

NOVACT
Noviolència
Nonviolence
اللاعنف

A NEW AGENDA FOR PEACE IN NORTHEAST SYRIA IN THE POST-ASSAD ERA

Strategic conflict analysis to strengthen strategies for democratic governance, resilience and civil resistance.

Felipe Daza Sierra

A New Agenda for Peace in Northeast Syria in the post-Assad era

Strategic conflict analysis to strengthen strategies for democratic governance, resilience and civil resistance.

DATE: JANUARY 13, 2025

AUTHOR: Felipe Daza Sierra

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Professor in nonviolent civil resistance at Sciences Po Paris University. Felipe Daza has worked for 20 years in the development of peace building, social transformation and civil resistance processes in North Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Email: felip.daza@sciencespo.fr

PROJECT COORDINATOR AND EDITOR: Carla Fibla García-Sala

RESEARCH ASSISTANCE: Iman Jumaa Abbas (traductora durante la investigación)

EDITING: Toni Sánchez Poy [flaperval@yahoo.es]

PROOF-READING: Nick Wells

COVER PICTURE: Mustafa Hassan, a Kurdish citizen from Hasaka, displays documents issued during the French Mandate indicating ownership of land that was taken from his father by the Syrian regime. Photo by Felipe Daza.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was conducted at a time of great upheaval and urgency for Syria, which involved an enormous effort on the part of the entire coordination, research and logistics team to make its final publication possible. The author would like to express his sincere thanks to the key informants who volunteered their time and knowledge for this project, as well as to the organizations DOZ International and Un Ponte Per for their valuable advice and logistical and security support, which made it possible to develop the fieldwork in the best possible conditions.

CITATION

Daza, Felipe. *A New Agenda for Peace in Northeast Syria. Strategic analysis of the conflict to strengthen strategies for democratic governance, resilience and civil resistance.* Novact, Barcelona, 2025.

LOCAL PARTNER:

SUPPORTED BY:

AEXCID cooperación JUNTA DE EXTREMADURA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary **4**

Acronyms **11**

I. Introduction **13**

II. Context **16**

III. Analysis of conflict actors **20**

3.1 DAANES and PYD Governance 20
3.2 Kurdish National Council (KNC) 23
3.3 Hayat Tahrir al Sham 24
3.4 Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) 25
3.5 The legacy of Bashar al-Assad 27
3.6 The NES Tribal System 29
3.7 Organized civil society of NES 27 30
3.8 The Government of Turkey and the Syrian National Army 33
3.9 United States of America 35
3.10 Russian Federation 36
3.11 Islamic Republic of Iran 36
3.12 The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government and other Kurdish political forces 38

IV. Impacts of the conflict **39**

4.1 Socio-economic deterioration 39
4.2 Forced displacements 43
4.3 Social polarization 45
4.4 Gender violence 47
4.5 Human insecurity 49
4.6 Attacks on civic space and freedom of the press. 52

V. Key Conflict Factors **57**

5.1 Degree of violence against the population and destruction of civilian infrastructure (KDC1) 57
5.2 Level of sectarianism and social division (KDC2) 64
5.3 Level of governance deficiencies and socio-economic deterioration (KDC3) 68
5.4 Level of international support for extremist actors in the region (KDC4) 75

VI. Key Factors for Peace **80**

6.1 Capacity for mobilization of organized civil society to guarantee human security (KDP1). 80
6.2 Degree of influence of the actors and mechanisms promoting social cohesion (KDP2) 83
6.3 Decentralized governance level for sustainable development and provision of public services (KDP3) 87
6.4 Level of international support for moderate and democratic actors (KDP4) 90

VII. Peace Agenda with a Triple Nexus Approach: Strategic Recommendations **92**

VIII. Bibliography **98**

IX. Annexes **102**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the fall of the Al Assad regime, the political transition towards the creation of a new Syria has begun. However, the Turkish invasion and the re-emergence of ISIS in Northern Syria threaten regional stability and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis experienced by the civilian population. Despite the regional challenges and political shortcomings of DAANES, the authorities have been able to deploy a system based on political decentralization, participatory governance and political power-sharing between the Arab and Kurdish communities in Northeast Syria (NES). The political project in NES, also in transition, could serve as a model for the new Syria and ensure the stability that the region needs after years of dictatorship.

This strategic analysis of the conflict in NES identifies the dynamics that have generated violence and social division in that region, as well as the pillars that promote peace, resilience and coexistence among ethnic, religious and ideological communities. All this in order to define an agenda for peace for NES that contributes to the political transition process initiated in Syria. These analyses and recommendations are based on the testimonies and data provided by more than 70 key informants interviewed during the field research conducted between late October and early November 2024.

KEY DRIVERS OF CONFLICT

KDC 1: Degree of violence against the population and destruction of civilian infrastructures

The culture of violence and domination is deeply rooted in society due to decades of regime repression. More recently, the Turkish government has used water restriction and destruction of civilian infrastructure as weapons of war against the civilian population, causing massive population movements and undermining socio-economic development in NES. Turkey, ISIS, and their allies have promoted violent riots and criminality to destabilize the DAANES government, taking advantage of this socioeconomic deterioration and social tensions. The militarization of society, poverty and patriarchal gender norms have contributed to gender-based violence (GBV).

KDC 2: Level of sectarianism and social division

The Al Assad regime developed a broad sectarian policy to psychologically and physically divide the Syrian population, including the instrumentalization of inter-tribal conflicts. This strategy was also used by Iran and Turkey to fight DAANES. Sectarian policies have exacerbated historical resentments and economic problems to increase social tensions. The political division of the Kurdish movement by influences from the Turkish PKK and Iraqi KDP have also contributed to social conflicts and repression of political dissent in

NES. In this framework, extremist ideologies have penetrated, reinforcing hatred and fear among the communities and undermining the legitimacy of the NES authorities. Disinformation and hate speech on social networks have become a mechanism to exacerbate confrontation and social division in the region.

KDC 3: Level of governance deficiencies and socio-economic deterioration

The DAANES governance model has been characterized by a centralizing tendency, repression of dissent and clientelistic practices to secure loyalties and prevent social tensions. The lack of political capacities of DAANES has not allowed for institutional development, undermining trust in the authorities and contributing to the weak provision of public services and to poor socioeconomic development. The lack of economic, political, educational, cultural and sporting opportunities has contributed to male youth migration and social protests. Inflation and Turkish attacks have made agricultural and livestock activities unviable, causing food insecurity in certain regions of NES such as Hasaka, where reduced rainfall due to climate change has also placed the region in a drought emergency situation. This situation has contributed to structural corruption and the development of illicit activities to cover basic needs. The scarcity of resources has increased competition for resources among ethnic communities, exacerbating the spread of stereotypes over the distribution of humanitarian aid and service supplies.

KDC 4: Level of international support for extremist actors in the region

While the Syrian regime has survived for decades thanks to military and financial support from Iran and Russia, support for progressive and moderate forces in the country has been intermittent and uncoordinated. Since 2015, the SDF has relied on US military support to fight ISIS, but the same attention has not been paid to the democratic development of the government. In parallel, the military expansion of DAANES has prompted a more assertive Turkish policy, including direct and consistent support to jihadist forces. US economic sanctions against the Al Assad regime have affected infrastructure rehabilitation and economic development, already affected by KRG border blockades. Also, the lack of recognition of DAANES has contributed to the political and economic isolation of NES.

KEY DRIVERS OF PEACE

KDP 1: Degree of mobilization capacity of organized civil society to guarantee human security.

The community resilience of the NES population is fundamental to understanding the resistance against aggressors such as ISIS or the Turkish government. This grassroots power has been structured around several pillars: First, energetic cultural resistance to attacks on the language, identity and education of the Kurdish population. Second, the role of women as an element of cohesion, social organization and moral strength through women's protection and empowerment networks and structures that have carried out

solidarity actions among women from different ethnic and religious communities. Third, the development of civilian systems of mutual support, information-sharing and resilience during periods of major crisis. Fourth, the role of youth movements during the 2011 popular revolution, their inclusiveness being key to building a new Syria. Fifth, a diverse civil society ecosystem with experience, expertise and strong relationships, enjoying a high level of perceived legitimacy among local communities.

KDP 2: Degree of influence of the actors and mechanisms that promote social cohesion

There is fertile ground for coexistence among diverse ethnic, religious and ideological communities with common spaces for cultural and economic encounters and exchanges. Projects of common interest such as the development of agricultural and livestock activities have had the potential to link divided communities. Tribal leaders have a role of cohesion and dispute resolution that should be harnessed in a genuine and transparent manner. This system has limitations in cases of GBV, but there are peace committees for women's rights issues that can resolve such disputes. There are also civil society structures and organizations with extensive experience in dialogue and inter-ethnic reconciliation, well practised in dealing with historical resentments and land and property disputes.

KDP 3: Decentralized governance level for sustainable development and provision of public services

The Social Contract of DAANES is based on democratic principles such as political decentralization, participatory governance, ecology and women's leadership. These aspects are crystallized in the communes (neighbourhood councils) as spaces for local participation, the distribution of political power with the participation of Arab leaders at the various administrative levels, and the mechanisms of co-presidency with the presence of a man and a woman in all government bodies. Likewise, at both the institutional and social levels, there are assembly structures that allow for the participation of a significant number of political and social actors, as well as "academies" for the promotion of democratic culture among the various professional guilds, government workers and other social components. Finally, DAANES has developed some strategic projects to guarantee the provision of public services.

KDP 4: Level of international support for moderate and democratic actors in Syria.

Contacts between the Damascus government and the DAANES authorities have been initiated. Kurdish political forces are also in negotiations to establish a common position with positive developments. The US has increased its troops in NES to dissuade the Turkish government from further military incursions into areas such as Kobane. In parallel, meetings with European institutions and diplomatic missions have been developed to support the DAANES government and stability in the region in general. International recognition of DAANES is still very limited, but there are regional governments such as Catalonia and academic institutions that have recognized the government's institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Action 1: Consistent diplomatic strategies for stability, national security and the protection of civilians

- To implement a ceasefire throughout the region, supervised by an independent international mission.
- To ensure the territorial integrity of Syria through the cessation of Turkish military operations and the return of the occupied territories to the control of DAANES.
- To increase the presence of international actors in the region through diplomatic missions, international press and civil society organizations.

Action 2: Implementation of the comprehensive framework for the protection of civilians and critical infrastructure

- To improve the systems for disseminating information to the population on the development of the crisis.
- To organize a system of monitoring, documentation and accountability for war crimes committed in NES.
- To promote a nonviolent civil defense system to protect local communities.
- To implement a program for the elimination of anti-personnel mines in eastern Raqqa.

Action 3: Women, Peace and Security Program

- To promote effective policies and mechanisms for the protection, accountability and redress of women and girls affected by GBV.
- To support the GBV protection programs and structures of local women's organizations financially.
- To implement social awareness and sensitization campaigns on women's rights and equality.
- To activate comprehensive programs for the reintegration into society of women, and their children, from refugee and IDP camps in NES.

Action 4: Access to humanitarian aid and development of resilience plans

- To facilitate safe humanitarian corridors and promote the effective and impartial delivery of assistance.
- To support resilience plans in the most needy households to cover basic needs.
- To develop an accurate census of the region to manage aid and the return of displaced persons.

Action 5: Combating disinformation and hate speech

- To develop communication campaigns on social networks to fight disinformation and promote counter-narratives.
- To guarantee freedom of the press and the work of independent media.

Action 6: Localized social cohesion and community-based structures

- To encourage dialogue and dispute resolution between Arab and Kurdish communities with a focus on land and property disputes.
- To reinforce the social role of cohesion and dispute resolution of tribal leaders, with the exception of cases linked to GBV.
- To promote a process of dialogue between authorities and communities in NES to address popular discontent and historical grievances.
- To implement measures to dismantle drug production and drug trafficking networks.

Action 7: Projects of common interest in productive and economic activities

- To develop sustainable projects in the field of agriculture and livestock with the participation of the various ethnic and religious communities.
- To support economic development programs that generate employment and opportunities, especially for young people and women, and other vulnerable groups such as people with functional diversity.

Action 8: Culture and sports program

- To promote sports activities and development of facilities among young people, with special attention to camps and areas with displaced populations.
- To encourage cultural and educational initiatives and centers that promote dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding between different social components in areas with Arab, Kurdish and other minority populations.

Action 9: Preventing and countering violent extremism

- To strengthen confidence building measures between DAANES and tribal communities including improved public service delivery, as well as greater integration, power sharing and political autonomy.
- To support and cooperate with those tribal leaders perceived as having legitimacy for dispute resolution, with specific security and confidentiality measures.
- To dismantle illicit activities and smuggling networks, while creating employment and economic (agricultural and livestock) opportunities to meet the needs of local communities and generate social cohesion.
- To facilitate social and economic reintegration of women and their families from Al Hol refugee camp.
- To create economic, employment, cultural and sports opportunities and structures for youth from refugee and IDP camps and rural areas of NES.
- To fight disinformation, fake news and hate speech promoted by the Turkish government and jihadist groups.

Action 10: Reconciliation and transitional justice program

- To implement transitional justice programs that promote reconciliation among the various communities, prioritizing the resolution of land and property disputes.
- To develop programs and DDR initiatives directed towards ex-members of the former regime and other non-state armed groups.

Action 11: Institutional development of DAANES to advance in the decentralization and provision of public services processes.

- To establish technical cooperation agreements of foreign governments and administrations with all administrative levels of DAANES, thus contributing to the development of institutional capacities for the efficient delivery of public services.
- To create channels for the participation of organized and specialized civil society in specific areas, with special attention to women, youth, minorities, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.
- To support training and empowerment programs for women and young people for their participation in political life.

Action 12: Facilitation of intra-Kurdish dialogue

- To facilitate genuine dialogue between the various political formations in NES, addressing historical grievances, ensuring the cessation of hostilities and taking advantage of new political opportunities to generate a united position for negotiations with the new government in Damascus.
- To support Syrian Democratic Council assembly structures for the integration and dialogue of all political and social actors of NES.

Action 13: Strategic projects for sustainable development

- To support institutional strategic projects in the critical sectors of energy, water, medicine and education, among others, as defined by DAANES.
- To rehabilitate critical infrastructure such as water and energy, and strategic support for the agriculture and livestock sectors.
- To rebuild and equip schools and health centers, ensuring an intersectional approach.
- To support permaculture projects and initiatives to promote agricultural production in the context of climate change.

Action 14: Protection and strengthening of civic space

- To protect civic space and the exercise of civil liberties such as freedom of the press and of expression.
- To promote the protection of political dissidence, with special attention to the exercise of the right to protest, and the right of association and assembly.
- To support the creation of accountability and reparation systems for victims, and their families, of human rights violations such as enforced disappearances.

Action 15: International pressure to preserve the autonomy of NES in the Syrian political transition process.

- To activate diplomatic actions to ensure the participation of all Syrian political actors in the future National Dialogue Conference.
- To promote international recognition of DAANES.
- To lift the economic sanctions imposed on NES.
- To develop international cooperation instruments with a triple nexus approach, applying flexible and financially-adequate measures.

ACRONYMS

DAANES: Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria.
DDR: Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration.
ANF: al-Nusrah Front.
CVE: Countering Violent Extremism
DoA: Deterrence of Aggression operation.
DoF: Dawn of Freedom operation.
FSA: Free Syrian Army.
GBV: Gender Based Violence
HRW: Human Rights Watch
HTS: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant).
IDPs: Internally Displaced Persons.
ICG: International Crisis Group.
ISF: Internal Security Forces.
ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KCK: Koma Civakên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Communities Union).
KDC: Key Driver of Conflict
KDP: Key Driver of Peace
KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC: Kurdish National Council.
KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government.
LCC: Local Coordination Committees.
NDF: National Defense Forces.
NES: Northeast Syria.
NLF: National Liberation Front.
OCHA: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
PCWK: People's Committee of Western Kurdistan.
PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party.
PMSC: Private Military and Security Companies.
PYD: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party).
PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces.
SDC: Syrian Democratic Council.
SIG: Syrian Interim Government

SKC: Supreme Kurdish Committee.
SNHR: Syrian Network for Human Rights.
STJ: Syrians for Truth and Justice.
TAF: Turkish Armed Forces.
TEV-DEM: Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (Movement for a Democratic Society).
UNSC: United Nations Security Council UNSC
UPP: Un Ponte Per
WASH: Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene.
YPG: People's Protection Units.
YPJ: Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units)

I. INTRODUCTION

The end of the period of the Al Assad regime has opened a door of hope for the construction of a new, united and inclusive Syria. But while western and Arab media celebrated the end of the cruel regime, the war continued in the north and south of the country, with military operations by the Turkish and Israeli governments. Both countries have taken advantage of the prevailing chaos to pursue their political objectives, at the cost of violating Syria's territorial integrity and causing new civilian casualties.

The post-Assad era has begun. It is glimpsed in the symbols and narratives, in the statements of Abu Mohammed al-Jolani in the historic *Umayyad* Mosque in Damascus,[1] in the hasty meetings of the US Secretary of State with the President of Turkey, and in the silences of the Kremlin and the Supreme Leader of Iran. It is time to keep our eyes wide open and examine the early decisions and actions of the leader of the jihadist group *Hayat Tahrir al Sham* (HTS) and other factions present in the country. But, above all, it is time to support moderate and progressive political and social actors to ensure their participation in the political transition process in Syria.

One of these actors is DAANES, the government in Northeast Syria, which despite its democratic shortcomings and the humanitarian crisis facing NES, has since 2014 been developing a political system based on political decentralization, participatory governance and political power-sharing between Kurds, Arabs and other ethnic communities in the region. This project, also in transition, could serve as an inspiration to build an inclusive Syria that contributes to peace and stability in the region. However, Turkey is threatening the DAANES government with a new war that could drag NES and the whole country into a new spiral of violence.

Within this framework, this report develops a **strategic analysis of the conflict in Northeast Syria** with the objective of identifying the actors involved, conflict dynamics, and opportunities for building peace and community resilience in Northeast Syria. This study concludes with an **agenda for peace in Northeast Syria in the post-Assad** era to prevent the escalation of violence and humanitarian crisis, while creating the necessary conditions for democratic development in NES and political transition in Syria.

To this end, this publication: 1) studies the manifestations of direct violence and its humanitarian impacts; 2) examines the dynamics that generate violence and social division among ethnic, religious, and ideological communities; 3) analyzes the factors that contribute to regional peace and stability through community resilience and nonviolent civil resistance; 4) develops a roadmap that combines; peacebuilding strategies with strengthening this resilience and resistance; supporting NES governance with sustaina-

1 See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfeIJeLWHA4

ble development of the region; and responding to humanitarian crisis by fulfilling human security needs.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

For the development of this study, the **Strategic Conflict Assessment** methodology has been adopted, combining traditional analytical frameworks such as **Actors Mapping** with the dynamic approaches of **Systems Thinking**, designed by specialized organizations such as CDA Collaborative, to obtain a more holistic and accurate view of the changing nature of contemporary conflicts.

These approaches allow us to approach modern conflicts as systems where different actors relate to each other around key issues that have their causes and effects in the context under analysis. This process of reasoning identifies points of support or pressure to transform or minimize the critical factors that generate conflict and maximize those that lead to peace and stability. At this point, the author has also used analytical frameworks on **Strategic Nonviolent Conflict** to capture the dynamics and actions of civil resistance in NES in order to build proposals rooted in the culture and history of peace and nonviolence of the communities in the region.

In addition, the author has applied the **Triple Nexus approach** to address the complexity of the context in NES and the needs of local communities.[2] With this approach, the study has paid comprehensive attention to the humanitarian, sustainable development and peacebuilding dimensions. As a result, relationships between the needs of the population at these three levels have been identified, allowing the definition of more comprehensive and effective recommendations in a conflict context. Within this framework, the principles and recommendations of the **United Nations New Agenda for Peace**[3] have been incorporated to articulate the Roadmap for Peace in NES with global challenges such as the fight against climate change, and the transformation of structural power relations that hinder gender equality and increase GBV and other forms of violence against vulnerable groups.

The general temporal scope of the report has included the collection and analysis of data from the popular revolution in Syria (in 2011) until December 2024, with special attention paid to the period from February 2023, when the earthquake that affected the region with severe humanitarian impacts occurred, until December 2024, with the fall of Bashar al Assad. This time frame has made it possible to analyze the structural causes of violence and the conditions for peace, as well as the factors closest to the current crisis and its humanitarian impacts.

---

2 For more information see: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-humanitarian-development-peace-nexus-interim-progress-review_2f620ca5-en.html

3 United Nations. Our Common Agenda: A New Agenda for Peace - Policy Brief 9. July 2023. Available at: https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace

The methods used have included; an exhaustive review of academic articles and of reports from international agencies, think tanks and civil society organizations, and news and articles in the digital media; fieldwork carried out between November 24 and January 6, 2024, including direct observation processes of the situation and interviews with more than 70 political and social actors (See APPENDIX I) in the cities of Amuda, Qamshili, Hasaka, Kobane, Raqqa and Tiberspiye; online interviews conducted and data collected throughout December 2024 to capture the impact of recent events and contextual developments in NES. Finally, before publication, the report has been shared with key informants and other subject matter experts to verify, contrast and consolidate the final results that we present in the following chapters.

It is important to note that, although the fall of the Al Assad regime changed the political map in Syria, there are structural challenges that remain and it will be key to address them in the political transition in Syria in general, and NES in particular. This report therefore aims to provide clues on how to intervene in this new political period in NES, considering both the structural causes of the conflict and the dynamics of the conflict and more recent developments.

With this background analytical framework, the report is structured in the following sections:

1. Contextual framework including a **brief evolution of the conflict** and the humanitarian crisis in NES
2. **Analysis of the main actors** of the conflict in NES, including a national, regional and international view, and pointing out the aspirations, strategies and actions developed in the context
3. Description of the **main negative impacts** generated by the conflict, from the manifestations of direct violence to the socio-economic deterioration of the region
4. Analysis of the **Key Drivers of Conflict (KDC)**, identifying the causal links between the causes and effects of each problem
5. Identification of **Key Drivers of Peace (KDP)** to decipher which structures, processes and initiatives present in the context have contributed to building peace and stability
6. Design of a **Peace Agenda with a Triple Nexus approach** that identifies the points of support and pressure of the factors contributing to conflict and peace, with a view to developing intervention actions at the humanitarian level, sustainable development and peace building aimed at public institutions, international agencies, international and local civil society organizations

II. CONTEXT

Northeast Syria is a region of great strategic and economic importance, characterized by its wealth of natural resources and geographic diversity. The fertile plains of the region, fed by the waters of the Euphrates River and its tributary Jabur, have for centuries facilitated the cultivation of essential crops such as wheat and cotton, making it one of the most productive agricultural areas in the country. Its geostrategic position, as a natural bridge between Turkey and Iraq, was exploited by the French during the colonial mandate (1920-1946), when cities such as Qamishli and Hasaka emerged as important regional trade centers of trade and commerce. Subsequently, in the 1960s, the Baathist regime intensified its control over these urban areas, driven by the discovery and exploitation of the vast oil reserves in areas such as Al Omar and Rmeilan, which account for approximately 70% of the country's oil production. This combination of agricultural and energy wealth and strategic position has consolidated Northeast Syria as a key region in the nation's economic and political development, but also as a recurrent focus of disputes and tensions throughout its recent history.

The Kurdish population, the majority in the most northerly part of NES, Hasaka and northern Aleppo regions, comprises approximately two million people who have faced decades of marginalization and repression under the Baathist regime. These policies include forced Arabization, loss of citizenship for 517,000 people,[4] expropriation of land and property, and prohibition of the use of their language and traditions. However, the cultural resilience of the Kurdish people has been key to preserving their identity and the cohesion of their communities, even in the darkest periods of repression and massacres perpetrated by the regime and other regional actors. Although the majority of Syrian Kurds are Sunni Muslims, there are also Yazidi and Christian minorities. Despite this religious diversity, Kurdish society in Syria is characterized by a strong secular character.

In the southern regions of NES, mainly Raqqa, Deir ez Zor and southern Hasakah, the majority population is Arab with 4.5 million people. Over the centuries, Kurds have coexisted with other communities in the region, such as Arabs, Assyrians and Turkmen, among others, consolidating a unique cultural mosaic in NES. But despite centuries of coexistence among the diverse ethnic, religious and ideological communities of NES, sectarianism has dominated politics in the region. On the one hand, the sectarian policies of the Bashar al-Assad regime generated deep social divisions between Arabs and Kurds, which were exploited by extremist movements such as ISIS in 2014. On the other hand, the interventions of the Turkish PKK and the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party frag-

4 Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ). *Statelessness in Syria: An Enduring Dilemma*. October 2022. https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Statelessness-in-Syria_An-Enduring-Dilemma.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

mented the Syrian Kurdish political movement into two main blocs: the PYD and the KNC, the latter being the coalition that groups the rest of the political parties in NES.

The Arab revolts of 2011 offered a double opportunity to the Kurdish political movement. The power vacuum left by the Al Assad regime allowed the creation of self-governing institutions and agreements between the PYD and the KNC, giving rise to common political structures. However, the intensification of repression by the Syrian Army accelerated the intervention of the YPG, the armed wing of the PYD, which in 2014 took control of the main cities of NES and proclaimed the Rojava Autonomous Self-Government. The so-called Rojava "experiment"[5] became a pioneering project by implementing the principles of Abdullah Öcalan, spiritual leader and founder of the PKK, based on radical democracy, women's liberation and ecology, all articulated in a political model of democratic confederalism. This dual system combines centralized and decentralized structures in a context of instability and uncertainty.

Meanwhile, in the rest of Syria, the non-violent revolution gave way to armed resistance. Initially led by the Free Syrian Army with support from western powers, this resistance morphed into an amalgam of Salafist jihadist factions controlled by Al-Qaeda and ISIS. In September 2014, ISIS launched an offensive that reached the gates of Kobane. The victory of the SDF, the DAANES Army composed of the YPG and YPJ, became a symbol of Kurdish resistance against international jihadism. From that point on, the United States stepped up its military support to the SDF, which led key operations to defeat ISIS and capture Raqqa and Deir ez Zor in 2016 and 2017 respectively. With this territorial expansion, the government in NES was renamed DAANES to better reflect the new ethnic composition of the territory under its administration.

In parallel, Turkey increased its military operations in Syria with the aim of containing the DAANES government and fighting the PYD, which it considers an extension of the PKK, its historical enemy. Between 2016 and 2019, three Turkish military operations resulted in the occupation of key NES territories, Tel Abiad, Ras al Ain, and the symbolic Afrin, among others. Heysam Mislim, a journalist and professor at Kobane University, summed up the change in the mood of the population with these words, "In 2015 people were very optimistic; there was a sense of victory and progress that spurred social and political development to rebuild the city. However, the fall of Afrin and the increase in Turkish hostilities drastically worsened the situation."[6]

In 2020, Turkey adopted the destruction of civilian infrastructure as a military strategy to undermine the PYD's political power. These actions, along with US sanctions on Syria, triggered a severe humanitarian crisis in NES. More than 900,000 people have been displaced in various stages, while health, agriculture and basic supply systems are current-

5 The "*Rojava* experiment" refers to the political model implemented in north Syria, based on direct democracy, feminism, ecology and ethno-religious pluralism.

6 Heysam Msilim, interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024.

ly on the brink of collapse.[7] More than one million people are dependent on humanitarian aid from the few international organizations still operating in the region.

