

# Syrian Kurds as a Proto-State Actor: From the Insurgent State to Democratic Confederalism<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** It is estimated that the self-proclaimed Kurdish autonomy in Northeastern Syria accounts for one-third of the country's territory, and, despite its unrecognized status, it appears to be one of the key players in the Syrian peace settlement and, at the same time, a political hostage to the situation that has developed in Syria as a result of the Civil War. The present article explores the formation of the self-proclaimed autonomy in Northeastern Syria (Rojava, Syrian Kurdistan, the Federation of North-Eastern Syria, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [AANES]) and puts forward the thesis of Rojava's emergence as an insurgent state. The first part of the study analyses its political system through the concept of proto-state actors for the Kurdish Self-Defence Forces (YPG) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Due to the inclusiveness of the Kurdish Self-Defence Forces, Kurdish non-state actors (PYD-YPG) have acquired the features of a proto-state, going beyond the definition of the "Syrian wing" of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The article focuses on the complex and diversified ethnic composition of the local population within the boundaries of the de facto autonomy. This is manifested in the presence of various political actors and movements, including those based on ethnic particularism. It is concluded that such a political structure is fragile due to the interethnic contradictions between the Kurds and the Arabs in the region.

**Keywords:** Syria; Syrian Kurdistan; Rojava; democratic confederalism; Federation of North and East Syria; Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; proto-state; YPG.

In the analytical and journalistic literature, the the Autonomous Administration of North-Eastern Syria (AANES) is often referred to as "Rojava" (Kurdish for "West," "Western Kurdistan" or "West Kurdistan").<sup>2</sup> We are talking about the following ter-

<sup>1</sup> English translation from the Russian text: Vertyaev K. 2021. Siriyskiye kurdy kak protogosudarstvennyy sub'yekt ot povstancheskogo gosudarstva k demokraticeskomu konfederalizmu. *Mezhdunarodnyye protsessy [International trends]*. 19(3). P. 22-42. <https://doi.org/10.17994/IT.2021.19.3.66.8>.

<sup>2</sup> In the Kurdish regions of the Middle East, they more often use the term "Western Kurdistan," although geographically Rojava rather refers to the southwest of Kurdistan. It would be more correct to use the term "Syrian Kurdistan," but the

ritories: the northern parts of the Syrian Trans-Euphrates, the self-proclaimed cantons of Cizre and Kobane, the Afrin Region occupied (at the time of writing) by Turkey, and the border rectangle stretching from Tell Abyad east to Ras al-Ayn, or Serekaniye. A large part of the Kurds living in the Kurdish enclaves of Aleppo city also consider themselves part of Rojava. The political structure of Rojava can be described as a practically implemented concept of alternative statehood (and even “anti-statehood”), built on the left-libertarian principles of exercising power “from below,” as well as control over natural resources within the framework of the emerging proto-state (Steiner 2009: 1–8). Scientific interest in this political phenomenon stems from the possible impact of the very existence of Rojava (at the time of writing, AANES) and the sociopolitical model implemented there on the further arrangement of Syria and the balance of political forces both in the country itself and in the region as a whole. Understanding the causes and mechanisms of the formation of proto-statehood in the north-east of Syria is essential both from the point of view of forecasting the development of interrelations and conflicts between the Syrian center and the Kurdish periphery, and as a kind of mold for the emergence in modern societies of proto-states with specific features that distinguish them from traditional and *de facto* political formations of pre-state type that possess sovereignty.

The interest is also due to the existing scientific consensus that in the modern world the phenomenon of proto-statehood is objectively found in various societies and at various stages of formation. The term “proto-state” usually refers to a political entity that is not a fully institutionalized and/or sovereign state (Szekely 2016). In turn, the state is understood as “a legally formalized and institutionally organized activity to exercise the powers of the supreme authority, aimed at meeting the needs of the members of society that they themselves cannot fully satisfy through private initiative” (Lyubashits, Razuvayev 2018: 52). In this definition, we can clearly see a reliance on communalism as a hallmark of statehood. The phenomenon can also be considered in terms of the theory of stateness. In the latter case, the state must have the organizational capacity to mobilize resources (including military resources), maintain internal order, and possess the instruments of regulatory intervention in the economic and social spheres (Bartolini 2005). If we look at Rojava in a general theoretical sense, the relevant question is also whether this polity (just as, for example, ancient Athens or Roman *civitas*) is a proto-state, or whether it represents a special type of stateless communities.

The genealogical approach to studying the balance of power, practices and strategies implemented both in Rojava and in the entire Kurdish political space of the Middle East (the main characteristics of which are an internal propensity for conflict and weak institutionalization), seems preferable here. According to Anthony Giddens’

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self-proclaimed autonomy, whose borders run almost along the entire Euphrates River, also controls Arab tribal areas. Therefore, the use of the term “Trans-Euphrates” seems most appropriate.

structuration theory, such polities can be approached as “institutional clusters,” where sociologists and political scientists interpret the social world that has already been interpreted by the agents who inhabit it [Giddens 2005]. Identifying the agents of such a cluster is one of the objectives of this article. To what extent can Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan or, geographically more broadly, AANES) be positioned within the theoretical characteristics of proto-statehood? This identification is influenced by globalization processes, the participation of external actors in the Syrian settlement, their donor assistance, relations with Damascus in the broadest sense, as well as the variability of theoretical approaches to the definition of statehood and its practical implementation in the modern world.

### **The Phenomenon of Rojava: Scientific Interpretations**

The Rojava phenomenon remains understudied, with the exception of Thomas Schmidinger’s voluminous field study, which contains a detailed analysis of the structure of power in this entity and the ways in which it is exercised (Schmidinger 2018). The topic is also touched upon in Sinan Hatahet’s article “The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.”<sup>3</sup> Much of literature on Rojava is descriptive, based on field research, observations, and interviews with local officials and representatives of various political forces. Some analysts are politically biased and focused on the demands of external players (the United States, Turkey, Russia, Iran). Of particular interest for understanding the power structure in Rojava are the materials collected by Human Rights Watch on human rights abuses in the region.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, understanding the nature of Rojava as a political phenomenon is impossible without studying the works of the functionaries and leaders of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), whose political philosophy formed the basis of the socio-political communal model of “statelessness” (Flach, Ayboğa, Knapp 2016: 14–24; Öcalan 2011; 2014).

