

Heated Conflict or Consolidation of the Status Quo in Northeast Syria: What is next for the AANES?

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Abstract: Following the presidential elections held in Syria in May 2021, the PYD-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has witnessed protests in the territories under its control. The deteriorating economic living standards coupled with the Syrian Democratic Forces' forced military conscription led people to organize protests, especially in the Arab-populated areas. As the grim living standards and security problems in Northeast Syria are unlikely to be reversed anytime soon, the AANES's Arab populated areas are likely to witness tribal resistance provoked by the Syrian regime. By considering the unfolding developments in the AANES areas and the ever-changing dynamics among different actors on the ground in Northeast Syria, this expert brief presents some possible political and security scenarios that the AANES is likely to cope with in the forthcoming period.

Introduction

The areas governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), chiefly led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), have been witnessing turbulent times politically and economically for quite some time. The grim situation on the ground was specifically exacerbated after the Syrian presidential elections which took place in May 2021. Following the presidential elections, which was called a sham¹ by different opposing entities, protests broke out in different parts of the AANES, including the Arab populated areas that have been a weak spot for the administration for years now. In Arab-populated areas, such as Shaddadi² and Manbij, people died³ after Asayish, the AANES's internal security force, intervened in the protests. It is known that the protestors took to the streets especially due to the dire economic living standards and the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) forced military conscription which has been in place ever since 2014.

As the reality in Northeast Syria becomes more desperate, different actors partaking in the Syrian conflict are aiming to reshape the country's political, military, and security situation. While Syria's political status quo is currently expected to continue in the coming period, the country's security and military atmosphere is increasingly unclear. As for the scenarios concerning the future of the AANES, it can be said that the situation is more complicated than the rest of Syria given the fact that different actors have an eye on it.

Potential Security Scenarios for Northeast Syria

Taking into account the ever-changing dynamics of Northeast Syria among the different actors in the conflict, the three scenarios below are likely in the upcoming period.

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Increased Regime-SDF/AANES Tension

Protests and regime-SDF tension in Northeast Syria are not novel phenomena. The tension between the two sides specifically increased at the end of 2020 and reached a new level with Syrian Democratic Council's (SDC) rejection⁴ to let the regime set ballot boxes for the presidential elections in the territories under AANES control. Starting from 2020, the Hasaka and Qamishli areas witnessed more frequent regime and SDF/AANES tensions. With the Ain Issa crisis,⁵ the two sides imposed sieges on one another for some time. During this period the sides also engaged in armed clashes and inflicted casualties on one another. In the period following this conflict, the regime-SDF/AANES tension continued and culminated in new clashes between Asayish and the regime-supported National Defense Forces in the Tai neighborhood in April. In the wake of the conflict which resulted in casualties⁶ on both sides, the SDF took over almost the entire neighborhood.

Apart from the military strain, at times both AANES and the regime close their border crossings in an attempt to increase economic pressure and force the other side to make concessions. For example, in March the regime closed "four of the five border crossings with" the AANES region. The AANES also occasionally prevents the flow of oil and wheat to the regime areas. Prior to the presidential elections, the AANES also closed⁸ the border crossings with the regime for a short while. Although lately Russia has called on the AANES to relaunch negotiations with the Syrian regime and the SDC announced that they would be open to negotiations if the projected negotiations would lead to concrete results,⁹ the increased tension between the two sides is likely to continue over the coming period given the regime's disinclination to make concessions with regards to AANES's political status. This dynamic in their relationship is partly due to their dependency on various external actors like Russia, the United States (US), and the PKK. The regime has never been enthusiastic about a power-sharing agreement, and it is taking advantage of the AANES's fragile situation that has grown worse following Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in 2019 coupled with the Biden administration's stance towards the region in general and Syria in particular.