In this context, the fall of the Al Assad regime and the rise of extremist opposition forces occur. In November 2024, HTS, heir to the al-Nusrah Front, launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression against the regime in Aleppo and other key cities, precipitating the fall of Bashar al Assad on December 8, 2024. In parallel, Turkey, with support from SNA factions, launched Operation Dawn of Freedom against DAANES. While Recep Tayyip Erdogan intensifies his diplomatic offensive to legitimize attacks on the DAANES government, millions of people are facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

Chronology

- **March 2004** - Clashes between Arab and Kurdish fans at a soccer match in Qamishli provoke intervention of regime's security forces who fire on Kurdish population, killing 25 people.8
- **March 2011** - Start of Arab revolts in Syria. Organization of first anti-regime movement Youth Rebellion (Ciwanên Serhildan).
- **July 2011** - Beginning of the regime's repression. Assassination of the well-known activist Meshal Temmo.
- **September 2011 -** Establishment of Union of Kurdish Committees with participation of organizations, youth groups and political parties.
- **January 2012** - Protests and sit-ins by women's movement in Qamishli. al-Nusrah Front movement created in Syria.
- **July 2012** - Beginning of YPG control of NES, except Deir ez Zor and Raqqa under FSA control. SKC created in Hewler by KNC and PYD.
- **June 2013** - Al Assad regime bombings in NES leave at least 20 dead in Amuda. Last protest of the anti-regime movement. YPG crackdown in Amuda leaves 8 dead.
- **January 2014** - Establishment of Rojava self-government.
- **September 2014** - ISIS siege of Kobane until January 2015, ending with expulsion of jihadist factions from the city. Creation of the SDF, fusion of YPG and YPJ.
- **October 2014** - Signing of Duhok Agreement between KNC and TEVDEM (PYD).
- **January 2015** - SDF victory against ISIS in Kobane.

---

7 European Asylum Support Office (EASO). *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*. December 2019. Available at https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/easo-coi-report-syria-idps-returnees-internal-mobility.pdf (Accessed 09/01/2025).

8 Brian Whitaker. "Clashes Between Syrian Kurds and Arabs Claim More Victims." *The Guardian*, March 17, 2004. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/mar/17/syria.brianwhitaker (Accessed. 09/01/2025).

- **August 2016** - Turkish occupation of Jarablus and Al Bab villages, north of Aleppo, through Operation Euphrates Shield.
- **November 2016** - Start of SDF Operation Wrath of Euphrates with US support against ISIS. October 2017 - SDF takes control of Raqqa.
- **September 2017** - Start of SDF and US Operation Jazeera Storm against ISIS in Deir ez Zor area.
- **December 2017 -** SDF takes control of the city.
- **January 2018** - Operation Olive branch, Turkish occupation of Afrin. Large exodus of Kurdish population to Aleppo and NES.
- **September 2018** - Creation of DAANES in Tabqa city and approval of the Social Contract.9
- **March 2019** - Final defeat of ISIS in Baghuz by SDF and US.
- **October 2019** - Operation Peace Spring, Turkish occupation of the strip between Ras al Ain and Tal Abiad in NES.
- **January 2020** - Start of Turkish military campaign of bombings and attacks against civilian structures of DAANES.
- **December 2023 -** Update of the DAANES Social Contract reflecting the new territorial reality of DAANES with control of Raqqa and Deir ez Zor.
- **January 2024** - 40 Turkish airstrikes destroying numerous critical energy, water and granary infrastructures.
- **October 2024** - Turkish attack following PKK attack in Ankara, resulting in 17 dead, 66 wounded and destruction of numerous critical infrastructures.10
- **November 2024** - Start of Operation Deterrence of Aggression by HTS-led anti-regime forces, culminating with seizure of Aleppo on November 29, 2024.
- **December 2024** - Overthrow of Bashar al Assad's regime on December 8, after 10 days of offensive. Start of Operation Dawn of Freedom by TAF and SNA against the SDF ending with capture of Manbij and other areas of NES.

9 For more information see: https://recognizemeproject.org/what-is-aanes/

10 See: https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2024/12/infrastructurestrikes-oct2024/

III. ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT ACTORS

The following section analyzes the main actors, their motivations and strategies developed in the Syrian conflict, with a special focus on the situation of NES. The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad reflects shared objectives among the multiple oppositions to the regime, despite their ideological differences. The new political situation also unveils the new relations of power, consolidating Turkey's influence in the country and changes in the loyalties of political actors in NES.

LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

3.1. The Government of DAANES and the PYD

The Kurdish population is the main minority in the country, representing 10-15% of the majority Muslim population (mainly Sunni) and, to a lesser extent, Yazidis and Christians. The Kurdish movement has historically been the main political opposition to the Al Assad family regime. The revolution in Syria in 2011 was an opportunity for the PYD to establish in 2014 the Rojava Autonomous Administration, and adopted the constitutional document called "Social Contract" which established a federal system in NES. First with three cantons, Afrin, Jazira and Kobane (Euphrates), and from 2016 including the regions of Raqqa, Manbij and Deir ez Zor, and the strategic area of Tabqa. In 2018 Turkey occupied Afrin with the support of proxy actors such as the SNA.

The PYD is a political formation created in 2003 by the PKK. The control of the NES territories in 2014 was led by the YPG and YPJ, which represent the armed wing of the PYD. Since then, the PYD and TEVDEM also have political control of DAANES through their influence over the SDC, the political assembly that formed the DAANES government, as it is currently known, in 2018. [11] The PYD is also part of the KCK, a structure that brings together all political formations affiliated with PKK ideology and objectives.[12] Since then, PYD political leaders have tried to distance themselves from the PKK, however many social and political sectors consider the PKK to have a great influence on the NES government through the Kadres. Turkey considers the PKK and PYD as terrorist organizations and as threats to its existence, which has served as the main justification for attacking DAANES. The Kadres are senior PKK commanders from different countries in the region who were incorporated into PYD structures from 2011 onwards. The PYD has denied the presence of these actors, but the Interna-

11 EASO, *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019.

12 Lowe, Robert. "The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria." In *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East*, edited by David Romano and Mehmet Gurses, 225-246. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

tional Crisis Group claims that their activity persists and that they have played a key role in the fight against ISIS.[13] Turkey uses these aspects to justify its military operations against the PYD government.

The SDC is the organizational and political umbrella of DAANES and the SDF and its functions include dialogue with the government of Damascus, participation in the negotiation processes and coordination with all the political parties in NES.[14] Dania Ramada, representative of the SDC Coordination Office, explained that the SDC Assembly involves a wide range of political and social actors to address issues such as the provision of public services for the NES population.[15]

Box 1: What is DAANES?[16]

DAANES was created by the SDC in 2018 and is founded on the constituent principles of its Social Contract based on the principles of direct democracy, democratic confederalism, ethnic and religious pluralism within a secular state, gender equality, cooperative economy and ecology, among others. [17] This Social Contract is imbued with the philosophical foundations of Abdullah Öcalan. In 2023, it was renewed to adapt to the new territorial reality of 2018 and 2019, with the addition of Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir ez Zor to DAANES.[18]

During this period, the NES authorities have been able to develop an administrative system based on decentralization and participatory governance. DAANES is structured on three main administrative levels: 1) General government consisting of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial Council; 2) Regional government of the 7 cantons of NES, organized by districts; 3) Local government consisting of sub-districts (councils) and communes.

13 International Crisis Group. "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North Syria." *Report 236 / Middle East & North Africa*, July 18, 2022.

14 Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). "Social Contract of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria." Accessed January 9, 2025 https://m-syria-d.com/en/?page_id=425.

15 Dania Ramada, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

16 For more information see: https://recognizemeproject.org/what-is-aanes/

17 Rojava Information Center. "AANES Social Contract - 2023 Edition." Accessed January 9, 2025. https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/12/aanes-social-contract-2023-edition/.

18 NLKA. "Enhancing Diverse Democracy: NE Syria's New Social Contract." Accessed January 9, 20255. https://nlka.net/eng/enhancing-diverse-democracy-ne-syrias-new-social-contract/.

At the general level, the main functions of the General Executive Council are to guarantee public services, approve general budgets and ensure SDC participation in government structures. The Executive Council is composed of 10 commissions (local administration, interior, social affairs and labor, women, education, economy and agriculture, finance, culture and art, health and environment, and youth and sports) and has as one of its main functions the approval of the government budget. These commissions are replicated at all other administrative levels. The commune system is based on the direct participation of the population with the objective of solving social problems and dealing with aspects of service provision. Both the communes and the councils are directly elected by the community.

The system, as a whole, applies the mechanism of co-chairmanship, which implies the participation of a man and a woman at the leadership levels of each administrative body. In addition to this system, there is a 50% quota for female participation in all administrative levels of DAANES.

The DAANES defense system is articulated through the SDF, a multi-ethnic force formed by Kurds, Arabs and other minorities in 2015. The SDF General Command, elected by the Military Council in which the different ethnic groups are represented, is controlled by the YPG/YPJ. Since 2019 the defense system is also structured into 6 military councils in Tel Abiad, Kobane, Tabqa, Raqqa, Qamishli and Al Hol.[19]

In 2015, the YPG/YPJ defeated ISIS in Kobane, strengthening their ability to fight jihadist terrorism in the region. This factor, along with the secular nature of their government, have contributed to the US supporting the SDF with military aid and establishing military bases in the region.

In the past, there were also areas of military cooperation between the US-backed FSA factions and the SDF. Relations with the jihadist Salafist groups in the former opposition to Bashar al Assad have not been stable, and have included clashes on certain occasions. This is due to the secular nature of the government, the support these groups receive from Turkey and the conflicts Kurdish forces have had with the local population in Arab-majority areas such as Deir ez Zor and Raqqa. A local security expert explains that SDF operations against ISIS in Deir ez Zor and other eastern towns, such as Baghuz, resulted in many deaths and arrests of family members linked to ISIS. This has contributed to a backlash against the SDF presence in those areas, including occasional clashes between tribes and Kurdish-led forces. [20]

The main demands of DAANES have been dialogue and the creation of a new Syria while preserving the Autonomous Administration in the NES. In the Al Assad era, the authorities tried to maintain political dialogue with Damascus. In 2019, the DAANES Government worked to reach an agreement with Bashar al Assad to seek a constitutional solution that

19 EASO, Syria: Actors, *Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019.

20 Security expert of humanitarian organization, interview conducted in Amuda, November 26, 2024.

would ensure military autonomy and governance in NES, but Damascus rejected that option. Since then, dialogue between the parties has broken down and their relationship has been limited to temporary economic and security arrangements.[21] In the new political context, the NES authorities have maintained the predisposition for dialogue with the political leaders in Damascus. Proof of this is the roadmap issued on December 16, 2024 by the Government, based on 10 key points such as aspirations to preserve Syria's territorial integrity, stop military operations, initiate dialogue in Damascus with all political forces in the country, stop hate speech and accusations of treason, and ensure women's participation in political decision-making processes, among others.[22] In this dialogue process, meetings have taken place between the PYD and the KNC to constitute a common position and representation.[23] One of the challenges of the intra-Kurdish dialogue is to articulate a political solution for NES in the new Syria. In the meantime, SDF commander general Mazloum Abdi has made statements showing his commitment to collaboration with the new state authorities, such as transferring control of NES borders to the new state authorities.[24]

3.2. Kurdish National Council (KNC)

The KNC is a coalition of approximately 16 Kurdish parties that came into being during the 2011 revolution with the aim of overthrowing the Damascus regime and preserving the rights of the Kurdish population in the country. It is the main political opposition in NES against the PYD. In its early stages it also involved LCC and youth and women's organizations.[25] One of the main parties is the Syrian KDP , which was one of the first political formations created in the country (in 1957).[26] A year later, Masoud Barzani, leader of the regional Kurdish movement, created the Iraqi KDP party, which was later led by his son, Masoud Barzani. He was the first minister of the KRG and was one of the main promoters of the KNC. According to academics Zeynep Kaya and Matthew Whiting, the Turkish government also funded the KNC during this period.[27]

21 EASO, *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019. p. 40

22 ANF News. "AANES Announces Initiative to Build New Syria." December 16, 2024. https://anfenglish-mobile.com/news/daanes-announces-initiative-to-build-new-syria-76905 . (Accessed 08/01/2024).

23 Kajjo, Sirwan. "Amid Divisions, Kurds Pursue Unified Representation in Post-Assad Syria." *Voice of America (VOA)*, December 26, 2024. https://www.voanews.com/a/amid-divisions-kurds-pursue-unified-representation-in-post-assad-syria-/7915063.html. (Accessed 09/01/2024).

24 The Syrian Observer. "SDF Ready to Hand Over Border Control to Damascus." Published December 29, 2024. https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/sdf-ready-to-hand-over-border-control-to-damascus.html. (Accessed 09/01/2025)

25 Lowe, Robert. *The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria*, 2014.

26 Kajjo, Sirwan. "Syrian Kurds: Rising from the Ashes of Persecution." In T*he Syrian War: Between Justice and Political Reality*, 268-286. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

27 Kaya, Zeynep, and Matthew Whiting. "Sowing Division: Kurds in the Syrian War." *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 79-91.

The PYD never joined the KNC, and in November 2011 organized the first elections to the PCWK following the ideological principles of the PKK and forming part of TEVDEM, to build an alternative government to that in Damascus, formed by six political formations and civil society organizations.[28] In early 2012, however, the KNC and the PCWK reached an agreement to establish the SKC, an interim administrative structure representing all of Syrian Kurdistan. Masoud Barzani played a key role in the creation of this project and hosted the signing of the agreement in Erbil in July 2012. That same month, the PCWK began taking control of several towns in NES such as Kobane, Afrin, Amuda, Ras al Ain and Derik.[29] However, when in 2014 the PYD announced the creation of the Social Contract, the KNC and other political forces in the country such as the SNC, created in 2011 and consisting of the main forces opposing Bashar al Assad and recognized by the international community, rejected the declaration.[30]

The Iraqi KDP and the Turkish PKK are the two major Kurdish political projects in the region, and their tense relations are crystallized in the development of DAANES in Syria. According to Robert Lowe, the KNC criticizes the interference of the PKK armed group, while the PYD denounces the influence of Barzani's KDP in Syrian Kurdish affairs through the KNC.[31] Likewise, recurrent criticisms of the PYD by the KNC political parties are the close relations between the PKK and the Al Assad regime, and the repression of political dissidence exercised by the government.

Unlike the PYD, the rest of the Kurdish parties in Syria have rejected the use of weapons and have adopted nonviolent strategies. However, some scholars note that some formations have created small militias. It is also noted that the KDP has created a militia of 1,200 Syrian Kurdish refugees in the KRG to counter the PYD's military capability.[32]

3.3. Hayat Tahrir al Sham

HTS was created in 2017 as a Sunni Islamist coalition formed by the al-Nusra Front, affiliated to the jihadist group Al-Qaeda, and other factions such as Jabhat Ansar al Din, Harakat Nour al Din, Liwa al Haqq and Jaysh al Sunna.[33] In the process it came into conflict with jihadist groups such as Ahrar al Sham, Jaish al Islam and Harakat Nour al Din al Zengi, but ended up dominating the forces in Idlib opposed to the Syrian regime. Like these groups, its objective was to overthrow Bashar al Assad, to eliminate Iranian influence

28 Lowe, Robert. *The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria*, 2014.

29 Ibid

30 Kaya, Zeynep, and Matthew Whiting. "Sowing Division: Kurds in the Syrian War." *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 79-91.

31 Lowe, Robert. *The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria*, 2014.

32 Ibid.

33 EASO, *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019.

and to constitute an Islamic State in Syria. In this way, it ended up integrating its rivals into a broad coalition of fighters made up of 30,000 troops.[34]

Its leader, Abu Mohamed al Jolani (nom de guerre of Ahmed al Sharaa), fought in Iraq with Al-Qaeda. Subsequently, he returned to Syria, where he assumed the leadership of the al-Nusra Front, a jihadist splinter of Al-Qaeda. However, in recent years his language has moderated, emphasizing that his priority is to create a state that respects diversity.[35] The US, UN, EU and Turkey designated HTS as an Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist organization in 2017.

Since that year, HTS has ruled Idlib through the Syrian Salvation government, an administrative body of HTS, and has effectively resisted attacks by the former regime and its ally, Russia. The government in Idlib has been characterized by repression of protests, arbitrary arrests, kidnappings, extortion and torture of dissident voices such as activists and journalists, among others.[36] In order to exercise its control, it established a judicial system based on sharia law, a brutally strict prison system, and dress codes and segregation in schools.[37] Its main source of financing has been taxes on the population for electricity and water services. Some sources indicate that they received donations from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait between 2013 and 2016. [38]

In November 2024, HTS launched operation Deterrence of Aggression (DoA) against the regime in coordination with other rebel groups, such as the SNA, through the mechanism agreed with Turkey, Fatah al Mubin. With the seizure of Damascus, many doubts are raised as to the type of government that HTS will establish together with the rest of the groups opposed to the former regime. According to the Stimson Center, the success of HTS would not have been possible without the support of Turkey, which is mainly aimed at neutralizing the PYD in NES. [39]

3.4. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)

ISIS, also known as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh, was born as a splinter group of Al-Qaeda and other Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups. ISIS was designated as a terrorist organization by the United States in 2002. The motivation of ISIS is to establish an Islamic state in Syria, but with the projection of rebuilding an Islamic caliphate on a global scale. From 2014 onwards they took advantage of the popular revolution in

34 Al Jazeera. "Who Controls What in Syria: In Maps.", December 1, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/1/who-controls-what-in-syria-in-maps. (Accessed 09/01/2025).

35 Burke, Jason. *Syria's New Leader: A Tale of Two Identities - Ahmed al-Sharaa and Abu Mohammed al-Jolani*, December 10, 2024.

36 See data at: https://snhr.org/blog/2024/08/30/record-of-arbitrary-arrests1/

37 EASO, *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019.

38 Ibid

39 Shahbazov, Fuad. "What Turkey Hopes to Gain from the HTS Offensive in Syria." *Stimson Center*, December 5, 2024. https://www.stimson.org/2024/what-turkey-hopes-to-gain-from-the-hts-offensive-in-syria/ (Accessed 09/01/2025).

Syria to control large areas of the country. In 2015 they attempted to capture Kobane, but their attack was repelled by the YPG/YPJ. With the support of the United States and other allies, the SDF took the last ISIS strongholds in Syria, such as Baghuz and Deir ez Zor. The clashes left numerous dead, including civilians. Many ISIS members were imprisoned in Sina'a prison in Hasaka, while their families were forcibly displaced to Al Hol refugee camp and regime-controlled areas.

Since the final defeat of ISIS in Baghuz in 2019, the jihadist group has adopted a low-level insurgency strategy. Sleeper cells remain in southwestern Deir ez Zor, Baghuz and the Abu Rujmin mountains in northern Badia.[40] ISIS military actions between 2019 and 2024 have reduced, but continue through a covert network in regime-controlled territories, carrying out insurgent attacks on an ad hoc basis. Several key informants further attest to the prevalence of ISIS "mentality" among the population in refugee camps and among certain tribal clans and other social components in Raqqa or Deir ez Zor.[41] Proof of this situation is the evidence of recruitment activities in Al Hol camp in 2019.[42]

ISIS has maintained commercial transactions with inhabitants of eastern Homs and Deir Ezzor to acquire basic commodities. Also, it has tapped into smuggling networks in Deir ez Zor and Hasakah, as well as the network between Syria and Iraq, especially Nineveh and Anbar. Some sources indicate that commodity and weapons warehouses are located in the rural Shaddadi areas between Deir ez Zor and Hasakah.[43] It is also key to note that, during periods of heightened regime violence and repression in these regions, ISIS supplied these areas with commodities and security services, gaining the trust of the communities which enabled them to continue illicit activities. This also contributed to many tribesmen and families joining ISIS.

Numerous sources consulted during the field research confirm that ISIS has reorganized and is ready to intervene militarily.[44] Proof of this is that with the advance of the opposition forces against Bashar al Assad, these cells were reactivated, carrying out attacks against SDF members in Deir ez Zor in December 2024.[45] In the context of new escalation of ISIS insurgent actions, Hasaka prison and other detention centers in NES are strategic targets of this group. The SDF has maintained a systematic strategy to fight these groups in Deir ez Zor and Raqqa. In this framework, different human rights organizations

40 Monitoring and Information Center. *ISIS Revival After Syrian Regime Collapse.* December 14, 2024.

41 Nazhan Mahmud, interview conducted in Qamishli, November 26, 2024; Heysam Mislim, interview conducted in Kobane, December 1, 2024.

42 EASO, Syria: Actors, *Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019.

43 International Crisis Group. "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North Syria." *Report 236 / Middle East & North Africa*, July 18, 2022. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north (Accessed January 9, 2025).

44 Abdulquddus Abbas, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024; Mustafa Hassan, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024.

45 North Press Agency. "SDF Arrests ISIS Member Planning Terrorist Attacks in Eastern Syria." December 18, 2024. Accessed January 9, 2025. https://npasyria.com/en/119911/ . (Accessed January 9, 2025).

have denounced arbitrary arrests of people, including women and children, allegedly affiliated to ISIS.[46]

3.5. The legacy of Bashar al Assad

The Al Assad family has ruled Syria for 54 years through a single-party, autocratic presidential system that has survived thanks to a totalitarian and clientelist system of repression, with special privileges for the Alawite minority. Hafez al Assad seized power through a coup d'état led by members of the Arab Socialist Baath Party. In 2000, Bashar al Assad took power after the death of his father. In order to maintain complete power in the country, Bashar al Assad developed a strategy of repression of political dissent and social division between the different ethnic, religious and ideological communities in Syria.

Faced with the revolutionary movements of 2011, Bashar al Assad rejected the demands of the population and launched a military campaign of assassinations, mass arrests and attacks against civilians, including the use of chemical weapons. Under this regime Syria has undergone the darkest years of its history, with more than 5.6 million people being driven into exile and reaching the figure of 617,910 people dead.[47] After 13 years of war, more than 12 million people live below the poverty line. This economic situation together with international isolation, US sanctions, strained relations with its allies, instability in the region and the development of an increasingly strong armed opposition supported by actors such as Turkey, led to the overthrow of the regime on December 8, 2024.

Despite the overthrow of Bashar al Assad it is important to highlight some key obstacles that remain in Syria to the national transition process. First, the regime has left behind a complex security system. This system is structured, on the one hand, in a vast civil-military intelligence apparatus, with technologies of mass surveillance of internet and telephone communications controlled by intelligence services, military units such as Electronic National Defense Forces and Iranian electronic armies such as Group5 or the Syrian Electronic Army, with the complicity of the German company Ultimaco or the French Qosmos.[48] On the other hand, the SAF were composed of approximately 150,000 men, and although many of them have fled the country, the vast majority remain in Syria. Al Jolani announced an amnesty for the State Security Forces, except for the main leaders of these structures.[49] In addition to these armed forces, there were the NDF, militias under the control of the State, made up of approximately 60,000-100,000 armed

46 Zayadin, Hiba. "Türkiye's Troubling Embrace of Syrian Groups Accused of Grave Crimes." *Human Rights Watch*. July 30, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/30/turkiyes-troubling-embrace-syrian-groups-accused-grave-crimes . (Accessed January 9, 2025).

47 See: https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/

48 Camps-Febrer, Dúnia, Felip Daza, Carlos Díaz, and Nora Miralles. *Report on Surveillance and Civil Liberties in Syria*. November 2024. Novact, Suds and ODHE. https://novact.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/informe-vigilancia-INGLES_compressed.pdf . (Accessed 20/12/2024).

49 The Telegraph. "Syria Faces New Challenges as Assad Loses Grip on Damascus." December 9, 2024. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/12/09/syria-assad-demascus-russia-israel-iran-putin-war/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

civilians distributed throughout the country. These forces were trained by Hezbollah and Iran, and dedicated to defending neighborhoods loyal to the regime, through control of checkpoints and surveillance, among other tasks.[50] Recently, criminal activities of NDF members have been identified in the geographical triangle between South Qamshili, Al Hol and Hasaka.

The Al Assad regime was able to survive for so many years because of the support of a socio-economic elite that was consistently loyal and even created militias to defend its interests, actively participating in the repression of civil society. In fact, according to author Bassam Haddad, a characteristic of the country's elite during the 2011 revolution was its cohesion, creating a "state bourgeoisie" where certain elites obtained great benefits thanks to their loyalty to the regime.[51] That state bourgeoisie mainly consisted of senior government officials (23%), more recently established businessmen with corrupt relations with the security services (48%) and a traditional pre-1960s bourgeoisie with a corrupt relationship with the state (22%).[52] Regarding economic relations with the NES, as we have commented, oil was a key natural resource for the regime, especially when it could not access Iranian reserves. In this framework, economic agreements were established involving businessmen loyal to the regime such as Husam Qaterji, who acted as an intermediary for oil and grain trade between areas controlled by the regime, ISIS areas and NES.[53] In 2023 Qaterj's business group was building facilities in Raqqa to refine oil acquired by DAANES.[54] Qaterji was active at the communicative level in supporting the regime and that loyalty was not only compensated with economic but also with political benefits, as evidenced by his inclusion in the Syrian Parliament as a representative of Aleppo in 2016.[55]

Another economic pillar of the regime was the production of drugs such as Captagon, also known as the "drug of the poor", which brought the regime some 5.7 billion dollars annually.[56] The main destination was the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, via Jordan. However, it was also widely used by members of ISIS and other sectors of the Syrian population. What is relevant to this business are the drug smuggling networks that have been built throughout the country, including NES, an aspect that will be analyzed in depth in the following sections.

50 ARK Group DMCC. *The Syrian Conflict: A Systems Conflict Analysis*. February 2016. https://es.cdacollaborative.org/publication/the-syrian-conflict-a-systems-conflict-analysis/. (Accessed December 15, 2024).

51 Bassam Haddad, Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resistance (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

52 Siham, A. "The Role of the Syrian Business Elite in the Syrian Conflict: A Class Narrative." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 3 (2022): 433-445.

53 Ibid

54 For more information see: https://www.syriahr.com/en/295196/

55 Siham, A., *The Role of the Syrian Business Elite in the Syrian Conflict*, op. cit., 433.

56 https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/syrias-captagon-crisis-a-narco-state-in-the-middle-east/

3.6. The NES Tribal System

Tribes in the Middle East are social entities and spaces of grassroots solidarity, consolidated by social affiliations and shared kinship networks, based on a common paternal lineage.[57] However, at least in Syria, they cannot be considered as an element of political uniformity, i.e. tribes are not monolithic groups, but they do contribute to the formation of a social identity. Tribal affiliation is an important indicator of social composition. Tribal leaders also play roles in governance, social cohesion, mediation of disputes, economic support and provision of security for the community. [58]

Mohammed al Zoba, one of the leaders of the Al Jebour tribe present in the Hasaka and Qamshili territories, details that one of his main functions is to maintain social peace and resolve disputes between family members.[59] The Al Jebour tribe is composed of approximately 800,000 people distributed among 22 clans, each clan having a representative who participates in the Tribal Council. [60] Al Jebour is one of more than 30 tribes in NES, along with the Arab tribes Shammar, Tayy, Jabour, Aqidat, Baggara, Al Walda, Al Afadala, Al Busbieh, Al Bu Khamis, Al Bu Ramadan, Al Bu Khabour, Al Mashahedah, Al Hadidiyin, Al Na'im, Al Bu Badran, Al Ajeel, Al Maraseemah, Bani Saba'a, Al Kal'aiyin and Al Mashhoor, among others. But there are also Kurdish tribes such as the Milli, Miran and Bashat, in addition to communities of Turkmen, Circassians, Chechens and some Armenian families. The regions of Raqqa, Deir ez Zor, Hasaka and Aleppo, among other areas of Syria, are areas with a significant tribal composition.

In this line, the expert Maziad Alharamy emphasizes that "the DAANES authorities are not aware of the real power of the tribal leaders and have tried to manipulate them by placing incompetent people as leaders who are not accepted by the tribe".[61] This manipulation has led to a lack of trust on the part of tribal leaders towards the government, a mistrust that has been growing because of the relations that DAANES has had with the regime. In fact, historically, the Syrian regime and other external actors such as Turkey and Iran have attempted at times to reduce and at others to instrumentalize the power of tribal leaders to achieve their political objectives, such as eliminating ISIS or other political opponents. [62]

57 Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). "Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria." May 6, 2019. https://www.coar-global.org/2019/05/06/tribal-tribulations-tribal-mapping-and-state-actor-influence-in-northeastern-syria/#elementor-toc__heading-anchor-4. (Accessed January 9, 2025).

