

# THORNY CHALLENGES FOR THE PYD- LED AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

ANALYSIS

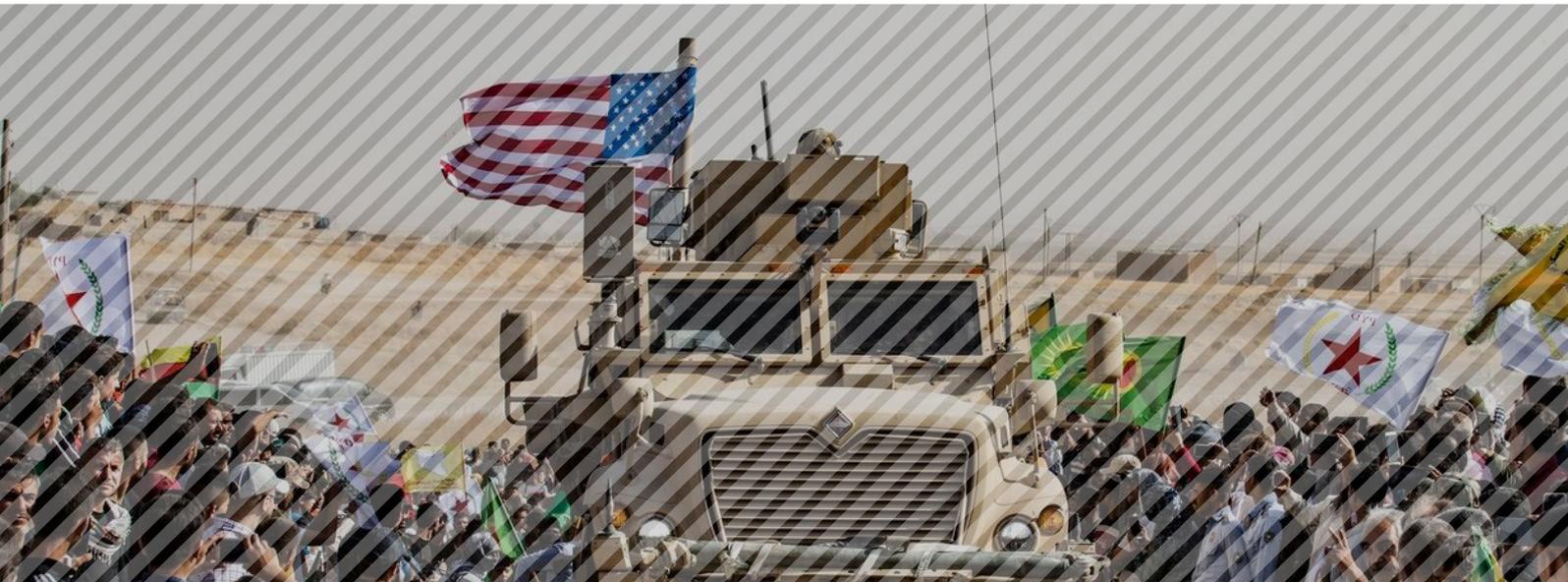


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AL SHARQ  
STRATEGIC  
RESEARCH



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# THORNY CHALLENGES FOR THE PYD-LED AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

**Abstract:** The PYD-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has been facing various thorny challenges in different realms ever since the launch of Operation Peace Spring. A climate of uncertainty with regards to the future continues to govern the atmosphere in Northeastern Syria. The AANES's present situation can best be described as unpredictable, given the fact that alliances from different sides are continuously being tested in Syria. The political status of the Autonomous Administration has not changed despite many rounds of negotiations with both Damascus and Russia. On top of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has become a novel challenge to the AANES.