As Russian researchers observe, some political theorists still hold the erroneous view that any non-state form of a political entity must be considered pre-state, believing that in the process of development it inevitably transforms into a state. This approach proceeds from the presumption that the most underdeveloped state is more complex than any non-state society, and that political relations only arise with the emergence of the state (Grinin, Korotayev 2009: 429–469). According to Leonid Vasilyev, such theories failed to explain where and why these large organizational structures emerged, without which it was impossible to wage successful wars, leading to

<sup>3</sup> Hatahet S. 2019. The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. European University Institut. URL: <https://op.europa.eu/s/prKS> (accessed: 12.07.2021).

<sup>4</sup> Under Kurdish Rule. Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria. Human Rights Watch. 2014. June 19. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria> (accessed: 19.07.2021).

the expansion of the territories (Vasilyev 1983: 33–34). In parallel with internationally recognized states, there are polities that cannot be classified as pre-state by their level of development. It can be concluded that proto-states are complex political organizations with the attributes of a state, which may or may not eventually become a full-fledged state.

In the context of the alignment and balance of political forces in the Near and Middle East, it is of interest to analyse the political nature of Rojava as an embodiment of the rebel state model (McColl 1969). The rebel state described by McColl has the characteristics of a proto-state, and such political entities are often formed as a result of unconstitutional seizures of territory by rebel groups that assume the functions of local government (for example, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, banned in the Russian Federation), quasi-government ( Hamas) and even claim to build their own state (like Islamic State, banned in the Russian Federation). Such political formations rely on compactly settled and politically mobilized ethnic and religious groups. Most of these proto-states, based on ethnic or other particularism, are short-lived, for example Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka (1983–2009), the Tuareg state of Azawad in Mali (2012–2013), and others.

These cases provide examples of political actors based on ethnic or other particularism, representing atavistic echoes of national liberation movements whose victorious march across the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries legitimized the established proto-states with historical experience of quasi-statehood (e.g., early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Uruguay, or Zimbabwe-Rhodesia). Today's "people's/national self-defence forces" in the Middle East are rapidly acquiring the characteristics of pro-state actors, whose actions lead to the emergence of new quasi-states.<sup>5</sup> They not so much seek to acquire the status of internationally recognized, independent states, as they seek to be accepted as having some degree of autonomy as "sovereign enclaves." Such a model is in demand in countries of the enclave-conglomerate type, as Syria appears to be at present. In such societies, individual groups are able to resist the unifying influence of the environment due to a high level of organization (Bogaturov, Vinogradov 2002: 9). Enclaves are formed by ethnic (cultural-linguistic or confessional) groups with high internal mobilization identities that reject the legitimacy of the ruling regime. They form a space where the group can live according to its own laws and social norms (Szekely 2016: 77).

According to the Marxist interpretation, a proto-state is formed by the self-development of a social organization, often taking the form of a military democracy. A military democracy is a horizontal political structure involving three non-subor-

<sup>5</sup> Here we should mention the differences in the definitions of proto-statehood and quasi-statehood, at least in the Russian-language literature. Despite the fact that the prefix "quasi" means "pseudo," there are different interpretations of this term in English and Russian (English: "proto-state"). Due to some historical traditions in Russian-language works, the prefix "quasi" had (and sometimes still has) pejorative connotations rooted, most likely, in the tradition of Soviet times, when this term meant pseudo-state formations without any substantive (i.e. pronounced national) or political justification, artificially created by obvious or imaginary geopolitical opponents, the bearers of another national or class ideology (for example, non-recognition by the USSR and the United States of the African Rhodesia ["quasi-state"]). For more detail, see: (Lukichev, Skorik 1994: 132).

dinate governing bodies: a leader, a council, and a people's assembly. In the scientific literature, military democracy is often contrasted with the sociopolitical structure of the proto-state called chiefdom (Vasilyev 1980: 157–175). Developing Carneiro's ideas (Carneiro 1981: 37–79), Leonid Vasilyev wrote: "Chiefdom (from the English 'chief') is an intermediate stage in the process of political integration from pre-state forms to the state and therefore is a universal phenomenon known both to farmers and nomads (who did not go beyond this stage), which is typical for both ancient and modern peoples" (Vasilyev 1983: 32).

In chiefdoms (a striking example of which is Iraqi Kurdistan, or, to be more precise, the two political and territorial elements that constitute it, united around the Barzani and Talabani clans, which also have proto-state characteristics), the hierarchy of settlements, their centralization, the stratification of society, the internal power structure characteristic of proto-states, and the stratification of elites into ruling and military classes are clearly visible. In the case of chiefdoms, there is also a tendency to sacralize the person of the supreme ruler, while in a military democracy, there may be expressions of disagreement with the decisions and actions of the leader. In Syrian Kurdistan, under the control of forces affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, this very element of classical chiefdom is in place – the sacralization of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader and founder of the PKK, who has been in a Turkish prison since 1999. In this case, the element of exaltation, the exclusivity of one's own figure is also present in Öcalan's works themselves (Öcalan 2014: 15–17).

Indeed, in the East proto-states have often been supported by the charisma and authority of their leaders, but they would quickly lose their mobilization potential if the leader was removed or died. Another appropriate example is the Free Lebanon State (1979–1984), self-proclaimed during the Civil War, and which ceased to exist *de facto* after the death of its leader Saad Haddad, a Maronite Christian. Some other examples of chiefdoms in Kurdish history include the Milli Confederation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Kingdom of Kurdistan, with its capital in Sulaymaniyah (1922–1924), and the Republic of Mahabad (1946). The emergence and gradual sovereignization of proto-states, that is, their transformation into national or conglomerate, complex entities, depends on the concurrence of various circumstances.