58 Ibid

59 Ibid

60 Mohammed al Zoba, interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

61 Maziad Alharamy, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 31, 2024.

62 Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). "Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria." May 6, 2019.

According to a study by the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, one of the big changes in Syria has been to turn tribes into actors with institutional roles.[63] DAANES authorities have incorporated tribal leaders into public councils and pacification committees for dispute resolution. In this regard, several key informants have agreed on the effectiveness of tribal leaders in resolving conflicts quickly, as they avoid lengthy and costly legal processes, and seek a solution that is acceptable to both parties.[64] However, others feel that when cases deal with issues such as early marriages, gender-based violence or compensation to women for divorce, tribal resolutions are often unfair.[65] The tribes use customary and uncodified law dating from pre-Islamic periods, although some Islamic laws and concepts have permeated. According to expert Alharamy, the tribal justice system is currently codified and based on Sharia law, customs and traditions.[66] For Alharamy, this system does not conflict with the laws and democratic processes promoted by DAANES, but rather complements them.[67] An aspect that has been supported by other informants, such as the Mali Jin association, who point out that the most serious cases such as murders or honor crimes[68] are dealt with in the courts. [69]

3.7. Organized civil society of NES

During the 2011 revolution, many activists, journalists, intellectuals, professionals from diverse trades and humanitarian workers, among others, organized themselves in decentralized networks of LCCs, in the neighborhoods of cities and towns across the country.[70] In the initial phases of the revolution, their main function was to organize nonviolent resistance actions such as protests, communication with the international media and documentation of human rights violations. To do this, they developed sophisticated communication systems, with technologies able to escape regime surveillance and control, and to continue working even during internet blackouts.[71] Activists were extremely creative with "surprise" actions such as market rallies lasting only a few minutes, theatrical

63 Hussein, Dima. *A Closer Look at Tribal Identity and Tribal Structure in Syria*. Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, February 2019. https://harmoon.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Closer-look-at-Tribal-Identity-and-Tribal-Structure-in-Syria.pdf. (Accessed December 23, 2024).

64 Mustafa Hassan, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024; Bozhan Khalil, interview conducted in Kobane, December 2, 2024.

65 GBV expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

66 Maziad Alharamy, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 31, 2024.

67 Ibid

68 Honor crimes are acts of violence, often murders, committed by family members against a person (usually women) who is perceived as dishonoring the family, often due to behaviors related to sexuality, such as extramarital affairs, refusing an arranged marriage, or even being a victim of sexual assault.

69 Neda Dawood and Nairuz Asad, group interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

70 Marei, F. G. "Local Coordination Committees." In *Conflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions, and Regime Change*, J. K. Zartman, 192-193. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2020

71 Marei, Fouad Gehad. 2020. "Local Coordination Committees." In: C*onflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions and Regime Change*, ed. by Jonathan K. Zartman, 192-193. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC - CLIO

performances depicting the tyranny of Bashar al Assad, or fountains pumping red-tinted water.[72]

When nonviolent protests gave way to armed confrontation between the Damascus regime and armed opposition actors such as the FSA, some LCC members joined those groups, but others maintained nonviolent discipline and led the tasks of social organization, provision of public services and humanitarian aid. The LCCs contributed to the creation of administrative councils to manage these tasks for the population in the liberated areas. However, as the war progressed and the opposition to the regime lost control of territories, the regime assassinated, arrested and tortured LCC organizers.

Many activists left the country for fear of these reprisals. Germany, Turkey, the United States and Egypt were some of the destinations where Syrian civil society went into exile to continue the resistance. From exile, important initiatives were developed to denounce, raise awareness of, and advocate against the Al Assad regime, such as Families for Freedom, which demands the release of missing or arbitrarily arrested family members, the end of these practices and accountability for the systematic violation of human rights.[73]

The revolution in NES also spread rapidly in early 2011 through youth movements such as Youth Uprising (Ciwanan Serhildana, in Kurdish) who started organizing protests in Qamishli and Amuda through Facebook and other channels. In their first communiqué they called for solidarity with other cities in the country and under the slogan "Free Syrian Youth" demanded dignity, freedom and an end to tyranny, emphasizing that Kurds were also part of Syrian society.[74] Numerous youth organizations were created during this period such as the Independent Committee for Social Development and Self-Organized Democracy later renamed DOZ International, an organization dedicated to youth empowerment through training programs and awareness-raising activities to prevent problems such as the prevalence of drugs through a network of social centers spread across cities such as Raqqa, Kobane, Ras Al Ain and Amuda. Walat Abdulrahman, country director of DOZ International, explained to us how during the regime young people were totally marginalized from the political and social scene.[75] The women's movement was also present in the organization of the protests, especially in early 2012, with direct nonviolent actions, such as sit-ins.[76]

From 2013 onwards, the development of numerous civil society organizations in different fields such as the defense of human rights, women's rights, environment, psychosocial support, support for disabled people, humanitarian aid, etc. has been identified. Some of the first organizations that emerged were: Center for Civil Society and Democracy, the

72 Black, Ian. "Syria Edges Closer to Collapse as Pressure Builds on Damascus to Change." *The Guardian*, January 16, 2012. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/16/syria-collapse-damascus-change. (Accessed December 10, 2024).

73 For more information see: www.syrianfamilies.org/en/

74 See: https://cities.syriauntold.com/#_edn16

75 Walat Abdulrahman, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 29, 2024.

76 See: https://cities.syriauntold.com/#_edn16

Sara organization, Mandela house, the Fraternity Foundation for Human Rights, Shar for Development, the Women's Kurdish Union of Syria, the Sawiska Women's organization, the Asti Center for Peace, the Assyrian Women's Union in Syria and the Kurdish Red Crescent.[77] Many of these organizations emerged and maintained their activity thanks to the support of international organizations. This support has not been consistently maintained throughout the region, and even in places like Kobane international support has dropped drastically, as reported to us by the DAANES Office of Humanitarian Affairs which laments that only eight organizations are active compared to the hundreds of organizations previously operating in Raqqa or Hasaka. [78]

During the field research, we established contact with numerous civil society organizations in different localities and were able to identify extensive accumulated experience and knowledge of the social fabric. Some trends identified were, firstly, the solid research work of many of these organizations to assess local needs and carry out systematic recording of rights violations and analysis of socio-political dynamics. Secondly, the numerous organizations with extensive experience in mediation, conflict resolution and social cohesion between communities. Thirdly, the importance of, and challenge to, humanitarian aid efforts to cover the basic needs of the population in the face of deteriorating socio-economic conditions and deficient public services. This work is being carried out by the few international and local organizations engaged in the direct provision of aid such as Un Ponte Per and the Kurdish Red Crescent Society, among others, as well as international organizations such as OCHA, NES Forum and Impact initiatives, which support this work by coordinating humanitarian aid. Fourthly, the feminist movement for the defense of women's rights and empowerment stands out, with numerous organizations working in NES, such as the organizations Sara, Rose or Sawiska. In this line, it also highlights the structure of Mali Jin, which is part of the DAANES Pacification Committees, dedicated to victim protection, conflict resolution and legal defense related to cases of gender violence, including honor crimes and early marriages. Fifth, there are organizations and informal groups focused on raising awareness of, and responding to, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, especially in areas such as Hasaka, where the lack of water is having serious consequences for agricultural production. Sixth and lastly, trends of competition between organizations due to lack of resources have been identified, but also broad networks and coordination spaces with the capacity to unify civil society demands and increase its political influence in NES. The Federal Democratic Society Organization in NES stands out, created in February 2024, a coalition that represents all social components in the region, from civil society organizations to professional guilds. With 120 representatives and the objective of promoting democratic development, it supports DAANES to develop the provision of public services and coordinates the demands of organized civil society, and to this end participates in the SDC.[79]

77 Ibid

78 Berivan Issa and Jamal Abdelqader, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

79 Jihad Hassan, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS

3.8. The Government of Turkey and the Syrian National Army

Turkey's presence in Syria dates back to 2011 with the main objective of impeding the creation of a Kurdish government and, in theory, eliminating the ISIS terrorist threat. The Turkish government considers the PYD and PKK to be terrorist organizations because of the threats they pose to the state. Since 2011, Turkey has taken in 3.6 million Syrian refugees.[80] In this framework, Turkey has maintained tense relations, but also spaces of cooperation, with Russia and Iran, allies of Bashar al Assad.

The gradual consolidation and territorial expansion of the DAANES provoked, from 2016 onwards, a more assertive Turkish policy in Syria, through the development of four military operations in the country. The first one in August 2016, called Euphrates Shield, involved the capture of the city of Al Bab, north of Aleppo, from ISIS, preventing the advance and control of those areas by the SDF. With the second operation, known as Olive Branch, Turkey occupied Afrin, causing a mass exodus of Kurdish communities and the expulsion of the SDF. In October 2019, Turkey developed the third operation, Peace Spring, occupying the border strip between Tel Abiad and Ras al Ain and moving 32 km into the territory of NES. It is to this "safe zone" that Turkey intends to return at least two million Syrian refugees.[81] In a fourth operation, in February 2020, it occupied new positions in Idlib. Since then, Turkey has administered all these territories with civilian institutions and private companies providing public services.[82] In carrying out these operations, Turkey has used its military forces, intelligence services and military police, as well as proxies on the ground.

In parallel, the Turkish government has been supporting the development of a rebel military structure inside Syria to achieve its objectives. Starting in 2015, Turkey established a new alliance with the SNA with logistical, economic, military and training support through the army, intelligence forces and even Turkish military and private security companies such as Sadat. The SNA is a coalition of 30 armed groups that operate in Northern Aleppo including factions such as the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Moutassem Brigade, Ahrar al Sharqiya, Al Jabha al Shamiya, the Sultan Murad Vision and the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade. [83] The latter, along with the Hamzat division, are subject to US sanctions and are recorded as having committed serious crimes such as kidnapping, sexual violence and torture.[84] These alliances were also forged on the basis of ethno-religious compatibilities (Turkmen, Sunni Arabs).

80 See: https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/europe/turkiye_en

81 EASO, *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019. 9

82 ACAPS 2023.

83 EASO, *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2019.

84 Zayadin, Hiba, *Türkiye's Troubling Embrace of Syrian Groups Accused of Grave Crimes*. Op. cit.

In October 2019, the SNA incorporated the NLF into its military structures. It is a rebel group from the Idlib area created in 2018 under the FSA brand, the main armed opposition group against the regime since 2011. The NLF consists of moderate and jihadist factions such as Feilaq al Sham, Ahrar al Sham, the Free Idlib Army, Jaish al Ahrar and Harakat Nour al Din al Zinki. Early 2019 saw clashes with HTS for control of Idlib, which ended with the defeat of the NLF.

The SNA and the NLF became part of the SIG's Ministry of Defense. The SIG is a parallel government to the Al Assad regime created in 2013 by the SNC, with executive functions to manage civil and administrative aspects in the liberated territories of Syria. The SNC is a political coalition created in 2012 and formed of various opposition and revolutionary groups in the country. As of 2016, Turkey increased its influence over the SNC, which ended up with de facto control of the military and administrative structures of the SIG.

Subsequently, Turkey established an agreement with HTS to support this group on several conditions that included moderating its rhetoric, strengthening its coordination with the rest of the rebel forces opposing the regime, and weakening the Syrian Kurds.[85] Within this framework, a unified command unit known as Al Fatah al Mubin was established.[86] This was the main coordination mechanism in the offensive against the Al Assad regime in late November 2024 under the so-called DoA military operation.

As HTS troops advanced towards Damascus, the DoF military operation, led by the SNA and other rebel groups, under the command of the SIG, was organized to take control of NES territories.[87] The SNA moved to control strategic areas such as Manbij on December 9, where days later a ceasefire was reached between the SNA and the SDF under US mediation. However, Turkish shelling and attacks on NES continued throughout December, especially in the strategic areas of the Tishrin Dam and Qaraqozak Bridge, south of Kobane.

Recently, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has insisted on his support for the Syrian rebel forces and offered support for the reconstruction of Syria. However, he has also stressed that it is a priority for Turkey to neutralize the ISIS and PKK terrorist groups, including the PYD. Likewise, Erdogan has declared that international support for the YPG must cease, in reference to US military support for the DAANES government, and has insisted that "the PKK and its versions, which threaten the survival of Syria, must be eradicated".[88]

85 Salah, Ahmed. "HTS Enters Turkey's Plot Against the Kurds." *Modern Diplomacy*, September 14, 2021. https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/09/14/hts-enters-turkeys-plot-against-the-kurds/.

86 *Al Jazeera*. "Who Controls What in Syria: In Maps." December 1, 2024. Op. cit.

87 *Al Jazeera.* "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Other Syrian Opposition Groups in Aleppo." December 2, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/2/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-the-other-syrian-opposition-groups-in-aleppo . (Accessed January 9, 2025).

88 *Al Jazeera*, "Erdogan Urges End of Foreign Support for Kurdish Fighters in Syria," *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/20/erdogan-urges-end-of-foreign-support-for-kurdish-fighters-in-syria (Accessed January 9, 2025).

3.9. The United States of America

US priorities in NES focus on fighting ISIS, protecting its regional allies (Israel) and reducing the influence of the "Shiite Crescent" in the region. In justifying its actions in Syria, the US also refers to the principles outlined in UN Resolution 2254, such as supporting humanitarian access and supporting local ceasefires. [89]

Its military activities began in Syria in 2015 with the military presence of approximately 900 soldiers in NES in cooperation with the SDF. The US has supported the SDF in its military campaigns against ISIS in Raqqa, Deir ez Zor and Baghuz, including the use of air power to attack ISIS and Iranian Revolutionary Guard enclaves. With the establishment of military bases in Hasakah and Deir ez Zor, the Washington government gained geostrategic influence in the region.

This military cooperation has led to tensions and conflicts with Turkey, affecting the stability of NATO. To reduce these tensions, the US did not stand in the way of Turkey's occupation of the strip between Tel Abiad and Ras al Ain and facilitated an agreement between the Turkish government and DAANES over that area.[90] Along these lines, in December 2019, the US imposed sanctions on Syria (Caesar Act) to weaken the regime, but which, indirectly, affected the rehabilitation of infrastructure and the arrival of humanitarian aid in NES.

The US position on NES remains ambivalent in light of recent developments. On the one hand, it has accepted Turkey's penetration into Syria and has established contacts with the HTS rebel forces, despite keeping it on the list of terrorist organizations. And on the other hand, it not only maintains its presence in NES, but has increased its troops to 2,000 soldiers.[91] According to the Pentagon, the forces in the north of the country will continue to fight ISIS.[92] On December 12, 2024, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Recep Tayyip Erdogan to address the situation in Syria and avoid an incursion into NES that would aggravate the humanitarian crisis in the region. Meanwhile, the presence of US troops in NES continues to play a crucial role in deterring Turkish advances. [93]

89 Congressional Research Service. "Syria: Overview of the Conflict." July 15, 2024. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11930. (Accessed January 9, 2025).

90 OpenDemocracy, "The Turkish Invasion of Syria: A New Hope for Jihadists?" October 16, 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/turkish-invasion-syria-new-hope-jihadists/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

91 Helen Cooper, "U.S. Troops in Syria: Key Updates and Decisions," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/19/us/politics/us-troops-syria.html (Accessed January 9, 2025).

92 See: https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3991009/dods-mission-to-defeat-isis-remains-ongoing-in-syria/

93 Shirin Jaafari, "Residents in Northeastern Syria React to Recent Attacks on US Bases," *The World, March* 13, 2024, https://theworld.org/stories/2024/03/13/residents-northeastern-syria-react-recent-attacks-us-bases (Accessed January 9, 2025).

3.10. Russian Federation

From 2011 onwards, the Kremlin diplomatically supported Bashar al Assad, blocking, for example, resolutions to sanction Syria in the UN Security Council. Since 2015, Russia intervened militarily in Syria, establishing military bases in the port of Tartous and the Khmeimim airfield. By doing so, Russia gained geostrategic influence in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa. Specifically, from these two military bases, Putin ensured logistical support and weapons to his military forces in Africa. In addition, Russia's presence in Syria also served as a strategy to counterbalance NATO's power in the Eastern Mediterranean and that of the US in the region. It also exploited relations with Turkey in phases of the conflict to create tensions and weaken the transatlantic alliance.

Russia has been instrumental in maintaining the brutal Al Assad regime, contributing to the violence and humanitarian crisis in Syria. Russia militarily supported the Al Assad regime with weaponry and soldiers, including the use of mercenaries. Numerous Russian military and private security companies, such as Wagner Group, Slavonic Corps or Redut, have operated in Syria, increasing the fragmentation of the conflict with more armed groups and impunity for crimes committed against the civilian population. [94]

With the fall of Bashar al Assad, the opposition forces showed interest in negotiating with Russia to maintain its naval base despite its international image having deteriorated.[95] However, some sources indicate a relocation of troops and military machinery from Syria to Libya to maintain its influence in the Mediterranean and continue its operations in Africa, with the support of mercenaries.[96]

3.11. Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran has been the most important ally of the Baathist regime through military, logistical support and the investment of between 30 and 50 billion dollars over the past 13 years to maintain the regime.[97] Specifically, the Iranian government established military command centers and advanced weapons systems for long-range missiles, drones, radars and other air defense systems in Syria. It also established six training centers, including one in the city of Deir ez Zor and another in the Nayrab area of the Idlib region, where, according to the Syrian pro-rights organization SCM, children under the age of 16 have

94 Aiman Menem. *Shadow Armies 2: Foreign Mercenary Groups in Syria*. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, 2024. https://scm.bz/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Shadow-Armies-2-EN.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

95 Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia Has Lost Prestige after the Fall of Assad, but It Has Also Been Freed from a Difficult Partner," *Chatham House*, December 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/russia-has-lost-prestige-after-fall-assad-it-has-also-been-freed-difficult-partner (Accessed January 9, 2025).

96 Emadeddin Badi, "Russia's Syria Playbook Finds a New Arena in Haftar's Libya," *Atlantic Council,* January 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russia-syria-haftar-libya/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

97 Nicole Grajewski, "Why Did Iran Allow Assad's Downfall?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 9, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2024/12/why-did-iran-allow-assads-downfall?lang=en (Accessed January 9, 2025).

been recruited, trained and indoctrinated.[98] In doing so, it gained geostrategic influence and access to the Mediterranean through the "Shiite Crescent" axis, formed by Syria, Hezbollah and its allies in Iraq.

The Tehran regime has been characterized by the systematic use of proxy warfare strategies, through the use, support and training of armed Shiite militias Liwa Abu al Fadhal al Abbas or Harakat Harakat or Hezbollah al Nujaba.[99] Experts Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickly argue that over the past 4 decades, Iran has been perfecting the use of proxy actors, developing a circuit of mercenaries from Pakistan, Afghanistan and other parts of the world who have participated in the Syrian conflict and other contexts.[100]

From 2023 onwards, Iran has been reducing its influence and presence in Syria due to the attacks against senior IRGC officials by Israel in this territory, the weakening of Hezbollah structures in Lebanon and political tensions with Bashar al Assad.[101] All this led to their silent withdrawal in the face of advancing rebel forces in early December 2024, including from the Deir ez Zor region, one of the Iranian government's strongholds from which arms and logistical support were being introduced to its troops and allied factions through the Qa'im-Bukamal border crossing.[102] Recently, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian showed his political will to meet with the new authorities in Damascus.[103]

Iran is undoubtedly one of the big losers of the fall of Al Assad, which in practice translates into a loss of influence in the region due to the dismantling of the "Shiite Crescent". According to some analysts, this situation will imply the revision of its national security policy, including the development of its nuclear military program.[104] Other experts consider, however, that the current chaos could be used by the Iranian government to maintain some influence in the country, through new alliances and the use of proxies.[105]

98 Menem, *Shadow Armies 2*, op. cit., 45.

99 Ibid

100 Krieg, Andreas, and Jean-Marc Rickli. *Surrogate warfare: The transformation of war in the twenty-first century*. Georgetown University Press, 2019.

101 Grajewski, "Why Did Iran Allow Assad's Downfall?" op. cit., December 9, 2024.

102 Ibid

103 Garrett Nada; Mary Glantz, "Iran and Russia Are the Biggest Regional Losers in Assad's Fall," *United States Institute of Peace*, December 12, 2024, https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/12/iran-and-russia-are-biggest-regional-losers-assads-fall (Accessed January 9, 2025).

104 Ibid

105 Grajewski, "Why Did Iran Allow Assad's Downfall?" op. cit., December 9, 2024.

3.12. The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government and other Kurdish political forces.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq has prioritized its political stability and regional security, despite the fact that its Prime Minister and leader of the KDP, Masoud Barzani, has had a rhetoric of solidarity and support for the Kurdish movement in the region. Proof of this are the extensive political and economic agreements Barzani has signed with the Turkish government on energy and trade.

To a lesser extent, Iraqi Kurdish authorities have established agreements with the SDF for tactical operations against ISIS and maintained cooperative relations for humanitarian aid and the transit of goods through the Semalka border crossing. Although the KRG has welcomed Syrian refugees, Barzani's migration policy has been very restrictive, maintaining tight control of people and goods at its borders.[106] These restrictions have involved the closure of the Semalka-Fishkhabour crossing on numerous occasions, disrupting the transport of humanitarian aid and other basic supplies to NES.[107]

The KDP has contributed to the political support of a component of the Kurdish movement in Syria, the KNC. The KDP has rejected the PKK's influence in the region and has sought to undermine its power through military agreements with Erdogan, including the establishment of Turkish military bases in KRG territory.[108] In December 2024, during a meeting with US Special Envoy for Syria Joel Rayburn, the KRG Prime Minister expressed his concern by noting that the support given to the SDF had ultimately favored the PKK.[109] In other statements, Barzani has supported Al Jolani's aspirations in Syria and his plans for NES, which was perceived as undermining the KRG's efforts to preserve its rule.[110] In parallel, Jalal Talabani, a prominent figure in the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and founder of the PUK, maintains a critical stance towards the new Syrian rebel groups, influenced by his historically close ties with the Al Assad regime.

106 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "The Syria Factor in Iraqi Kurdish Politics," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2014/04/the-syria-factor-in-iraqi-kurdish-politics?lang=en&utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed January 9, 2025).

107 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/fishkhabour-semalka-border-closure-may-2023-impact-markets-northeast-syria-december-2023

108 İdris Okuducu, "Turkey's Anti-PKK Operation and the Development Road in Iraq Are Two Sides of the Same Coin," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 2024, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-anti-pkk-operation-and-development-road-iraq-are-two-sides-same-coin (Accessed January 9, 2025).

109 *ANF English*, "2020 in North-East Syria: Ideological Attacks and Resistance," December 29, 2020, https://anfenglish.com/features/2020-in-north-east-syria-ideological-attacks-and-resistance-48962 (Accessed January 9, 2025).

110 Dana Taib Menmy, "Barzani's Remarks on Syrian Kurds and HTS Leader Sets Off Debate," *The New Arab*, December 2024, https://www.newarab.com/news/barzanis-remarks-syrian-kurds-and-hts-leader-sets-debate (Accessed January 9, 2025).

IV. IMPACTS OF THE CONFLICT

This section describes the main effects of the conflict from an intersectional perspective, with special attention to the differential impacts among the various social groups and vulnerable groups. While in section V we will analyze the factors and the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions that are interacting to provoke and/or accentuate the consequences of the conflict.

4.1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERIORATION

In 2024, Syria remained mired in a humanitarian crisis unprecedented in its modern history. Thirteen years of conflict had left the country with a devastated economy, millions of people displaced both internally and externally, and massive destruction of essential infrastructure. According to estimates, approximately 90% of the population was living below the poverty line, placing Syria among the poorest countries in the world.[111] The UN OCHA reported that, in 2024, around 6.3 million people in regions such as Aleppo, Raqqa, Hasakah and Deir ez Zor faced shortages of basic needs.[112] This economic crisis, as will be discussed below, has profound effects on gender-based violence and other social aspects.

Since February 2023, the Syrian pound (SYP) has lost about half its value against the US dollar, further aggravating the already critical economic situation.[113] According to the UN World Food Program, the cost of living in 2024 had nearly doubled compared to the previous year, with a price increase of 83%.[114] In July of the same year, the NES Forum platform, made up of various humanitarian organizations, published a report based on data collected from more than 1,037 communities in NES. This report revealed that 92% of the population considered accessibility to food as one of the main challenges, while 82% also mentioned difficulties in accessing affordable housing[115]

Economic hardship also had a devastating impact on access to basic services. According to the report, 82% of people were unable to cover health expenses, and 41% stated

111 See: https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15339.doc.htm

112 United Nations Office for the Coordination of *Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic 2024*, February 2024, https://reliefweb.int/country/syr (Accessed January 9, 2025).

113 Ibid.

114 For more information see: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-situation-report-may-2024

115 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-situation-overview-syria-hsos-north-east-syria-july-2024

that they did not have the means to pay for water supply in their homes.[116] These conditions exacerbated problems such as access to safe drinking water, with serious health implications, and the lack of resources to acquire energy alternatives such as solar panels or generators, whose high cost made them inaccessible to most.[117]

In this framework, the deterioration and destruction of critical infrastructures such as water, sanitation and electricity have aggravated the difficulties of DAANES authorities to provide public services with respect to the needs of the population. The earthquakes that hit northern Syria in February 2023 resulted in the destruction of schools[118] and damage to water pipes and tanks, especially in Kobane and Sarrin. [119]

However, the most significant destruction of civilian infrastructure has been caused by Turkey's systematic attacks. In 2023, Turkey carried out a massive attack on 150 locations in NES, including civilian infrastructure for water and electricity supply in particularly vulnerable areas such as Hasaka, which is under severe water stress.[120] While military factions affiliated with Turkey attacked the Alouk water station near the town of Ras al Ain, affecting the supply to 460,000 people in NES.[121] In November 2024, during the fieldwork of this research, Turkey conducted attacks on 88 locations in NES - in retaliation for the PKK attack on a Turkish Aerospace Industry plant in Ankara - which resulted in the death of 17 civilians and affected water facilities, granaries in Qmashili, the domestic gas-bottling plant and the Swediyeh power station, which caused power outages in hospitals and bakeries.[122] These and other attacks also led to the evacuation of 1,937 schools and the disruption of humanitarian protection, such as health, food and WASH programs.

These types of attacks respond to a new military strategy adopted by Turkey in 2020, with the aim of undermining the morale of the population and destabilizing the DAANES government. Human Rights Watch stated that this practice has aggravated the humanitarian crisis in Northern Syria.[123] Several experts consulted in Kobane point out that 2023 recorded the highest number of suicides in recent years in the locality, with 27 cases due to psychological problems due to the unstable situation.[124] Likewise NES Forum points out that the Turkish attacks have contributed to the increase in fuel and food prices, among

116 Ibid

117 Ibid

118 Berivan Issa and Jamal Abdelqader, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

119 Zozan Khalil, interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024.

120 Ibid

121 See: https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20230804_ACAPS_Thematic_report_Northern_Syria_key_crises_to_watch.pdf

122 See: https://rojavainformationcenter.org/storage/2024/10/October-2024-Raport-Turkish-Airstrikes.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

123 *Human Rights Watch*, "Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Disrupt Water, Electricity," October 26, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/26/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity (Accessed January 9, 2025).

124 Heysam Msilim, interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024; Bangin Abdullah, interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

others.[125] Experts from the local organization Ashna for Development described a similar situation in Sirrin, where multiple interconnected factors such as war, high seed prices, Turkish dams on the Euphrates, desertification due to climate change and lack of institutional support have hindered the development of agricultural activities, thus increasing food insecurity in rural areas.[126] Qayssar Mansour, former head of the Public Affairs office of the NES Executive Council, noted that the health and agriculture sectors are in a state of collapse and detailed that "the miserable situation in the countryside is causing large displacements of people from rural to urban areas[127]

Rising prices and the deterioration of public services increase social tensions and therefore affect the distrust and legitimacy of the government. In recent years, protests against the Government from different sectors have been increasing. The following table details some of the most important protests in NES and the evolution from protests over public services to demands to replace the government.