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Decreased Possibility for a Large-Scale SNA Assault

It is widely believed that after US president Joe Biden took office, the possibility of a large-scale Syrian National Army (SNA) assault supported by Turkey diminished greatly. The current situation is likely to continue without ruling out the likelihood for low-scale tensions and some skirmishes between the SDF and SNA. The US is also in favor of the status quo in Northeast Syria and does not show any signs of leaving the area anytime soon. However, the nature of US military presence in Northeast Syria has been blurry. Nevertheless, the US is expected to continue its military support to the SDF.

Having said that, the US support to the SDF may not be unlimited taking the security and social problems facing the SDF and AANES in different parts of Northeast Syria. Moreover, the US support and presence in Syria to a large extent would be connected to the flexibility of SDF leaders towards US demands and requests. In that vein, the SDF needs to solve the cross-border links of some of its figures as the presence of the PKK cadres within the ranks of the SDF has been a longstanding bone of contention between Ankara and Washington in the past years and poisoned their relationship. Bearing this in mind, the US may collaborate with Russia and retrench its military presence in Northeast Syria if the AANES continues to fail in governance and the SDF fails to manage the local population's security and social concerns and meet US expectations and the concerns of actors like Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In addition to these, the US is unlikely to provide the AANES with the official political recognition that the AANES has aspired towards for many years. This situation can be clearly observed in the rhetoric of US officials. For instance, Paul T. Calvert the Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTFOIR), in his recent speech at the annual gathering of the SDF, focused on Northeast Syria's security situation and avoided "talking about explicit support for the AANES."¹⁰

The Continuation of ISIS Attacks

Even though it has been around three years since the US and SDF declared themselves triumphant in the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the organization has continued its attacks in Northeast Syria. Unlike the AANES's Kurdish-populated areas, the Arab-populated areas

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are likely to continue to witness ISIS attacks as the organization is effectively capitalizing on the local grievances in the absence of well-planned reconstruction and rehabilitation programs in the places that witnessed the fiercest battles in the fight against ISIS. It is well known that huge areas of the Deir Ez-Zour countryside are controlled by ISIS at night and the SDF in the daytime. It is also no secret that Eastern Syria has long been suffering from weak infrastructure stemming from war conditions and bad governance. This situation incentivizes the local people to blame the SDF for the grim economic living standards and security problems they endure. Moreover, the SDF and AANES do not administer the region very well due to the population's tribal nature, which poses a real challenge to the region's stability.

Probable Political Scenarios in Northeast Syria

Taking into account the trajectory of the unity talks between the PYD and Kurdish National Council (KNC) as well as the growing waves of protests in various parts of the AANES, the following scenarios seem likely in Northeast Syria in the forthcoming period.

Futile Intra-Kurdish Unity Talks and the PKK's Growing Clout

The SDF/AANES has long been ruling Northeast Syria in a very authoritarian manner without permitting any dissent. In the upcoming period, this situation may grow worse as it is speculated that the PKK will increase its clout over the area by sidelining Mazloum Abdi, the current commander-in-chief of the SDF. Mazloum Abdi, in April 2020, "took the lead"¹¹ of an intra-Kurdish dialogue between the PYD and the KNC, an opposing Syrian Kurdish party. However, the PKK-leaning wing within the PYD seems to have prevailed concerning the issue, which effectively means the end of the talks' chances for success. This wing which is "publicly" led by Aldar Khalil has not been enthusiastic about a power-sharing agreement with the KNC since the outset of talks, and negotiations have stalled for around a year now. Even worse, the US, the initial facilitator of the unity talks, also does not seem very eager to force the two sides to launch the third phase of the unity negotiations.

