

An experiment in inclusion?

Informal peacemaking in Manbij, Syria

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Examples of informal and localised peacemaking have emerged from within the chaos of the Syrian civil war and violent reign of the Islamic State (IS), and from outside formal peace initiatives. A model of inclusive, grassroots democracy has been instituted in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which includes Manbij, an Arab-majority city. The AANES has achieved remarkable stability and prioritised women's equality. Yet challenges remain about the broader acceptance of the model by the local population, particularly in the light of inconsistencies in its ad hoc implementation and shifting regional and international power dynamics, which raise important questions over its sustainability and wider applicability. Significant tensions arise from the fact that the inclusive governance vision and model of AANES has links to particular Kurdish political movements and ideologies, notably the Democratic Unity Party (PYD).

Women's participation and representation has been a barometer for understanding and assessing the practical viability of the political system in the AANES and Manbij. This article examines the geopolitical and social context of the AANES 'experiment', and its potential as a formula both for 'inclusive stabilisation', and for sustaining peace through representative governance. A small number of interviews were conducted by the authors in Manbij in July and August 2019 to inform this article. These interviews were held through existing networks and

do not constitute a statistically relevant sample, but rather provide qualitative insights. Throughout 2019 and early 2020, the situation in North and East Syria was volatile. Extensive local research was not feasible due to security and access issues thus we also draw on secondary sources, media reporting and prior knowledge.

Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

Experimentation with autonomous governance in northern Syria predates the outbreak of the war in 2011. The withdrawal of the Syrian government from Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria in 2012 left a governance vacuum. Since then, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – known colloquially as Rojava, or 'west' in Kurdish – has been through several iterations. The Democratic Autonomous Administration was formed in 2014, expanding into the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria in 2016 and then into the AANES in September 2018 – by this time comprising six autonomous areas incorporating four million people.

The establishment of the AANES was driven by the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), which shares ideological ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. The AANES instituted an experimental governance system that had been developed by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan called Democratic Confederalism. This proposes a network of popularly elected administrative

Map 3: The civil war in northern Syria



- Arabs
- Kurds and Arabs
- Kurds
- Turkmens

This map is illustrative and does not imply the expression of an opinion on the part of Conciliation Resources concerning the delimitation of the borders of the countries and territories featured.

At the time of publication (mid-2020), the situation in north-east Syria is in flux. This map was chosen to demonstrate the ethnic demographics and the development of democratic confederalism under the auspices of the AANES, rather than military control. Up to date information on lines of control can be found at <https://syria.liveuamap.com>

councils implemented through social revolution and built on direct democracy, gender equality, multiculturalism, environmentalism, and self-defence – whereby armed forces fall under direct control of local democratic institutions.

Democratic Confederalism asserts that it eschews Kurdish nationalism in favour of a communalist notion of a 'democratic nation'. However, within broader Syrian society the administrative regime is commonly perceived to be ethnically Kurdish. The connection between the PKK and PYD deepened pre-existing social and political fractures in Kurdish areas in northern Syria. Ruptures manifested locally, between older Syrian-Kurdish political organisations and the PYD, as well as regionally, between the three main Kurdish political parties in the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union Party (PUK) in Iraq, and the PKK in Turkey.

The PYD has drawn heavily on the model of PKK organisational capacities and resources. It formed armed People's Protection Units (YPG) in response to civil unrest in 2011. Women's Protection Units (YPJ) were further established in 2013 as the conflict spread. These Kurdish forces grew to be the pre-eminent military groups within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a north-eastern military alliance established in 2015 that became the main operational partner of the 'Global Coalition' against the Islamic State (Daesh). This international military alliance helped the AANES to increase its territory and influence outside of Kurdish-majority areas. However, at the same time, the AANES' association with the PKK has meant that many international actors have kept their distance from it politically, as much of the international community classify the PKK as a terrorist organisation. The AANES has also been excluded from international peace negotiations to resolve the Syrian crisis, despite ongoing requests to send representatives to the UN-led talks and other negotiations as a major internal actor.

An experiment in grassroots democracy?

Democratic Confederalism emphasises local-level decision-making and conflict resolution, as well as political inclusion and gender equality. However, perceptions that it has to an extent been imposed in the AANES 'top down' by the PYD has created tensions and resistance in practice, including in relation to its links with the ideology of PKK leader Öcalan.

Women's representation and participation in governance and decision-making has been institutionalised at all levels in the AANES, from local neighbourhood communes to the highest-ranking officials. All leadership positions are co-chaired by one woman and one man, often from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. All representational

bodies include a quota of 40 per cent female members and 30 per cent ethno-religious minorities. A women's representational structure drafts laws, resolutions and programmes relating to women, manages safe houses for women escaping family and partner violence and develops the social science of jineology: women's perspectives on history and sociology.