According to the Russian researcher Tatiana Kashanina, the necessary condition for proto-statehood is the ability to produce an amount of a product that is not only sufficient to meet one's own needs, but also leaves a surplus for exchange with the external environment (Kashanina 2004: 44–45). Rojava has the appropriate material base: the northern and eastern parts of Syria are rich in wheat and other crops, being the "breadbasket" of the whole country. The northeastern and southern regions of the autonomy, near Deir ez-Zor (Khsham, Al Tabiya), contain large oil reserves (given that Syria is not rich in hydrocarbons). As of the early 2020s, all of these resources were

under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the United States. Oil sales account for approximately 60% of the autonomy's revenues, with oil transported by various routes, including through Damascus-controlled territories.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of interpretations of proto-statehood, various categories are used to explain the political nature of such political entities. In the case of Rojava, the predominantly pre-industrial character of economic life keeps society at the stage of proto-statehood, while the Kurds' historical memory also preserves the image of an independent social organism with signs of political sovereignty. In the case of Rojava (or Syrian Kurdistan), the categories of contested statehood, typical, for example, of Kosovo (Weller 2009: 8), do not apply, since the self-proclaimed autonomy is not currently contesting the territorial integrity of Syria: rather, this is a territory with incomplete governance, where the Syrian state performs only part of its functions, or a region with abdicated governance, where the state leaves part of its responsibilities to local groups and elites (as in Iraqi Kurdistan or some border areas of Saudi Arabia).<sup>7</sup> We can also use here the term "parallel statehood," which, in fact, implies the transformation of Syria into a conglomerate society.

A non-state actor, originally formed on the basis of ethno-confessional particularism, is often represented by a pair of related institutions: a self-defence force and a political organization. Such structures are defined as "non-sovereign entities that wield substantial economic, political, or social power and influence at the national, and in some cases international, level" (The Middle East in a Changing Global Context 2018: 301). Despite their political differences, they can interact with the central government, including within the framework of consociational democracy, by participating in elections and even by attending parliament meetings, as can be clearly seen in the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Non-state actors can perform other functions, challenging the authority and legitimacy of the state within which they exist. These are, in particular, military functions (self-defence, territorial control), border control, and the distribution of external donor aid. Most often, such functions become more relevant in war-time or civil war conditions. Although non-state actors possess many of the characteristics of a state, they lack recognition as a legitimate government, even if they are not capable of governing the territory they claim (Mampilly 2011: 112). Groups based on a common identity and social affiliation tend to form coalitions to contain a common enemy. Such alliances often remain fragile and, at the first opportunity, disintegrate to form a smaller but more cohesive and effective coalition (The Middle East in a Changing Global Context 2018: 307).

<sup>6</sup> In April 2021, the administration of the autonomy sent 200 oil trucks to the refinery in Homs. For more detail, see: Bartu P., Ruttimann M. North East Syria: The Good, the bad and the Oil. Australian Institute of International Affairs. June 8. 2021. URL: <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/north-east-syria-the-good-the-bad-the-oil/> (accessed: 19.07.2021)

<sup>7</sup> For more detail, see: (Popov 2011).



Sustainability appears to be one of the main features of proto-statehood, where a society within a proto-state acquires the elements of political centralization and acts, in the case of Syria, in the form of an alternative anti-state that challenges the omnipotence of the central government's state elites. This process helps to unite a number of territories around a single center, which sometimes initially has no political significance. The attraction to it is due to linguistic, religious, ethnic and even blood ties, similar lifestyles and customs, as well as geographic proximity.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, there is no such center within the democratic confederalism of the Syrian Kurds due to the formation of a proto-state in which the ethnically diverse population is consolidated not only through expansion or the presence of an external enemy, but also through donor assistance from the United States.<sup>9</sup> There is neither province nor periphery here, for each territorial corporation, united around local councils, considers itself a subject of the union, independent within its boundaries. The common political space is maintained through military or other pressure (in the case of Syrian Kurdistan, by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party, PYD, and the People's Protection Units, YPG, as a political and military organization claiming to be the unifying center of this social entity). In such political formations, power often has a charismatic, and later a traditional (traditionally legitimized) character, when the very observance of the rule of law is conditioned by tradition.<sup>10</sup>

While the abstract commonality of territory is often unstable and the very nature of the entities that form a territorial proto-state does not contribute to their consolidation, a proto-state entity is characterized by a certain level of consolidation, which is largely characteristic of both the Syrian Kurdish self-defense forces (Kurdish YPG: Yekineyen Parastina Gel) and the political forces of the AANES organized on the principles of democratic federalism (the Democratic Union Party, PYD), acting as the organizational and mobilizing center of the proto-state entity, as was mentioned above. In essence, a self-proclaimed polyethnic conglomerate that attempts to replace both the nation-state as a whole and a specific political system in particular is a universal structure, which can include supranational organizations, proto-state formations, anti-system actors of a supra-state type and of the type alternative to the state (Naumkin, Kuznetsov 2020: 109).

Professor Ora Szekeley defines proto-state actors as non-state organizations that have assumed many functions of the state in a given territory and build external relations independently of that state, challenging its legitimacy in that territory. The state

<sup>8</sup> Lukichev P.N., Skorik A.P. Quasi-Statehood: Historical and Theoretical Concept, 20 Years Later. Commentary on the Previously Published Concept. 2013. URL: <https://www.npi-tu.ru/index.php?id=2028> (accessed: 10.05.2021).

<sup>9</sup> The formal recipient of aid from the three main and traditional donors (the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom) is Syria. These countries, having refused to cooperate with the Assad regime, provide aid directly to territories controlled by the opposition. Syria receives donor aid from 30 countries (Bartenev 2018: 26).