125 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/situation-report-4-november-20th-2024-impact-escalations-hostilities-northeast-syria-infrastructure-and-services

126 Sherzad Saido and Shiar Mohammed, group interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

127 Qayssar Mansour, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 26, 2024.

Box 2. Brief list of social protests in NES since 2019

- **November 2019 in Qamishli**: Demonstrations in response to Turkish military incursions and forced displacement.
- **January 2020 in Kobane and Qamishli**: Protests due to fuel shortages and mobility restrictions due to the conflict.
- **August 2021 in Raqqa and Deir ez Zor**: Widespread protests over forced recruitment of minors by SDF-linked armed groups.
- **March 2022 in Deir ez Zor**: Demonstrations against the local administration for corruption and economic policies perceived as detrimental to tribal communities .
- **July 2023, Tal Hajar (Hasaka)**: Demonstrations over rising fuel prices, lack of access to water due to the inoperative Alouk station, and delays in gas distribution.
- **July 19, 2023 in Manbij**: Protests by merchants and residents against deteriorating living conditions.
- **February 2024 in Qamishli**: Protests by Arab communities against forced recruitment by the SDF.
- **April 2024 in Hasaka**: Demonstrations over fuel shortages and price increases, mainly affecting rural communities.
- **June 2024 in Raqqa**: Tensions between tribal groups and the autonomous administration due to lack of representation in local government structures.
- **August 2024 in Deir ez-Zor**: Protests following the arrest of local tribal leaders for alleged collaboration with groups opposed to the NES Government.
- **October 2024 in Kobane**: Demonstrations against Turkish shelling of border areas, demanding a greater international response.
- **November 2024 in Manbij**: Protests by farmers over lack of access to irrigation water due to decreased flow of the Euphrates River, exacerbated by tensions with Turkey.
- **December 2024 in Raqqa and Deir ez Zor:** Protests against SDF for abuses of power, forced recruitment and economic mismanagement in Arab-majority areas. Some demonstrators interviewed claimed that HTS will take control of those areas.

Sources: *LiveUAMap, North Press Agency*, interviews with key informants.

4.2. FORCED DISPLACEMENTS

The armed conflict in Syria has led to the forced displacement of millions of people. According to UNHCR, in 2024, 5.2 million people were refugees and 6.8 million were internally displaced.[128] Approximately 75% of the displaced people are women and girls.[129] The 2023 earthquakes also generated forced displacement in northern Syria, leaving many families homeless.[130] In Kobane, the destruction of infrastructure was particularly severe and, to this day, there are still families living in tents.

This situation, together with deteriorating socio-economic conditions and lack of opportunities, has contributed to the mass exodus of young people, mostly Arab, Kurdish and Assyrian men, to other countries. Ahmed Shekho, a member of DOZ International, said: "Many of my friends are thinking of leaving for Europe. Some are afraid of being mobilized by the army, others are looking for a better life."[131] The migration route is traced from different locations in NES, especially Deir ez Zor towards Turkey, through the towns of Tal Abiad, Ras al Ain and Qamishli.[132]

In parallel, the escalation of the war in Lebanon in October 2024 caused the displacement to Syria of 425,000 people, 71% of whom were Syrians.[133] In November 2024, the escalation of the conflict between the regime and the opposition forces of HTS and the SNA caused forced displacements from Aleppo (542,600), Hama (347,100) and Homs (26,000), including at least 155,000 people for whom this was a second displacement.[134] For example, numerous Kurdish families who fled Afrin due to the 2018 Turkish occupation and settled in Aleppo have been forced to flee to "relatively" safer areas in the NES region, such as Raqqa.

NES has been hosting millions of internally displaced persons throughout the conflict in the country. In December 2024, there were 12 camps with a population of more than 140,000 refugees and IDPs. Despite humanitarian aid, many family units have difficulty accessing basic services such as food and medicine.[135] Gender-based violence is one of the most worrying problems with serious cases of early marriage, sexual abuse and

128 See: https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation#

129 For more information see: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA_FACTS_AND_FIGURES_2016.pdf

130 See: https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-global-report-2023

131 Ahmed Shekho interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024.

132 Rena Netjes, "The Silent Exodus from Northeast Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/03/the-silent-exodus-from-northeast-syria?lang=en (Accessed January 9, 2025).

133 See: https://reporting.unhcr.org/syrian-arab-republic-new-arrivals-lebanon-overview-core

134 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-flash-update-no-3-recent-developments-syria-8-december-2024

135 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/camps-northeast-syria-humanitarian-needs-october-2023-syria

prostitution.[136] The Al Hol camp contained more than 53,000 people, 50% of whom are children under 11 years of age, mostly Syrian nationals and Iraqis. According to the United States Institute for Peace, the widespread ideological affiliation to ISIS among the displaced people in the camp has caused a social stigma, hindering the social reintegration of families in the villages. [137]

In December 2024, Turkish Army and SNA attacks on the NES Shahba canton in northern Aleppo, where thousands of displaced people from Afrin had been living since 2018, triggered a new wave of displacement into NES. The Italian organization Un Ponte Per estimated, at the time, the arrival in NES of around 120,000 people.[138] The vast majority of the displaced have concentrated in Raqqa and Tabqa, and to a lesser extent, in other NES cities such as Qamishli, Hasaka or Kobane, to join their relatives. According to the NES Forum, 186 schools in Raqqa and Tabqa have been used as shelters,[139] as well as stadiums and mosques. However, the precarious public services and infrastructure in NES have not had the capacity to respond to the needs of these mass movements.[140] This has been compounded by a reduction in the scope and quality of humanitarian aid, as the escalation of the conflict has reduced the mobility of humanitarian staff by increasing the need to work in remote areas, provoking displacement of international staff, and disrupting humanitarian programs in many areas. Curfews and insecurity have also forced the closure of many businesses and disrupted supply chains, contributing to the precarious access of the population to basic commodities.[141] This has led to a great sense of abandonment and frustration that has pushed these people to leave NES. It is estimated that 43% of the people displaced in this latest wave have returned to Afrin and Aleppo despite the risks.[142] By the end of December 2024, dozens of arrests, cases of harassment, movement restrictions and confiscation of property of displaced families in these areas by NES factions are estimated.[143]

136 Yara Malaka and Mizgin Mehmud, interview conducted in Qamishli, October 27, 2024.

137 See: https://www.usip.org/blog/2023/09/usip-explains-al-hol-camps-reintegration-challenge-shows-isis-enduring-impact

138 See: https://unponteper.it/en/syria-facing-a-new-crisis/

139 Ibid

140 NES Forum, *Situation Report #4: Impact of the Escalations of Hostilities in Northeast Syria on the Infrastructure and the Services*, November 20, 2024, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/escalation-hostilities-targeting-critical-civilian-infrastructures-northeast-syria (Accessed January 9, 2025).

141 See: https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20241206_ACAPS_Briefing_note_Syria_escalation_of_conflict_in_the_northwest.pdf

142 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

143 Siwar Hamo, "SDF Says Turkish Drone Strikes Disrupt Aid, Damage Civilian Infrastructure in NE Syria," *North Press Agency*, December 23, 2024, https://npasyria.com/en/120088/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

4.3. SOCIAL POLARIZATION

Social polarization has been the result of decades of sectarian politics in Syria. This polarization has multiple expressions in Northeast Syria, such as stereotypes, hate speech or social disputes between communities, tribes and families. As we will analyze in the following sections, structural racism exposed many people to extremist ideologies such as those promoted by ISIS in 2014, which still survive today in some social sectors.

The mediation expert and director of the Amal al Furat organization, Hussein al Hussein, pointed out that in cities such as Raqqa or Deir ez Zor there is no coexistence between ethnic and religious communities, due to years of violence promoted by factions supported by the former regime and Iran.[144] One indicator of this tension has been the increase in social disputes. Several experts consulted have pointed to the growing trend of social conflicts over land, economic issues, tribal clashes, robberies and murders.[145]

Social division has been exacerbated by the promotion of stereotypes and rumors about the other communities. Hessein Shihadeh, a farmer, social mediator and member of the Office of National Relations and Civil Peace, described the social deterioration as very worrying, reflected in an increase in stereotypes about other ethnicities, with perceptions such as “all Kurds are PKK” or “all Arabs are ISIS terrorists”.[146] These tensions have also flared up in discussions about the precarious provision of public services. The director of Al Raed organization, Bangin Abdullah, explained how the other communities were openly criticized for the poor economic and social situation with expressions such as, “there are families from Raqqa, former ISIS members who destroyed Kobane, and are now receiving better services than the Kurdish communities.”[147] Examples of hate speech towards Arab communities have also been cited during the interviews conducted, due to the disparate electricity supply in Kobane with only four hours a day, compared to eight hours in Raqqa. These differences have led to outrage among Kurdish communities and distrust towards their rulers, generating rumors and reinforcing stereotypes. An informant stated that this situation is due to the fact that the DAANES government in Raqqa is controlled by Arab leaders, some of them with links to the former Al Assad regime.[148]

DOZ social intervention technicians in Tiberspiye, Salma Hussein and Shukri Ali, also noted that hate speech has increased in physical and digital spaces at an alarming rate, targeting minorities, displaced people and other social constituents.[149] In a similar vein, Arya Haji, director of Nextory, and Hozan Hadi, director of Nextep, highlighted that fake

144 Hussein al Hussein, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

145 Naboo Jihad. Interview conducted in Kobane, December 2, 2024; Nazhan Mahmud, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 26, 2024.

146 Hessein Shihadeh, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

147 Bangin Abdullah, interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

148 Ahmed Shekho interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024.

149 Salma Hussein and Shukri Ali, group interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

news promoted by political groups and their electronic armies have aggravated social polarization, labeling their political opponents as "traitors."[150] Some studies from 2020, have identified that the propagation of hate speech on social networks and tribal statements are two effective mechanisms of confrontation against the NES government.[151] These discourses have criticized the authorities for the increased prevalence of weapons, the US presence in the region, the educational curriculum, the military incursions of the SDF, the lack of participation in the civilian structures of the Administration and the impact of IDPs on communities.[152] The persistence of these criticisms has created the conditions for clashes between Arab tribes and the authorities, as well as protests in regions such as Raqqa or Deir ez Zor.

In recent years, hate speech and fake news have increased in NES society. Quantitative and qualitative studies conducted by the Nextep organization between 2021 and 2023 point out that the massive use of social networks and the politicization of the media have accelerated the spread of hate speech increasing its negative impact on social cohesion, accentuating historical resentments between communities and degrading political and economic life.[153] Along these lines, in an opinion poll conducted by Nextep among 116 people in the NES region in 2021, 59.5% of respondents considered that hate speech had very wide diffusion in society, and 84.5% considered that it had a negative impact on social cohesion.[154]

This digital violence has involved episodes of violence in physical spaces, as happened during the SDF military operation Security Reinforcement in 2023 for the arrest of the commander of the Deir ez Zor Military Council, Ahmed al Jubail, causing an escalation of the conflict between some tribes and the government.[155] In that framework, the human rights organization STJ noted that many social media accounts tried to impose the narrative that this was an inter-ethnic conflict between the Arab and Kurdish communities.[156] These same confrontational mechanisms have been activated during Turkey's operations against the NES and demonstrations in Raqqa to demand the end of the "Kurdish" government.

150 Arya Haji and Hozan Hadi, group interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

151 *Justice for Life, Hate Speech in Eastern Syria*, October 2020, https://jfl.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Hate-Speech-in-Eastern-Syria-EN.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

152 Ibid

153 Data extracted from reports of activities carried out by Nextep between 2021 and 2023. Available on request.

154 Nextep, Opinion poll, November 2021. Available on request.

155 True Platform, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), and Suwar Magazine, *Syria: Disinformation in the Context of Deir-ez-Zor Unrest*, November 2023, https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Syria_Disinformation_in-the-Context-of-Deir-ez-Zor-Unrest.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

156 *Syrians for Truth and Justice, Syria: Hate Speech Unprecedentedly Surges during Deir-ez-Zor Unrest*, November 2023, https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Syria-Hate-Speech-Unprecedentedly-Surges-during-Deir-ez-Zor-Unrest.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

4.4. GENDER VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is a social scourge in Syria in general and NES in particular, due to the humanitarian crisis, socioeconomic deterioration, war and the 2023 natural disasters. Some sources have estimated that approximately 1,181,860 women were accessing protection services against such violence in 2023 in the NES.[157] According to the United Nations Voices for Syria 2024 report, domestic violence and intimate partner violence,[158] are the most common forms of gender-based violence in Syria.[159] The same report details that displaced women, widows, women and girls with functional diversity, separated women and elderly women are the most vulnerable groups.[160]

Patriarchal gender norms perpetuate inequality and undermine civil society's efforts to combat gender-based violence. A local GBV expert, with extensive experience working with local communities, described systematic violations of women's rights in areas of labor, education and health: "women have no rights in NES" and added that in places such as Washokani camps west of Hasaka, Serekaniye east of Hasaka, Shahba, Sehla al Banat in rural eastern Raqqa and Noroz in eastern Syria, their situation is far from reaching minimum standards of "human rights. [161]

As we will analyze in the next section, weak legal frameworks contribute to the creation of a climate of impunity that leaves GBV victims defenseless. In the most extreme cases, this situation leads to cases of suicide. Investigative journalist, Heysam Mislim, reported that in 2023 the peak of suicides in Kobane was reached with 25 cases of women and two cases of men. These suicides are considered honor crimes, although sometimes families try to hide the pressure the victim was under.[162] Journalist Jihad Naboo noted that honor crimes have increased in recent years.[163] Some recent data has indicated 185 cases of honor crimes between 2019 and 2022.[164] Another growing trend is the increase in cases of digital violence through extortion and online harassment, especially against vulnerable communities such as internally displaced persons.[165]

---

157 *Global Protection Cluster, Northeast Syria Protection Analysis Update*, July 2023, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/northeast_syria_pau_final.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

158 Refers to physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence inflicted by a partner or ex-partner.

159 GBV AoR; UNFPA, *Voices from Syria 2024: Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview*, 2024, https://reliefweb.int (Accessed January 9, 2025).

160 Ibid.

161 Ibid

162 Heysam Msilim, interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024.

163 Naboo Jihad. Interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

164 *Syrians for Truth and Justice, Syria: 185 Cases of Honor Killing since 2019*, November 2022, https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Syria_185-Cases-of-Honor-Killing-since-2019.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

165 Haneen Alsayed and Nadia Al-Sakkaf, *Syria: Domestic Violence against Women in Widows' Camps, March* 2024, https://portal.salamatmena.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Syria-DVAW-2024-widows-camp-EN.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

The humanitarian crisis and war have specific impacts on women. By way of example, since 2014 ISIS has used kidnapping and sexual violence against Kurdish Yazidi women as a strategy to disrupt ethnic and religious communities in Syria and Iraq.[166] Also, in the absence of resources, many refugee and internally displaced women are forced into prostitution to support their families.[167] Refugee camps, homes, detention centers, humanitarian aid distribution sites and schools, among others, are sensitive spaces where cases of gender-based violence are concentrated. [168]

At the political level, despite the explicit description of women's rights in the DAANES Social Contract, the reality is that women's participation in public affairs is very low, especially in regions such as Hasaka, Raqqa and east and west of Deir ez Zor.[169] Women do not effectively participate in decision-making centers in Syria, such as in negotiation bodies, political movement leaderships and actual management of institutions.[170] This lack of participation in decision-making processes does not allow the various forms of gender-based violence to be prioritized in society. Although the co-presidency mechanism has contributed to the political empowerment of women, because it demonstrates their capabilities and leadership skills, it is still proving insufficient and slow as an instrument to ensure women's participation in decision-making processes. Another example provided by the informants is the social harassment suffered by women who participate in demonstrations and "sit-ins" demanding improved living conditions and adequate public services. [171]

4.5. HUMAN INSECURITY

In 2024, Syria remained one of the three most insecure countries in the world along with Afghanistan and Yemen.[172] This situation inherently implies high levels of militarization of society with enormous economic costs, causing its gross domestic product to fall by 85% since 2010.[173] But, over and above these data, the most dramatic figures left by this war are the number of deaths. According to the SOHR, 617,910 people have been killed in the last 13 years of conflict in Syria.[174]

166 Sali Bitar, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: The Case of ISIS in Syria and Iraq*, edited by Uppsala University and Noha, 2015, https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:889178/FULLTEXT01.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

167 GBV expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

168 GBV AoR and UNFPA, *Voices from Syria 2024*, op. cit., 45.

169 Mona Abdesalam, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

170 GBV expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

171 Ibid.

172 Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*, June 2024, https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

173 Ibid

174 See: https://www.syriahr.com/en/328044/

Another characteristic aspect of the Syrian conflict has been its high degree of military fragmentation into dozens of state and non-state armed groups, supported by foreign governments such as Turkey, Russia, Iran and the United States.[175] In November 2024, in the northeast, the SNA controlled Afrin, northern Aleppo, Al Bab and Manbij, and HTS controlled Idlib.[176] From that date on, these actors coordinated through Fatah al Mubin,[177] first with the assault on Aleppo, and, subsequently, on other Syrian cities until reaching Damascus on December 8. NES was mostly controlled by the SDF, but with enclaves controlled by Turkey and the SNA (former FSA) and the Al Assad regime. In NES there were also US and Russian military bases, as well as ISIS cells operating in the rural areas of Deir ez Zor.

Moreover, within this framework of fragmentation, the large number of mercenary groups, militias and PMSCs stand out. The Syrian regime has been supported by Russian PMSCs such as Wagner Group, which was used for the assaults on Palmyra in 2016 and 2017, Moran Security Group, Slavonic Corps, Redut and Vega Strategic Service Ltd, among others. Iran has also contributed mercenary groups such as the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, the General Command, Hezbollah, the Badr Brigade, and Liwa Asad Allah al-Ghalib, to attack populations and force the displacement of their communities. Likewise, Iraqi mercenary groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al Haq in 2011 were used to suppress protests in Syria with battalions of 800 snipers and other professional fighters.[178] While Turkey reportedly used the Turkish PMSC Sadat Group to train SNA forces[179], and the use of the US PMSC Castle International has also been identified to train the YPG in 2014.[180]

Prior to Operation Deterrence of Aggression, serious and systematic human rights violations were recorded in the regions controlled by these armed groups. Some key data has revealed that from March 2011 to June 2014, 113,218 people were forcibly disappeared by the different parties to the conflict, at least 2,246 at the hands of HTS, 2,981 by the SDF, 2,986 by the SNA and 8,684 by the regime of Bashar al Assad.[181] The regime has undoubtedly been the worst perpetrator of killings and destruction in the country. According to the SNHR, the Syrian regime was responsible for the killing of 201,290 civilians between March 2011 and June 2024,[182] including the use of chemical weapons in 2013, 2017 and 2018 in different locations in Syria.[183] However, as we have noted above,

175 Walther, Olivier J., and Patrick Steen Pedersen. "Rebel Fragmentation in Syria's Civil War." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 3 (2020): 445-474.

176 Position information collected on December 11, 2024 from multiple sources: https://syria.liveuamap.com ; ACAPS reports.

177 *Al Jazeera*, "Who Controls What in Syria: In Maps," December 1, 2024. Op. cit.

178 Aiman Menem. *Shadow Armies 2: Foreign Mercenary Groups in Syria*.SCM. 2024. Op. cit.

179 Ibid

180 Ibid.

181 See: https://snhr.org/blog/2024/08/30/record-of-enforced-disappearances1/

182 See: https://snhr.org/blog/2024/08/30/civilian-death-toll/

183 For more information see: https://snhr.org/blog/2024/11/29/between-pain-and-agony-12-years-of-chemical-weapons-crimes-in-syria/

the total death toll in Syria over the past 13 years of war exceeds 600,000 people. This destruction would not have been possible without the support of Iran and Russia.

In the northwest of the country, HTS and the Syrian Salvation Government (the administrative body created to manage the areas under its control) have been responsible for arbitrary arrests, cases of torture and other forms of physical aggression. According to the human rights organization, Syrians for Truth and Justice, this repression was particularly severe during the various waves of protests in the Idlib region in 2019 and more recently in early 2024 when demands were made for the release of detainees, the removal of extremely high taxes and protection of human rights defenders such as journalists and activists. [184]

In other regions of Northern Syria, such as Afrin, with a 80-90% Kurdish population, and the NES strip between Tel Abiad and Ras al Ain, the Turkish invasion led to forced displacement of Kurdish communities and serious human rights violations. A February 2024 HRW report detailed human rights violations and potential war crimes, including killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, confiscation of property, extortion, sexual abuse and torture, among others. [185]

ISIS is responsible for serious atrocities between 2014 and 2019. At least 20 communal graves have been found in the areas they controlled during the terrorist group's most active period.[186] Despite the defeat of ISIS in 2019, sleeper cells have remained active in rural areas of southern Deir ez Zor and the ideology continues to be present in various NES population groups. These groups have been reactivated by recent events with several attacks on the SDF and Kurdish Asayish police positions. [187]

The SDF has also committed human rights violations. Amnesty International denounced, in 2023, the expulsion by the SDF of 50,000 people, linked to Arab tribes, to areas controlled by the former regime.[188] Also, in its fight against ISIS, there have been cases of arbitrary arrests,[189] including 800 children detained at the end of 2023, as well as 29,000

184 *Syrians for Truth and Justice, Between Reformist Discourse and Actual Repression: How Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Handled Idlib Protests*, September 2024, https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Between-Reformist-Discourse-and-Actual-Repression_How-Hayat-Tahrir-al-Sham-Handled-Idlib-Protests.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

185 *Human Rights Watch, "Everything Is a Power Weapon: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria*, February 29, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria (Accessed January 9, 2025).

186 *Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression*, *Report on Enforced Disappearances in Syria*, 2023, https://scm.bz/en/report-on-enforced-disappearances-in-syria-en/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

187 *North Press Agency*, "Turkish Drone Strikes in NE Syria Impact Health Services, Civilian Lives," December 18, 2024, https://npasyria.com/en/119896/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

188 *Amnesty International*, "Syria Report 2023," 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/syria/report-syria/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

189 *Syrians for Truth and Justice, Deir-ez-Zor: Dozens Arbitrarily Arrested during SDF's Deterrence of Terrorism Campaign*, October 2020, https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Deir-ez-Zor-Dozens-Arbitrarily-Arrested-during-SDFs-Deterrence-of-Terrorism-Campaign.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

people deprived of their liberty in the refugee camps of Al Hol and Rawj for their alleged links with terrorist groups.[190] Similarly, another particularly relevant issue is the cases of military recruitment of children. The STJ organization denounced in 2023 the recruitment of 52 children by the Revolutionary Youth Movement and the YPJ, while the United Nations in 2024 reported 231 cases attributed to the SDF and ISF belonging to DAANES. [191]

Another trend that has aggravated human security concerns has been the prevalence of weapons. According to the expert of the international organization Geneva Call, Idris Nassen, the uncontrolled spread of weapons in the NES has increased: "there are more illegal weapons in circulation than those authorized by the SDF".[192] In this vein, Mohammed al Zoba, leader of the Alborug tribe in Al Hasaka, argued that access to weapons by the population has contributed to the increase in killings.[193] Al Zoba also notes that crime has increased in the region, a point that has been confirmed by other key informants.[194] In one of the latest NES Forum reports of July 2024, robberies were perceived as one of the most relevant problems in terms of security for 44% of the communities assessed.[195] Similarly, drug smuggling and organized crime, where also senior officials of the Al Assad government were involved,[196] have contributed to human insecurity in the NES, especially in cities such as Raqqa. Numerous testimonies collected in Raqqa, assured that the drug business is a very serious problem that generates violence. Drug dealers form mafias that control areas of Raqqa and terrorize the citizenry. [197]

190 United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Syria*, June 2024, https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/095/07/pdf/n2409507.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

191 *Human Rights Watch*, "Northeast Syria: Military Recruitment of Children Persists," October 2, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/02/northeast-syria-military-recruitment-children-persists (Accessed January 9, 2025).

192 Idris Nassen, interview conducted in Raqqa, November 4, 2024.

193 Mohammed al Zoba, interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

194 Ibid

195 See: https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-situation-overview-syria-hsos-north-east-syria-july-2024

196 Hesham Alghannam, "Border Traffic: How Syria Uses Captagon to Gain Leverage over Saudi Arabia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/border-traffic-how-syria-uses-captagon-to-gain-leverage-over-saudi-arabia?lang=en (Accessed January 9, 2025).

197 Various activists and social experts, interviews conducted in Raqqa, November 28, 2024.

4.6. ATTACKS ON CIVIC SPACE AND FREEDOM OF THE PRESS.

Civic space has been undermined by DAANES authorities and affiliated groups. During the Arab uprisings, activists who campaigned against the Al Assad regime were killed or imprisoned. In other opposition-controlled regions, such as Northern Syria, HTS and the SNA also cracked down on journalists and activists, with numerous cases of enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests.[198] While in NES the YPG has been responsible for cases of abuses against activists since its establishment in 2013.[199]

More recently, civic space in NES has been gradually degrading at different levels. Randa Hamo, director of Impact, pointed to increasing difficulties in registering organizations since 2017.[200] SNRH reported arbitrary arrests of six journalists, humanitarian workers and members of civil society organizations in Raqqa since 2019[201] and, more recently, during fieldwork we obtained testimonies of assaults on journalists and confiscation of their cameras by police and unidentified individuals while covering protests in Raqqa in 2023 and 2024.[202] A growing trend of attacks by youth from the Revolutionary Youth Movement (Jwani Shoreshger in Arabic, Ciwanên Şoreşger in Kurdish, a PYD-affiliated movement) against KNC offices has also been identified.[203]

Journalists are one of the groups most affected by political persecution that takes the form of legal restrictions, physical violence and intimidation, that end up provoking the self-censorship of professionals.[204] Along these lines, Hozan Hadi and Arya Haji, of the organizations Nextep and Nextory, argued that journalists are attacked with smear campaigns through electronic armies.[205] Such disinformation and hate speech campaigns have also targeted members of the political opposition in regions such as Hasaka.[206]

198 See: https://www.syriahr.com/en/category/human-rights-violations/violations-against-media-and-human-rights-activists/

199 See: https://cities.syriauntold.com/

200 Randa Hamo, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 28, 2024.

201 https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Nearly_3000_Individuals_Are_Still_Detained_or_Forcibly_Disappeared_by_Syrian_Democratic_Forces_en.pdf

202 Ahmed Hussein, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 31, 2024.

203 Hessein Shihadeh, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

204 Natacha Danon and Ammar Hamou, "Restrictions on Local Journalists in Northeastern Syria Multiply," *Syria Direct*, July 1, 2024, https://syriadirect.org/restrictions-on-local-journalists-in-northeastern-syria-multiply/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

205 Arya Haji and Hozan Hadi, group interview conducted in Qamshili, October 30, 2024.

206 Salma Hussein and Shukri Ali, group interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

V. KEY DRIVERS OF CONFLICT

In this section we identify the Key Drivers of Conflict (KDC), i.e., elements or dynamics present in the conflict, without which the conflict would not exist or would be completely different. Each conflict factor is the result of a web of root causes (historical) and temporally more proximate causes, which produce specific consequences and manifestations of violence. To organize these elements, we identify *feedback loops* to establish the relationships between causes and effects.

5.1. DEGREE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THE POPULATION AND DESTRUCTION OF CIVILIAN INFRASTRUCTURE (KDC1)

Destruction of civilian infrastructure and the weaponization of water supply

At the time of writing, the NES region is under massive attack by the Turkish government and its allied factions. This phase of the conflict is a continuation of the military operations developed by Turkey and its allied factions in 2016, 2018 and 2020, with the aim of controlling strategic territories in Northern Syria and overthrowing the DAANES government. As we have described in section III of this report, the cause of these attacks lies in Turkey's historical conflict against the PKK, which it considers a terrorist group and an existential threat to its state. Turkey also considers the PYD, and its armed wing YPG/YPJ, an extension of the PKK.

