

# DECODING THE INTRA-KURDISH DIALOGUE IN SYRIA

**MEHMET EMIN CENGİZ**

19 APRIL 2021



Partiyên Yekîtiya Nîştîmanî ya Kurd  
أحزاب الوحدة الوطنية الكردية



**Abstract:** The intra-Kurdish unity talks between the PYD and the KNC seem to be at an impasse. The unity negotiations, which are undoubtedly the product of times of crisis in Kurdish politics in Syria, started in April 2020, and two rounds of negotiations have already passed. Nevertheless, face-to-face negotiations between the sides stalled months ago, and the third round of talks could not be initiated despite various attempts and US mediation. Moreover, many obstacles lie ahead of the success of the unity talks.

## **Introduction**

The launch of the Operation Peace Spring by Turkey and its local ally, the Syrian National Army, on October 9, 2019, and the subsequent seizure of a stretch of land between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, inflicted a heavy blow to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the PYD-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The assault paved the way for Syrian regime troops to return to Northern Syria after Turkey and Russia struck a deal<sup>1</sup> on October 22, 2019 in Sochi. Also, thanks to the partial withdrawal of United States (US) troops, Russian forces found the opportunity to spread to the SDF-held areas in Northern Syria, where they were not previously present. Furthermore, Mazloum Abdi, the SDF's commander-in-chief, under US pressure coupled with the military onslaught, took the lead to launch intra-Kurdish unity talks between the PYD and the Erbil-backed Kurdish National Council, which is also a part of the Istanbul-based Syrian opposition. The military onslaught has clearly shown that the PYD cannot rule the area on its own. Thus, in an attempt to find a solution to the crisis, the SDF, with the mediation of US officials and French support, initiated the talks in April 2020.

We need to bear in mind though that the two sides' unity talks are not a novel development. Rather, the talks have a history, with the talks in fact are the product of the different crises in Kurdish politics in Syria. The necessity of a united political front/mechanism based on power-sharing for Syrian Kurds has been voiced since the outset of the Syrian War. This

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was essential for the Syrian Kurds to “project a strong image of themselves to Syrian and international public opinion, and then enter into alliances with non-Kurdish Syrian political parties and blocs.”<sup>2</sup> To this end, with the mediation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s (KRI) leadership, the PYD and KNC have reached several agreements ever since 2012. As a result, the two sides brokered the First and Second Erbil Agreements in 2012 and 2013, respectively, before striking another deal dubbed as the Duhok Agreement in 2014. As a result of the First Erbil Agreement, the PYD and KNC even established the short-lived Kurdish Supreme Committee<sup>3</sup> to jointly govern Northern Syria. Nonetheless, once the sides returned to Syria, their disagreements surfaced, and the agreements become dysfunctional. The result of these failures culminated in the PYD’s establishment of unilateral rule in Kurdish-populated areas. Over time, the KNC weakened gradually, and many of its members were either arrested, killed<sup>4</sup>, or exiled.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the points mentioned above, it is salient that the unity talks between the PYD and KNC were launched due to a new crisis, namely, Operation Peace Spring. Nevertheless, a wing within the PYD led by Aldar Khalil has constantly shown its discontent with the talks. The representatives of this wing are not sympathetic to the idea of power-sharing. Hence, the PYD, in May 2020, established a new coalition named the Kurdish National Unity Parties (PYNK) that comprises 25 parties. Many interpreted this move as an attempt to complicate the already fragile unity talks.

### **Reasons for the Halt in Face-to-Face Talks**

Two rounds of talks have passed in the unity talks between the PYNK and the KNC (A coalition of 15 parties). After many meetings between the coalitions, in June 2020, the representatives of both sides, accompanied by William Roebuck, then Deputy Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, declared that they had reached an understanding to establish a Supreme Kurdish Reference.<sup>6</sup> Although the agreement/understanding was not comprehensive, many deemed it a positive preliminary step

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given that both sides declared they had reached a consensus on certain political issues, including a future decentralized Syria. The two coalitions' representatives also stated that the Duhok Agreement would be the basis for future negotiations.

