activist – but this figure is not growing.⁸³ August 2020 saw protests in Raqqa city center against the SAA's putative return to the city.⁸⁴

For as long as the wider conflict remains frozen, the AANES will be able to continue its reconstruction, community outreach and public education programs in these regions. At the same time, however, with locals looking uneasily over the border at Turkey or southward towards Damascus, many people are unwilling to commit to a political project they fear may be wiped out in a fresh Turkish invasion in the coming months or years.

BUILDING AUTONOMY

More than this passive acceptance of AANES as the 'least worst' option, there are also encouraging signs that the AANES' political program has something new to offer the Arab regions. It is clear that the AANES' call for a federal Syria has an appeal to Arab communities tribal leaders seeking assurances they will be able to retain local power and autonomy as the Syrian conflict enters a new phase. Indeed, some tribes have historically played a mediating role between the AANES and Damascus for coordinating service provision in regions where they have a presence.

⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GATT0NGoJEo>

⁸³ RIC interview, civil society activist in Raqqa, August 2020

⁸⁴ <https://npasyria.com/en/?p=45455>

A report commissioned by the US Department of Defense recently found that despite pressure from Turkey and Damascus, “the majority of Arab communities in NES passively support the SDF and its associated civil institutions... the majority of Arabs in NES oppose the Syrian regime and many continue to support the SDF on the condition that the SDF includes Arab components in important discussions and provides equitable assistance to both Arab and Kurds.”⁸⁵

RIC’s observations broadly align with this assessment. Damascus’ tone toward the Kurdish population remains hostile, and most Kurds retain a deep-seated loyalty to the AANES and SDF – particularly, as it happens, those Kurds in eastern regions where the U.S. no longer retains a presence. Damascus’ strategy in NES therefore remains focused on pulling Arab populations away from the AANES – a strategy it shares with Turkey, ISIS, and even some U.S. policy-makers.

Damascus’ trump card when wooing key political actors in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and other Arab regions is the security and service provision it should be able to provide as a state actor.

But a potential Turkish invasion does not seem likely to affect these regions, and nor indeed has Damascus proven particularly capable of combating Turkey’s air capabilities in Idlib. When it comes to internal security, meanwhile, Damascus’ bloody reputation precedes it. It is only die-hard GoS loyalists who feel they have nothing to fear from Assad’s intelligence services. In terms of service provision, likewise, AANES has been consistently outperforming Damascus on key local issues like the cost of bread, electricity provision and now its coronavirus response.

Where AANES really has the ability to outflank Damascus, however, is in the extent of autonomy it can offer to these communities – though limited to date, a far cry from Damascus’ rigid central control. Concessions to Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor, granting them more autonomy via a new federal system even at the expense of AANES’ efforts to promote a more secular and pro-woman agenda in the region, pull the rug out from under the GoS’ feet and create the space for AANES and SDF to continue building trust in this region.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ https://media.defense.gov/2020/May/13/2002298979/-1/-1/1/LIG_OIR_Q2_MAR2020_GOLD_508_0513.PDF

⁸⁶ RIC interview, USAID-funded stabilization coordinator, August 2020

Much the same could be said about the AANES' recent cancellation of the rollout of its secular curriculum in Deir ez-Zor following pushback from the conservative local population, or the reforms concerning alcohol and female employment in cafeterias in Raqqa. AANES' willingness to launch major public consultations in response to the crisis in Deir ez-Zor is to its credit, and puts into practice the ideals it has long promoted.

It has become something of a truism that the majority-Arab regions suffer from AANES domination; but it is in these regions where civil-society pressure has recently created concrete changes to regional AANES policy. From the tribes of Deir ez-Zor through to women participating in political organization in Raqqa, there are many people in these regions who stand to benefit from the new political contract proposed by AANES.

Though some sections of the Arab population are effectively waiting for the return of central control, GoS has not been able to stir up significant pro-Damascus agitation even in those regions where it now has a military presence. Deep suspicion toward Damascus gives the AANES the time and space to keep building trust – in terms of both short-term alliances with local tribes and political stakeholders, and longer-term efforts to win the population over to its political vision.

POLICY PROPOSALS

US and Western policy-makers must recognize that a stable situation in the Arab regions of NES is critical to a long-term and enduring defeat of ISIS in these regions, as well as preventing Assad's government from making any further advances.

Simply allowing the SDF to incur enormous losses fighting ISIS only to abandon them to deal with the immense challenges in the liberated regions is short-sighted in the extreme. The US-led Coalition's successful partnership with the SDF indicates not only that the AANES can be both relied upon as the West's best partner in this region, but also that the AANES is open and receptive to feedback and input from the outside. As such, a number of policy proposals present themselves.