The all-female YPJ allows women to hold equal rank with men. Schools and academies teach gender equality and women's rights to 'fast track' gender equality. New laws have given women rights in areas previously reserved for men, for example in relation to inheriting property, divorce, and custody of children. The Manbij Council of Women includes multiple women-only institutions, including a *Mala Jin* ('Women's House'), a women-centred economic institute and a centre for advancing jineology.

AANES institutions were implemented in response to pressing governance and service vacuums but have seen relative success in re-establishing or maintaining public services in majority-Kurdish areas, including public security. However, the reality of instituting political and cultural diversity in practice has created tensions and representational challenges in Kurdish-majority and more ethnically diverse areas.

Implementing Democratic Confederalism in practice has necessitated concessions and compromises, particularly in Arab-majority areas. Political groups that oppose governance dominated by the PYD have resisted the system's inclusion measures. For example, while new laws prohibit polygamous marriage, pre-existing arrangements are tolerated out of respect to local traditions. More broadly, Democratic Confederalism has been criticised by other Kurdish and Arab political parties for failing to extend power to communities not connected to the PYD.

Manbij – testing inclusive governance

The city of Manbij is a gateway between dislocated Kurdish majority regions of Afrin and Kobani (see Map 3: The civil war in northern Syria). It is also of strategic importance to the US, Turkey, the Syrian government, and other external actors, which have vied for influence over local factions. The town fell to Syrian rebel control in 2012, Daesh control in 2014, and then to the SDF in 2016. Arabs make up the majority in the town (approximately 80 per cent) and surrounding region, with Kurdish, Circassian and Turkmen minorities. Tribal structures remain relatively strong and have underpinned political allegiances and alliances. However, conflict has displaced several tribal and political groups with different ideological leanings, some of which view the AANES as another imposing force or entity.

Some analysts have hailed Manbij as a haven of stability established through the civil and military councils of the AANES, as well as a paragon of cross-ethnic and cross-cultural accord and cooperation. Indeed, extending the AANES outside Kurdish-majority areas necessitated broader military and political coalition-building, as well as an increase in diversity such as through the incorporation of local communities in decision-making and governance. After the SDF took control of Manbij from Daesh, arrangements between the AANES and local Arab leaders were negotiated around community needs and implementing Democratic Confederalism – although it should be noted that joining the AANES was widely seen by Manbij locals as the best of many poor options.

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Limitations of access due to insecurity and other factors make it impossible to confirm the current circumstances of the AANES conclusively. But a small set of interviews in Manbij and the wider region conducted for this article in July and August 2019 provide some insights into life in the area – again, we do not claim these are fully representative. Contrary to AANES rhetoric of multi-ethnic participation and popular support, recent analysis by organisations like the Washington Institute suggest that the SDF tightly controls institutions, and that Arabs are in fact discriminated against, while anti-YPG and anti-Kurdish sentiment appears to have stimulated support for Syrian government return.

Our interviews reveal institutional bias in favour of supporters for Democratic Confederalism in several areas. Proportional representation was not fully applied in Manbij, while the Arab-majority Military Council is headed by two Kurds and two Arabs, all men, with an additional two female Kurdish advisors. A quota system for including women was implemented to some degree, with women present in each governing body – and sometimes outnumbering men. Yet ethnicity still influences divisions of power, with numerous sources suggesting that key positions are held by Kurds despite the Administration’s emphasis on inclusion, equality, and ethnoreligious diversity. One interviewee lamented the difficulties of operationalising inclusion and stated: ‘Raising glamorous slogans, local and international forums can only bear fruit if coupled with practical application on the ground’. Another commented that ‘Leadership positions are [reserved for] Kurds while administrative ones are for Arabs’.

A Kurdish official claimed that ‘all the [women’s] committees and institutions have their own programmes and projects and include all women from all components of the society of Manbij without exception’. Nonetheless, Arab women in military roles are often employed in comparatively modest positions such as checkpoint guards, or traffic or general administration. PYD and YPG influence over decision-making feeds perceptions that these institutions are led by Kurds and are implementing ‘Kurdish’ ideas, including Democratic Confederalism, regardless of egalitarian rhetoric, local adaptation, or the plurality of ideas within the Kurdish polity.

Women’s inclusion in public life

Implementing institutional mechanisms for women’s inclusion has in some instances been difficult, for example challenging deeply ingrained traditional inequalities and raising some men’s fears of ‘losing out’. Women are supported through empowerment processes and education, encouraging them to occupy non-traditional roles. One Arab male interviewee, the director of a teacher training institute, acknowledged that the traditional way of life for Arabs in Manbij prevented women from participating in many areas of life due to early marriage, stringent gender roles and limited educational opportunities.