Operation DoF, led by Turkey and the SNA against DAANES in December 2024, began with attacks in northern Aleppo (Shahba canton) that involved the capture of the town of Manjib. By mid-December, major fighting was concentrated on the Tishrin dam and Qaraqozak bridge.

The Tishrin dam is strategic because it supplies electricity and water to large areas of NES such as Hasaka and Kobane.[207] The TAF and SNA attacks in this period have led to further forced population displacement. As happened in 2018 with the Turkish occupation of Afrin, the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Kurds is causing dire population pressure in the NES region, increasing tensions over scarce resources in cities such as Raqqa or Tabqa.

This situation has occurred in a context of highly precarious provision of public services (KDC3) and the inability of the DAANES authorities to respond to the needs of newly displaced people. Likewise, the reduction in the activities of humanitarian organizations,

207 See: https://syria.liveuamap.com/es/2024/10-december-07-anha-the-sdf-have-been-repelling-attacks-launched

due to the escalation of the conflict, has grievously aggravated the humanitarian crisis in the NES region. [208] All this has led to the return of displaced persons to their places of origin with high risks to their safety, due to the systematic human rights violations committed by the SNA and other jihadist factions in Northwest Syria, as we have described in section IV.

Turkish military incursions have been accompanied by the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure in NES through drone and missile attacks, with the aim of undermining the morale of the population and increasing social pressure on public authorities in the face of socio-economic deterioration. In this regard, Berisavan Issa and Jamal Abdelqader, co-chairs of the DAANES Humanitarian Affairs Office in Kobane, noted that attacks and rumors of a possible occupation have had negative psychological effects on the population, undermining its capacity to resist and motivating the migration of young people. [209]

Eysha Nasser, co-chair of the DAANES Energy Board, detailed how the Turkish attacks on the electricity system have had a multiple impact on Kobane, disrupting, among others, hospital services, bread production and the pumping of water from wells.[210] Along these lines, the Water Authority in Kobane stated that there has been a 50-60% reduction in agricultural production due to lack of water since the onset of these attacks.[211] This has had negative implications on the food security of the population, increasing social tensions due to the scarcity of resources and the increase in commodity prices (a factor that we will analyze in detail in KDC3). These key informants added that these problems have occurred in an infrastructure system already severely damaged by the 2023 earthquakes, which caused displacement and affected water pipes, as well as by the destruction of electric poles during the war against ISIS in Kobane in 2015.[212]

It is important to highlight that the control of water resources has been a widely used military strategy by Turkey in the region. Turkey has taken advantage of its geostrategic position on the Euphrates River to dominate and put political pressure on Syria and DAANES in specific aspects. The reduction of water flow, made possible by its control of dams, has had serious consequences on agricultural production, access to water and sanitation, and so indirectly on the health of NES communities. In 2022, the Turkish Claw-Sword operation damaged water facilities in Alouk, causing water-supply disruptions to more than 610,000 people in the Hasaka region, resulting in a cholera outbreak affecting 20,000 people.[213] Water has also been a weapon of war used by the Syrian regime and

208 Humanitarian organization security expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

209 Berivan Issa and Jamal Abdelqader, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

210 Eysha Nasser, interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024.

211 Zozan Khalil, interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024.

212 Zozan Khalil, interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024; Eysha Nasser, interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024.

213 Global Protection Cluster. *Northeast Syria Protection Analysis Update.* October 2023. https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/northeast_syria_pau_final.pdf.

ISIS to weaken their opponents.[214] From 2014 to 2015, for example, ISIS controlled the Tishrin Dam, affecting the supply of hundreds of thousands of people in NES, until the SDF, with US support, wrested this critical infrastructure from the terrorist group. [215]

Resurgence of ISIS

With the fall of Bashar al Assad, there has been the reactivation of ISIS sleeper cells in southern NES. ISIS has intensified its covert operations in the Deir ez Zor desert, Raqqa and southern Aleppo, among others.[216] SOHR has recorded 217 ISIS operations in 2024 across Syria, of which 74 occurred in Deir ez Zor and 26 in Raqqa.[217] The terrorist group has targeted both civilians and NES security forces. According to consulted sources, there is concern on the part of DAANES authorities regarding the increase of ISIS in the desert areas of the NES.[218] But according to consulted sources, the social instability recorded in December 2024 in Deir ez Zor is being provoked by ISIS cells.[219]

Another hotspot is the Al Hol refugee camp where ISIS families of different nationalities live. In 2024, ISIS calls to incite riots and violence in the camp were identified,[220] as well as youth recruitment activities and propagation of extremist propaganda.[221] Recently, there have been attempts by 24 people to flee.[222] A local security expert believes that a reactivation of ISIS cells in Al Hol camp would be a disaster, due to the concentration of civilians in that area and its proximity to the Sina'a prison in Hasaka, where hundreds of members of that terrorist group are imprisoned.[223]

Despite the defeat of ISIS in 2019, its structures have survived in Syria due, on the one hand, to the prevalence of the ISIS mentality in certain rural areas and refugee camps (KDC2) and, on the other hand, to its logistical capacity to maintain: economic transactions with local communities; the distribution of products and weapons through warehouses in the desert; and smuggling networks between Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, among

214 Daoudy, Marwa. "Water Weaponization in the Syrian Conflict: Strategies of Domination and Cooperation." International Affairs 96, no. 5 (2020): 1347-1366.

215 For more information see: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-diplomacy/ISIS-uses-water-and-dams-as-weapons/7888

216 Monitoring and Information Center. *ISIS Revival After Syrian Regime Collapse.* December 14, 2024.

217 See: https://www.syriahr.com/en/351359/

218 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

219 Ibid

220 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

221 *Rudaw*, "Turkey Resumes Airstrikes on Northeast Syria Amid Rising Tensions," February 4, 2024, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/04022024 (Accessed January 9, 2025).

222 Monitoring and Information Center. *ISIS Revival After Syrian Regime Collapse.* December 14, 2024.

223 Humanitarian organization security expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

other capacities (KDC3).[224] Some sources have identified ad hoc arrangements with Iranian soldiers and relationships with jihadist factions in Idlib for the training of youth by ISIS. [225]

Violent riots and criminality

In parallel to the DoA and DoF military operations, subversive actions have been observed in the main southern cities of NES, especially in Deir ez Zor, in which some Arab components attacked the SDF.[226] These situations respond to the increased spread of hate speech and disinformation, an aspect that we will analyze in more depth in KDC2, but also to sectarian affiliations, resentments and clashes between tribal sectors and the SDF. Along these lines, since 2023, the SDF has been engaged in fighting with a tribal military command created by Sheikh Ibrahim al Hefel, leader of the Al Akidat tribe and former member of ISIS.[227] Al Hefel managed to mobilize large tribal clans in his fight against the SDF. According to a local security expert, these groups do not accept Kurdish authority in their territories. Recently, Al Hefel has shown support for the HTS forces.[228]

Other focal points of destabilization are the armed NDF groups of the former regime, which were located in the Security Squares[229] of Qamshili and Hasaka. With the fall of Bashar al Assad these military groups have dispersed in the triangle comprising the southern regions of Qamishli, Al Hol and Mount Kawkab, and their lack of income has pushed them to criminal actions such as robberies. According to a local security expert, the DAANES authorities consider this geographical triangle a critical area for NDF activities.[230] In the past, NDF leaders have also allied themselves with tribal leaders who opposed the SDF, and made calls to eradicate the DAANES government from the Deir ez Zor region, as was the case in 2023 with Firas Al Jaham, commander of the NDF.[231]

Repression, dispossession and social conflicts between communities

Despite the overthrow of the Al Assad regime, external interference (KDC4) and the culture of violence as a mode of domination persist. Historically, ethnic and religious minorities in Syria in general and in NES in particular have suffered severe repression and persecution by the regime and ISIS. Kurdish rights, language and culture were banned

224 Monitoring and Information Center. *ISIS Revival After Syrian Regime Collapse.* December 14, 2024.

225 Ibid.

226 Humanitarian organization security expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

227 See https://www.syriahr.com/en/312771/

228 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

229 Security squares are specific areas within cities that remain under the control of the Syrian regime, even in regions predominantly governed by other entities, such as the SDF and DAANES.

230 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

231 See: https://www.syriahr.com/en/312771/

by the regime for decades. Mustafa Hassan, a retired engineer and activist from Hasaka, explained that it was forbidden to speak Kurdish in schools and that there was a system of surveillance against any expression of Kurdish culture on a public or private level. Hassan fought underground for the rights of the Kurdish people, and for this he was tortured and lost his job at the Ministry of Water in the 1980s. [232]

The Baathist regime was a totalitarian and strongly centralized system. Diversity and decentralization were a threat to the regime and, therefore, the Kurdish population was discriminated against. In 1962, 25-30% of Kurds were deprived of citizenship, humiliated and forced to leave their hometowns.[233] Land and property confiscation was a deliberate strategy of the regime to alter the demographic composition in predominantly Kurdish areas in NES. The most visible project was the Arab Belt, developed between the 1960s and 1980s, which aimed to Arabize the north of the NES, from Derik to Ras al Ain, through land confiscation, deregistration of property and the reassigning of land to Arab families. Indirectly, the project also aimed to control the oil resources located in Hasaka. Mustafa Hassan showed us how the regime did not accept official documents from the French Mandate where his family declared ownership of Hasaka land.[234] A local GBV expert added that the Kurdish owners of the land confiscated in the 80's are still living there and refuse to accept this situation, which causes social tensions with the Arab families who were assigned the land, which according to the expert is a "time bomb that can explode at any moment".[235]

These policies of dispossession have provoked massive movements of internally displaced persons to refugee camps and to the cities. This phenomenon has altered the social fabric in cities with extremely negative effects. The expert Maziad Alharamy pointed out that this new social fabric has several consequences: "Competition for resources among the population increases. Young people have fewer opportunities, their educational level is reduced and they are exposed to drug use. Men leave to look for work in other countries and women are left alone to raise their children. In refugee camps, women in this situation are forced into prostitution in order to survive."[236] It is in these places that numerous cases of gender-based violence are recorded due to overcrowded conditions and lack of human security.[237]

Patriarchal system and gender-based violence

Finally, another critical problem is GBV, which is caused by the patriarchal system and male domination of women. GBV in NES is the result of the interrelation of multiple causes. First, patriarchal gender norms reflected in cultural and social traditions and en-

232 Mustafa Hassan, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024.

233 Mesguin Jalil and Farhan Haji Issa, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024.

234 Mustafa Hassan, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024.

235 GBV expert, interview conducted in Amuda, November 28, 2024.

236 Maziad Alharamy, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 31, 2024.

237 Ibid

courage practices of early marriage, honor killings and sexual harassment. Bozhan Jalil and Berivan Ismaeel, co-chairs of PYD's Euphrates Cantonment, asserted that a central cause of gender-based violence is the patriarchal, conservative and religious mindset.[238] A GBV expert argued that they are trying to implement UN Resolution 1325, but societal norms and prevailing values hinder this process.[239] In this regard, representatives of Sawiska Women's Organization and other women's organizations pointed out that tribes represent an obstacle to gender equality in society.[240] However, DAANES seeks to please tribal leaders, which hinders the implementation of stricter laws against GBV. [241]

Second, the lack of effectiveness of laws defending women's rights. Although the DAANES Social Contract explicitly defines women's rights, and laws have been developed in this direction, there are no solid mechanisms to ensure their implementation. This lack of effectiveness of the regulatory framework leads to impunity in serious cases of gender-based violence, such as honor crimes. Mona Abdesalam, director of the Rose organization, has highlighted the widespread impunity for honor crimes.[242] The women association, Mala Jin, added that although many of these cases end up in the DAANES courts, judges do not recognize honor crimes and the perpetrators are often acquitted.[243]

Third, socioeconomic deterioration in the region, including poor provision of public services, shortages of food, water and other supplies, as well as price increases, gaps in humanitarian assistance and lack of opportunities, are all identified as contributing factors to GBV.[244] For example, hardship in the homes of the NES population has had a direct effect as it has, for example, forced parents to accept early marriages of their daughters due to their inability to meet their needs.[245] However, this phenomenon also responds to patriarchal gender norms, as we have discussed above.

Fourth, we note, as an extreme case, the use of rape as a weapon of war. The mass abductions and rapes of Kurdish Yazidi women by ISIS, during the periods of increased activity of this terrorist group, are an example in this direction. Behind these serious violations lies a military strategy aimed at destroying certain ethnic and religious minorities, as women are a pillar in families and are the repository of family honor.[246]

238 Berivan Ismaeel and Bozhan Khalil, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

239 GBV expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

240 Andera Olika, Sawiska Women's Organization, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

241 Ibid

242 Mona Abdesalam, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

243 Nairuz Assad and Neda Dawood, interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

244 GBV AoR and UNFPA, *Voices from Syria 2024*, op. cit., 45.

245 See: https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20230804_ACAPS_Thematic_report_Northern_Syria_key_crises_to_watch.pdf

246 Jaber Jendo, interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

5.2. LEVEL OF SECTARIANISM AND SOCIAL DIVISION (KDC2)

Demographic engineering and social division

Historical causes explain the deep social division that exists in Syria. The French Mandate in Syria (1920-1946) implemented a system of governance that favored ethnic minorities, such as the Alawites, over the Sunni majority. This produced an Alawite military elite that was later instrumental in the rise of Hafez al Assad. The Alawite elite took advantage of their strategic positions at the political and military level to reap huge economic benefits, while the lack of wealth distribution led to the socio-economic deterioration of the rest of the population, which would later contribute to the outbreak of the March 2011 uprisings. The Baathist regime, despite the persistent use of a rhetoric of Arab unity, implemented a sectarian policy to divide the opposition and rule for more than 50 years.

One strategy for social division was physical division. During the French colonial period, several autonomous states were created for the Druze and Alawites, dividing the Sunni population and excluding the Kurds from the political spheres. With the Al Assad regime, the Alawite elite concentrated in the mountains of Latakia and defended strategic centers in the main cities of the country such as Damascus, Aleppo, Qamishli and Hasaka. The Kurds were the majority in the rural areas, while the cities were controlled by the political, economic and military elites.

To achieve this division, Bashar al Assad developed a deliberate policy of "demographic engineering" based on allocating resources to populations according to their degree of loyalty to the regime, marginalizing communities opposed to it. The report Demographic Engineering in the Course of Syria's War A consequence or cause? by the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) analyzes Al Assad regime policies in this matter, but also the forced displacements caused by the TAF in Afrin or the SDF in Ain Isa, Suluk and rural areas of Raqqa, in the framework of military operations against ISIS. [247]

Moreover, the regime's pervasive security and intelligence systems fomented fear and distrust among society. As DOZ International activists in Raqqa and Tiberspiye argued, "during the era of the Al Assad family it used to be said that 'walls have ears'. Mistrust, lack of communication and fear contributed to many communities "living in parallel",[248] which reinforced local ethnic and religious identities, as well as the atomization of society, i.e., the fragmentation of society into homogeneous and disconnected units.

247 *Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, Demographic Engineering in Syria*, April 17, 2021, https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/demographic-engineering-in-syria-en-17-abril.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

248 Arya Haji and Hozan Hadi, group interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

Instrumentalization of communities

The regime instrumentalized tribal leaders to achieve its political objectives and maintain sectarian tensions. According to expert Maziad Alharamy, the regime marginalized and reduced the social cohesion role played by tribal leaders until 2011, when it tried to establish political alliances to reduce the unrest in the country.[249] Since then, the social role of tribal leaders has been modified to give them a political role. According to Alharamy, "for that reason, inter-tribal conflicts have increased. Instead of focusing on cohesion and supporting the people, they have become political actors to benefit certain interests.[250]

This evolution explains the ability of Turkey and Iran and, to a lesser extent, the Al Assad regime to instrumentalize tribal leaders and create social tensions in regions such as Raqqa, Hasaka or Deir ez Zor. A report by the international consultancy COAR, identified a significant increase in conflicts between Arab tribes and the SDF in Deir ez Zor in 2021.[251] In that period, the Jazira tribal councils denounced the marginalization they suffered on the part of the authorities, demanding a greater role for Arab communities at the political and social level. While in Qamshili, tensions between the authorities led to clashes between the Tayy tribal militias, with links to the Al Assad regime, and the SDF, for the control of the northern neighbourhoods of the city.[252] Along these lines, a report by the Syrian Dialogue Center concluded that the mobilizations and clashes of the Deir ez Zor tribes with the SDF in 2022 respond to affiliations and influences of Iranian factions and the Syrian regime.[253] In any case, it is important to note that not all political dissent or demands of tribal communities have been instrumentalized, many are legitimate and genuine in the framework of conflicts over political power-sharing and decentralization of DAANES as we will see in KDC3.

Clientelism and penetration of extremist ideologies

Clientelism has been one of the fundamental strategies of DAANES to secure the loyalty of Arab communities[254], but this loyalty is fragile, as seen in the defections of senior commanders from the Deir ez Zor Military Council.[255] One of the factors behind this fragility is the historical resentments to the DAANES government over the impact of SDF and US

249 Maziad Alharamy, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 31, 2024.

250 Ibid

251 Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). "Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria." May 6, 2019.

252 Ibid.

253 See: https://sydialogue.org/en/a-look-into-the-recent-tribal-protests-against-qsd-in-deir-ezzor-and-its-consequences-on-the-stability-of-the-region/

254 Ibid

255 Walid Al Nofal, "Protests and SDF Defections: Discontent Simmers in Eastern Deir ez-Zor," *Syria Direct,* December 2024, https://syriadirect.org/protests-and-sdf-defections-discontent-simmers-in-eastern-deir-e-zor/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

forces' fighting against ISIS in the Raqqa, Deir ez Zor and Baghuz regions. Many members of these communities have been killed, detained or displaced by the SDF. This would also explain the instrumentalization capacity of Turkey or of ISIS in the past, but also in the current phase of instability in NES.

He also notes a penetration of extremist ideologies into Arab communities through ISIS propaganda and appeal. Analyst Walad Choli of the think tank Al Furat Center for Studies, described how racism against communities increased from 2011 and had its maximum expression in the penetration of ISIS into Arab communities between 2014 and 2018, adding "this has created hatred between different social components and undermined the peace building process."[256] Firouz Jalil, co-chair of the PYD in Raqqa, assured that the sectarian and conservative mentality survives and this hinders progress, tolerance and democracy in NES. [257]

In this regard, some policies promoted by DAANES have been perceived as an attack on the religion of Arab communities, causing mistrust and rejection of the authorities. Hussein al Hussein, director of the Amal al Furat organization in Raqqa, explained that there are many social components that are working against DAANES due to policies such as the new educational curriculum because it reduces the role of religion in society.[258] ISIS has taken advantage of these grievances to portray itself as an actor defending religion against DAANES attacks, thus attracting new members and generating loyalties among tribal clans.

The International Crisis Group notes that the loyalty of Arab communities to DAANES depends on its ability to counter ISIS social control strategies. In Deir ez Zor, ISIS cells have carried out assassinations of SDF commanders and tribal leaders in order to intimidate the population and prevent them from cooperating by providing information to the SDF. Adding to this situation are two key factors hindering the trust of certain Arab communities in the NES authorities. First, the perception that these areas could be out of DAANES control in the future. Second, the poor provision of public services to these communities.[259] Thus, the attraction to ISIS is not only ideological, but also makes practical sense, linked to the economic and protection needs of rural communities in southern areas of NES. These dynamics will be analyzed in depth in KDC3.

Hate speech and disinformation

Disinformation and hate speech in social networks and media are confrontational mechanisms used in NES. Their effectiveness can be demonstrated by the defections of senior commanders from the Deir ez Zor military councils following the dissemination of false

256 Walad Choli, interview in Qamshili, October 26, 2024.

257 Firouz Jalil, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

258 Hussein al Hussein, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

259 International Crisis Group. "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North Syria." *Report 236 / Middle East & North Africa*, July 18, 2022. Op. cit.

information about alleged SDF attacks on civilians in the Hatla, Marat, Al Halabiya and Al Husseiniya demonstrations on December 12, 2024

In this vein, in the recent unrest, it has been identified how some pro-Turkish media have spread the narrative of SDF repression against Arab communities and Erdogan's rhetoric that the PYD is a terrorist actor controlled by the Kadres of the PKK.[260] The hate messages have had an incendiary capacity in NES communities, increasing social tensions and clashes between members of Arab communities and the SDF.

A local security expert consulted claimed that the Turkish intelligence services are also responsible for spreading false information about human rights violations and even cases of rape of women in the Al Hol camp.[261] The tribal leaders responsible for these areas have denied these allegations. However, this type of disinformation has been a catalyst for the uprisings in different localities in southern NES. Manipulation of the population to promote chaos and instability is one of the main concerns of DAANES authorities in the new phase of the conflict.

The organization Nextep, specialized in communication for social transformation and peace building, has developed research on hate speech, concluding that the sectarian politics of the Syrian regime, the social divisions generated by the war, the politicization of the media and the levels of intolerance, prejudice and resentment present in society, are key factors enabling the dissemination and impact of this type of narratives in society.[262]

Division of the Kurdish movement in Syria and the repression of political dissent

On another level, the social division in NES has also been rooted in fractures in the Kurdish political movement, the weak legitimacy of the parties and the relations of Kurdish leaders with political forces outside Syria.[263] Various authors agree that since 2011 there has been a dynamic of division in the Kurdish political movement, with competing political projects.[264] As we have analyzed in section 2, the PYD is strongly linked to the PKK, although members of the former insist on publicly rejecting these links in order to preserve perception of the independence of the political project in NES. In this sense, some authors point out that the PYD has centralized power in NES and has prevented any challenge to its hegemony by other political formations.[265] The recorded attacks on journalists and activists who have criticized the government or covered protests in the region demonstrate attempts to silence political dissent.

260 Local security expert from international organization, online interview, January 7, 2025.

261 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

262 Data extracted from reports of activities carried out by Nextep between 2021 and 2023. Available on request.

263 Lowe, Robert. *The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria*, 2014.

264 Elise Boyle, Adam Ronan. "Rojava's 'War of Education'" *Third World Quarterly* 44. Op. cit.

265 Lowe, Robert. *The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria*, 2014.

Some sources indicate that in the 2011 uprisings the youth movement was harshly repressed by YPG military forces as they began to take control of NES. In Qamshili and Amuda, for example, youth demonstrations in the summer of 2013 were harshly suppressed, and included the deaths of six youth at the hands of the YPG. [266] Despite public apologies from the YPG, this episode of violence remains in the collective memory, generating resentment among the Kurdish population.[267] More recently, the organization Syrians for Truth and Justice has identified a growing trend of repression of journalists and dissenting voices in NES. This phenomenon has also been visible in the repression in civil society and crackdowns on protests that have been organized in NES against commodity prices and problems in the provision of public services. Some informants also pointed to increased attacks by the PYD-affiliated Jwani Shoreshge Revolutionary Youth Movement against KNC offices and individuals. [268]

In general, all these social divisions have translated into daily conflicts and social disputes at the local level over theft, economic and land-ownership issues, among others. Likewise, the scarcity of resources and socio-economic deterioration have aggravated this situation, degrading day-by-day the coexistence between the ethnic, religious and ideological communities of NES.

5.3. LEVEL OF GOVERNANCE DEFICIENCIES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERIORATION (KDC3)

The socio-economic deterioration described in section IV is due to multiple factors, which generate negative social and political effects, including the loss of trust and legitimacy of society in the DAANES authorities and the aggravation of social tensions due to competition for resources. In a comprehensive identification of needs among 910 families in NES, conducted by the Aid Gate Organization in 2023, conflicts over resources such as water, land and economic opportunities were identified as the main causes of social tensions in the region. [269]

Shortcomings of the governance model

A first structural factor is the centralization of the DAANES political system. Despite the democratic and participatory governance principles defined in the Social Contract, and the narrative disseminated by the NES authorities, the PYD exercises an iron grip on the central organs of government. Analysts Stein Aaron and Emily Burchfield point out that

266 Human Rights Watch. *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves in Syria*. June 19, 2014. https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria.

267 Hessein Shihadeh, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

268 Nazhan Mahmud, interview conducted in Qamishli, October 26, 2024; Arya Haji and Idris Saleh, interviews conducted in Qasmishli, October 26, 2024.

269 Aid Gate Organization (AGO). *Comprehensive Needs Assessment Report: Northeast Syria*. 2023.

in NES there is a large gap between the theory and reality of the governance system.[270] While there is some administrative decentralization for the resolution of problems related to public services at the local level, strict centralization in executive, legislative and judicial aspects at the higher levels of government predominates. Along these lines, many respondents have criticized the lack of power-sharing by the PYD, the dominant actor in DAANES, and the lack of dialogue with other political forces, as well as the increasing repression of civil society and other dissenting voices. [271]

There are also different levels of decentralization at the territorial level. In Arab-majority areas, the control of security by Arab tribes has resulted in greater political participation by these actors. However, in areas where Arab communities are a minority, their participation in political affairs has been limited. Political decentralization, and thus power-sharing, are said to be linked to specific interests and the need to ensure certain loyalties to the government among Arab communities. Clientelism has been effective in maintaining political instability in the NES, but has also been perceived as a strategy to instrumentalize tribal and social leaders, as noted by expert Maziad Alharamy.

In general, numerous informants have insisted that the poor delivery of public services is due to DAANES' governance model, lack of strategic planning and lack of institutional capacities. Randa Hamo, director of Impact, emphasized that the main problem is DAANES' lack of vision, planning and experience.[272] This has translated into problems in the implementation of policies and laws and in the development of strategic committees to manage crises and the development of specific procedures. For example, the lack of accountability mechanisms and procedures in the judicial system contributes to the development of a climate of impunity for human rights violations, cases of gender-based violence and corruption, thus reducing society's trust in the authorities.[273] Although in these specific cases, a deliberate policy of laxity on the part of the authorities to accommodate the interests and ensure the loyalty to the government on the part of the most conservative sectors of society is inferred, even if this hinders institutional development and the implementation of laws for the equality and protection of women.[274] This has provoked criticism from the women's movement of the government's inaction on gender violence.