## Introduction

October 9, 2019, marks an important turning point for both the presence and future of the PYD-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The sudden withdrawal decision of US troops from Syria announced by Donald Trump on October 7, which came amidst Turkey's long standing pressure on creating a safe zone along its borders in Northeastern Syria, paved the way for Turkey to initiate Operation Peace Spring on the areas ruled by the AANES. Prior to the AANES, the PYD had provided social services to the population under its controls through Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA), which was a structure of local governance systems comprised of local councils and assemblies across three main cantons<sup>1</sup> (Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane) declared in 2014. The DAA later evolved into AANES as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of which the YPG consists as a backbone expanded its influence towards Arab-populated areas such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

The fragile security situation in Northeastern Syria, which was further exacerbated with the military operation, led to a massive reaction in favor of the YPG/SDF<sup>2 3</sup> specifically from Western civic organizations and countries. Soon after the initiation of the military assault, the White House cadres pushed the situation towards a more manageable direction. First phone calls and demands were made and later a US delegation headed by Vice President Mike Pence was sent to Turkey. In the wake of the tense negotiations, Pence announced that he and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had brokered a five-day-long ceasefire. According to the agreement, the main point was the following: the Turkish side would pause Operation Peace Spring in order to allow the YPG elements to withdraw from the projected safe zone within the specified time slot.

Although the operation continued in the aftermath of the 120-hour long ceasefire, though not as planned initially, Turkey concentrated more on two axes in an attempt to capture the two road's junctions "Tel Tamer and Ain Issa" which are located on the strategic M4 international highway.<sup>4</sup> The SDF from its side was trying to minimize damages incurred from the sudden withdrawal of the US troops and the ongoing Turkish operation. Thus, from the very beginning of the operation, the organization entered a complex negotiation process with both the Syrian regime and Russia. The process resulted in an agreement on October 13.<sup>5</sup> The agreement included deploying Border Guards<sup>6</sup> belonging to the Syrian Army on the border with Turkey, both on the international border, and on Operation Peace Spring's final boundaries. On October 21, US President Donald Trump adjusted the withdrawal plan by deciding to keep several hundred US soldiers in Eastern Syria for the following reasons as some of the US officials presented<sup>7</sup>: protecting oil wells,<sup>8</sup> preventing ISIS from regrouping, facing the Iranian influence and pushing it out of Syria and affecting the Syrian political process. Moreover, the next day, before the completion of the 5-day long ceasefire, President Erdoğan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin reached a new agreement that foresaw the withdrawal of SDF-YPG forces from the North to the South for 30 kilometers deep.<sup>9</sup> From, October 22 onwards, most of the steps were moving according to the Sochi ceasefire agreement, except for the situation around Ain Issa, and Tel Tamer, where clashes continued until the SDF's agreement with the regime was activated by deploying border guards on the frontlines of Tel Tamer town<sup>10</sup> and some other areas like in Kobane.

### **Uncertainty for the AANES**

Uncertainty with regards to the future governs the atmosphere in Northeastern Syria as of now. The AANES's situation is unpredictable as alliances from different sides are continuously being tested.<sup>11</sup> Internally, many local parties vary severely in terms of ideology and ethnicity. What is more, the area "faces the divergent interests of powerful external actors."<sup>12</sup> Prior to the Turkish operation, in the area, there was a kind of local administration that resembled the AANES, of which the military wing was the local ally of the USA and the International Coalition in their fight against ISIS. Meanwhile, there was a weak presence of the central government, which would not dream of putting its feet back in the area for an extended period taking the presence of the USA and the Coalition into consideration.

That said, the AANES before and after October 9 is not the same; somehow, there have been some changes in the self-administration we used to know from 2014 until 2019. The new situation of controlling areas of administration are divided into:

**A.** mixed areas of control shared between Asayish (AANES police force)<sup>13</sup>, and regime border guards along the border with

Turkey starting from the West of Amuda city up to Kobane, and with the new Turkish-formed area of "Operation Peace Spring "frontlines," besides some Russian military police forces in different areas like in Kobane, Amuda and Qamishli airport.

**B.** the region which extends from Al-Qamishli city to Al-Malikiyah city, reaching the border with the Kurdistan region of Iraq and South of Deir ez-Zor,<sup>14</sup> is an SDF-USA controlled area, with a new Russian deployment at the Qamishli airport.

**C.** regions of Tabqa, Manbij, and Kobane – located outside of cities, contain forces from Russia, the regime and the SDF, as for Raqqa the city is still under SDF control with even more Russian presence<sup>15</sup>, since local communities made it clear that they will not accept the return of the Syrian regime to their region.