The Supreme Kurdish Reference is of great importance in its essence. The Reference, which is expected to be comprised of 40 figures, is aimed at charting a common political vision for Kurdish actors in Syria. More importantly, it aims at establishing a partnership between the PYD and KNC in the Autonomous Administration. Additionally, it is expected to develop the Kurdish representation in international arenas and protect the Kurdish gains in Syria. In the third round of the unity negotiations, it is anticipated that the nature of the KNC's participation in the AANES will be discussed. Additionally, the return of Roj Peshmergas to Syria is expected to be addressed. The Roj Peshmergas were formed in Erbil in 2012 out of soldiers and officers who defected from the regime's army. Over time, the size of the mentioned Peshmergas grew with the participation of civilian Syrian Kurds living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The number of this force, whose commander-in-chief is Dilovan Robari,<sup>7 8</sup> is estimated to be around 7500.<sup>9</sup>

That being said, the face-to-face unity talks are currently stalled. It has become clear that this delay is due to the sides' diverging expectations and mutual accusations. Notably, the SDF/PYD side does not seem to have a united stance towards the talks. Against the backdrop of the negotiations, two names are of great importance: Mazloun Abdi and Aldar Khalil. Mazloun Abdi tries to present himself as the unifying figure and guarantor behind the talks. However, the KNC media, over the past weeks, consistently attacked him and questioned<sup>10</sup> his guarantor role in the negotiations, implicating that he is a "side" rather than a "guarantor" in the unity talks. Aldar Khalil meanwhile seems to be playing the role of spoiler of the negotiations. Aldar Khalil, a senior figure in the PYD and the PYNK coalition leader, constantly lashes out at the Roj Peshmerga and

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consistently refuses the return to Syria of these forces currently stationed in the KRI. What is more, he depicts the Roj Peshmergas as “gangs/mercenaries”<sup>11</sup> which are used by Turkey.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, the KNC has demanded an apology<sup>13</sup> from Aldar Khalil and shown its unwillingness to return to the negotiating table until Khalil apologizes<sup>14</sup> and stops using accusatory language<sup>15</sup> against the KNC.

### **Impact of the New US Administration on the Unity Talks**

During the administration of former US President Donald Trump, the Autonomous Administration lost a sizable portion of its territories to the Turkey-backed opposition. Therefore, even though the Syrian Kurds acted pragmatically and remained silent regarding the US election in late 2020, it can be predicted that the Syrian Kurds preferred a Biden victory in the election. Donald Trump’s greenlighting of Operation Peace Spring especially reinforced a feeling of betrayal among the Syrian Kurds. Following Biden’s declaration of victory, both the PYD and KNC figures seem satisfied with the result, as manifested in their speeches and statements.

On top of this, the Biden administration’s appointment of Brett McGurk, the previous Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, as the National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa<sup>16</sup> is another factor behind the Syrian Kurds’ expectations for a positive working relationship with the new administration. In fact, nobody expects Joe Biden to pull a rabbit out of the hat concerning the Syrian file in general and Kurdish politics in particular. The Syrian Kurds believe that the possibility of the SDF-held areas facing an unexpected or unpleasant operation to have tremendously diminished with the Biden administration. In parallel to this, the SDF is expected to receive continual US military support within the framework of Washington’s objective of preventing an ISIS resurgence in Syria. Additionally, the war on terror rhetoric is expected to dominate the realm, given McGurk’s aggressive stance on terror-related issues. Aware of this situation, the SDF has tried to transform

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the ISIS-affiliated prisoners in the SDF-held camps and prisons into a bargaining chip on the way to political recognition. In light of these, we can expect that there will be no decrease in US military support to the SDF in the upcoming period. In fact, in the past months of 2021, US military support for the SDF-held areas has continued. Many armored vehicles have been flown to the SDF areas through the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>17 18</sup>

Having said that, the US military support is not anticipated to translate into formal political gains for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. AANES figures in the past have desperately called on the Biden Administration to recognize it politically. Nonetheless, the Biden administration has so far not demonstrated any positive indication to this demand. Therefore, the de facto situation on the ground is highly likely to continue without translating into political gains for the PYD-led AANES. As a matter of fact, this is nothing new in the US stance on regional Kurdish politics. For example, even though the Iraqi Kurds gained de facto autonomy following the First Gulf War in 1991, their autonomy was only officially recognized in 2005 in the Iraqi constitution, in which Iraq was reconfigured as a federal state following the US invasion of Iraq.