270 Aaron Stein and Emily Burchfield, *The Future of Northeast Syria, Atlantic Council*, August 2019, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/The-Future-of-Northeast-Syria.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

271 Multiple informants

272 Randa Hamo, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 28, 2024.

273 Mohammed Muslem, interview conducted in Raqqa, November 4, 2024; Hamza Ajaji, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

274 Aaron Stein and Emily Burchfield, *The Future of Northeast Syria*, *Atlantic Council*, August 2019.

Weak political participation

The decentralization model contributes to covering basic needs such as fuel to the population, through the communes.[275] This is also reflected in the authorities' dialogue on social issues, but the lack of civil society participation in political decision-making processes of strategic and political significance reduces the scope of participatory governance.[276] This phenomenon has discouraged youth, tribal leaders and other social actors from getting involved in participatory governance bodies. [277]

Along these lines, some sources indicated that the governance model also has shortcomings in terms of the actual participation of women in decision-making processes. Although the Social Contract establishes the right of women to participate in public affairs and requires 40% representation of women in public institutions, the reality is that such participation does not always equate to political empowerment. Moreover, many of the women who occupy these positions are selected by TEVDEM, reducing diversity in public representation. [278]

In the consultations conducted, many key informants have nevertheless considered that the co-chair mechanism is useful and has an empowering effect, because it "demonstrates the capacity that women have to lead institutional bodies".[279] DAANES also has a Women's Council that aims to address social problems such as discrimination, child marriage and other forms of GBV. Again, traditions and certain patriarchal norms encourage practices that exclude women from education and certain leadership roles.[280] Likewise, there are no effective women's empowerment centers due to a lack of strategic funding to women's organizations that propose these initiatives.[281]

Discontent, tensions and social protests

Turkey's military operations emerge again as a key factor of socio-economic deterioration and of erosion of governance capabilities in NES. On the one hand we have Turkey's use of water deprivation as a weapon of war and its critical impact on agricultural activity and food security, as we discussed in KDC1. Sherzad Saido and Shiar Mohammed of Ashna for Development described the negative impact of this conflict on agricultural areas such as Serekaniye, severely reducing agricultural and livestock production. This has meant importing fruit from Aleppo and Homs, and grain from other areas of Syria at three to four times the cost, leading to higher commodity prices for the population.[282] This has

275 GBV expert, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 29, 2024.

276 Randa Hamo, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 28, 2024.

277 Ahmed Shekho interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024; multiple PYD control: 6, 21, 53.

278 Aaron Stein and Emily Burchfield, *The Future of Northeast Syria*, *Atlantic Council*, August 2019. Op. cit.

279 GBV expert, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 29, 2024.

280 GBV expert, interview conducted in Amuda, October 28, 2024.

281 Ibid.

282 Sherzad Saido and Shiar Mohammed, group interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

been compounded by the increase in the prices of fertilizers, seeds, fuel, irrigation systems, animal feed and medicines, which has made agricultural and livestock activities in rural areas unviable, forcing the population to migrate to the cities.[283] This situation has been aggravated by the effects of climate change, most evident in the Hasaka region, known for its extensive wheat production, where rainfall has been significantly reduced and droughts are ever more frequent.[284]

Moreover, attacks on infrastructure have increased the prices of fuel and gas, needed for transportation and home heating, leading to social unrest and health problems. The infrastructure situation was also seriously damaged by the 2023 earthquakes, with direct effects on electricity systems, water pipes and other civilian infrastructure such as schools, especially in Kobane. Businessmen in that area agreed that the destruction in the city, due to the effects of the natural disaster, has caused problems in the sanitation infrastructure with implications on the health conditions of the population.[285]

The level of electricity, water and health supplies is disparate across the NES regions. For example, Ahmed Shekho of DOZ International explained that in Kobane there are often periods where there is electricity for four hours a day, while in Raqqa it extends to eight hours. This contributes to tensions between Arab and Kurdish communities, which crystallize into hate speech and negative stereotypes, while reducing trust in the authorities.[286] Along these lines, Bangin Abdullah of the Raed organization, also detailed that this disparity exists between neighborhoods in Kobane, where some receive electricity, while others do not, creating tensions between neighbors.[287]

These tensions have also translated into mobilizations and protests against rising commodity prices, and problems of access to housing or deficits in the provision of public services. For example, farmers in rural Kobane and other areas have shown their discontent with the government for the lack of government strategies and services to maintain the activity of the sector. The DAANES authorities have not only been unable to respond to these demands, but have attempted to silence these dissents and even limit the civil liberties of the population. Press freedom has deteriorated in NES and there have been numerous cases of attacks on journalists covering protests or amplifying dissenting voices, as detailed in section IV.[288] Civic space is being obstructed and many journalists

283 Hadia Al Mansour, "Farmers in Northern Syria Are Struggling to Make Ends Meet," *The New Arab*, October 23, 2023, https://www.newarab.com/features/farmers-northern-syria-are-struggling-make-ends-meet (Accessed January 9, 2025).

284 Ibid

285 Marwan Shaykh Barkal and Hikmat Ismet, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

286 Ahmed Shekho interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024.

287 Bangin Abdullah, interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

288 Jihad Naboo. Interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024; Ahmed Hussein, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 31, 2024.

practice self-censorship. Some key informants detailed how there are topics that cannot be covered publicly, such as corruption or drug trafficking.[289]

Corruption and illicit activities

Although the society is aware of the impact of Turkish attacks on civilian infrastructure and thus on the provision of basic services, it also feels that DAANES could do more to improve the economic situation, especially considering the natural resources available in the region. In 2021, SNRH denounced the supply of gas and oil to the Al Assad regime by the DAANES government at a profit of $120 million, carried out under opaque conditions.[290] These types of business relationships have led broad sectors of the NES population, including tribal leaders, to distrust their institutions because of the corruption and relations entanglements with the former regime.

These phenomenons reflect, according to key informants interviewed, the prevalence of structural corruption in DAANES. Informants also pointed to the lack of monitoring mechanisms and of accountability of public authorities, and the low salaries of public employees, among others, as causes of this corruption.[291] As a consequence, we observe an increase in drug smuggling networks and other illicit activities. According to the think tank COAR, perceived corruption and the deficit in the provision of public services are the main catalysts of social discontent and protests against the DAANES authorities. [292]

In addition, poor socio-economic conditions have pushed many families into informal economies and networks of illicit economic activities. According to ICG sources, the SDF has criticized the former regime and the Government of Iraq for failing to act forcefully against this smuggling, however, it has been observed how members of the SDF also rely on these informal economies.[293] The Al Assad regime and ISIS have contributed to the development of these drug, weapons and goods-smuggling networks with routes through Deir ez Zor and Hasaka, among others. Many tribal clans have relied on these networks, also obtaining commodities and security from ISIS and the former regime. When the SDF wrested control of the southern territories of NES from ISIS, they began to dismantle these networks, which generated a great deal of backlash against the government due to the existing dependence on these illicit activities. According to Hussein al Hussein, executive director of the Amal al Furat organization, many communities used to have a better standard of living because they could earn income from distilling home-produced oil

289 Ibid

290 Ver: https://snhr.org/blog/2021/07/29/56595/

291 Social expert, interview conducted in Raqqa, November 4, 2024; Community leader, interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

292 Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). "Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria." May 6, 2019.

293 International Crisis Group. "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North Syria." *Report 236,* July 18, 2022.

to produce fuels such as diesel, gasoline and kerosene, but these activities were banned by DAANES. [294]

Lack of economic, employment and educational opportunities

Political instability has contributed to the underdevelopment of the NES economy. On the one hand, most of the DAANES budget has been allocated to defense.[295] On the other hand, the DAANES economy is 60% dependent on the oil sector, but has failed to develop the necessary infrastructure for oil refining.[296] One of the reasons is the lack of foreign investment, sanctions and difficulties imposed by neighbouring countries for the development of industrial activities, aspects that we will analyze in more depth in KDC4.

In addition, more than half of the population depends on agricultural and livestock activities, but as we have seen above, their viability is increasingly under threat due to the bombing and destruction of infrastructures and the increase in prices of the products necessary for their development. All this has increased unemployment and generated uncertainty about the future among the population. Randa Hamo, director of Impact, pointed out that there is no DAANES strategy to support local projects to cover the needs of the population in times of greater emergency, such as the closure of the Semalka-Fishkhabour border crossing by the KRG's authorities.[297] In a new vicious circle, the lack of opportunities has pushed the population into informal economies and has increased child labor in NES[298], as well as exposing the youth to drug use in the main cities[299] with the consequent increase in criminality. [300]

In this regard, the lack of job opportunities has also been compounded by the lack of international recognition of the education system in NES. Dr. Shirvan Muslem, Rector of Kobane University, explained that students who graduate from NES universities and move outside the region have to deal with the reality that their degrees are not recognized. Without this recognition, they are unable to access job opportunities. Dr. Muslem also noted that the majority of graduates are women, as men either have to try to find jobs or are drafted into the Army. One effect of this situation is that many NES families, in the absence of national and international recognition, decide to take their sons and daughters to schools and universities in areas controlled by the former regime. This has implica-

294 Hussein al Hussein, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

295 Abdulquddus Abbas, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024.

296 Peter Bartu and Maurice Ruttimann, "North-East Syria: the Good, the Bad, the Oil," A*ustralian Institute of International Affairs*, June 8, 2021, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/north-east-syria-the-good-the-bad-the-oil/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

297 Randa Hamo, interview in Qamshili, October 28, 2024.

298 *Global Protection Cluster, GOS and NES Protection Analysis Update*, June 2022, https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/gos-and-nes-pau-june-2022-final.pdf (Accessed January 9, 2025).

299 Loseen Beaker, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024; Dania Ramada, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024; Abdesalam Hansura, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 29, 2011.

300 Bozhan Khalil and Berivan Ismaeel, Interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

tions for the preservation of Kurdish language and culture, as noted by Canton Executive Council co-chairs Furat Mesguin Jalil and Farhan Haji Issa.[301]

Disruptions and tensions in the delivery of humanitarian assistance

Humanitarian aid plays a fundamental role in meeting the needs of the population, but, as we have discussed in section IV, during the escalation of the conflict in December 2024 the activities and quality of humanitarian programs were significantly reduced due to restrictions on movement and the activation of contingency plans, including the relocation of international humanitarian personnel to the KRG. To make matters worse, on multiple occasions humanitarian aid has been targeted to areas of greatest need, but this distribution has also led to tensions between communities. According to the Raed organization, there has been criticism of organizations working in Raqqa or Deir ez Zor for not supporting people in need in Kobane.[302] The DAANES Humanitarian Aid Office in Kobane noted that only 8 local organizations maintain activities in Kobane with some international support, while there are hundreds of organizations working in other cities. Some sources have also detailed the lack of coordination in international aid or the inconsistent and excessively bureaucratic cooperation mechanisms used by donors that result in relatively modest projects, in terms of the time and money allocated.[303]

5.4. LEVEL OF INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST ACTORS IN THE REGION (KDC4)

External interference and the negative impact on NES autonomy

The armed conflict in Syria has been characterized by extensive interference by regional and international powers. Broadly speaking, this external interference has manifested itself on two levels. On the one hand, a relatively solid and unwavering support from Iran and Russia to the government in Damascus, where political and economic interests have converged, as we have analyzed in section III. This support was fundamental for the survival of the regime from the Arab revolts of 2011 until the fall of Bashar al Assad at the end of 2024.

On the other hand, a second system of uncoordinated and intermittent support from the US, EU, Turkey and the Gulf States of an ideologically fragmented opposition. In this second ambit, we have observed how the United States and the European Union have not maintained continuous and decisive support for moderate opposition forces in Syria, probably because of a lack of confidence in their ability to overthrow the regime. An exception is the US support of the SDF to fight ISIS in 2015, which included the establish-

301 Mesguin Jalil and Farhan Haji Issa, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024. Mustafa Hassan, interview conducted in Hasaka, October 29, 2024.

302 Bangin Abdullah, interview conducted in Kobane, October 2, 2024.

303 Jihad Hassan, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024; humanitarian organization security expert, interview conducted in Qamishli, October 26, 2011.

ment of military bases and the development of joint military operations, despite the tensions this produced with Turkey, a key partner in the region and in NATO. In recent stages, consulted sources point to the uncoordinated military support in NES, while the US was supporting the SDF in Deir ez Zor, humanitarian organizations were focusing efforts on Raqqa or Hasaka.[304]

The military strengthening of the SDF and its progressive control over the regions of Manbij, Raqqa and Deir ez Zor, achieved during the military campaigns against ISIS, triggered a more assertive policy on the part of Turkey in Syria from 2016 onwards. This materialized in military operations culminating in the occupation of Afrin and the territorial strip between Tel Abiad and Ras al Ain in NES. In parallel, Turkey was establishing military agreements with multiple extremist groups such as HTS, successor to Al-Qaeda. The gradually increasing strength of these groups also eventually convinced Gulf countries, such as Qatar, to support their structures and operations. The result of that support became visible with the seizure of Damascus by HTS on December 8, with the support of the SNA.

Both Turkey and the US have prioritized the military capacity of their allies in Syria to achieve their political objectives, without considering democratic development and the protection of human rights. Turkey has maintained military, logistical and operational support to jihadist groups that have committed systematic human rights violations in areas under its control (See section IV), while US support has focused on military aspects, without paying sufficient attention to strengthening the DAANES government and improving the socio-economic situation in the region. Proof of this was the imposition of sanctions against the Syrian regime in 2020, without considering the collateral effects on the NES region. According to ACAPS, these economic sanctions (Caesar Act) have hindered the procurement of commodities and supplies for the reconstruction of schools, homes and hospitals, as well as access to fuel and other basic products needed by NES households. In addition, this blockade increased the prices of these products and obstructed the investment necessary for social recovery.[305] According to International Crisis Group, the US also failed to authorize foreign investments in the oil sector in NES, which has further undermined the government of the region.[306] In addition, the Turkish government's continued military operations against critical infrastructure in the region have ultimately discouraged any productive and investment in the rich natural resources of oil and gas. The contraction of the economy has choked and often caused the total collapse of public services in DAANES.

304 Peter Bartu and Maurice Ruttimann, "North-East Syria: the Good, the Bad, the Oil," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, April 2021, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/north-east-syria-the-good-the-bad-the-oil/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

305 See: https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20230804_ACAPS_Thematic_report_Northern_Syria_key_crises_to_watch.pdf

306 ICG "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North Syria." *Report 236,* July 2022. Op. cit.

Inaction of the international community

The international community has also failed to condemn and stop Turkey's indiscriminate attacks on civilians and critical infrastructure, the occupations of DAANES territory or the use of water deprivation as a weapon of war. These military strategies have had a critical impact on the humanitarian crisis in NES, including the death of hundreds of people from attacks on the population. The priority of western governments has been to maintain humanitarian aid to the population, but without adopting a triple nexus intervention perspective that would create the necessary conditions of human security and sustainable development in the region while responding to the most urgent needs of the population with humanitarian aid. Consulted DAANES representatives pointed out interference by agencies such as UNICEF in the development and implementation of the educational curriculum based on principles of radical democracy, ethnic pluralism and gender equality, aligned with the ideology of "Democratic Confederalism" proposed by Abdullah Öcalan. Seemingly, UNICEF rejected this program and considered more appropriate the Syrian regime's educational curriculum.[307]

This ineffectiveness has been reflected in the lack of recognition of DAANES, with serious implications for border control, the education system and the economic development of the region. These elements have especially contributed to socio-economic deterioration, hindering trade, economic investment, and the transportation of raw materials necessary for the development of NES industrial sectors. A relevant example was described by several businessmen in the Kobane construction sector who noted that cost prices of construction products had become more expensive due to disruptions in supply chains, such as blockades at the border with the KRG. [308]

The inability of the international community to reach an agreement with the parties to the conflict was evidenced by the lack of implementation of 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Between 2020-22 progress at the negotiation tables in Geneva was stalled by the blockade of the former regime to prevent political transition. In this framework, pressure from Turkey led to the exclusion of the DAANES government from the international negotiation process. The diversion of the attention of the international community towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 finally stalled the international negotiations.

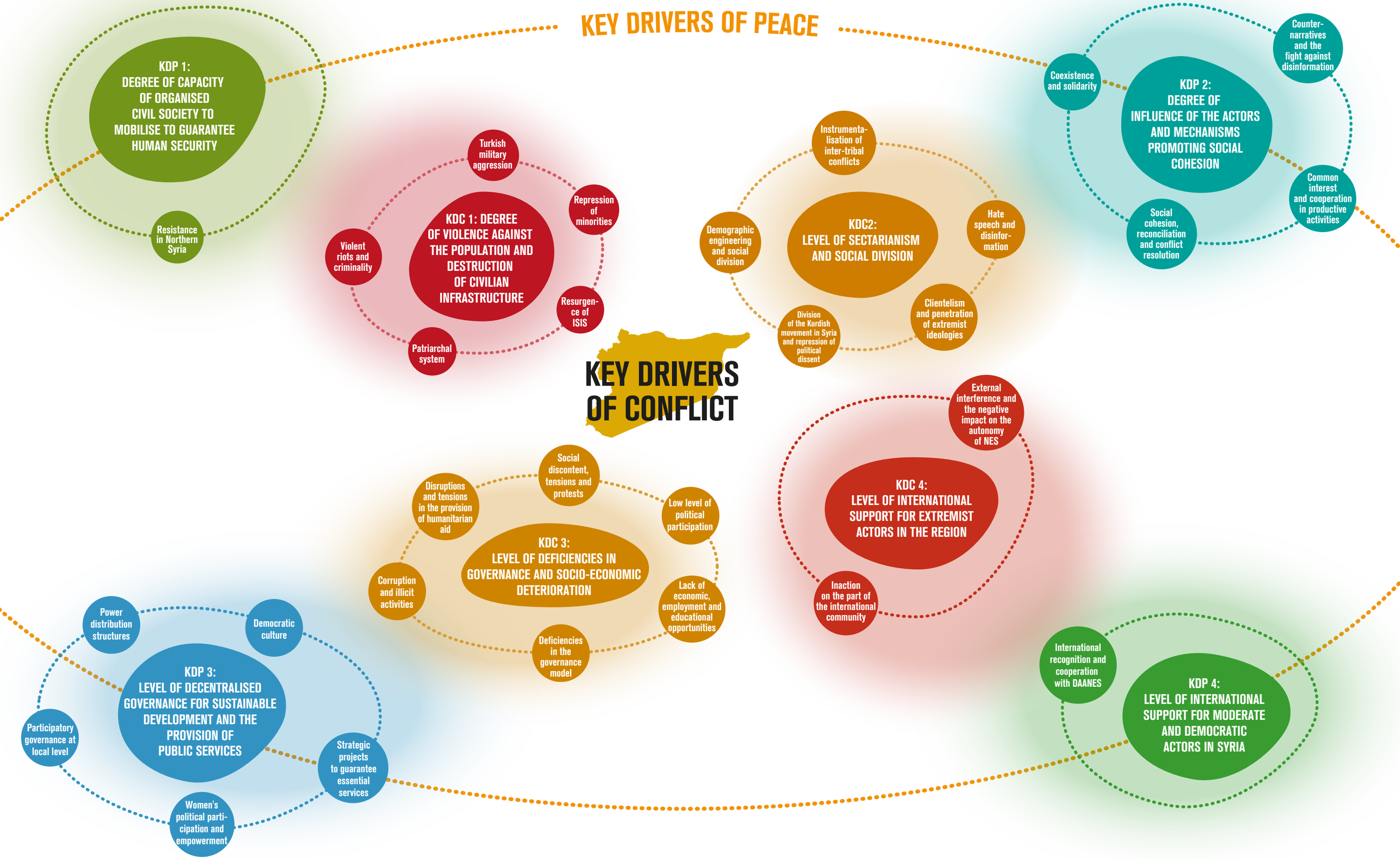
International support to NES has continued in the form of humanitarian aid, but the reduction of aid in recent years has left millions of people without any service delivery.[309] In addition, Sawinska noted that donors condition aid by "imposing their agendas" and offering very time-limited projects, resulting in beneficiaries receiving support for only three or four months.[310] This also results in a lack of strategic funding for key projects such as women's empowerment centers and long-term programs to protect women from gender-based violence.

307 Berivan Issa and Jamal Abdelqader, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

308 Marwan Shaykh Barkal and Hikmat Ismet, group interview conducted in Kobane, November 2, 2024.

309 For more information see: https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2022/05/cuts-in-international-aid-create-severe-health-crisis-in-north-west-syria/

310 Andera Olika, Sawiska Women's Organization, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.


KEY DRIVERS OF PEACE
KDP 1: DEGREE OF CAPACITY OF ORGANISED CIVIL SOCIETY TO MOBILISE TO GUARANTEE HUMAN SECURITY
Resistance in Northern Syria
KDP 2: DEGREE OF INFLUENCE OF THE ACTORS AND MECHANISMS PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION
Coexistence and solidarity
Counter-narratives and the fight against disinformation
Common interest and cooperation in productive activities
Social cohesion, reconciliation and conflict resolution
KDC 1: DEGREE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THE POPULATION AND DESTRUCTION OF CIVILIAN INFRASTRUCTURE
Turkish military aggression
Repression of minorities
Violent riots and criminality
Resurgence of ISIS
Patriarchal system
KDC2: LEVEL OF SECTARIANISM AND SOCIAL DIVISION
Instrumentalisation of inter-tribal conflicts
Demographic engineering and social division
Hate speech and disinformation
Clientelism and penetration of extremist ideologies
Division of the Kurdish movement in Syria and repression of political dissent
KEY DRIVERS OF CONFLICT
KDC 3: LEVEL OF DEFICIENCIES IN GOVERNANCE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERIORATION
Social discontent, tensions and protests
Disruptions and tensions in the provision of humanitarian aid
Low level of political participation
Corruption and illicit activities
Lack of economic, employment and educational opportunities
Deficiencies in the governance model
KDC 4: LEVEL OF INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST ACTORS IN THE REGION
External interference and the negative impact on the autonomy of NES
Inaction on the part of the international community
KDP 3: LEVEL OF DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Power distribution structures
Democratic culture
Participatory governance at local level
Strategic projects to guarantee essential services
Women's political participation and empowerment
KDP 4: LEVEL OF INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR MODERATE AND DEMOCRATIC ACTORS IN SYRIA
International recognition and cooperation with DAANES

VI. KEY DRIVERS OF PEACE

The next section analyzes Key Drivers of Peace (KDP), specifically, it identifies the structures, processes and initiatives present in the conflict that contribute to peace, nonviolence and regional stability. As in the previous section, we analyze the key factors from a systemic perspective analyzing how the various elements relate to each other to transform and counteract the vicious circles of violence.

6.1. CAPACITY TO MOBILIZE ORGANIZED CIVIL SOCIETY TO GUARANTEE HUMAN SECURITY (KDP1).

Northern Syria combines multiple histories of resistance that were intertwined by the common goal of ending the tyranny of the Al Assad regime. Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Assyrians and Yazidis, among others, have created their own structures of resistance and spaces of cooperation to survive the brutal repression of their aggressors. Knowing the roots and pillars of these resistances is fundamental to facilitating the resilience and protection of communities in the post-Assad period. In this chapter, we will analyze some key aspects of these resistances.

First of all, the Kurdish resistance in north Syria, was born from an underground struggle to preserve their cultural identity alive. Cultural resistance is a key aspect to understanding the cohesion of the Kurdish movement, which is probably why the Baathist regime banned the Kurdish language in schools, and any expression of their traditions. Mustafa Hassan, an engineer and activist from Hasaka detailed how in the 1960s they used to celebrate Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, in the "darkness", until they decided to disobey and started celebrating it in the countryside with their family, far from the city. Subsequently, Hassan began to participate in underground political formations and for all this he lost his job and was tortured in the 1980s.

Likewise, Dr. Shirvan Muslem, Rector of Kobane University, detailed how before DAANES the teaching of Kurdish was maintained through clandestine educational activities. For this reason, he added that it is now important to protect the DAANES education system, not only because Kurdish can be taught, but because they incorporate multicultural and democratic values. Dr. Muslem remarked that some of the students at the university insisted on continuing with the exams even when Turkish bombs were falling on NES.[311] "Revolutionary" education based on diversity, democracy and equality is a central pillar of the Kurdish movement's political project and thus of its resistance. These elements explain why the authorities and civil society need the recognition of DAANES and its ed-

311 Shirvan Muslem, interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024.

ucation system in order to preserve their culture, generate job opportunities and prevent young people from having to emigrate from the country. A positive initiative in this regard is that DAANES has ensured that the 250 students who graduate annually from the University of Kobane will be hired by the government.[312]

Secondly, women play a central role in the Kurdish resistance. One of its most famous symbols is the YPJ fighters who fought against ISIS in the battle of Kobane and other NES locations. But beyond the military facet, women have been mainstays of the Kurdish resistance at the cultural and political level. On the one hand, women are the custodians of the community's traditions and cultural identity. Journalist Newruz Rasu has witnessed many cases of resistance, especially of displaced women who have kept up celebrations such as the olive harvest season from their hometown Afrin, in the refugee camps; or have developed laborious cooking recipes for young fighters; or grandmothers who have become mothers for the second time to take care of their granddaughters; or strive to keep morale high in the most difficult moments.[313] This crucial role explains why ISIS or other armed actors have used sexual violence against women in order to destroy NES morale and communities.

On the other hand, women have played an active political role in the Kurdish movement. This has been reflected in the development of networks of support, solidarity and political activism.[314] One of the first expressions was the Yêkîtiya Star (Star Union) movement created in 2005 with the aim of organizing and promoting women's participation in all social and political spheres within the framework of the Democratic Nation project. Other expressions are the networks of women's organizations including Sara, Sawiska and Rose among others. In addition, Mali Jin structures also play a key role in the system of protection and defense of women against gender-based violence in NES. These movements have transcended social divisions to create spaces of solidarity and support with women from other communities. Mona Abdesalam, director of the Rose organization, detailed how Kurdish women activists have carried out solidarity actions with women from Baghuz and Raqqa who have suffered GBV.[315] However, Andera Olika, director of Sawiska Women's Organization also expressed that the women's movement is still fragmented.[316] In KDP2 we will analyze the specific participation of women in DAANES structures.

Third, the nonviolent nature of the resistance reinforces the legitimacy and determination of the communities. During the fieldwork, we collected several testimonies that repeated how "sit-ins" were a widely used action in the history of protests in NES. This type of "symbolic actions" have allowed the participation of men, women and youth, in contexts of extreme repression. Nonviolent intervention actions have also been identified

312 Ibid

313 Newruz Rasu, online interview, November 3, 2024

314 Tank, Pinar. "Kurdish Women in Rojava: From Resistance to Reconstruction." *Die Welt des Islams* 57, no. 3-4 (2017): 404-428.

315 Mona Abdesalam, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

316 Andera Olika, Sawiska Women's Organization, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

to respond to community needs. A local GBV expert explained that, during the siege of Afrin in 2018, the community established spaces of support and protection, such as the Jaltan village in the mountains near Afrin that served as a makeshift market during the war, where the population could buy and sell basic supplies.[317] These types of "spaces of security and solidarity" were also created in other regions such as Deir ez Zor during times of high conflict. [318]

In Kobane, another of the great symbols of the Kurdish resistance, it is not possible to understand the victory against ISIS without the nonviolent actions organized by the community. Common actions were supporting the fighters with food and other supplies, or mothers accompanying the young men on the front line, singing traditional songs to keep morale high. Also in Kobane, actions of communication with international media and documentation of war crimes have been recorded.[319] Even after the massacre committed by ISIS in June 2015, information systems were set up where civilians reported strange movements or suspicious people in the city to the YPG/YPJ.[320]

Fourth, community resilience is intimately linked to nonviolent action in the NES region. That is, the capacity of the population to maintain solidarity, morale and cohesion in the most difficult moments. In this framework, the ability to cover basic needs was crucial. During the early years of the Arab uprisings, self-organized communities to provide public services to the people, the so-called LCCs, sprung up all over Syria. In NES, LCCs were created by the youth and women's movements in major cities.[321] The LCC in Deir ez Zor was created in 2013 and took over the services of education, sanitation, infrastructure reconstruction and other humanitarian needs, for this they organized a local census.[322] In Qamishli, between 2012 and 2014, several structures were created to manage local needs such as the Movement for Democratic Society and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan.[323] More recently, in the last phases of the conflict with Turkey, populations affected by resource shortages and energy and water supply problems organized to provide themselves with alternative energy systems such as solar panels and batteries.

Fifth, the development of a diverse ecosystem of organized civil society during the 2011 uprisings should be highlighted. New organizations created for the defense of women's rights and protection, the promotion of Kurdish culture and the development of humanitarian aid or youth empowerment, among others, emerged from 2012 onwards. As we have observed in the map of actors, NES has numerous organizations specialized in protection, communication and defense of civil and political rights. Likewise, extensive networks and coordination structures have been created such as the Federal Democratic

317 GBV expert, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 29, 2024.

318 See: https://cities.syriauntold.com/

319 Heysam Msilim, interview conducted in Kobane, November 1, 2024.

320 Ibid.

321 Lowe, Robert. *The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria*, 2014.

322 See: https://syriauntold.com/2016/03/04/where-is-the-deir-ez-zor-local-council/

323 See: https://cities.syriauntold.com/

Society Organization in NES (made up of more than 210 organizations),[324] the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations in NES, or the NGO Platform, grouping more than 130 organizations.[325] Key assets contributing to human security in the region in the current phase of the conflict.

Sixth and finally, we must highlight the system of international and local humanitarian organizations operating in NES, under the coordination of OCHA and other platforms such as the NES Forum. As we have seen in section 3 (Analysis of actors), currently the most important organizations are the Kurdish Red Crescent, Un Ponte Per, and Concern, which in coordination with OCHA have been at the forefront of humanitarian aid.