The probability of success for the intra-Kurdish negotiations remains extremely low despite the initial US pressure and eagerness. Washington no longer seems intent on increasing its engagement in the Syrian crisis in favor of the SDF and AANES

Additionally, the PYD-KNC relationship has grown worse given the fact that the PYD has been accused of committing a number of recent violations against the KNC. Many names of the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (PDK-S), the largest and oldest Kurdish party and the driving force for the KNC, were recently arrested¹² in Northeast Syria. A PDK-S figure, Amin Issa, also lately died from torture¹³ while he was under SDF custody. Therefore, the probability of success for the intra-Kurdish negotiations remains extremely low despite the initial US pressure and eagerness. Washington no longer seems intent on increasing its engagement in the Syrian crisis in favor of the SDF and AANES, as Syria does not seem to be a chief priority for the Biden administration. In fact, the administration has yet to even appoint a special envoy to Syria. Hence, the KNC expectation for the US to pressure the PYD to resume talks is unlikely to materialize soon.

The problems between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, also directly reflect on Syria. Tensions between the two sides have been growing, leading to the arrest of some AANES and PYD figures¹⁴ in Erbil. As stated above, some PDK-S members were arrested by the PYD which seems like a retaliatory act towards the development unfolding in the KRI between the PKK and KDP.

Likewise, the tensions are unlikely to cease as rumors are growing that the PKK will replace¹⁵ Mazloum Abdi, a strong proponent of the intra-Kurdish dialogue who showed some signs regarding his intention to distance the SDF/PYD from the PKK, with Mahmoud Barkhadan, a known PKK cadre. Mazloum Abdi has tried to employ positive language towards the KRI, considering it as a useful move for the AANES's consolidation and dream of political recognition. Abdi is also well aware that the AANES is dependent on the KRI and Semalka border crossing at a time when other border crossings face sporadic closures. As such, he refrained from using any hostile rhetoric towards Erbil and tried to have a working relationship with the KRI leadership. This, however, is not the case for Barkhadan. Unlike Abdi, Barkhadan has directly threatened the KDP and KRI in any possible conflict between the PKK and Peshmerga. He recently articulated that if the Peshmerga (the KRI military forces) attacks PKK militants in their areas of control, the SDF would not remain silent and would take a side.¹⁶ He furthermore said that SDF's side is evident, indicating his siding with the PKK. This may effectively mean the end of Abdi's term and

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his goal of Syrian Kurdish unity, although Mazloun Abdi later tweeted in opposition to Mahmoud Barkhadan and claimed that the SDF is a Syrian entity and would “not be a force that threatens the stability of its neighbors.”¹⁷ The PKK-oriented wing within the PYD foresees its future with Damascus, while Abdi perceives the future of the SDF/AANES to be with Washington. If the PKK decides to replace Mazloun Abdi, he is unlikely to resist such a decision and may resort to taking part in politics. In fact, Mazloun Abdi previously expressed in an interview his desire to devote his time to politics.¹⁸ If he is replaced with Mahmoud Barkhadan or another PKK cadre, the US reaction would be connected to the new name's stance as the priority for the US seems to be the preservation of the status quo in Northeast Syria. If the projected new leader resorts to finding common ground with Damascus as the PKK desires, this would surely have a negative impact on the US perception of the SDF and may even lead Washington to revisit its strategy towards the SDF. Such a situation may lead the US to reduce its military support to the SDF and retrench its presence in Syria which is likely to leave a power vacuum that Russia can fill over time.

Possible Tribal Resistance Against the SDF

Given the aforementioned points, the SDF/AANES finds itself between a rock and a hard place. As their relationship with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq deteriorates, they will become more dependent on the regime. The lifeline for the AANES is the Semalka border crossing, which as of late has only been partially open due to problems unfolding between the PKK and KDP in the KRI. Thus, the current situation will force the AANES to fall in with the regime for economic reasons in order to ensure the flow of commodities as other border crossings like the ones in Northern Aleppo are used as a pressure tool against it from time to time. The AANES has consistently asked for the Al Yaroubiya crossing,¹⁹ which was closed in 2020, to be re-opened for cross-border humanitarian aid. This aim, however, has not materialized, and its reopening seems to be a far-fetched objective for the AANES over the near future. On the other hand, the regime does not offer the AANES much and it can intensify its efforts to provoke local tribal resistance in the Arab-populated areas in the coming period.