### **AANES's Unwavering Quest for Political Recognition/Status**

Following the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria in March 2019, AANES increased its efforts for political recognition. Nonetheless, all the efforts of the AANES in this regard have proven to be futile thus far. Namely, the PYD/YPG could not transform its military triumph over ISIS into political recognition neither within the country, nor in the international arena. The Syrian regime consistently refused to grant the PYD/SDF any constitutional gains in the negotiations that took place between the regime and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) at Kheimim airbase and Damascus under Russian mediation. However, in spite of this reality, the Autonomous Administration has not abandoned its dream of political recognition.

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The SDC within this context started organizing in September 2020 a series of panels in the SDF-held areas, meeting with notables of different regions for consultations. After holding 13 panels in different places such as Tabqa, Raqqa, Hasakah, and Qamishli, the SDC held a congress entitled “the National Congress for the People of Jazira and the Euphrates” in Hasaka in November 2020. The SDC considered the congress as a shrewd move to boost its position on the path to political recognition. After the congress, the SDC and AANES released a concluding statement<sup>19</sup> consisting of 17 points. In the statement, the SDC and AANES promised to make reforms in different realms ranging from security to education in the SDF-held areas. One of the most critical points in the statement was the AANES’s intention to organize elections across Northeast Syria in an effort to make the PYD-led administrative structures more inclusive. Although the PYD previously held elections, genuine Arab representation<sup>20</sup> in the administrative structure has been problematic. Thus, in order to curb the Arab population’s discontent and add a certain level of KNC participation to the administration, the issue of elections was raised. By increasing inclusivity/representation, the AANES/SDC hopes to overcome its problem of legitimacy in its search for political status.

Moreover, after Biden’s victory, the AANES figures intensified their rhetoric for political recognition from the US. For example, Sinam Mohamad, the SDC’s Representative to the United States, called on the Biden Administration to officially “recognize the autonomous status” of North and East Syria.<sup>21</sup> Additionally Ilham Ahmad, the President of the Executive Committee of SDC, has expressed her desire to find common ground with the Syrian opposition on more than one occasion. Ahmad even voiced her desire for a joint project with the Syrian opposition within 2021 to turn Northeast Syria into a region of “shared democracy.”<sup>22</sup>

On top of this, AANES has also considered the intra-Kurdish dialogue to be useful in its dream of political recognition/status. At least from the US perspective, the unity talks aim

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to distance the PYD from the PKK. The US aims at incorporating the Kurdish National Council figures into the AANES in a way that would alleviate Ankara's security concerns. Via this strategy, the PYD also aims to overcome its legitimacy crisis at both societal and international levels and find a way to be included in political processes, such as the Geneva negotiations, which might draft Syria's future. Evidently, the US and some SDF/PYD figures envisage the unity talks as a part of a possible wider political solution to the Syrian Crisis, as evidenced by Abdi's remarks.<sup>23</sup> The moves mentioned earlier and the AANES/SDF figures' discourse regarding the change in administration, elections, and reforms should be read within the context of the AANES' unwavering quest for political legitimacy and recognition/status.

### **Obstacles Facing the Success of the Intra-Kurdish Dialogue**

Undoubtedly, there are a host of obstacles in facing the intra-Kurdish dialogue in Syria. Although the AANES and SDF figures have voiced their desires for reforms and elections across Northeastern Syria, the Kurdish National Council seems to be quite reluctant to take part in the election process. The election plan appears to have created a new crack in the unity talks. KNC figures have already made various preconditions to participate in the elections.