<sup>10</sup> Lukichev P.N., Skorik A.P. Quasi-Statehood: Historical and Theoretical Concept, 20 Years Later. Commentary on the Previously Published Concept. 2013. URL: <https://www.npi-tu.ru/index.php?id=2028> (accessed: 10.05.2021).

functions they claim include a wide range of tasks, the most obvious of which remains military (defense), where the presence of an armed militia clearly challenges the central government, the Weberian standard of state sovereignty, and the monopoly on the legitimate use of force (Szekely 2016: 75). The armed units of some proto-state actors are comparable in size and equipment with the armies of small states, or even surpass them. An important distinction between pro-state actors and ordinary local militias is that the former also perform a number of non-military functions, such as maintaining infrastructure, providing education and medical care, and regulating traffic (Flanigan 2009: 114). They can have an effective bureaucracy and strong administrative capacity, sometimes competing with the agents of the state whose authority they seek to displace, as is evident in both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan (Stansfield 2013: 60).

Many pro-state actors have developed effective diplomatic activities: for example, the Palestine Liberation Organization was represented at the UN General Assembly. In this sense, a good example is the international voyage of former PYD co-chair Salih Muslim in 2013–2015 in search of potential partners for a political alliance. In addition, local elites used their improved ties with Damascus to put pressure on outside actors such as the United States, which did not prevent Turkish troops and their Turkoman proxies from seizing the Afrin Region in Syria, which was part of Rojava.<sup>11</sup> Pro-state actors build their foreign policies in response to regional dynamics (in this case, determined by the negative effects of the Arab Spring), as well as in response to the demands of public opinion within the entity itself. The position of an adversary state is also relevant to this study, because Turkey appears to be just this adversary for the Syrian Kurdish autonomy under the control of the PYD–YPG, while it is not an adversary for the US-initiated Syrian Democratic Forces, which includes the YPG.

When it comes to other proto-state actors in the Middle East, such as Hamas or Hezbollah, the foreign policy decisions they made in the context of the Arab Spring (a series of uprisings in Arab countries in 2011), which led to a change of several political regimes, the “chaotic aftermath” of which “unavoidably triggered a debate on whether the current borders in the Middle East are still tenable now that the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya seem to have irreparably damaged relations between minorities, tribes and regions which not so long ago lived relatively peacefully together” (Kwarten 2020: 235). This indicates that they are guided not only by the imperatives of fighting for national or religious rights, but also by seeking pragmatic responses to political pressure from the outside. Thus, against the backdrop of worsening relations with Israel in 2021, these political actors pursue their foreign policy in much the same way as states.

<sup>11</sup> Gurbuz M. False Hopes? Prospects for Political Inclusion in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. Issue Brief. May 9, 2018. URL: <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/sites/default/files/2018-10/import/cme-pub-carnegie-gurbuz-101818.pdf> (accessed: 05.05.2021)



Based on the previous analysis of proto-state entities, the theory of an insurgent state coined by Robert McColl in 1969 is still relevant in the case of Syrian Kurdistan. Referring to the radical nature of the socio-economic and political transformations taking place in Syrian Kurdistan, including the establishment of a people's political government and the granting of maximum rights to women, many researchers label them as revolutionary (Life without a State: The Revolution in Kurdistan. 2017: 117). By contrast, McColl argued that revolution seeks to increase the territories under its control, which becomes a "territorial imperative." He pointed out that during the Cold War, the main tactic employed by national revolutions was the creation of an anti-state (an insurgent state) that competed with the very *raison d'être* of the internationally recognized state. This kind of entity establishes control over the territory and the population, in particular through the creation of its own army, and the registration of territory and administrative units. In this regard, it would be wise to consider national revolutions as a process of formation of a territorial-political entity on politically hostile territory. McColl views these phases from a geographical perspective, suggesting that "each stage actually represents the evolution of an insurgent state and its ability to increase the area under its political and military control" (McColl 1969: 619).

The scheme of traditional insurgent groups was used by the rebellious Iraqi Kurds in the 1960s, as has been deployed by the supporters of Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey since 1984, when the establishment of control over the territory and the creation of an insurgent state were declared the goals of the armed struggle. For example, in his research on the Iraqi Kurds, Gareth Stansfield refers to the works of Mao Zedong, where this staged tactic was defined through the scheme conflict – parity – counteroffensive – mobile war – regular war (Stansfield 2003: 21). It is precisely this phased pattern of the armed struggle against the Turkish state that was outlined at the fourth congress of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in 1990 – namely, the creation of strategic points on "liberated territory" with the transformation of mobile war into a positional one (Vertyaev 2007: 51). The subsequent mainstreaming of the Kurdish factor in Syria as a result of the Civil War and the fragmentation of the Kurdish proto-state here led to the flow of Kurdish insurgents and PKK personnel from Turkey to Syria, given the close links between Turkish and Syrian Kurds who speak the same Kurdish dialect – Kurmanji.

The creation of an insurgent state has a number of requirements and values for the national liberation movement. *First*, it is a refuge for its leaders in order to continue the struggle and achieve the goals of the national liberation movement, including in terms of human and material resources, creating an aura of legitimacy for its followers (McColl 1969: 614). Although in theory the goal of an insurgent state is the gradual establishment of full control over territory and the displacement or replacement of central authority, according to McColl's view, the 1969 national liberation movements of his day used the creation of a territorially based anti-state (insurgent state) within another state as their primary tactic. This mechanism involves the creation of territorial units that compete with all or many attributes of any legitimate state, and its quasi-

statehood, from the perspective of the elites of such a political entity, is expressed in the control of territory and population, including the creation of its own territorial and administrative units, as well as its own guerrilla army.

Since 2012, the core of the rebel command in Rojava (AANES) has been made up of supporters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party mobilized around the PYD. The political doctrine of this movement from its emergence in 1978 until the beginning of the 21st century was focused on the creation of an insurgent state – a political entity with all the attributes of national sovereignty ("Socialist Kurdistan"), which was perceived by the elites of this political movement as control over the territory and population, a network of support bases and administrative units, as well as force support in the guerrilla army (Vertyaev 2007: 29). Russian researcher Rostislav Turovsky also defines insurgent states as territories controlled by armed opponents of the ruling regime (Turovsky 1999: 216). Today, an insurgent state can also be viewed as a political institution that controls territory and competes with the attributes of statehood of the current regime and the institutions of public authority associated with it. In the case of the PKK, Turkey was (and is) just such an antagonist, the territory on which this political force originated and acted. In this regard, the PKK's doctrine extrapolated to Syrian Kurdistan has acquired qualitatively new characteristics, which will be described below.