6.2. DEGREE OF INFLUENCE OF THE ACTORS AND MECHANISMS PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION (KDP2)

As we have noted in the previous section, the systematic promotion of sectarianism has been a state policy to ensure the survival of the Al Assad regime for the last 50 years. This has led to great divisions that have created ideal conditions for social tensions and armed conflict in Syria. However, this is not the natural state of human coexistence in the country. Analyst Walad Choli says there is "fertile ground" that can be the basis for building a solid coexistence. [326]

Coexistence and solidarity

In Kurdish-majority areas there is a shared culture with similar traditions and ways of life. Conflict in these contexts stems from political and ideological differences that, in many cases, have been exploited by external actors to strengthen their political power.[327] However, most key informants have agreed that the Kurdish population wants to be part of a Syria with an inclusive political system that guarantees the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. The 2011 uprisings were an example of such aspirations. Kurdish youth movements that took to the streets of Qamshili and other NES cities under slogans calling for inclusiveness and solidarity with the rest of Syria. [328]

This political vision has been shared among civil society organizations and political parties, who during interviews commented that the priority for a political solution in DAANES was dialogue. In practice, we have observed how numerous civil society organizations have cooperated with other social and political actors in various regions of Syria such as

---

324 Avin Youssef, "Rising Tensions in Northeast Syria Amid Turkish Threats," *North Press Agency*, April 2024, https://npasyria.com/en/113172/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

325 For more information see: https://www.ngoplatform.org/

326 Walad Choli, interview conducted in Qamshili, November 26, 2024.

327 Imad Megol, interview conducted in Amuda, November 26, 2024.

328 See: https://cities.syriauntold.com/

Aleppo, Idlib and Afrin. An example of this cooperation is the statement signed by more than 30 Syrian organizations to stop TAF and SNA attacks on NES. [329]

In the field of intercultural relations, we have collected initiatives in Raqqa developed by organizations such as Al Sajeel for the promotion of cultural exchange between the various communities. Mohammed Muslem, in charge of the project, described how their cultural, artistic and musical initiatives have contributed to peace building in that city, generating great interest among thousands of people. [330]

Common interest and cooperation in productive activities

There are wide areas of economic, social and political cooperation between various sectors of society, the economic relations between the Sharabien tribe and Kurdish communities in Qamishli being a good example.[331] These interactions occur in specific locations both in urban and rural areas.

One of the key elements identified by several organizations interviewed is the search for common interest between the communities and the various social actors. The Share organization has created several local structures in the regions of Deir ez Zor for cooperation in agriculture and livestock. Yara Walaka, director of the organization, stated that the communities are interested in these types of projects because they help to improve their quality of life.[332] Within this framework, partnerships have been created with objectives for the good of the community, which have enabled interaction between the various local stakeholders. Share has promoted the development of at least three associations with very positive outcomes for the region.

Along these lines, markets and other economic spaces are strategically useful to reinforce social cohesion, as they are places of interaction between the different Arab and Kurdish communities. Other possible resources that can be taken advantage of are the family relationships within the large tribes, to strengthen interaction and prevent conflicts. Walad Choli detailed how within the Tayy tribe many economic transactions take place thanks to family relationships.

Social cohesion, reconciliation and conflict resolution

In NES there is a sophisticated conflict resolution system of a semi-institutional and civil society nature, led by multiple political and social actors. DAANES has developed Pacification Committees for dispute resolution, and for the transformation of social tensions linked to civil society structures and the tribal system in the region. Such mechanisms

329 See: https://stj-sy.org/en/130-syrian-organizations-urge-the-united-nations-security-council-to-protect-civilians-promptly-intervene-to-stop-the-military-escalation-in-northern-syria-and-enhance-humanitarian-response/

330 Mohammed Muslem, interview conducted in Raqqa, November 4, 2021.

331 Ibid

332 Yara Malaka and Mizgin Mehmud, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

prevent a large number of disputes between families, clans and other members of society from having to be dealt with in lengthy and costly legal proceedings in the DAANES courts.

DAANES has created bodies such as the Councils of Notables, made up of tribal leaders, whose function is to facilitate relations with local communities, mediate social disputes and advise the government on public policies affecting the community. These institutions establish links with the leaders of the different tribes in the region. Maziad Alharamy, an expert in social and tribal affairs, explained that in Syria tribal leaders have traditionally played a key role in social cohesion, mediation and local governance.[333] Nazhan Mahmud, a member of the NES Board of Notables, noted that people prefer to rely on traditional systems to resolve disputes.[334] For each party in conflict, a tribal or religious leader participates in the debate, seeking a solution that is accepted by all parties. This system has even dealt with murder cases, where fair compensation is sought for the victim's family to prevent a cycle of revenge.[335] However, there are also voices critical of the role of tribal leaders in conflict resolution, especially in cases of gender-based violencet, as discussed in the previous section.

It is also important to highlight the role that tribal leaders have played in preventing violent extremism in the region. Idris Nasen, representative of Geneva Call, explained that the strategic position of tribal leaders in relation to DAANES has also allowed the integration of families from the Al Hol camp into the towns and cities of the region.[336] Adris Saleh, director of STJ, notes that this type of initiative was proposed by the tribal leaders themselves with the aim of reducing the prevalence of ISIS mentality in the refugee and IDP camps.[337]

Also, there are other types of Peacemaking Committees linked to disputes and problems that particularly affect women's rights, organized around the Mali Jin movement. This semi-institutional structure has physical spaces for the reception and support of women who have suffered gender-based violence. The Mala Jin office in Amuda, for example, receives between 10-15 cases monthly, especially cases of domestic violence and early marriages.[338] The most sensitive cases are dealt with in court, but other cases remain unprotected such as divorces after which men do not pay the maintenance imposed by the sentences to their ex-wives. [339]

333 Maziad Alharamy, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 31, 2024.

334 Nazhan Mahmud, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 26, 2024.

335 *North Press Agency*, "Water Crisis in Northeast Syria Continues Amid Turkish Control," October 2020, https://npasyria.com/en/47862/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

336 Idris Nassen, interview conducted in Raqqa, November 4, 2024.

337 Adris Saleh, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

338 Ibid

339 Mona Abdesalam, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 27, 2024.

In parallel, there are dialogue and reconciliation commissions promoted by political formations and civil society organizations. In Amuda, the commission of the KNC's Front for Peace and Freedom acts as a space for inter-ethnic relations. Facilitators of these spaces have promoted dialogue among participants from Assyrian, Kurdish, Arab and other minority communities to identify shared perceptions of betrayal, remember their common past, and review historical grievances in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes.[340]

Likewise, during the fieldwork, a large number of organizations and specialists in mediation and social intervention for conflict resolution were identified. In this line, experts in social intervention from DOZ International added that there are also social leaders with a very positive influence on local communities such as teachers, doctors and community organizers, among others.[341] An example of this type of role can be seen in Hessein Shihadeh, a social mediator, who has dealt with numerous social disputes and conflicts in Amuda, Hasaka and other regions. According to Shihadeh, his team have made visits to Assyrian, Arab, Kurdish, and other minority communities to resolve conflicts such as honor crimes, land disputes, family tensions, among others. These communities have requested their services because they trust them and the effectiveness of their traditional methods.[342]

Counter-narratives and struggles against disinformation

Racism is a growing trend in the region, which takes multiple forms such as hate speech and disinformation on social networks. Civil society organizations, especially those specialized in social communication and with experience in social networks, have played a role in fighting back against these pernicious phenomenons. An example of this work can be found in the organization Nextory, which is dedicated to weaving and disseminating narratives based on coexistence, diversity, respect, equality and justice. For example, its Facebook page gives voice to relevant political and social actors who express messages such as "What distinguishes Syria is the diversity of its communities, and in Northeast Syria this diversity is manifested. It is necessary to maintain it, and not to marginalize the area. Achieving equality and justice in a country requires maintaining communal cohesion and embracing the diversity of Syrian communities."[343]

340 Hessein Shihadeh, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

341 Salma Hussein and Shukri Ali, group interview conducted in Hasaka, November 5, 2024.

342 Hessein Shihadeh, interview conducted in Amuda, October 26, 2024.

343 See: https://www.facebook.com/NextoryPlatform?rdid=prc3EpSaqhpj38eD&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F1Xjg99re3v%2F

6.3. DECENTRALIZED GOVERNANCE LEVEL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES (KDP3)

DAANES is built on Abdullah Öcalan's concept of "Democratic Nation" which is rooted in the revolutionary principles of radical democracy, equality and ecology. The Social Contract describes the constitution of a decentralized, democratic system based on participatory governance. However, as we have commented above (KDC3), in practice there has been a centralized political axis in the hands of the PYD since 2014. Some scholars consider that this system does not lay the foundations for democratic development, at least in the short term.[344] While it is a fact that DAANES has not organized general elections since its creation, there are administrative positions at the cantonal, local and communal levels that have been elected by the communities.

Moreover, it must be taken into account that this situation is developing in a context of lack of formal recognition of DAANES at the international level and years of conflicts with the former regime, ISIS, and now the Turkish government, with a population that have not lived under full democracy in their living memory. In this complex context, a dual governance system has developed where centralized and decentralized structures coexist. Authors Espinosa and Ronan define it as a dual power structure, on the one hand, the centralized Autonomous Administration controlling main executive, legislative and judicial institutions at the national and cantonal levels, and on the other hand a decentralized system consisting of local and communal councils.[345]

In this chapter, we will analyze the opportunities, but also challenges, of developing a democratic system in NES that responds to the most urgent needs of the population, especially the improvement of socio-economic conditions, thereby increasing its legitimacy at the international and national levels.

Power distribution structures

One of the main challenges is to develop a shared power structure. The composition of NES is ethnically, religiously and ideologically diverse, but historical sectarian politics have divided these communities. In this regard, the DAANES government: 1) Has incorporated representatives of Arab communities into central structures, such as in Raqqa, where official positions have been held by Arabs. In addition, approximately 200,000 people, including Arabs and other ethnic minorities, work in the administrative and military structures of the NES Government.[346] According to the ICG, this clientelist strategy seeks to secure the loyalty of Arab communities. 2) It has incorporated tribal leaders into the Peoples' Councils (legislative bodies) and the Pacification Committees (dispute resolu-

344 Lowe, Robert. *The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria*, 2014. 231

345 Elise Boyle, Adam Ronan. "Rojava's 'War of Education'" *Third World Quarterly* 44 (2023): 2281-2299. Op. cit.

346 International Crisis Group. "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North Syria." *Report 236*, 2022. Op. cit.

tion bodies) of DAANES as a strategy to involve them in decision-making processes and promote social cohesion. 3) It has favored the creation of the Syrian Democratic Council, a political assembly independent from DAANES with the function of promoting dialogue with all social and political actors in NES. The Federal Democratic Society Organization in NES participates in the SDC, representing more than 120 civil society organizations, professional associations, etc. However, as a negative aspect, the absence of the KNC stands out. Idris Nassen, pointed out that the SDC is a democratic actor and its role is positive because it is the main representative of NES at the international level, while at the local level it maintains dialogue with all parties.[347]

In the current political phase, these power-sharing mechanisms have succeeded in securing the loyalty of Arab leaders to the government in various regions of NES. A prominent example of this dynamic occurred in December 2024, when the Tabqa Councils rejected HTS proposals, which called for taking control of security in their areas rather than leaving it under the command of the SDF.[348]

Women's political participation and empowerment

Women's political participation in all political spheres is a principle described in the Social Contract. In practical terms this has been translated into the co-presidency mechanism and the 40% quota of women in all public institutions. In addition, there are Women's Committees to promote equality and prevent GBV, as well as semi-institutional structures for direct protection such as Mali Jin. Notwithstanding, critical testimonies have been collected on diversity in representation and actual participation in the decision-making process. There are also numerous key informants who have considered the role of women in these positions to be positive because they gradually assume functions and real leadership, and become an example for society. In this framework, it is key to highlight the various initiatives of women's organizations with centers and programs for women's empowerment at the political level, including mechanisms and activities to facilitate entrepreneurship, micro-credits and vocational training, among others, with a view to boosting their economic independence. However, there has been a lack of financial support from donors for the maintenance of these programs in the long term.

Participatory governance at the local level

With regard to the communes as a space for citizen participation, the data collected have indicated that they are spaces mainly dedicated to covering basic needs. In this sense, their function is positive, although the effectiveness of their responses depends on the place, and the people chosen to manage the communes because in some cases they lack training or experience and can thus be ineffective or even create problems in the community.

347 Idris Nassen, interview conducted in Raqqa, November 4, 2024.

348 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

Another important aspect is that they are not spaces for political participation and do not involve the participation of young people or members of Arab communities. However, the researcher Qayssar Mansour conducted a study on 450 communes in NES, and among his findings highlighted that, starting about three years ago, the communes began to function better through the active participation of the people, also the resolutions of the communes began to be adopted by higher positions in DAANES, although the lack of information about the role and the selection process at these levels still had room for improvement.[349]

Democratic culture

Some key informants have stressed that society is not prepared for this "sudden democracy" due to decades of living under an authoritarian and repressive regime. In some cases, the process has even created intra-family problems such as conflicts between children and parents,[350] motivating some social sectors to perceive that DAANES wants to destroy the traditional values of society. In this way the DAANES model has created distrust and resistance among these social components. With a view to remedying this situation, one of the priorities of some social and political institutions is to promote democratic principles and use the communes as spaces where participatory governance can be practiced.[351] Jihad Hassan pointed out that one of the functions of the Federal Democratic Society Organization in NES is to create channels for the participation of all social actors such as professional associations.[352] Also, Fairouz Jalil, co-chair of PYD in Raqqa, noted that one of their tasks is social organization and promoting the idea of democracy so that citizens support DAANES.[353] Finally, Dr. Muslem indicated that the NES education system is also aimed at promoting democracy and respect for diversity, and for this purpose the formative curriculum deploys these principles in the education system. In addition, Academies for Democratic Society have been established, linked to all public and social institutions, from the communes to the police forces, where education is provided promoting values of freedom, equality and democracy to build the revolutionary political community.[354]

Strategic projects to guarantee strategic services

The further institutional development of DAANES based on decentralization, transparency and citizen participation would improve democratic governance and, therefore, the provision of public services. However, the priority identified is the rehabilitation of infrastructure to ensure basic supplies for the population. In this regard, in addition to

349 Qayssar Mansour, interview conducted in Qamshili, October 26, 2024.

350 GBV expert, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 29, 2024.

351 Fairouz Jalil, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

352 Jihad Hassan, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

353 Fairouz Jalil, interview conducted in Raqqa, October 30, 2024.

354 Shirvan Muslem, interview conducted in Kobane, November 3, 2024.

the work being carried out in the communes, we have collected evidence of the intense activity being carried out by other administrative departments of DAANES such as the Water and Electricity Authorities.

These institutions have designed strategic projects to address structural problems in the provision of critical public services such as: 1) the creation of new irrigation systems; 2) the production of medicines in NES to avoid the high costs of importing these supplies; 3) the development of the renewable energy industry; 4) alternative energy systems (some of these projects are already underway with the support of international donors, others are still in the design or fundraising phase); 5) the development of the university system. In addition to these projects, there are strategies led by organized civil society, such as the development of permaculture to meet the needs of the agriculture and livestock sector in regions such as Hasaka.

6.4. LEVEL OF INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR MODERATE AND DEMOCRATIC ACTORS (KDP4)

To date, the international community has not formally recognized DAANES, although there are international and national institutions, such as the Parliament of Catalonia in Spain, which have recognized DAANES. This recognition makes it possible to strengthen international cooperation and develop diplomatic missions to analyze the political and humanitarian situation on the ground. In addition, French universities have established cooperation agreements with the DAANES university system, creating opportunities for students and improving the quality of universities.

Another positive value is that Rojava has become a symbol of women's resistance and liberation, which has attracted the interest and support of numerous civil society organizations and social movements around the world. This international solidarity has been reflected in demonstrations organized internationally in support of DAANES in the current phase of the conflict.[355] Through these channels and other international channels, more than 130 NES civil society organizations have demanded a UNSC resolution to protect the population, de-escalate the conflict and ensure humanitarian aid for the population.[356]

In parallel, the Government of DAANES through the SDC, its highest political body, has launched a communiqué asking the international coalition to support DAANES against the threats of the Turkish Government.[357] So far, some diplomatic actions have been developed by the United States and other European governments demanding the cessation

355 See: https://medyanews.net/solidarity-demonstrations-in-europe-for-the-people-of-rojava-stop-turkeys-war-in-syria/

356 See: https://stj-sy.org/en/130-syrian-organizations-urge-the-united-nations-security-council-to-protect-civilians-promptly-intervene-to-stop-the-military-escalation-in-northern-syria-and-enhance-humanitarian-response/

357 *North Press Agency*, "US-Led Coalition Condemns Escalating Violence in Northeast Syria," December 15, 2024, https://npasyria.com/en/119793/ (Accessed January 9, 2025).

of hostilities by Turkey.[358] International pressure should increase, building on the efforts that DAANES has made since 2014 to contain the advance of ISIS in the region. Some governments such as the US have maintained during that period military cooperation agreements in that regard. As a result, the Washington government has increased its troops in the region to 2,000, deterring the TAF and its allied factions from a military incursion into Kobane.

At the time of writing, the dialogue process between the Damascus authorities and the DAANES government has begun. The latter has put forward as political objectives its participation in a united and sovereign Syria, the equitable distribution of natural resources, the recognition of the rights of the Kurdish people in the new Syrian Constitution, the preservation of the decentralized structure and autonomy of the DAANES, as well as the integration of the SDF into the state military structures, among others. These objectives will be addressed at the upcoming Syrian National Dialogue Conference.

358 See: https://medyanews.net/meps-call-for-urgent-action-against-turkish-backed-mercenary-attacks-on-DAANES/

VII. PEACE AGENDA WITH A TRIPLE NEXUS APPROACH: STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of the Key Conflict and Peace Factors in the NES has identified the main problems, causes and consequences of violence, but also structures, processes and initiatives present in the NES that can be used to minimize conflict and build peace. Below, we detail strategic pressure points to transform these dynamics, reducing the influence of key conflict factors and reinforcing peace factors. These recommendations have been designed based on the analyses conducted throughout the report, including the proposals defined by the more than 70 key informants interviewed during the research process.

This roadmap comes at a crucial time for the future of Syria in general and NES in particular. The DoF operation launched by the Turkish government and its allied factions against the DAANES government has the potential to destabilize the entire region. Currently, the fighting is concentrated in Tishrin, where one of the most important dams on the Euphrates is located. The capture of this strategic location would increase Turkish pressure on the DAANES authorities with serious implications on electricity and water supplies with consequences at the sanitation and health level with possible cholera outbreaks.[359] Also, this Turkish advance could leave Kobane isolated and besieged by the TAF. The fall of Kobane would provoke a greater penetration of Turkey into NES territory, allowing this government to connect the territories captured in the DoF with the occupied territories between Tel Abiad and Ras al Ain, during the Peace Spring operation. But it would also be a symbolic victory over one of the SDF strongholds, presenting an image of weakness and undermining the morale of DAANES that would be exploited by other political opponents in the southern part of NES to create further instability. According to a local security expert consulted, this would mean the unleashing of further violence that could affect not only NES, but the entire region.[360]

Given this possible scenario, it is essential to deploy urgent diplomatic actions to reach a ceasefire, while developing measures to meet the humanitarian needs of the population and improving conditions for inter-ethnic dialogue, social cohesion and democratic governance. Furthermore, these demands are aligned with the democratic reforms for political transition presented by more than 77 civil society organizations to the EU on December 18, 2024.[361]

359 Security coordinator of international humanitarian organization, online interview conducted on January 7, 2025.

360 Ibid

361 See: https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-recommendations-from-77-syrian-civil-society-organizations-to-the-european-union/:

KDC1: Extent of violence against the population and destruction of civilian infrastructure

KDP1: Degree to which organized civil society is mobilized to ensure human security

ACTION 1: DIPLOMATIC STRATEGIES FOR THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS, STABILITY AND NATIONAL SECURITY

The war in NES has provoked indiscriminate attacks against civilians and critical structures essential for the survival of the communities. The fragmentation of armed actors and the impunity they enjoy has led to serious human rights violations and war crimes. Increased international pressure is needed to prevent further regional instability.

Concrete measures:

- To **implement a region-wide ceasefire, overseen by an independent international peace mission**, to ensure the protection of civilians and allow humanitarian access to the communities most in need. This demand considers the call of 130 Syrian organizations demanding a UNSC resolution to protect civilians, ensure humanitarian access and stop the military escalation.362
- To **ensure the territorial integrity of Syria through the cessation of Turkish military incursions and attacks on critical infrastructure**, including the **cessation of water-supply weaponization**, as well as the **end of the occupation and the return of territories** to the DAANES Government, in order to re-establish public security and the rule of law in these areas.
- To **promote international presence in the region**, from diplomatic delegations to journalists and international civil society organizations, with a view to understanding the situation on the ground and deterring Turkey from further hostilities.

ACTION 2: IMPLEMENTATION OF COMPREHENSIVE FRAMEWORK FOR CIVILIAN AND CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION

Building on the experience, strategies and structures of NES nonviolent civil resistance, it is necessary to develop an effective civilian protection system that includes preventing and/or mitigating the impacts of armed conflict on civilians and critical infrastructure in accordance with the principles of International Humanitarian Law. This framework

362 See: https://stj-sy.org/en/130-syrian-organizations-urge-the-united-nations-security-council-to-protect-civilians-promptly-intervene-to-stop-the-military-escalation-in-northern-syria-and-enhance-humanitarian-response/

should include conflict-sensitive mechanisms tailored to the needs of the population, and should leverage the institutional capacities of the organized civil society ecosystem.

Concrete measures:

- To **improve systems able to inform on the evolution of the crisis**: large sectors of the population do not have information on the current situation. This can be done by taking advantage of the work of multiple international and local organizations that produce detailed reports on the security situation and humanitarian needs in the region.
- To **organize a system of documentation of human rights violations and war crimes** through local organizations. This requires training, equipment (technology) and financial support to deploy human rights observers in the NES.
- To **build a nonviolent civil defense system** that includes the preparation and deployment of civilian peace corps to protect local communities, especially vulnerable groups, the transportation of the population to safe areas, and psychosocial support.
- To **implement a program for the elimination of anti-personnel mines** in the rural areas east of Raqqa (Madan-Sabkha). This type of mine causes daily casualties and obstructs the development of agricultural activities.[363]

ACTION 3: WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY PROGRAM

In accordance with the principles and guidelines of Resolution 1325 and building on the women's movement and GBV protection structures in NES.

Concrete measures:

- To **promote effective policies and institutional mechanisms for protection, accountability and redress for gender-based violence**: especially for prevention and accountability for honor crimes, child marriage, etc.
- To **support politically and financially the programs and initiatives for the protection and political and economic empowerment of women** of local women's organizations.
- To **implement social awareness and sensitization campaigns on women's rights** with a view to favoring the change of social gender norms and facilitate the understanding and implementation of policies and laws for the protection and promotion of women's rights.

363 For more information see: https://snhr.org/blog/2024/12/31/maps-of-the-most-prominent-areas-contaminated-by-landmines-in-syria-and-recommendations-to-address-this-issue/

- To **activate specific programs for the reintegration of women and their children from refugee camps into society**. Priority should be given to interventions that aim to meet the needs of these women and their children in order to integrate them into the communities.

ACTION 4: ACCESS TO HUMANITARIAN AID AND DEVELOPMENT OF RESILIENCE PLANS

The DoA and DoF military operations have led to further forced displacement into NES. Also, the ongoing military campaign of destruction of critical infrastructure executed by Turkey since 2020 is significantly aggravating the humanitarian crisis in the region. Clashes in different locations have forced the humanitarian community to reduce its activities, heightening the level of risk for many communities.

Concrete measures:

- To **facilitate safe humanitarian corridors and promote impartial access to assistance**, in line with the principles of International Humanitarian Law.
- To **support community resilience plans** so that the most needy population can respond individually and collectively to the most urgent challenges of this humanitarian crisis through the acquisition of generators, solar panels and water purification systems.
- To **develop an accurate census of the region in order to manage aid more effectively**, avoiding duplication of aid and ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable groups are met. This census is aligned with the DAANES proposal for the return of refugees and internally displaced persons.

ACTION 5: COMBATING DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

In the current phase of the conflict in NES, social networks have been flooded with disinformation designed to promote hate speech and clashes between the various ethnic and religious communities. Leveraging the capacities of organized civil society, the following measures are proposed:

Concrete measures:

- To **develop communication campaigns on social networks to fight disinformation and promote counter-narratives** that generate trust, calm and dialogue among communities. To this end, it is necessary to work with organizations and activists specialized in social communication.
- To **guarantee press freedom and support independent media** in the fight to depoliticize information and prevent disinformation and incitement to violence.

KDC2: Level of sectarianism and social division

KDP2: Degree of influence of the actors and mechanisms promoting social cohesion

ACTION 6: LOCALIZED SOCIAL COHESION AND COMMUNITY-BASED STRUCTURES

Social cohesion strategies must be localized and developed in the short-medium term. The areas of greatest instability in the recent period are those with a majority Arab population and under the control of the SDF such as Raqqa and Deir ez Zor, both in rural and urban areas. Other critical areas are refugee and IDP camps, where there is penetration of extremist ideologies and recruitment of young people (Hajin, Diban, Kharab Eshek, Tel Abiad, Soluk, Washokani).

Concrete measures:

- To **foster dialogue and reconciliation between Arabs and Kurds through existing structures and spaces**, with the support of those local facilitators who have credibility and social legitimacy. Tension, division and historical resentments must be overcome.
- To **strengthen the social cohesion and dispute resolution role of the tribal system** through collaboration with community-accepted tribal leaders, establishing confidential working mechanisms to avoid ISIS threats to these actors. This will involve improving transparency, trust and information-sharing between DAANES and tribal communities, and redoubling efforts to support the implementation process of tribal leaders' resolutions.
- To **channel the resolution of disputes and cases related to GBV to the Mali Jin Pacification Committees or NES courts**.
- To **promote a process of dialogue between authorities and communities in the NES** thus addressing popular discontent and historical grievances.
- To **implement measures to dismantle drug production and trafficking networks**, which have proliferated during the conflict.

ACTION 7: PROJECTS OF COMMON INTEREST IN PRODUCTIVE AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Projects and spaces of shared interest are crucial for social cohesion, as they meet basic needs while promoting relationships of trust and mutual understanding among the various social components.

Concrete measures:

- The **development of sustainable development projects in the field of agriculture and livestock** that meet the basic needs of divided communities, in cooperation with local organizations that have the necessary experience and social legitimacy to be able to work effectively at the local level.
- To **support economic development programs that generate employment and opportunities, especially for young people, women, and other vulnerable groups** such as people with functional diversity, and to revitalize key sectors such as agriculture and industry.

ACTION 8: CULTURE AND SPORTS PROGRAM

Intercultural and sports interventions are effective in promoting dialogue between Arab and Kurdish communities and other minorities. Art, culture and music bring members of different social components together in physical spaces, where interactions fundamental to social cohesion and mutual understanding can take place.

Concrete measures:

- **Promoting sports activities and development of facilities** is a leverage point to enable exchange between young people from different communities and prevent their exposure to extremist ideologies and drug use. Ideally locating these activities in camps and areas with displaced populations, also involving the host communities.
- To **encourage cultural and educational initiatives and centers that promote dialogue, tolerance and mutual understanding** between different ethnic and religious groups, locating these activities in cities and areas where different ethnic and religious communities coexist such as Raqqa.

ACTION 9: PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The re-emergence of ISIS poses an additional threat to DAANES in the current crisis context. But it also reflects the prevalence of the ISIS mindset in the rural areas of the southern NES, its military and logistical capabilities, and its potential to destabilize areas such as Deir ez Zor. The following points integrate measures that have been proposed in other action sections, but with specific adjustments for CVE.