1/ Engage with AANES and SDC as a whole, not only the SDF

Efforts to build inclusive and decentralized governance in NES are severely impeded by the West's insistence on referring to 'the Kurds', dealing only with select Kurdish leaders, and ignoring the civil and political institutions being-built up in NES in favor of the SDF.

The SDF has importance and legitimacy as a military body, but it is the AANES and SDC who represent the future of NES as civil bodies tasked with creating a better life for the region's millions of residents beyond the battlefield. Moreover, military coordination remains necessarily centralized, whereas the AANES has been able to more fully realize the aim of devolution and power-sharing via their local councils, and is more representative of NES' present-day ethnic diversity. By recognizing and dealing with these bodies – for example, inviting SDC to join the official UN negotiations over the Syrian constitution – the US and other actors can help to ensure that millions of Arabs and Kurds in NES have a voice in Syria's future.

2/ Support ongoing AANES reforms in Deir ez-Zor and elsewhere by strengthening local councils

As noted above, it is in the Arab regions that the AANES has been pushed into enacting significant and ongoing reforms. On key issues such as ISIS detainees or perceived corruption, the AANES has proven itself willing to listen to local concerns and to seek a compromise position which is amenable to local leaders even where it contradicts the AANES' vision.

The international community's role is not to determine the pace at which power should be devolved, or the extent to which the demands put forward by protesters in Deir ez-Zor should be met: rather, they should help to mediate productive discussion between local community leaders and the AANES and SDC. The AANES should be trusted to build a new political consensus in these regions, with the international community facilitating these conversations and providing professional training where appropriate to enable locals to take a leading role in determining and delivering the best possible policy for their communities.

3/ Invest in redevelopment and reconstruction beyond the battlefield

Other issues, such as lack of service provision in these regions, remain largely out of the AANES' hands. Peace and security are needed for the AANES to bolster its ailing economy and increase the rate of reconstruction in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and elsewhere. As well as guaranteeing that no further Turkish invasion will affect the slow rebuilding of day-to-day life in the Arab regions, Western powers with an interest in ensuring ISIS' enduring defeat must enable the AANES to engage in fast and effective reconstruction.

Providing solid infrastructure, health and education services is a necessary condition for keeping ISIS and the GoS from strengthening their foothold in these highly-strategic areas. Whether via funding provided to the AANES, to its constituent councils or via NGOs, the international community must do much more to assist the AANES in its efforts to rebuild the vast destruction wrought in the Arab regions – much of it caused by bombs paid for by Western taxpayers.

4/ Prevent a further Turkish invasion and subsequent boost to ISIS and the GoS

As has been extensively discussed throughout this report, though it occurred some distance from the Arab heartlands, Turkey's 2019 invasion not only set back the campaign against ISIS in Deir ez-Zor by up to a year, but allowed the GoS to make unprecedented advances and regain a foothold across the Arab regions of NES. Until now, this foothold has not been translated into any real control for Damascus in the Arab regions, but the situation is extremely precarious.

Only a Turkish attack on NES would be likely to have the seismic impact necessary to force the AANES to accept any return of GoS control to the Arab regions. Unfortunately, such an assault presently seems an inevitability, with NES still vulnerable and unrecognized by the international community. By strengthening NES on the one hand (through political recognition and the imposition of a no-fly-zone covering the surviving regions of NES) and reigning in Erdoğan on the other (through the pre-emptive threat of Magnitsky

sanctions), the US and other political actors can finally grant the region space to breathe. The SDF will be able to focus on the enduring defeat of ISIS, and the GoS will no longer be able to use the existential threat posed by Turkey to press forward into the Arab regions of NES. As a result, the AANES will be able to continue building peace and security in its long-troubled Arab regions, to the benefit of all those who have suffered at the hands of either ISIS or Damascus.

THE CRUCIBLE OF THE ARAB REGIONS

Whether AANES will be able to achieve long-lasting peace, security and genuine devolution of power in the Arab regions depends to a large extent on the duration and nature of the Biden government's commitment in NES. It is only a matter of time until another Turkish operation east of the Euphrates rears its head, and if the US cannot prove a renewed commitment to NES today, it can expect a further lurch toward Russia and Damascus tomorrow.

Conversely, if the AANES and SDF are able to keep on ensuring a reasonably calm security environment, rolling out service provision and incorporating local opinions into their decision-making – supported where possible by their Coalition partners – Damascus and ISIS alike will find it hard to make major inroads towards retaking Raqqa, Manbij or Deir ez-Zor.

The Arab regions are a crucible, where the ideals promoted by the AANES are being tested in fire. If these principles can withstand the test in Deir ez-Zor, international powers should begin to take seriously the AANES' claim that their political program is the only way to achieve a better future for all of Syria.

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