### **The Emergence of an Insurgent State in Syrian Kurdistan**

The development of an insurgent state in Syrian Kurdistan is believed to have begun on June 18–19, 2012, when self-defence forces in the Kurdish area of Syria (YPG) took control over the entrance to and exit from Kobane, and in the city itself, the supporters of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) occupied the state institutions. The Syrian Army, forced to fight against the armed opposition in other regions of the country, left the northern provinces inhabited by Kurds, in accordance with agreements reached during negotiations with Kurdish representatives (Acun, Keskin 2016: 12). It only retained control over the airport, train station and checkpoint on the border with Turkey in the main town of Qamishli.

A temporary governing body for Syrian Kurdistan, the Supreme Kurdish Committee (Desteya Bilind a Kurd, DBK), was established in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, in 2012. It was formed on a parity basis from the members of the People's Assembly of Western Kurdistan (PAWK), which was dominated by the PYD, and from the members of the Kurdish National Council in Syria, focused mainly on the Democratic Party of Iraqi Kurdistan. However, the Kurdish groups remained deeply divided over relations with the central government in Damascus, the need for foreign intervention in the Syrian domestic conflict, and unification with the Syrian opposition, which the PYD supporters opposed. In November 2013, the umbrella organization Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, TEV-DEM) was established in Syrian Kurdistan under the auspices of the PYD, whose goal was to build a political system of "democratic confederalism" (Vertyaev 2015: 368).

The political legitimacy of the local councils that were established under the PYD stemmed exclusively from the dominance of a certain ideologically oriented group (eco-anarchists and representatives of other leftist groups) that had substantial military and administrative backing from the PKK, but consisted overwhelmingly of PYD representatives, political satellites of the PKK who denied the legitimacy of their opponents – mostly from among the supporters of the Barzani clan from Iraqi Kurdistan, and small Kurdish parties of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria.

Following self-declaration in January 2014, the Kurdish autonomy of Rojava consisted of three Kurdish cantons, with much of the territory between them controlled by the forces of the quasi-state Islamic State (IS). By June 2015, as a result of the armed struggle by the self-defense forces (the YPG–YPJ [women's battalions]) against radical Islamists, the cantons were united into a single quasi-state, Rojava. Autonomy was proclaimed on March 17, 2016 as the Democratic Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria. In late 2016, the autonomy was renamed the Federation of North-Eastern Syria, without mention of “Rojava” (Kurdish for “West” or “Western Kurdistan”), as the democratic armed forces of Syria, with the YPG troops at their core, began to take control of the southern territory of Trans-Euphrates, mainly populated by Arabs.

The *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF) took control of approximately three million people in the self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, including the Shahba enclave north of Aleppo and the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood in central Aleppo, which had been under the joint control of the YPG and Jabhat al-Akrad (and which was taken over by government forces in late December 2017).

As a pro-Kurdish party in Syria, the PYD was able to attract a large number of PKK supporters with experience of fighting against security forces and the Turkish army. The PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, rose to prominence through military victories over IS fighters, largely thanks to donor support they received first from Iran and then from the US-led international coalition. Between 2013 and 2018, the SDF, backed by the United States, took control of all of Syria's Trans-Euphrates south to Deir ez-Zor.

In the early 2020s, the backbone of the SDF was still formed by the Kurdish People's Self-Defence Forces (YPG), formally subordinate to the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC), but actually affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The border of the self-proclaimed autonomy, separating it from the rest of Syria and from the canton of Kobane, where Russian troops were stationed, de facto ran along the Euphrates.

In the summer of 2017, amid a large-scale offensive against IS, Russia and the United States agreed to establish the Euphrates River as a line separating the SDF forces (which were advancing along the northeast bank of the river) from territories controlled by the Syrian army and other government and pro-government militias.<sup>12</sup> This

<sup>12</sup> Makarenko G., Sidorkova I. A New Turn in the War: How the Victory over IS Changed the Syrian Conflict. RBC. 15 February. 2015. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/02/2018/5a83fa169a79476fb19e3029> (accessed: 19.07.2021)

led to the formation of a de facto quasi-state dominated by the supporters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is banned in Turkey. According to the supporters of Turkey's opposition People's Democracy Party, shortly thereafter the Turkish government began to put pressure on reactionary jihadist organizations, pushing them to attack the emerging centres of Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria.<sup>13</sup> This largely correlates with the threats to the very concept of an insurgent state, the creation of which, under the PKK ideology, is a "redline" for Turkey's national security (Acun, Keskin 2017: 7–8).

In particular, the first attack took place on the city of Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn) in November 2012. Attacks on Kurdish autonomies by ISIS (IS since 2014), al-Nusra, as well as some units of the Syrian Free Army continued in the summer of 2013. Their targets were the self-proclaimed autonomous entities (cantons) of Jazira, Kobane and Afrin. Amid attacks on the self-proclaimed autonomy in Syrian Kurdistan, the PYD and the Kurdish Self-Defence Units (YPG) merged. However, due to some internal Kurdish disagreements, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) withdrew from the Supreme Kurdish Committee in November 2013, which led to the suspension of its activities until late 2020, when negotiations resumed between the KNC and the Kurdish National Unity Parties, mainly comprised of the PYD supporters.

One of the obvious reasons for the emergence of Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria is that the representatives of the Syrian Kurdish national movement were not invited as independent political forces to participate in the negotiations in Geneva (the Geneva II talks), set up in an attempt to broker an external diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict. The sovereignization of the self-declared cantons has not eliminated some dependence on Damascus. The Syrian state has maintained and continues to maintain a formal presence in Rojava, which is reflected, for example, in the fact that Damascus provides textbooks for schools and food in exchange for oil, while also performing a number of formal representative functions (including guarding the airport in Qamishli, where flights were operated from Damascus). The self-proclaimed autonomy has its own stamp on the land border with Iraq, which designates the Federation of Northern Syria as part of the Republic of Syria (not the Syrian Arab Republic). Thus, we see the attributes of proto-statehood, which are expressed in attributive terms characterized by a contestation of statehood without encroaching on Syrian territorial integrity.