Neşet Zaza, a senior figure from the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (PDK-S), the oldest and most influential Syrian Kurdish Party, under the KNC, has stipulated a number of points to participate in the elections. According to him, the two sides have to reach a comprehensive agreement<sup>24</sup> to talk about the election process. Moreover, Zaza says that the region still faces security threats; thus, the environment is not plausible for an election. Additionally, he asserts that elections cannot be realized unless the Syrian refugees return to their homes after the region is secured. From Zaza's remarks, one can surmise that KNC figures consider a large amount of Syrian Kurdish refugees to be in support of the KNC. Thus, they stipulate the refugees' return, thinking this would be in their favor in a possible election. Apart from these points, the below thorny issues complicate the unity talks and diminish the chances for the negotiations' success.

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-First and foremost, there is a crisis of confidence between the PYNK and KNC coalitions. The two sides cannot even sit at the negotiating table without US mediation. In this respect, the US delegation has been holding separate meetings with both sides in the last period to convince them to relaunch face-to-face negotiations. The US has long been pushing for the talks. This can be seen in the statements<sup>25</sup> released by the US embassy in Syria. Moreover, the US' eagerness was also voiced by David Brownstein, the US Deputy Special Envoy to Syria. Brownstein, who replaced William Roebuck and is the most senior US diplomat in Syria for the time being, lately underscored the US' readiness<sup>26</sup> to facilitate the stalled unity talks between the Kurdish sides. Mazloum Abdi has also on more than one occasion called on both sides to resume<sup>27</sup> face-to-face talks, overcome their differences<sup>28</sup> , and pointed out the negative impact of the statements and accusations in the media.<sup>29</sup> Abdi has also stressed the need to consider the national interest<sup>30</sup> above everything to portray himself as a neutral and unifying figure in the negotiations. Despite Mazloum Abdi's attempts, the stance of the Aldar Khalil-led wing appears to be stronger. Nevertheless, under US and Abdi pressure, the PYNK was forced to release a statement. In the statement, the PYNK claimed that "they are continuing to succeed in the strategic dialogue with the Kurdish National Council, indicating that Comprehensive agreement is about to be finished that would result in a comprehensive Kurdish supreme authority."<sup>31</sup>

-Secondly, there is no clarity on the KNC's participation in the Autonomous Administration. Previously, it was expressed that a 40% quota will be allocated for each coalition. Moreover, it was stated that the remaining 20% will be allocated for independent figures. Yet, there has not been a comprehensive agreement that clarifies the allocated percentages.

-Thirdly, the two sides have diverging visions on the forced conscription and curriculum imposed by the AANES. The KNC shows its discontent with the SDF's compulsory military service implemented since 2014 under the name of "Self-Defense." The KNC objects to the idea of forced conscription on the grounds that thousands of young people fled

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Syria to avoid military service. As for the curriculum, on the one hand, the KNC wants the system to be changed entirely as the curriculum has a partisan tone. Moreover, the regime does not recognize the diplomas issued by the AANES, meaning the graduates of the schools following the curricula imposed by the Autonomous Administration will not be able to enroll in any university neither within Syria, nor abroad. On the other hand, the PYD accuses the KNC of objecting to providing education in the Kurdish language, a claim the KNC outright rejects.

-Additionally, Roj Peshmergas' return to Syria remains a source of contention/friction between the sides. Although Mazloun Abdi stresses that the issue will be solved in line with the Duhok Agreement<sup>32</sup>, some figures within the PYD/PYNK consistently showcase their discontent with the Peshmergas' return, as shown in Aldar Khalil's speeches. Even if the Peshmergas find a way to return to Syria, their status will continue to be problematic, as it is not clear whether they will be integrated into the SDF. The PYNK figures clearly say that there cannot be two separate defense forces in Northeastern Syria as such a situation will lead to chaos. In addition to these, the KNC objects to the idea of deploying the Roj Peshmergas as a defense force in Arab-populated areas like Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zour.

-The fate of political prisoners and missing persons from the KNC remains a mystery. Some KNC figures were arrested, and some went missing in the previous years due to PYD's crackdown. Moreover, the missing people (at least some of them) are thought to be killed. The KNC demands clarity and solutions in this regard.