### **Military Situation**

Discussing the military situation and the future of AANES is getting more complicated day by day. It is known that the SDF has long been aspiring to attain autonomy in return for the integration with the Syrian Army. The SDF has continually asked the regime to preserve its organization and hierarchy within the Army for a possible integration. For quite a while, this stark precondition has been

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voiced by the SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Kobane in various interviews<sup>16</sup> many times. What is more, the SDF wants its fighters to stay in their current positions and does not want the regime to deploy them in other conflict areas as the main attacking forces. However, the integration plan is not promising, as there are a number of problems that cannot be easily addressed.

The first critical issue with regards to the integration is related to the main components of the area. Not everyone taking part in the ranks of the SDF would be willing to join the Syrian Army. In this regard, especially Eastern Syria has seen many protests against the return of the Assad regime. Specifically, in Deir ez-Zor, there were mass protests against the Assad regime and Iranian-backed militias.<sup>17</sup> Raqqa was also an area of mass protests in late 2019.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, even if the regime agrees on the SDF's integration into the Syrian Army, at this point, some other problematic issues, ranging from the structure and deployment of forces to budgetary issues will arise.

Secondly, any agreement between the SDF and the regime would face issues regarding the military ranks. It is ambiguous how the SDF personnel would be placed within the military hierarchy through a possible integration since the organization adopted a different form of hierarchy in comparison to regular armies. Even though there was an attempt in this direction by forming the military councils before the initiation of Operation Peace Spring, as of now the initiative is no longer active.

Having said that, even though, in parallel with its purpose of obtaining autonomy, the AANES and SDF have been negotiating with the Syrian regime and its main backer Russia both in Damascus and at the Kheimim airbase for quite a while, the regime has consistently refused any demands with regards to autonomy. Likely increasingly so, in the upcoming period, the regime's stance concerning autonomy seems to follow the current trajectory. On top of that, the regime is still trying to use Turkey's threats against the AANES to gain more leverage over the negotiations. However, this does not imply that Damascus cannot or does not offer anything in return. Damascus

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had previously offered minimal proposals to the AANES, such as implementing the local administration law (term 107) to buy its consent during the negotiations. Additionally, according to some reports, the regime also offered some modifications concerning internal security forces.<sup>19</sup> Taking Damascus' stance into account, the PYD/AANES could gravitate towards increasing its efforts to reach an agreement with the Erbil-backed Kurdish National Council (KNC) so as to beef up its position vis-à-vis Damascus.

In addition to the points mentioned above, it can be articulated that the SDF-controlled areas are not in a favorable position in terms of the military. Militarily-speaking, the areas controlled by the SDF have been split into two in terms of zones of influence as of now. The Eastern part of the AANES is under US protection, while the Western part of the administration is now mainly under Russian influence. Taking into consideration the USA's steps in the region, such as its initiative in the direction of establishing local forces in Deir ez-Zor, and the sponsoring of the intra-Kurdish dialogue, it can be said that the country plans to stay in Northern Syria for a prolonged period of time, irrespective of Donald Trump's sudden withdrawal

decision. The US decision-makers are also quite suspicious of more Russian and Iranian influence in Syria. These reasons, combined with the aspiration of preventing a possible ISIS resurgence seem to be directing the US officials to stay in Syria, at least for the near future.

With the likelihood of an extended US presence in the upcoming period, some developments could take place in favor of the SDF. In the coming period, the extended US presence could be accompanied with attempts of pushing Russia and the regime forces from areas like Raqqa, Kobane, and Manbij, where they deployed troops previously. Nonetheless, Russia is likely to continue to increase its clout vis-à-vis US attempts. As a matter of fact, Russia is trying to enhance its presence by recruiting<sup>20</sup> some elements from the tribes<sup>21</sup> in the region in an effort to solidify its power in the country, capitalizing on the deterioration of the economy<sup>22</sup>. Besides, the USA can increase its support to local administrations in the SDF-controlled areas to fortify the dependency of actors aligned with the SDF on the USA. This dependency scenario could be realized through financial support and some degree of security.