### Political Structure of Rojava

The Democratic Union Party was created in 2003 by Syrian PKK supporters as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Community Union (KCK), and was under constant pressure and persecution by the Baathist regimes of Syria and Iraq before the

<sup>13</sup> Olug H.K.İŞİD'in Türkiye bağlantıları. URL: <https://www.hdp.org.tr/tr/isidin-turkiye-baglantilari/13616> (accessed: 19.07.2021)

Civil War. One of the political goals of the KCK as an umbrella structure is to unite the entire territory densely populated by Kurds along the principles of democratic confederalism while keeping the existing state borders (that is, without undermining the territorial integrity of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria). This approach is based on the views of the American eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin, an advocate of a “radically new” political system that, unlike the nation-state model, is based on both physical and institutional decentralization of power and embodies the concepts of libertarian municipalism and confederation.<sup>14</sup>

Rojava’s model “emphasizes the concept of organising the cohabitant singularities of the multitude in line with the models of self-representation and self-organization, as explained below, wherein the institutions of self-organization are not confined to cultural and ethnic categories of identity...” (Knapp, Jongerden 2014: 88–90). Such an organization, in which self-defense forces are extremely strong and influential, has the features of a military democracy, which is also considered a sign of proto-statehood in terms of Marxism, so popular among Rojava supporters. The political system of Rojava is an attempt to implement the concept of “democratic autonomy, confederalism, and a democratic republic in a small territory” (Flach, Ayboğa, Knapp 2016: 101).

According to the American researcher Michael Gunter, the local councils implemented in Rojava do not actually have the power to make important decisions. In reality, all the levers of power are in the hands of the PKK leadership and Abdullah Öcalan personally, who is currently in a Turkish prison (Gunter 2014: 120). Nevertheless, a number of political decisions are made by key commanders such as Mazloun Abdi (General Commander of the SDF armed forces) and Murat Karayılan (Commander-in-Chief of the PKK’s armed wing, the People’s Defence Forces). Meanwhile, the system of councils plays an important role in the functioning of local authorities, in making decisions that affect the daily lives of the autonomy’s residents (Schmidinger 2018: 221). The councils deal with economic issues, provide local feedback and management organization, and are also an important advocacy tool for the PYD social model. Reforming the patriarchal structure of Kurdish society is facilitated by the introduction of female self-government at the local level and ensuring gender equality in the executive branch and self-defence forces.

Since the 2000s, the PKK, with which the PYD is ideologically affiliated, has seen a strategic shift toward a more democratic discourse in order to create federal and confederal entities in the Middle East (Öcalan 2014: 457). In 2011, Abdullah Öcalan wrote that the excessive emphasis on nation-building in the Middle East can be overcome through “democratic autonomy” (Öcalan 2011: 18–20). The Kurdish movement associated with the PKK has relaxed its emphasis on the right to self-determination through the formation of an independent Kurdish state, leaning towards a concept based on self-government, democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism.

<sup>14</sup> Bookchin M. *Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview*. 1991. URL: <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview> (accessed: 11.05.2021)



The founding document (a constitution of sorts) of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is the so-called social contract, which proclaims the ideas of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism as the cornerstone of the regional political structure.<sup>15</sup> The main institution that embodies democratic confederalism in Rojava is the Democratic Autonomous Administration, which consists of the Legislative Council (parliament), the Executive Council (government) with ministries (Kurdish “deste” meaning “board”) and municipalities (local authorities, “people’s municipalities”). The radical/direct democratic structures in Rojava are called the People’s Council of West Kurdistan (Meclîsa Gel a Rojavayê Kurdistanê, MGRK). The basis of the bottom-up model within democratic confederalism is a commune (an assembly composed of households), followed by neighborhoods – villages composed of communes, district people’s councils coordinated by the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which consists of political parties, social movements, and civic organizations. According to some researchers, this is the “project of radical democracy for the Middle East, which has three main components: anti-nationalism, anti-statehood, and gender liberation” (Flach, Ayboğa, Knapp 2016: 101–102).

One of the signs of proto-statehood is the separation of the state apparatus from society as an inherent property of political power during the formation of the bureaucratic state. In Rojava, the grassroots organization of such a communal system is the village council or city district council. Communities consist of several commissions of 5–19 members each, which are responsible for different areas – economy, defense, etc. Delegates from several communes form a district or village council, which, similar to the communes, consists of several commissions. Such district (village) councils elect regional councils, also consisting of several commissions. These councils elect the People’s Council of West Kurdistan. All councils have two co-chairs, a man and a woman. They have a separate women’s council in their structure (Schmidinger 2018: 219). The highest authority in the autonomy is the Democratic Syrian Assembly.

A sizeable part of the Syrian Kurds is mobilizing around the PYD and its self-defense forces, trying to extend their social experiment to the entire conglomerate of nationalities living there. This theory of democratic confederalism (extremely idiosyncratic for neighboring Turkey), focused on the creation of autonomy for the Syrian Kurds while denying the idea of a nation state, allows local elites who support demands for autonomy in Syria to argue that the Kurds pose no real threat to the country’s territorial integrity, as they are not seeking full independence from Damascus.

The need for Rojava’s consociational structure became evident back in 2012, when the Supreme Kurdish Committee was formed and signs of nation-building based on ethnic particularism began to emerge. Therefore, the PYD’s political paradigm can be defined as “non-Kurdocentric,” based on the maximum inclusiveness of the non-

<sup>15</sup> The full text is available here: Social Contract of the Democratic Confederation of Northern Syria. December 29, 2016. URL: <https://internationalistcommune.com/social-contract/> (accessed: 11.05.2021).



