EVOLUTION OF THE KURDISH FORCES IN SYRIA

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The Kurdish question in Syria stands apart from the multiple conflicts and social struggles that have defined the country's turbulent modern history. Among all the ethnic and political issues in Syria, the Kurdish story stands out as one of systemic denial, quiet resilience, and transformation.

For decades, the Assad regime had denied citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds and removed them from the legal fabric of the state. Stateless and marginalized, they faced cultural suppression, economic exclusion, and lived with a shadow identity in a nation that refused to recognize their existence. Its suppression was coupled with government crackdowns that denied the Kurdish people basic rights to education and healthcare, let alone representation in the political arena.

With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, a political and security vacuum was created that allowed Kurdish groups not only to reclaim their space but also to redefine their identity and governance. The Kurdish journey throughout the war, marked by the emergence of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), reflects the resilience of Syria's Kurds and the transformative power of their political ideology and democratic confederalism. What had long been a fractured community grew into a model of decentralized governance, gender equality, and pluralistic coexistence.

Understanding the trajectory of the Kurdish struggle in Syria allows comprehending the broader dynamics of the region. The Kurds of Syria have managed to instill a haven of progressive governance against armed outrage and sectarian strife, the dominant paradigm underpinning so much of Syrian history. Its fragility persists, threatened by geopolitics, economic strangulation, and nameless international status today.

The Kurdish question in Syria demands attention not only for its historical significance but also for its potential to shape the future of one of the world's most volatile regions. By tracing the historical roots of the Kurdish movement and examining the ideological and operational differences among its key actors—the PKK, PYD, and SDF—this article attempts to explain the complexities of Syria's Kurdish question.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) Syrian journey began in 1980, amidst a harsh crackdown on Kurdish and far-left movements in Turkey following Kenan Evren's military coup. It was from Hafez al Assad, then - leader of Syria - that the group sought asylum. This arrangement came with strings attached. The PKK pledged it wouldn't mobilize Syria's Kurds and would base operations in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. There, they allied with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and fought against Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

While the PKK refrained from mobilizing Syrian Kurds directly, it succeeded in organizing them through networks and cells. In 1998, the PKK was pushed out of Syria under pressure from Turkey,

yet the party left behind a base of Syrian Kurdish cadres. This network became instrumental in shaping the later emergence of the PYD. Over time, the PKK's presence in Syria evolved from being merely a safe haven to a breeding ground for broader Kurdish political aspirations.

The PKK's transformation in the 1990s, particularly after Abdullah Öcalan's capture and imprisonment in 1999, marked a significant ideological shift. Öcalan transformed the PKK from Marxism-Leninism into democratic confederalism— a vision rejecting nation-states in favor of local self-governance. The new ideology championed gender equality, ecological sustainability, and grass-roots democracy, making the PKK atypical compared to any traditional nationalist movement.



This shift also influenced the Kurdish diaspora, laying the groundwork for the PYD and its

governance model in Syria. The PKK's embrace of decentralization and gender equality had a profound impact on subsequent Kurdish movements, making it a cornerstone of their identity.

In 2004, an already existing stay-behind network was used in founding the PYD against state-led violence committed against Syrian Kurds. In the course of the Syrian Civil War, the PYD developed an increasingly distinct existence of its own from the PKK. While most Kurdish groups joined the Arab rebels, the PYD took a "third path," in opposition to both the Assad regime and the Islamist rebels. The withdrawal of Syrian government troops from Kurdish areas in 2012 allowed the PYD to consolidate control and develop governance structures that would grow into what came to be known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).The Syrian Civil War finally gave the PYD a way to put its dream of democratic confederalism into practice: building up a pluralist, inclusive society via local councils and communes. That ambition was, however, to immediately run afoul of a few significant obstacles: the competition of other Kurdish factions and tension with the Arab populations of the areas that it liberated.

As the PYD started assuming governance responsibilities, the organization developed its own financial resources, military capabilities, and political legitimacy. The emerging autonomy climaxed into several failed attempts by the PKK to reassert control. This was resisted by such leaders as Mazloum Abdi, further solidifying the independence of PYD. By the mid-2010s, ideological and operational links between the PKK and PYD had significantly weakened, despite their shared commitment to democratic confederalism.

The PYD's military wing, the YPG, played a key role in the fight against ISIS. In 2015, the YPG joined forces with other ethnic and tribal groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Backed by the United States, the SDF expanded its recruitment and established a unified command structure. The SDF's diverse membership reflected its commitment to inclusivity. Among its ranks was the Martyr Nubar Ozanyan Brigade, named after a Turkish Armenian military commander, highlighting the group's pluralistic ethos.

Despite its successes, the SDF has had to deal with animosity from Turkey over its alleged links to the PKK, limited international recognition, and the partial withdrawal of US forces from Syria in 2019. This withdrawal placed the organization between Turkish incursions and an uneasy accommodation with the Assad regime.

The Turkish government's identification of the PYD and SDF with the PKK drives its aggression against northern Syria. History links the factions, but the PYD and SDF operate in an operationally and ideologically independent way from the PKK. AANES has constantly distanced itself from the operations of the PKK, emphasizing local issues and governance.

The AANES faces additional challenges in achieving international acceptance and sustainability of its governance approach. Economic problems, security threats, and political isolation weigh on its future. The AANES still advocates a decentralized, pluralistic solution to Syria's dilemma.

The PKK, PYD, and SDF are examples of Kurdish political movements' extensive adaptation process. All three entities illustrate complex questions of identity, autonomy, and authority in a conflict-torn environment. How well the SDF answers these complex tests from local and international issues will probably determine the viability of its governance model.

As the SDF undergoes the trials of governance and legitimacy, its transformation bears the prospect of peace and inclusivity for one of the world's most turbulent regions. Its story underlines at least one very important fact: if such movements are to be understood, it is not only essential to trace their historical and ideological roots but also keep in mind their changeability and adaptability. The future of the Middle East is uncertain, but what remains assured is that among those forging it are the PKK, the PYD, and the SDF.

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