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It is no secret to anyone that the YPG/SDF's military position has been protected by the presence of the International Coalition for almost five years now. However, since the launch of "Operation Peace Spring," the position of the SDF has been closely connected to multiple foreign states, namely: the USA, Russia, and Turkey. The desires of some Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE will also be important in SDF's position. Saudi Arabia, as a geopolitical rival to Turkey, has been trying to increase its support to the SDF mainly through Arab tribes.<sup>23</sup> However, since the countries mentioned are far from reaching a comprehensive agreement regarding Syria, the areas controlled by the AANES will continue to be areas of friction/contention. These areas will continue to be vulnerable and will be open to both internal and external problems and threats. For the AANES, this situation is a hard challenge to overcome in the short term.

### **Administrative Situation**

The Autonomous Administration, which started in 2012 and was announced in 2014, both expanded and shrunk many times at different points. Territorial gains and losses happened as a result of clashes with rival groups. For example, the YPG and Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups clashed in Ras al-Ain city in 2012-2013. The YPG also had clashes with the Al-Nusra Front and ISIS. In 2012, within the framework of a security arrangement between the Assad regime and the PYD, the regime forces retreated from Northern Syria. This posture paved the way for the PYD to become the de facto ruler of the area over time.

The geographical expansion of the Autonomous Administration started in 2012 and continued steadily until 2014. The Kobane Battle that took place in 2014 became a turning point for the Autonomous Administration as it heralded a new relationship with the USA. In late 2014, the YPG, thanks to the extraordinary air support it received from the International Coalition without which the group would not have won the battle in Kobane, prevailed over ISIS. The brutality of ISIS against Yazidis in Sinjar, Iraq, and the subsequent ISIS attacks on the Syrian city Kobane/Ayn al-Arab drew the attention of the world. The newly formed International Coalition

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against ISIS took the lead in aiding Kobane and the YPG fighters inside the city. The period after the defeat of ISIS in Kobane marked changes for the YPG regarding the size of their land, the military aid they received, worldwide their reputation, and of course their alliance with the USA and member countries of the International Coalition. With the US moving toward establishing bases in northern Syria and declaring the formation of an army to protect the region, and describing the YPG/SDF as an ally, the Autonomous Administration began to change its name and administrative structure in line with the SDF's increasing control over Arab-populated areas, especially in the East of the country. Due to the SDF's growing clout, the Autonomous Administration began to remove terms such as "Rojava," given its negative connotation.

In addition to these, the Autonomous Administration underwent many steps in its rebranding efforts regarding its administrative structure. At the beginning of 2014, it was announced as the formation of three cantons. Later in mid-2015, the AA moved towards changing its project. The declaration of the Federation of North Syria was made, and subsequently a constituent assembly was formed in December 2015. In March 2016, the foundation meeting of the council of the Federal System in Rojava and Northern Syria took place. The council had to work on the establishment of the Federal Democratic System of North of Syria and Beth Nahrin.

The General Assembly approved the draft of the social contract in December 2016, after amending the project name as the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" by removing the word "Rojava" from it. Then, in an attempt to enhance the declared federalism, the Constituent Assembly of the Federal Democratic System approved the law enabling the federal elections in Northern Syria in July of 2017. The law set the dates for holding elections in 3 phases:

- 1- Elections of the communes, which took place in September 2017.
- 2- The local administration elections which were held in December 2017.<sup>24</sup>
- 3- The elections of the "Region's People Assembly" and elections of the "People's Democratic Conference" in January 2018, which did not take place. Later, it was announced that the Democratic Conference elections would be postponed by the high commissioners for the elections two weeks ahead of schedule, and then they never happened.

Regarding the postponement, Fawza Yusef, the joint head of the executive body in, "Syria's North Federation" explained the situation with one statement, by saying "there were no circumstances that prevented us from completing the third stage, but the organizational aspect and the administrative divisions related to the results of the second stage led us to postpone it."<sup>25</sup> She also claimed that the delay was due to the postponement of

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the elections for the second phase between 03.11.2017-01.12.2017. Limited time and the commission's preoccupation with the joint presidential elections for the district and municipal councils led to this decision.<sup>26</sup> However, as observers and some sources on the ground explained, the postponement was connected to Ankara's preparations to launch a large-scale military operation on the Afrin Canton. With the stumble of the "Syria's North Federation" project, the Autonomous Administration went on to take a new step by announcing the establishment of AANES on June 9, 2018, which included Arab-majority cities alongside Kurdish-populated areas. In the meantime, it stepped back from completing the election process.