Concrete measures:

- To **strengthen relations, legitimacy and transparency between DAANES and tribal communities to build trust**, including improved public service delivery, as well as greater integration, power-sharing and political autonomy.
- **To support and cooperate with tribal leaders with legitimacy for the resolution of disputes** between families, with strong security and confidentiality measures.
- To **dismantle illicit activities and smuggling networks** in the rural areas of Hasaka, Deir ez Zor, Raqqa, among others, while creating **employment and economic opportunities to meet the needs of local communities**. Also to focus on the recovery of agricultural and livestock activities with measures to reduce the prices of seeds and other products, improve irrigation systems and embark on projects of common interest to develop trusting relationships between divided communities.
- To **socially and economically reintegrate women, with their families, from the Al Hol refugee camp** in cooperation with tribal leaders and other political authorities.
- To **create economic, employment, cultural and sports opportunities and structures for young people** in refugee and IDP camps, as well as rural areas of NES. To include the improvement of living conditions in cooperation with DAANES and humanitarian organizations, and the development of sports and cultural facilities.
- **To fight against disinformation,** fake news **and hate speech promoted by the Turkish Government and jihadist groups,** through communication and awareness campaigns led by local social-communication organizations and experts.

ACTION 10: RECONCILIATION AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE PROGRAM

Decades of repression and historical grievances have divided Syrian society, so it is necessary to develop reconciliation and transitional justice programs that allow for justice, compensation and forgiveness among the various social components. These types of programs are especially relevant in areas of historical clashes such as those in which the regime forced demographic changes in the 1960s-70s-80s, located on the border between Turkey and NES (e.g. Ras al Ain).

Concrete measures:

- To **implement transitional justice programs** that address human rights violations, promote reconciliation among diverse communities, and address historical grievances, prioritizing the **resolution of property and land disputes** arising from the former Syrian regime's policies of dispossession and Arabization.
- To **support DDR programs and initiatives for former members of the former regime and other armed groups**, ensuring their reintegration into civil society, including verification processes to ensure that amnesty applicants have not committed war crimes, so promoting justice and national reconciliation.

KDC3: Level of governance deficiencies and socio-economic deterioration

KDP3: Decentralized governance level for sustainable development and provision of public services

ACTION 11: INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF DAANES TO ADVANCE THE PROCESSES OF DECENTRALIZATION AND PROVISION OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Democratic development in NES requires recognizing the prevailing social structure and ensuring the distribution of power, services and resources among the different communities in the region. The diverse civil society ecosystem has organizations with extensive experience that can contribute to this process, and this participation has the potential to enhance relationships of trust, legitimacy and support between institutions, civil society organizations and communities.

Concrete measures:

- To **establish technical cooperation agreements between foreign governments and DAANES administrative bodies**. The constituent framework and the regulations approved by the DAANES authorities are oriented towards the democratic development of the region, but there are challenges in their implementation. Capacity-building of administrative cadres will contribute to the improvement of the development of procedures for the implementation of laws and public policies.
- To **create channels for the participation of organized and specialized civil society** in specific areas due to their knowledge and contacts with local communities. This cooperation should be aimed at effective participation in decision-making processes such as the design of public policies, drafting of norms and establishment of effective accountability mechanisms.
- To **support training and empowerment programs for women and young people for their participation in political life and decision-making processes,** taking advantage of the structures of the Federal Democratic Society Organization in NES and the Academies for the Promotion of Democratic Culture.

ACTION 12: FACILITATION OF INTRA-KURDISH DIALOGUE

The new political period opens an opportunity for confluence between the Kurdish political parties. According to consulted sources, progress is noted in negotiations between DAANES and the KNC and KRG authorities. A unified and solid Kurdish position would put NES in a better position to negotiate its political future in Syria.

Concrete measures:

- To **facilitate dialogue between the various political formations** in NES, with special attention to the PYD and KNC. Decentralization should create mechanisms to distribute political power and ensure the participation of the various political forces in the decision-making process.
- To **support the assembly structures of the SDC** for the integration and dialogue of all political and social actors of NES to advance the development of a common political project.

ACTION 13: STRATEGIC SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Improving the socio-economic situation is essential to meeting the basic needs of the population, manage social discontent and improve the legitimacy of the DAANES government. In this framework, the rehabilitation and/or reconstruction of critical energy, water and sanitation infrastructures is urgent.

Concrete measures:

- To **develop institutional strategic projects in critical sectors** such as energy, water, medicine and education, among others**.** These projects require financial support and technical expertise for their development. Governments and international administrations can establish bilateral agreements for the development of these strategic projects.
- To **rehabilitate critical infrastructure** such as water and energy, and strategic support to the agriculture and livestock sectors, including cultivation policy, subsidies to reduce prices of supplies such as seeds, medicines for animals, among others.
- To **rebuild and equip schools and health centers.** The development of infrastructure and public services must incorporate an intersectional approach to meet the needs of vulnerable groups, such as women and people with functional diversity.
- To support permaculture projects and initiatives to **provide alternative solutions in agricultural production.** These projects help reduce costs and preserve natural resources in a context of climate change.

ACTION 14: PROTECTION AND STRENGTHENING OF CIVIC SPACE

Democratic development in NES depends on a strong, organized civil society with the capacity to support communities, but also to monitor and hold the government accountable.

Concrete measures:

- To **protect civic space and the exercise of civil liberties such as freedom of the press and expression,** through norms and mechanisms that protect these rights, promoting independent investigations in cases of violations.
- To **promote the protection of political dissidence, with special attention to the exercise of the right to protest and the right of association and assembly**.
- To **support the creation of systems of accountability** and redress for victims of human rights violations and their families, including war crimes, forced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detention, cruel or degrading treatment, etc.

KDC4: Level of international support for extremist actors in Syria

KDP4: Level of international support for moderate and democratic actors in Syria.

ACTION 15: INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE TO PRESERVE THE AUTONOMY OF NES IN THE SYRIAN POLITICAL TRANSITION PROCESS.

The UN and western governments must redouble their efforts to ensure the autonomy and rights of the NES population in the country's new constitution. The political transition in the country must be developed in line with the principles set out in UN Resolution 2254, be adopted by consensus, and respect territorial integrity, international law and transitional justice, and foment dialogue between the different political and social actors in Syria. Recently, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, emphasized the importance of the development of a political transition process led by the Syrian people, of an inclusive nature.[364]

Concrete measures:

- To activate **diplomatic actions** to influence the authorities in Damascus **to ensure the participation of all political actors in Syria in the future National Dialogue Conference** for the political transition of the country, in line with the Roadmap published by DAANES in December 2024365
- To **promote international recognition of DAANES** to ensure its participation in national political transition processes and international forums, ensuring recognition of the educational system in the NES with a view to improving employment and educational opportunities while preserving the various languages, cultures and traditions of the region.
- The **lifting of US economic sanctions** to attract international investment in strategic economic sectors, which would help improve the country's economic situation.
- To **develop international cooperation instruments with a triple nexus approach** that allow multilateral aid to meet the humanitarian needs of the population while contributing to sustainable development and coexistence among the region's different ethnic, religious and ideological communities. Also to **make cooperation mechanisms more flexible, expanding financial support and respecting the needs and demands of organized civil society at the local level**.

364 See: https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/statement-united-nations-special-envoy-syria-mr-geir-o-pedersen

365 ANF English, "DAANES Announces Initiative to Build New Syria," December 2024, https://anfenglish-mobile.com/news/daanes-announces-initiative-to-build-new-syria-76905 (Accessed January 9, 2025).

VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aid Gate Organization (AGO). *Comprehensive Needs Assessment Report: Northeast Syria*. 2023.

Alghannam, Hesham. "Border Traffic: How Syria Uses Captagon to Gain Leverage over Saudi Arabia." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. July 2024.

al Jabassini, Abdullah. "Civil Resistance to Military Conscription in Kurdish Areas of Northern Syria: The Untold Story." *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 12, no. 3 (2017): 104-109. https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2017.1371064.

Alsayed, Haneen, and Nadia al Sakkaf. *Syria: Domestic Violence against Women in Widows' Camps*. March 2024.

Amnesty International. "Syria Report 2023." 2023.

ARK Group DMCC. *The Syrian Conflict: A Systems Conflict Analysis.* February 2016.

Badi, Emadeddin. "Russia's Syria Playbook Finds a New Arena in Haftar's Libya." *Atlantic Council*. January 2025.

Bartu, Peter, and Maurice Ruttimann. "North-East Syria: The Good, the Bad, the Oil." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*. June 2021.

Bassam Haddad, Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian

Resistance (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Bitar, Sali. *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: The Case of ISIS in Syria and Iraq*. Edited by Uppsala University and Noha. 2015.

Boyle Espinosa, Elise, and Adam Ronan. "Rojava's 'War of Education': The Role of Education in Building a Revolutionary Political Community in North and East Syria." *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 10 (2023): 2281-2299. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2115884.

Cafarella, Jennifer, Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff, and Kenneth R. Rosen. "The Economic Future of Northeast Syria." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 23, 2021.

Camps-Febrer, Dúnia, Felip Daza, Carlos Díaz, and Nora Miralles. *Report on Surveillance and Civil Liberties in Syria.* Novact, Suds and ODHE. November 2024.

Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). *Northeast Syria Social Tensions and Stability Monitoring: April Update*. May 2021

_____ "Tribal Tribulations: Tribal Mapping and State Actor Influence in Northeastern Syria." May 6, 2019.

Daoudy, Marwa. "Water Weaponization in the Syrian Conflict: Strategies of Domination and Cooperation." *International Affairs* 96, no. 5 (2020): 1347-1366. doi:10.1093/ia/iiaa131.

European Asylum Support Office (EASO). *Syria: Actors, Country of Origin Information Report*. December 2019.

GBV AoR and UNFPA. *Voices from Syria 2024: Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview*. 2024.

Grajewski, Nicole. "Why Did Iran Allow Assad's Downfall?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. December 2024.

Global Protection Cluster. *Northeast Syria Protection Analysis Update*. July 2023.

_____ *GOS and NES Protection Analysis Update*. June 2022

Human Rights Watch. "Northeast Syria: Military Recruitment of Children Persists." October 2024.

_____ *Everything Is a Power Weapon: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria*. February 2024.

_____ "Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Disrupt Water, Electricity." October 2023.

_____ *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-Run Enclaves in Syria*. June 19, 2014.

Hussein, Dima. *A Closer Look at Tribal Identity and Tribal Structure in Syria.* Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, February 2019.

Institute for Economics and Peace. *Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*. June 2024.

International Crisis Group. "Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North Syria." *Report 236 / Middle East & North Africa*, July 2022.

_____ "The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria." Middle East Report N°190, November 2020.

Jaafari, Shirin. "Residents in Northeastern Syria React to Recent Attacks on US Bases." *The World*. March 2024.

Justice for Life*. Hate Speech in Eastern Syria*. October 2020.

Kajjo, Sirwan. "Syrian Kurds: Rising from the Ashes of Persecution." In The Syrian War: Between Justice and Political Reality, 268-286. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Kaya, Zeynep, and Matthew Whiting. "Sowing Division: Kurds in the Syrian War." *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 79-91. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/mepo.12253.

Kozhanov, Nikolay. "Russia Has Lost Prestige after the Fall of Assad, but It Has Also Been Freed from a Difficult Partner." *Chatham House*. December 2024.

Krieg, Andreas, and Jean-Marc Rickli. *Surrogate warfare: The transformation of war in the twenty-first century*. Georgetown University Press, 2019.

Lowe, Robert. "The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria." In *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East*, edited by David Romano and Mehmet Gurses, 225-246. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Marei, Fouad Gehad. 2020. “Local Coordination Committees.” In: Conflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions and Regime Change, ed. by Jonathan K. Zartman, 192-193. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC - CLIO

Menem, Aiman. *Shadow Armies 2: Foreign Mercenary Groups in Syria*. Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, 2024.

Monitoring and Information Center. *ISIS Revival After Syrian Regime Collapse.* December 2024.

Nada, Garrett, and Mary Glantz. “Iran and Russia Are the Biggest Regional Losers in Assad’s Fall.” *United States Institute of Peace*. December 12, 2024

NES Forum. *Situation Report #4: Impact of the Escalations of Hostilities in Northeast Syria on the Infrastructure and the Services*. November 20, 2024.

Netjes, Rena. “The Silent Exodus from Northeast Syria.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. March 2024.

OCHA. *Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic 2024*. February 2024.

Okuducu, İdris. “Turkey’s Anti-PKK Operation and the Development Road in Iraq Are Two Sides of the Same Coin.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. December 2024.

Savelsberg, Eva. “The Syrian-Kurdish Movements: Obstacles Rather Than Driving Forces for Democratization.” In *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria*, edited by David Romano and Mehmet Gurses, 179-199. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Siham, A. “The Role of the Syrian Business Elite in the Syrian Conflict: A Class Narrative.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 3 (2022): 433-445. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1920210.

Stein, Aaron, and Emily Burchfield. *The Future of Northeast Syria*. *Atlantic Council*. August 2019.

Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. *Report on Enforced Disappearances in Syria*. 2023.

_____ Demographic *Engineering in the course of Syria’s war*. A consequence or cause? 1962-2011. November 2022.

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ). *Statelessness in Syria: An Enduring Dilemma*. October 2022.

_____ *Between Reformist Discourse and Actual Repression: How Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Handled Idlib Protests*. September 2024.

_____ *Syria: Hate Speech Unprecedentedly Surges during Deir-ez-Zor Unrest*. November 2023

_____ *Syria: 185 Cases of Honor Killing since 2019*. November 2022.

_____ *Deir-ez-Zor: Dozens Arbitrarily Arrested during SDF’s Deterrence of Terrorism Campaign*. October 2020

Tank, Pinar. “Kurdish Women in Rojava: From Resistance to Reconstruction.” *Die Welt des Islams* 57, no. 3-4 (2017): 404-428. doi:10.1163/15700607-05734p07.

The Soufan Center. *Syria: The Humanitarian-Security Nexus*. March 2017.

True Platform, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), and Suwar Magazine. *Syria: Disinformation in the Context of Deir-ez-Zor Unrest*. November 2023.

United Nations. *Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Syria*. June 2024.

_____Our *Common Agenda: A New Agenda for Peace - Policy Brief 9.* July 2023

Van Wilgenburg, Wladimir. “The Syria Factor in Iraqi Kurdish Politics.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. April 2014.

Walther, Olivier J., and Patrick Steen Pedersen. “Rebel Fragmentation in Syria’s Civil War.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 3 (2020): 445-474. doi:10.1080/09592318.2020.172.

IX. ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 - LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

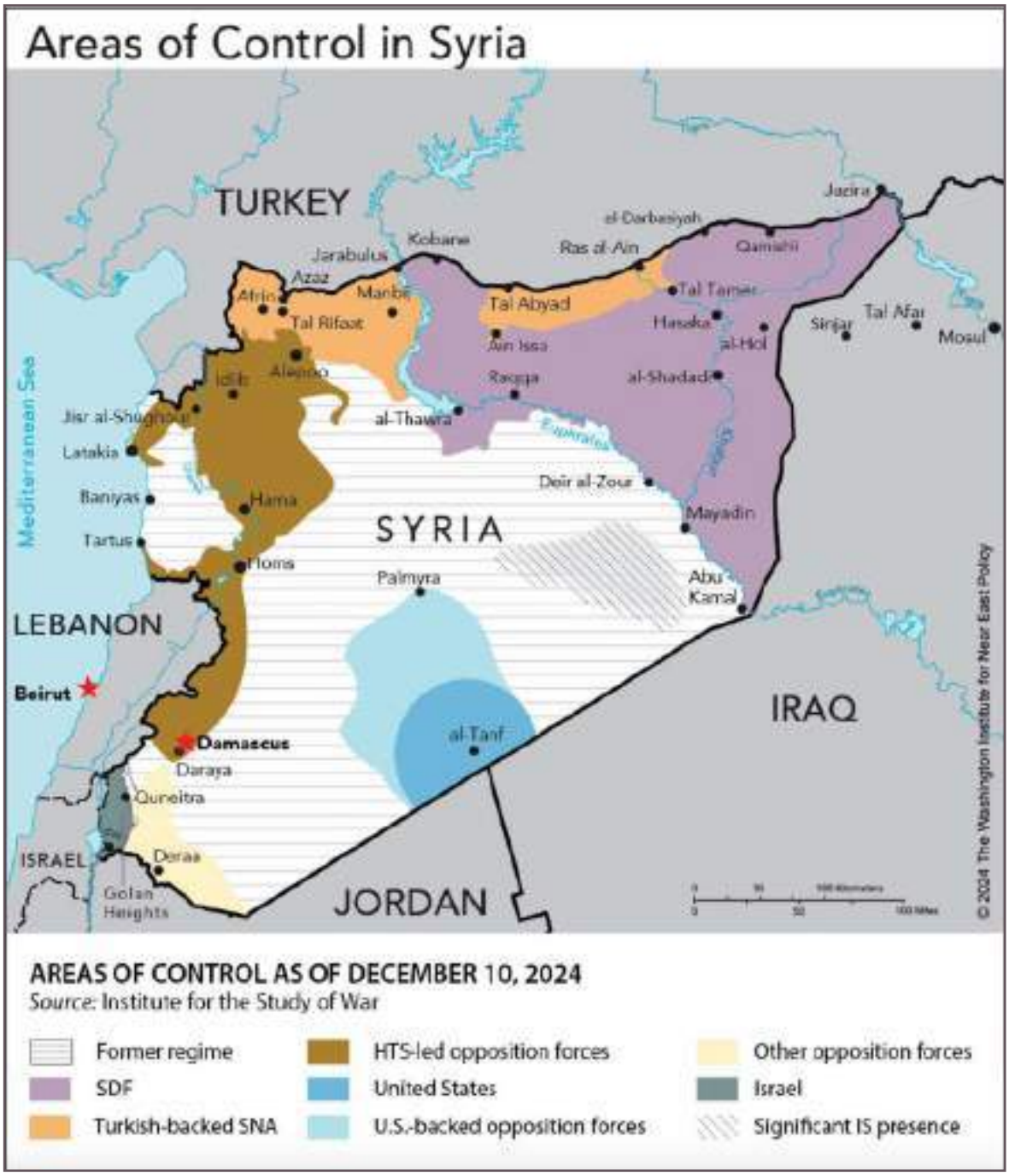
N	First and last name	Position	Organization name	City
1	Dilbirin Khalil	Co-founder and regional director	Doz international	Erbil
2	Imad Megol	Member of the People's Democratic Council at the NES	Kurdistan Democratic Party	Amuda
3	Hessein Shihadeh	Mediator and reconciliation expert	KNC	Amuda
4	Qayssar Mansour	Journalist		Qamshili
5	Nazhan Mahmud	Co-chair	Members of Notables Board in NES (DAANES)	Qamshili
6	Walad Choli	Consultant	Al-Furat think tank	Qamshili
7	Jalinos Issa	Academic and journalist		Qamshili
8	Security expert (male)			Qamshili
9	Mona Abdesalam	Director	Rose organization	Qamshili
10	Hozan Hadi	Director	Nextstep	Qamshili
11	Arya Haji	Journalist, Civil Activist, Leader. Director	Nextstory	Qamshili
12	Idris Saleh	Director	Syrian for Truth and Justice	Qamshili
13	Jano Shakir	Journalist and researcher	Syrian for Truth and Justice	Qamshili
14	Andrera Olika	Director	Sawiska Women's organization	Qamshili
15	Yara Malaka	Director	Share organization	Qamshili
16	Mizgin Mehmud	Member	Share organization	Qamshili
17	Jaber Jendo	Coordinator	Emma organization	Amuda
18	GBV expert (female)			Amuda
19	Nairuz Assad	Women's Justice Program Coordinator	Mali Jin	
20	Neda Dawood	Women's Justice Program Coordinator	Mali Jin	Amuda
21	Arzo Temmo	Board member	Sara organization	Qamshili

22	Rasha Darwish	Spokesperson	Sara organization	Qamshili
23	Randa Hamo	Director	IMPACT Organization	Qamshili
24	Abdulquddus Abbas	Religious leader		Hasaka
25	Mustafa Hassan	Civil activist, Mechanics Institute, former politician		Hasaka
26	Loseen Beaker	Youth activist		Hasaka
27	GBV expert (female)			Raqa
28	Walat Abdulrahman	Country Manager	Doz international	Raqa
29	Abdesalam Hansura	Deputy Co-Chairman	People Council Raqqa (DAANES)	Raqa
30	khazna Mohamed	Co-chair	People Council Raqqa (DAANES)	Raqa
31	Brahim Alabid	Member	People Council Raqqa (DAANES)	Raqa
32	Dania Ramada	Representative	Coordination Office of the Syrian Democratic Council.	Raqa
33	Muhamed Al Karacha	Member	Leaders Council	Raqa
34	Jihad Hassan	Co-chair	Confederation of Democratic Society Organizations in NES	Raqa
35	Firouz Jalil	Co-chair	PYD Raqqa	Raqa
36	Manaf Moussa	Co-chair	PYD Raqqa	Raqa
37	Hamza Ajaji	Volunteer	Doz international	Raqa
38	Hussein al Hussein	Chief Executive Officer	Amal al Furat organization	Raqa
39	Maziad Alharamy	Legal and social expert	Dari organization	Raqa
40	Turki Daadu	Co-chair	Green Idlib council	Raqa
41	Dima Taha	Co-chair	Green Idlib council	Raqa
42	Ahmed Hussein	Journalist		Raqa
43	Wajd al Mohammed	Civil engineer, monitoring and evaluation technician	Amal Al Furat organization	Online
44	Heysam Mislim	Journalist and founder	Media and Development organization	Kobane
45	Ahmed Shekho	Logistics Coordinator	Doz international	Kobane
46	Berivan Issa	Co-chair	Humanitarian Office Affairs (DAANES)	Kobane
47	Jamal Abdelqader	Co-chair	Humanitarian Office Affairs (DAANES)	Kobane
48	Bangin Abdullah	Director	al-Raed organization	Kobane
49	Bozhan Khalil	Co-chair	Democratic Union Party Furat canton (DAANES)	Kobane
50	Berivan Ismaeel	Co-chair	Democratic Union Party Furat canton (DAANES)	Kobane

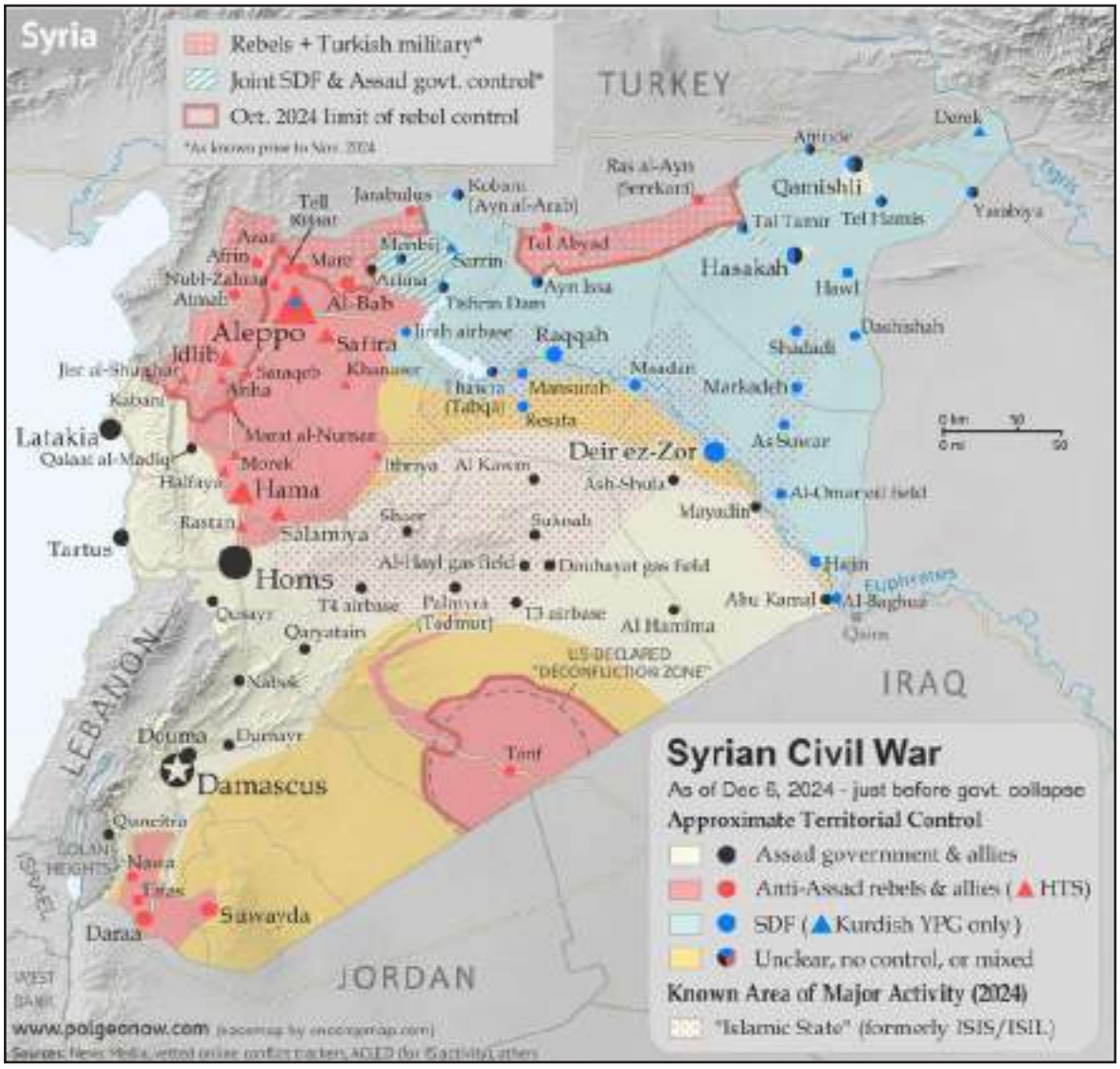
51	Yihad Naboo	Journalist		Kobane
52	Heder Mahmud	Member	Religios Counil in Furat canton (DAANES)	Kobane
53	Marwan Sheij Barkal	Chief Executive Officer	Construction Youth company	Kobane
54	Hikmat Ismet	Chief Executive Officer	Amazon company	Kobane
55	Yaser Ahmad	WASH Expert		Kobane
56	Farhan Haji Issa	Co-chair	Furat Canton Executive Council (DAANES)	Kobane
57	Mesguin Jalil	Co-chair	Furat Canton Executive Council (DAANES)	Kobane
58	Eysha Nasser	Co-chair	Energy Board (DAANES)	Kobane
59	Shirvan Muslem	Co-chair	University of Kobane	Kobane
60	Zozan Khalil	Co-chair	Water Directorate Al Furat canton (DAANES)	Kobane
61	Newruz Rasu	Journalist		Online
62	Idris Nassen	Representative	Geneva Call	Raqqa
63	Abdo Mohammed	Director	Al-Furat Organization.	Raqqa
64	Mohammed Muslem	Chairman of the Board	Zajel Organization	Raqqa
65	Mohammed al Zoba	Tribal leader	Al Jebour tribe	Hasaka
66	Bashar Muhammad	Project Coordinator	Doz international	Hasaka
67	Experta social (Mujer)	Member	Bokra Ahla organization	Hasaka
68	Sherzad Saido	Chief Executive Officer	Ashna for Development	Hasaka
69	Shiar Mohammed	Agriculture Program Coordinator	Ashna for Development	Hasaka
70	Salma Hussein	Member	Doz international	Tirbespiye
71	Shukri Ali	Member	Doz international	Tirbespiye
72	Security Coordinator in international organization (male)			Online

ANNEX 2 - MAPS

- Post-Al Assad map (December 10, 2024) - source: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy



■ Pre-fall of Al Assad map December 6th, 2024. Area of ISIS activities - source: ACLED




NOVACT
Noviolència
Nonviolence
اللاعنف