Kurdish ethnic element represented by Assyrians, Yazidis, Arabs, and others. And vice versa, a certain “Kurdish-centric” approach of the Kurdish parties that were affiliated with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) before 2013, provoked rejection in Rojava. Local democratic confederalism is much more flexible even than consociational democracies, which is important in terms of the ability of an emerging political system to resolve disagreements and conflicts caused by ethnolinguistic and ideological pluralism. According to the provisional constitution of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria adopted in December 2016, this proto-state was built on the principles of “democratic socialism, libertarian municipalism, direct democracy, anarchism, and gender equality.”<sup>16</sup>

A serious problem that Rojava still faces is the lack of a strong leader responsible for making and implementing political decisions, as well as the lack of support for such a political system by competing Kurdish political organizations. The Commander of the SDF, Mazloun Abdi, does not suit those Kurds close to the Kurdish National Council of Syria. The Dohuk agreement between the PYD and the KNC, brokered by the United States on October 21, 2014, which involved the creation of new councils with an equal distribution of representative functions between PYD supporters on the one hand and the KNC supporters on the other, has not yet been implemented. The agreement was supposed to create a joint Kurdish armed force (something the United States wanted), but the political forces within the Kurdish National Council were unable to agree among themselves, not to mention the Syrian Kurdish Self-Defence Forces (YPG) unwilling to join the armed formations (Peshmerga) of Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, the autonomous Kurdish cantons of Cizre, Kobane and Afrin, which were proclaimed in January 2014 in northern Syria, did not become a joint political structure of Kurdish political forces; rather, they became a political entity under the sole leadership of the PYD in the context of a military democracy.

This notwithstanding, successful negotiations were held in June 2020 between the two main Kurdish organizations that have constantly competed for autonomy: the Kurdish National Council of Syria, close to the Barzani clan from Iraqi Kurdistan, and the umbrella organization Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), ideological supporters of democratic confederalism.

Another umbrella organization, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), created with US participation, includes Kurdish, Arab, Turkoman and Assyrian representatives. After the fall of the IS terrorist stronghold in Raqqa in 2017, the Future Syria Party was established in 2018 as an ideological partner of the PYD in the Arab-Sunni areas under the control of the SDF, bringing together those supporting the ideology of democratic confederalism, mainly from among Arabs. The closest non-Kurdish forces to the PYD include the al-Sanadid Forces (Shammar tribe), the Syriac Military Council, and Jaish

<sup>16</sup> Social Contract of the Democratic Confederation of Northern Syria. December 29. 2016. URL: <https://internationalist-commune.com/social-contract/> (accessed: 11.05.2021).

al-Suwar (“Army of Revolutionaries”). All of these organizations are known for their firm opposition to official Damascus. As of the end of 2019, there were approximately 40,000 fighters in groups affiliated with the SDF, which controlled roughly 70% of the region's oil production.<sup>17</sup> Back in 2017, the PYD leadership said it intended to use its control over oil and gas resources in northern and eastern Syria as an argument in negotiations with the Syrian authorities over the fate of Syrian Kurdistan.

Against this background, there is still the problem of legitimizing power in the autonomy, especially in the territories inhabited by Arabs liberated from IS rule. Anti-Kurdish sentiments are brewing among the Arab population under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with cases of blood vengeance on the rise. In early August 2020, the sheikh of a large Arab tribal conglomerate, Ibrahim Khalil Abboud Al-Jadaan Al-Hafil, was killed and his funeral escalated into a clash between Arabs and Kurds. The centres of the revolt were the settlements of Diban and Al Hawajj, but the unrest soon spread to Deir ez-Zor and was supported by the Arab tribe in Al Hasakah.<sup>18</sup> In early June 2021, clashes broke out in the city of Manbij, where SDF forces opened fire on demonstrators opposed to serving in the Kurdish-led SDF, killing four people.<sup>19</sup>

Such conflicts suggest that if Washington's support for the AANES stops, it will hardly survive as a single political unit, but is more likely to break up into Arab and Kurdish parts. It is difficult to assess how antagonistic the contradictions between Kurds and Arabs in both the southern and the northern parts of the autonomy. Attempts by the Self-Defence Forces and the PYD within the framework of the Syrian Democratic Council (the supreme authority of the self-declared autonomy) to impose the principles of democratic confederalism in the Arab areas of northeastern Syria are often resisted by the population. Yet the PYD leaders and political forces affiliated with them continue their efforts, insisting that there is no room for separatism in the political system of democratic confederalism.

The reasons for contradictions between the PYD and some of the Arab tribes, mostly clerical in nature, lie largely in the fact that the political culture of an Arab ummah of the Middle East has long prevented the introduction of a multiparty system, since the traditional Islamic ideology is characterized by dichotomy, the opposition of the only truth (sent by Allah) to the war (Dar al-Harb) or party (Hizb) of Shaitan (Zvyagelskaya, Kuznetsov 2017: 9). The PYD, as well as the inter-party conglomerate around it (the former TEV-DEM, and since 2020, the Kurdish National Unity Party),

<sup>17</sup> Francis E., Perry T. Syrian Kurds Outgunned but Vow to Inflict Toll on Turkish Army. Reuters. October 10. 2019. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-sdf-idUSKBN1WO2VX> (accessed: 11.05.2021).

<sup>18</sup> Vertyaev K. The Situation in Rojava: The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) during the Pandemic (2020). November 25. 2020. URL: <https://riataza.com/2020/11/25/situacziya-v-rozhave-avtonomnaya-adminis/> (accessed: 21.06.2021).

<sup>19</sup> Kurdish Forces Opened Fire on Protesters in Manbij, Syria. Russia Toda. June 1. 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210601/siriya-1735151217.html> (accessed: 21.06.2021).

have a better chance of establishing relations with the non-clerical segment of an Arab ummah. This is facilitated by the close association of Rojava (as well as AANES) with leftist, ultra-leftist, environmentalist, neo-Marxist, and anti- and post-clerical movements both in the Middle East and globally, providing the proto-state with ideological support and legitimization in the eyes of many European and American leftist activists. So, the political system that has emerged in Rojava has its own unique characteristics and is managing to maintain political stability despite receiving external donor support.