During all the administrative and political changes that the Autonomous Administration underwent between 2014-2019, all the changes in the process were based on unilateral decisions, with no basis from the Syrian constitution nor the Syrian local administration law. Rather, the changes all took place in a partisan way based on the PYD's political prescriptions. Thus, the shape of the AANES has been one of the more contentious discussion topics in most of the dialogue rounds recently initiated between the PYD and KNC.

Additionally, the changes did not settle in one form within five years, which led to an absence of stability and made them more vulnerable concerning the negotiations with the regime. This situation also reduced their credibility level in the eyes of the local communities, given the fact that many administrative bodies are running at the same time while the AANES is announcing new ones and keeping the old system active. Despite all these, AANES claims that it is ready for a political agreement with the regime based on some very serious demands concerning the recognition of its political project.

Now, as the AANES is in a weaker position after the operation launched on October 9th, the regime is not accepting to negotiate on the political future of the AANES, envisioning that the AANES will weaken more over time. After Operation Peace Spring, the regime

found an opportunity to increase its footprint in some areas controlled by the AANES. It has also returned to some areas, primarily in a military capacity, acting as a buffer of power on the border with Turkey and the areas surrounding “Operation Peace Spring” Zone.

Moreover, between 2016 and 2017, many rounds of negotiations were held between the Syrian regime and AANES at the Kheimim Air Base<sup>27</sup> with Russia’s initiatives. Nonetheless, these negotiations did not bring about any tangible political or administrative agreements. The negotiations took place during a time when the Autonomous Administration was in a strong position. Despite this fact, the Syrian regime did not make any concessions. Now, the AANES is in a worse situation, and the pressure on it is increasing.

Again, as the USA changed its plans regarding the withdrawal from Northern Syria, the regime is likely to try to increase its influence and minimize the presence of the AANES in the region starting from the west of Qamishli city all the way to Kobane and other areas. Especially Arab-populated areas like Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa are the

regime’s primary targets. Nonetheless, this process is not easy. It would be difficult for the regime to absorb the reaction of Arab-majority areas when the protests against the regime held in late 2019 are taken into account. Moreover, the regime and Russia are likely to concentrate on the province of Idlib, given the fact that they deem Idlib as a grave threat. Therefore, the regime most probably will initiate a new military offensive on Idlib at the earliest opportunity and refrain from engaging in a bloody confrontation with the YPG/SDF in the short term. Russia and the Syrian regime “view elements of the SDF as reconcilable and could, in theory, negotiate with elements of the group.”<sup>28</sup> However, the situation in Idlib is different for them.

### **Political Situation**

From 2015 onwards, local actors faced challenges in maintaining a balance to preserve their achievements in Syria. The start of the International Coalition’s ground operations, taken together with direct Russian military support to the regime, and Turkey’s direct intervention contributed to this situation. These factors made local actors more dependent on their foreign sponsors. As for the Autonomous

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Administration of North and East Syria, this dependency was one of the reasons behind the frequent shifts of its administrative and governing structure. The first three years of the Coalition's presence in Northern Syria combined with Turkey's pressure have forced the Autonomous Administration to make changes in line with the changing dynamics on the ground.

The frequent changes in the political structure show that the Autonomous Administration had considerable flexibility, adapting new forms in line with new dynamics stemming from realities on the Syrian battlefield. However, this situation also shows the uncertainty regarding its final political will as the changes mentioned have different dimensions. For example, the AANES itself has been trying to adapt to the new reality according to the explanations of "Abdullah Öcalan's Democratic Nation Concept." Another dimension is intra-Kurdish dynamics. The PYD has a turbulent history with the Erbil-backed Kurdish National Council. The AANES and KNC have held many rounds of negotiations to solve their political problems. However, until now, they maintain a problematic relationship with unresolved problems concerning the political and administrative shape of governance in the region despite many attempts to solve them.