The forced military conscription , which is not accepted by both the Kurds and Arabs has forced hundreds of young men to flee the area to avoid fulfilling the “self-defense duty.”

As a matter of fact, the SDF has consistently accused²⁰ the regime of being behind the protests by provoking the local Arab population. Although Arab-populated areas like Deir Ez-Zor are oil-rich, these areas largely lie in ruin and the population blames the SDF/AANES for their grim economic living standards. The forced military conscription²¹, which is not accepted by both the Kurds and Arabs has forced hundreds of young men to flee the area to avoid fulfilling the “self-defense duty.” Following the Manbij protests, the SDF has made some changes in the “self-defense duty.” Nonetheless, the protests are unlikely to halt until forced military conscription is canceled entirely.

This situation will continue to be a challenge for the SDF. Many actors including Turkey have an eye on the Arab tribes and could also help organize local tribal resistance towards the SDF. This scenario becomes more likely as Ankara could not obtain what it wanted from the US in this matter. Additionally, in the upcoming period, Turkey might have limited direct contact with the regime. Bashar Jaafari, the deputy Syrian Foreign Minister, has recently acknowledged²² that Syrian and Turkish officials have held some security meetings. Nevertheless, they did not bear fruit.

Some Regional Developments and Concluding Remarks

In the coming months, we may witness the ramifications of the developments unfolding in the PKK-controlled areas in the KRI and also in Hasaka. Ever since the launch of Turkey’s military operations in the Northern part of the KRI, the tension between the PKK and KDP has escalated drastically. This escalation reached a new level after Baghdad and Erbil agreed upon the Sinjar agreement. However, despite this, the parties did not plunge into a very hot conflict. That said, the situation changed when the US started paying less attention to the Syrian file in the recent past which was used by Russia to fill the vacuum and exercise more pressure on the AANES. These dynamics increased the level of tension between the KDP and PKK.

Furthermore, the breaking point between the two sides was the onset of a power competition within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the KRI. The co-presidents of the party, Lahur

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Sheikh Jangi, and Bafel Talabani, have started vying for power in Sulaymaniyah over the last months. This move wasn't seen by the PKK through the lens of an intra-PUK rivalry as Lahur Sheikh Jangi was one of the most important supporters of the YPG and SDF²³ and even supported some PKK policies implemented in Sinjar and Northern KRI. As is well known, the road that starts from the Qandil Mountains through Sulaymaniyah province to Sinjar and Northeastern Syria is a lifeline for the SDF's shadow administration. The removal of Lahur Sheikh Jangi, who was previously in charge of the Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG), meant the SDF had been cut off from this vital corridor. When analyzed in conjunction with Lahur Sheikh Jangi's relationship with the SDF, we can understand why Mahmoud Barkhadan and Aldar Khalil reached the level of outright threatening the KRI. Moreover, during the PUK's internal problems, the AANES-linked media favored Lahur Sheikh Jangi who was sidelined by Bafel Talabani.

All these dynamics affect AANES's current situation and future scenarios and create an unstable administrative situation. The unclear future of US-AANES relations, the Russian desires to bring all of the AANES areas under the Syrian regime's control, and the PYD's cross-border history all combine in drawing a blurred picture for the AANES's near future. In conclusion, taking into account the security and political balances between regional and international actors, it can be said that the most likely scenario for the AANES is the following: The AANES's political situation is likely to continue as it is in the short and medium-term. Namely, it will not be able to obtain official recognition neither from the regime nor from international actors despite its intensified attempts, which include AANES representatives' visit to Élysée Palace²⁴ where they met with French President Emmanuel Macron, opening a new representation in Geneva²⁵ and launching a media campaign calling for recognizing the status of Northeast Syria.²⁶ The AANES's authoritarian tendencies decrease its chances of political recognition and this status is unlikely to be reversed anytime soon.

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