### **The Prospects for the Stability of Rojava as a Proto-State**

Comparing the Syrian Kurdish movement led by the PYD with the separatists of South Yemen (Southern Transitional Council), we can see a number of parallels. According to Dutch researcher Leo Kwartén, the dynamics of the civil war mobilized the population in South Yemen in 2017–2020 around political forces that used an external threat to them in the form of Houthi attacks to sovereignize the southern regions under their control, an attempt to secede from Yemen (Kwartén 2020: 236). Here we can assume that the Kurdish pro-state entities in Syria also emerged rather as a reaction to the Arab Spring and to the approach of ISIS (IS) forces to the borders of territories inhabited by Kurds, than to the Civil War in Syria itself. If this hypothesis is correct, then the analysis of the situation in Syria would suggest potential alliances that such pro-state actors could enter into across the whole of the Middle East.

In 2011–2013, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the temporary victory of the Turkish-backed Islamist governments in Tunisia and Egypt nevertheless caused a major shift in the balance of power in the Middle East region, both in terms of the growing importance of the Islamic factor and in terms of the changing political and clerical elites in the region, when the earlier proto-state actors, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, found themselves challenged, while new Kurdish self-defense forces, the YPG, emerged in tandem with the Democratic Union Party, established in 2003, and, potentially, with the Supreme Kurdish Council. After the outbreak of the civil conflict in Syria, Hamas broke off relations with official Damascus, while Hezbollah, on the contrary, directly participated in the Syrian Civil War, despite the losses in manpower and image (for Lebanon). The Kurdish self-defense forces and their political satellites maintained neutrality in the Syrian conflict.

This PDS–YPG decision is framed by broad regional narratives and domestic political challenges, rather than simply based on the imperatives of securing national rights for the Kurds in Syria. In this regard, the PDS–YPG sought to build alliances not only to address the conflict with Turkey or with rival Kurdish political forces, but also to shift the regional balance of power in its favor by attracting the United States as a donor in order to legitimize its political status quo as a proto-state. Its growing legitimacy in the eyes of the local non-clerical population was facilitated by its successes in confronting ISIS, Turkey (where the PKK and the PYD are recognized as terrorists),

Fatah Halab (until 2016), Ahrar al-Sham, the al-Nusra Front and partly with the central Syrian government in Damascus. So far, this multi-vector military resistance has ensured the stable mobilization of such an insurgent state in the face of antagonistic forces, primarily ISIS (IS).

Analysing the history of autonomous governance and strategies pursued by the PYD in northern Syria since 2012, a number of researchers argue that the PYD has demonstrated a commitment to democracy, while also violating democratic methods of governance in its practices (Ozfelik 2020: 690–691). This is confirmed by the observations of Human Rights Watch.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Rojava, we see how instruments of violence and armed resistance also serve as a way of attempting political legitimization, which is characteristic of many pro-state militant organizations, such as the YPG–PYD (Syria), Hezbollah (Lebanon), Hamas (Palestine), the Polisario Front (Western Sahara) or, for example, the Zapatista Movement in Mexico. The constant military mobilization of insurgent states is an important prerequisite for their survival and possible legitimization with reliance on external donor support.

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The emerging proto-state in northeastern Syria, which at the time of writing is called AANES, is not Kurdish in the ethnic sense. It has the characteristics of a military democracy, with the Syrian Democratic Forces military alliance, composed in large part of Kurdish self-defense forces (YPG). However, the SDF does not have full control over the population and does not hold a monopoly on violence in the territories inhabited mostly by Arab tribes, those under Turkish control following Operation Source of Peace, and those under the control of the Syrian government forces in Al Hassakeh and Qamishli, where Russian armed forces are present as peacekeepers.

At the same time, Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava) appears to be not even a proto-state but an anti-state, within which Syrian Kurds close to the PYD use Abdullah Öcalan's ideas (which he borrowed from Murray Bookchin) that a nation state is not necessary for international recognition, and that the line between separatism and local self-government is blurred. In particular, Öcalan argues that Kurds should not seek to create an independent nation-state structure since the nation-state is inherently a dying institution based on homogenization and assimilation, which is exactly what the Kurds have suffered from in their recent history (Öcalan 2010: 195). As a phenomenon of historical memory, the division of the Kurmanji-speaking unified Kurdish people by the borders of Syria and Turkey since 1921, this political message resonates and is understood by a significant part of the Kurdish population, which provides the basis for maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria (Vertyaev 2018: 448). There are two possible scenarios for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES),

<sup>20</sup> Under Kurdish Rule. Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria. Human Rights Watch. 2014. June 19. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria> (accessed: 19.07.2021).

which claims to be part of Syria. The first is formal incorporation into the republic of Syria (which would probably require constitutional changes, including in the official name of the country), something that the PYD-allied forces want. The AANES leadership considers the formal recognition of an autonomous status within Syria to be a necessary condition. The alternative is the gradual disintegration of the AANES into two quasi-states, Arab and Kurdish, which, if the United States leaves – that is, if external donors disappear – will inevitably lead to the revival of an Islamic quasi-state (IS or its equivalent) on this territory).

As for the political dialogue that began in 2020 between the competing political groups Kurdish National Council and TEV-DEM (since 2020, the Kurdish National Unity Party) within the AANES,<sup>21</sup> its success and the re-subordination of self-defense forces from the PYD to the Supreme Kurdish Committee will lead to further sovereignization of the AANES as part of the Syrian conglomerate state. At the same time, the ability of the negotiators to do their job continues to raise doubts.

Based on the above, we can assume that Rojava is a proto-state with “a low level of stress resistance due to the lack of internal consensus on the performance of power functions and distribution of public goods” (Bartenev 2018: 22). Stability has been restored here under the influence of endogenous political processes that allow assistance from external forces, with US donor support being one of the key elements of AANES's stability as a proto-state.

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The author declares the absence of any conflicts of interests.

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<sup>21</sup> Wilgenburg van W. Syrian Kurdish Parties Agree on Supreme Kurdish Reference. *Kurdistan24*. URL: <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/ba899219-46d4-4ff5-8bf1-465bb634a967> (accessed: 17.05.2021).



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