The third dimension or dynamic is the negotiations with the Assad regime. This dynamic can be merged with the presence of the International Coalition in Northern Syria. Even though negotiations between the AANES and the Syrian regime were frequent, they failed to bring about a solid political agreement. The negotiations mentioned date back to the beginning of 2016. This date refers to the period after the formation of the SDF, which brought more US support and the presence of the Coalition. The International Coalition factor was important for the SDF and Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), as they believed that the Coalition would continue to support them, and later this support could transform into political support/recognition. This way of thinking was evident in many aspects. It can easily be observed in the statements released by the PYD/SDF/SDC. The second aspect concerns the political offices that were opened in the various European states and in the USA. The PYD even has a political office in Russia.

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To summarize, the three dimensions/dynamics clarified above have resulted in contradicted lines of negotiations; like the case with the KNC, beside conflicted external factors; cooperation with Russia in the west of Euphrates, the alliance with the International Coalition in the East of the Euphrates, and the presence of internal factors, regarding the factions inside the AANES and SDF. The PYD was not willing to activate any of the agreements with the KNC. Moreover, it could not get any sort of political recognition neither from the regime nor from the USA. Namely, the AANES could not translate its military victories into political recognition. What is more, if the US troops go through with the withdrawal from Syria, the political project of the SDF/AANES will be at stake. As many would acknowledge, the future of this political project is “dependent on the US presence and therefore tied to the policy choices Washington makes.”<sup>29</sup>

The survival of the AANES would continue to be connected with the US and Coalition presence. The USA is likely to preserve this area, at least in the middle term, since a total withdrawal from Syrian soil could affect the USA's position on many regional and international platforms such as the American position in the Geneva

political process. It is no secret that the political process is not functioning well. More precisely, the process is frozen, yet in order to keep it alive, the USA would want to stay in the country in the near future. Having said that, the USA would also consider staying in Syria as ISIS has been increasing its attacks in Syria after its territorial defeat in the country. Needless to say, Washington is eager to preserve its presence in the country to balance Russia and push Iran out of the country.

Taking into account the aforementioned points, the US and Coalition presence in Northeastern Syria seems to continue in the upcoming period. However, as we have seen, the USA is not willing or able to push other state actors to move towards granting AANES political recognition. Thus, it can be stated that AANES will likely preserve its unstable political position, with no agreement with the Syrian regime.

### **A Novel Challenge to the AANES: The Covid-19 Pandemic**

The Covid-19 Pandemic, which hit the whole world, poses a novel challenge to the AANES. Even though the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has taken various measures such as implementing a curfew, starting

sterilization campaigns, closing borders, and preventing all gatherings<sup>30</sup>, it is evident that the region is facing severe problems and is in dire need of health facilities, equipment, and medical staff. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the region only has 64 health facilities alongside 166 specialists.<sup>31</sup> The areas controlled by the AANES also have a very low number of ventilators and intensive care beds. It “has only 150 ventilators and 35 intensive care beds for a population of 2 million.”<sup>32</sup> AANES areas are also home to refugee camps in which thousands of ISIS-affiliated women and children reside.

Moreover, thousands of ISIS-affiliated prisoners (including foreign fighters) in various SDF-controlled jails put even further pressure on the organization. In March, some of these detainees rioted in a prison in Hasaka, and reportedly several inmates escaped<sup>33</sup> from the prison. Yet, the riot was quelled afterward. Nonetheless, a possible outbreak in such notorious overcrowded camps still has the potential to turn into a disaster swiftly.

The AANES will undoubtedly try to successfully get past this crisis at least by minimizing the damage on the population it controls in an attempt to increase its legitimacy both at the societal and international levels. However, if it fails more than the regime or the opposition, its legitimacy is likely to decrease in the eyes of the people living under its control. In the opposite scenario, if it does better than them, the local population would probably tolerate it. As of now, the situation is not very favorable for the administration. The AANES up until very recently, could not even carry out Covid tests. Although the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has recently sent some coronavirus test kits<sup>34</sup> to the AANES, the Autonomous Administration still has to cooperate with Damascus as the number of tests it has in its possession remains very limited. The WHO mostly operates in the regime-held areas, and the AANES cannot expect much help from it as the WHO refuses to provide direct aid to the AANES, in line with its “policy of working only with or through a country’s official representation.”<sup>35</sup> This situation merely increases the reliance of the AANES on the Syrian regime.