There have been tensions between Arab men and Kurdish women in the public sphere, such as where Kurdish women have been employed or promoted over Arab men with better qualifications. Arab women who are willing to join the workforce also receive support, which many Arab men see as a slight against them, their culture, and traditions. Implementing such a system of ‘fast tracking’ gender equality may be more acceptable if accompanied by non-discriminatory power sharing. Women’s inclusion in military life provides remarkable parity with men in a traditionally male-dominated sector, while Kurdish women’s initiatives continue to reach out to Arab women. For example, one Arab woman interviewee lauded AANES institutions as providing safety, shelter, and positivity for women, saying that they were effective in promulgating and enacting laws that sponsor and regulate women’s freedoms.

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Arab discontent and complaints of PYD and YPG domination are rife. But local resistance to the AANES has not significantly challenged its rule. There may be a few explanations for this: coincidence of interests in preventing Turkish inroads into the area; the radical Islamic orientation

of many Turkish-backed forces; or the political orientation of the tribal groupings involved in existing local governance. Also, many Manbij residents have welcomed the security and stability that SDF control has brought, especially when supported by the US. It remains to be seen whether this short-term relative stability can evolve into transformative and sustainable peace for all.

International involvement and the fall of Islamic State

US military support to the SDF facilitated the development of the AANES and deterred other international actors from seeking control there. This all changed with the fall of Daesh in March 2019 and the sudden withdrawal of US troops in October 2019: Turkey saw the opportunity to move against the perceived PKK threat in the area; and Syrian and Russian forces were increasingly deployed within SDF-controlled areas. The AANES was forced to prioritise self-defence, which curbed some ethnic tensions.

Military groups pledged in 2016 to remain under the SDF umbrella, to continue the fight against Daesh and resistance to Turkish incursions. Following agreements with the SDF in December 2018 and October 2019, the Syrian Army was deployed to the periphery of Manbij as a buffer against Turkish and other hostile forces. The incursion of Turkish and Syrian government forces has undermined advances by the AANES, which might result in a concomitant roll-back of women's rights in the area. PYD and YPJ forces may relinquish power to the Syrian government or its loyal local tribes, although the extent to which Damascus will be able to extend authority into northern Syria remains unclear. The most recent relevant UN Security Council Resolution was agreed in January 2020 (Resolution 2504). This limited humanitarian assistance border crossings from the previously agreed four points located in Jordan, Iraq and Turkey to just two points in Turkey, with requirements for permission from Damascus, and has resulted in significant diminution in humanitarian assistance funding and further increased pressure on the AANES.

Conclusions and recommendations

The AANES in northern Syria shows many encouraging signs of informal and inclusive peacebuilding in a highly volatile situation – outside of any formal talks to end

the war or to map out a peaceful future for the country. The institutionalisation of women's representation at all levels of local governance is a remarkable example of mainstreaming gender equality, which has enabled Syrian women from a range of backgrounds to participate more meaningfully in public life. In Manbij, solidarity among local leaders against Daesh and Turkey coincided with the ambitions of YPG/SDF. Women's inclusion in early phases of local institution-building and policy implementation demonstrated a level of acceptance in some quarters, despite cultural, ethnic, and religious disparities.

However, inconsistencies in the realisation of the AANES and the ideologies that underpin it have also caused friction. The rhetoric of inclusion has not materialised equitably for all communities and identities. The ideological hegemony of the PYD and YPG and the entanglement of women's rights with the complexities of Democratic Confederalism in practice have increased ethnocultural and political tensions. Women's equal participation and representation has come up against cultural resistance to change in a largely conservative and semi-tribal society.

These contradictions raise questions about how parties to conflict, practitioners and policymakers can facilitate inclusive peace in northern Syria without exacerbating power inequalities. The international community and practitioners in Syria nationally and in local affairs have significant roles in promoting meaningful and complex inclusion. In the case of Manbij, as elsewhere, obvious disparities in distribution of power exist and international alignments contribute to these. The contribution of outside powers' and actors' policies to creating uneven distributions of power and to increasing local tensions along ethnic and religious lines must be considered. As the region enters yet another new phase in the Covid-19 era, a critical step towards international support for stability and peace could lie in the reopening of border crossings for humanitarian assistance not contingent on Turkish or Syrian regime permission, providing a pathway for essential humanitarian medical equipment and assistance that will prove crucial, as yet another threat looms over the Syrian people.

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