-Another obstacle in the talks is the lack of civil society figures in the negotiations. Both sides assure that civil society would be incorporated into the negotiations at some point in the future, yet they decline to specify a date in this regard. This situation raises the question of both sides' seriousness.

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-Furthermore, some parties that are not part of either PYNK or the KNC want to be part of the talks as an independent third camp. The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party and the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (Al-Wahdah) share their reservations on the negotiations and aspire to become a part of the talks. However, the KNC figures claim<sup>33</sup> that Al Wahdah is close to the PYNK and object to the idea of having it as an independent third party in the talks.

-Additionally, many KNC offices were burned over the past months. The KNC accuses<sup>34</sup> the PYD side of the burnings. That said, many believe a group named the “Revolutionary Youth (Ciwane Şoreşger)” to be behind the arsons. This group is believed to be receiving direct orders from the PKK cadres. Moreover, it is thought that even Mazloum Abdi cannot prevent this group from their destructive actions. The group’s actions exacerbate the situation and reduce trust between the sides.

-The PYD-PKK ties still poison the talks. In an interview with Crisis Group<sup>35</sup>, Mazloum Abdi admitted the PKK cadres’ presence within the SDF and Autonomous Administration. He also promised to remove non-Syrian PKK cadres from their positions over time, without specifying a timetable for their removal. However, as stated above, a wing within the PYD and the PKK leaders in the Qandil mountains resist<sup>36</sup> this break, even though the KNC consistently asks the PYD to break its ties with the PKK. The wing that is eager to follow Qandil leadership constantly claims that they need to reach an agreement with the Syrian regime through Russian mediation. Nevertheless, the past rounds of talks with the regime show the futility of this idea. It is also worth noting that the KNC wants the PYD to officially state that it does not have any links with the PKK in a final signed comprehensive agreement. Mazloum Abdi previously objected to this idea outright, stating that any name other than PYNK/PYD-KNC would not be included in a final agreement. That being said, Turkey would not be satisfied by the removal of non-Syrian PKK cadres from their positions in the SDF and the Autonomous Administration. For Ankara, the most crucial issue is the “organizational link to the PKK” rather than any specific citizenship. Thus, the fact that Syrian PKK cadres will resume their activities in Syria will continue to anger decision-makers in Ankara.

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-Moreover, given Kurdish politics' regional dynamics, it can be stated that the problems between the PKK and KDP undermine the intra-Kurdish unity talks. The media war between the sides reverberates in both the KRI and Northeastern Syria.

-Lastly, Turkey has a well-known negative stance towards the unity talks, as evidenced by the negative past remarks of the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. The PYD, via the unity talks, expects the KNC to break off from the Istanbul-based Syrian opposition, which is an unrealistic expectation. Turkey's dissatisfaction with the unity negotiations is not anticipated to alter any time soon unless a decisive dynamic emerges in the Syrian War.

All in all, concrete results have not yet materialized in the unity talks after almost a year of the initiation of negotiations between the PYNK and KNC. What is worse, no glimmer of hope for the success of the unity talks appears at the end of the tunnel. A bumpy and long way lies before the sides. The negotiations are doomed to fail unless both sides agree to make serious concessions.

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## Endnotes

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mehmet Emin Cengiz is a Research Fellow at Al Sharq Strategic Research. He received his B.A. in the Sociology Department from Ege University in 2016. During his B.A. he attended the Erasmus+ Program and studied at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf as an international exchange student in Germany. Cengiz received his master's degree from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the Middle East at Marmara University in 2020. His pieces regarding the Syrian war and non-state armed actors have appeared in national and international media outlets and think tanks. His research interests are: Syrian Conflict, Non-State Armed Actors, Turkish Foreign Policy, Volunteer Foreign Fighters, Regional Kurdish Politics, and Political Islam.

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**Address:** Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No:68 Postal Code: 34197

Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

**Telephone:** +902126031815

**Fax:** +902126031665

**Email:** info@sharqforum.org

**research.sharqforum.org**



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