The AANES has announced three cases of Covid-19 thus far.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, in April, the first death from coronavirus was officially confirmed by the AANES. A 53-year-old man had died in Qamishli.<sup>37</sup> The AANES has accused the WHO of not sharing information about

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this fatality.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the regime might also exploit the fragile situation in the area in an attempt to undermine the AANES.

### **Conclusion**

From the Russian involvement in the Syrian crisis in late 2015 onwards, the dynamics and fate of local actors in Syria have changed a lot. As for the AANES, its future is more connected with the presence of the USA and the International Coalition, except for Afrin and Operation Peace Spring areas now. This dependency on the presence and activity of external actors made most of the local projects fragile when foreign powers were reaching a consensus on issues with regard to their interests. The case of the AANES has not been exceptional in comparison to the opposition-controlled areas. Soon after the US withdrawal decision made by Trump, the map on the ground changed rapidly. Even though the situation on the ground now looks stable, the reality remains. The United States has an ambiguous stand towards Northeastern Syria. Also, the regions that were controlled by the AANES before Operation Peace Spring were administratively considered as one entity;

today, they are divided into three areas. One part is under Russian influence, the second part is under American influence, and the third one is controlled by the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army. This situation makes the administrative future of the AANES hanging with two likely outcomes. The first one is related to the presence of the US and the recent US-sponsored talks between the PYD and KNC. However, the likelihood of the success of the talks is low as both sides have laid stark preconditions from the very beginning. The PYD wants the KNC to resign from<sup>39</sup> the Istanbul-based opposition, while the KNC is demanding the PYD to distance itself<sup>40</sup> from the PKK. Both demands do not seem very realistic in the current atmosphere. Turkey also had tough rhetoric towards the talks, which further undermines the likelihood of final success for the talks given Erbil's relationship with Ankara. Despite these facts, recently the KNC and the Kurdish National Unity Parties (PYNK)<sup>41</sup> announced that they reached an initial understanding on political vision.<sup>42</sup> However, the two sides in the past years reached political agreements several times. But eventually, the agreements failed and the PYD appeared as the winner.

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Bearing this situation in mind, the fate of this initial understanding will continue to be dubious. That said, if the two sides continue the unity talks, overcome the longstanding problems and reach a comprehensive agreement in the coming period, the PYD and AANES will surely utilize this situation as a tool of gaining legitimacy both at the societal and international levels.

The second one is related to the negotiation rounds between the AANES and the Syrian regime. This possibility puts the future of AANES relations with the USA and the Coalition on edge. Militarily AANES is mainly connected with the US position, if the US maintains its presence on the ground and works to reach a comprehensive final agreement between the KNC-AANES, then SDF can refuse to join the regime forces and try to preserve its dependency on the International Coalition, with a greater tendency to build friendly relations with Turkey, and the Syrian opposition. However, if the US and the Coalition make another move to decrease their presence in Syria, the SDF could increase its efforts to reach an agreement with the regime, even if that would be a weak one.

In summation, the AANES and its previous forms have been excluded from the Astana and Geneva political processes over the past six years. The political fate of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has still not changed despite many rounds of negotiations with both the regime and Russia. On top of this, Operation Peace Spring and the Covid-19 Pandemic have created new challenges for it in different realms. Taking these points into account, the prospects of having a political status for “the current shape of the AANES” do not loom on the horizon.

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## Endnotes

- 1- Rana Khalaf, "Governing Rojava Layers of Legitimacy in Syria", Chatham House Research Paper, December 2016, p.5.
- 2- "World reacts to Turkey's military operation in northeast Syria", Al Jazeera, 10.10.2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/world-reacts-turkey-military-operation-northeast-syria-191009181335266.html>
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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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