



مركز السياسات وبحوث العمليات
Operations & Policy Center

Northeast Syria's Kurds: The Dynamics of Politics and Power

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Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction	7
2. Research Methodology	8
3. Historical Context	10
3.1 The Formation of NES and Internal Factors of Conflict	11
3.2 Power Structure in the Autonomous Administration Areas	14
3.3 Political Differences Among Kurdish Parties	17
3.4 A Review of The Negotiation Process	18
4. Research Findings	22
4.1 Public Interest Requires Accessible Information	22
4.2 An Unclear Horizon	25
4.3 Political Conditions in Syria and the Region Following the Agreement - Cautious Optimism	26
4.4 Questions About Facets of the NES Dialogue	28
5. Recommendations	32

Executive Summary

The Kurdish people are an original and essential component of Northeast Syria (NES)—the area to the east of the Euphrates River—and of Syria as a whole. However, since independence, successive ruling governments have neglected their cultural and symbolic presence and marginalized development in their areas. Since the 1960s, Ba'athist governments have pursued restrictive policies on the Kurds, where the government in the democratic era before the Ba'ath coup d'état stripped one-third of Syrian Kurds of citizenship.

Despite widespread Kurdish protests across the country over the years until the beginning of the revolution—the 2004 uprising in Qamishli being the most prominent and widespread—the Kurds had not gained any of their basic cultural and political rights in Syria.

Present-day Northeast Syria—which embraces Kurds as well as Arabs, Assyrians, and other ethnic groups—was historically formed through the violent destruction of the Bedouin lifestyle, pushing them to settle down. This weakened the strength of Arab tribal leaders and the Kurds. But it couldn't end the Kurdish role among the Arabs; major Kurdish parties in the region have had a leading role among Syrian Kurds since the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The conflict between the main Kurdish political parties in Syria, drawn from two main currents in the Kurdish political movement in the region as a whole—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—has contributed to solidifying divisions among smaller Kurdish parties. This has always allowed the authorities in Damascus to exploit the differences, using them to prevent the emergence of any unified Kurdish voice.

As the war in Syria began in 2011, the pro-PKK parties took control over NES and marginalized the KDP-affiliated parties, driving many of their leaders outside the country. Dialogue between the Kurdish parties has gone through many stages since 2011; the last dialogue, which began in the spring of 2020, shows a serious will and greater international support for its success, which gives it a better chance than any previous agreement or negotiation.

OPC conducted an opinion poll in NES that included 600 respondents from various national and religious backgrounds, in addition to carrying out interviews with influential and informed personalities from the region. This study is the last in a series of three, surveying the people of NES on their views. The first two discussed the depreciation of the Syrian pound and the Caesar Act.

The key findings of this study, using our sample as a metric for the population as a whole, are as follows:

- NES residents as a whole don't avidly follow the details of the negotiations, quite likely because of a long history of failed attempts, cynicism over the ability of the Autonomous Administration to get its act together, or simply because they don't consider it relevant

to their daily lives. However, subsets reveal that Kurds in NES do follow somewhat more avidly than other ethnic groups.

- Public perception of the availability of current information regarding the negotiations leans to the cynical. Information sources appear to be limited to news media, social media, and to talk around town. The lack of public engagement by the parties involved in the talks leaves people wondering why they should bother being interested.
- When it comes to expecting whether the negotiations will finally succeed, Kurdish Syrians in NES trended more positively, though overall sentiment is more opaque. Cautious optimism would best describe it.
- Even with the cautious optimism about these talks improving the political situation in NES, the public is far less certain of an agreement in NES affecting the overall political situation in Syria.
- Most respondents believe that a more comprehensive dialogue in the region, involving Arabs, should occur.
- Pessimism about the success of talks mostly falls into three reasonings: that other minor parties have not yet been included, that outside forces rather than an internal will are driving this attempt at diplomacy, and that the chasm of differences between the main parties is too wide to be bridged by talks alone.
- We urge the French authorities to push the negotiating parties to not only make meaningful concessions in order to complete an agreement that will at last stabilize Syria, but to include the Syrian public in the process with greater transparency about the details of developments and milestones in the negotiations. Regional independent media being allowed to cover political affairs, community discussions (including safe spaces for both women and the most vulnerable of the population to engage), and the simple dissemination of balanced and credible information into ordinary Syrian households would go far to re-engage a weary and frustrated public. We also advocate for pressure on the Autonomous Administration to regulate the activities of informal organizations, such as the Revolutionary Youth Movement and the Martyr's Families, in order to relieve tensions and facilitate the return of Kurdish National Council (KNC) parties to their effective work in the region.
- The French authorities can also use incentives, whether for progress in transparency itself or as a whole package upon the successful outcome of the talks—for example, support to improve the region's oil-refining capacity or administrative support for various civil institutions in NES. It would also be advantageous for the French Foreign Ministry to craft a statement addressed directly to the general populace of NES in support of the Kurdish-Kurdish talks, explaining their reason for supporting it and the importance of these talks in bringing a needed stability to the region at last.

1. Introduction

Ongoing negotiations among the most prominent political parties in Syria over the past weeks mark an important development. This dialogue has reopened a path for discussing changes in the administrative structure of Northeast Syria (NES), which has recently fallen prey to regional conflicts, one of which was the Turkish military operation in the fall of 2019.

However, the region also maintains built-in tension factors. Some of these factors stem from the complex history of the region's formation during the 19th and early 20th centuries; others originated from federal governance approaches in the region that did not take into account its national and religious diversity—among the largest in Syria. Some tensions can be traced back to old and renewed political disputes among major political parties in the region; these are reflected in the failure of most previous agreements to make any progress whatsoever.

The current single-party rule approach within the Autonomous Administration—which adopted similar policies for dealing with the diverse components in NES as previous central Syrian governments—has resulted in regional tension and increased frustration with the inability of this new dialogue to reach a real and stable agreement that will result in a new form of governance.

In this paper, we will present a brief historical background of the formation of NES, and explain the context of the partisan differences among the largest Kurdish parties and the negotiation processes between them. The analysis of sample data from an opinion poll conducted by OPC will play a role in accurately reflecting shades of opinion among the region's residents, highlight the gaps between the various political forces and the population, and suggest ways to overcome them.

The opinion poll includes data from 600 respondents, distributed among the ethnic groups and the various cities and towns of the region which fall under either the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Autonomous Administration) or that of the Peace Spring Turkish Operation forces.

2. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a combination of research approaches; a desk review of the historical context was used to create a concise picture of the recent development in the region and the circumstances surrounding it, and the most prominent historical contexts of disagreement between the main Kurdish parties in NES.

In addition, OPC conducted eight interviews via voice call (because of the Covid-19 pandemic) with persons in leadership positions within the Autonomous Administration and its military councils. The interviews also included meetings with experts and researchers from the region, to clarify some information about the Administration's work mechanisms regarding service provision and security.

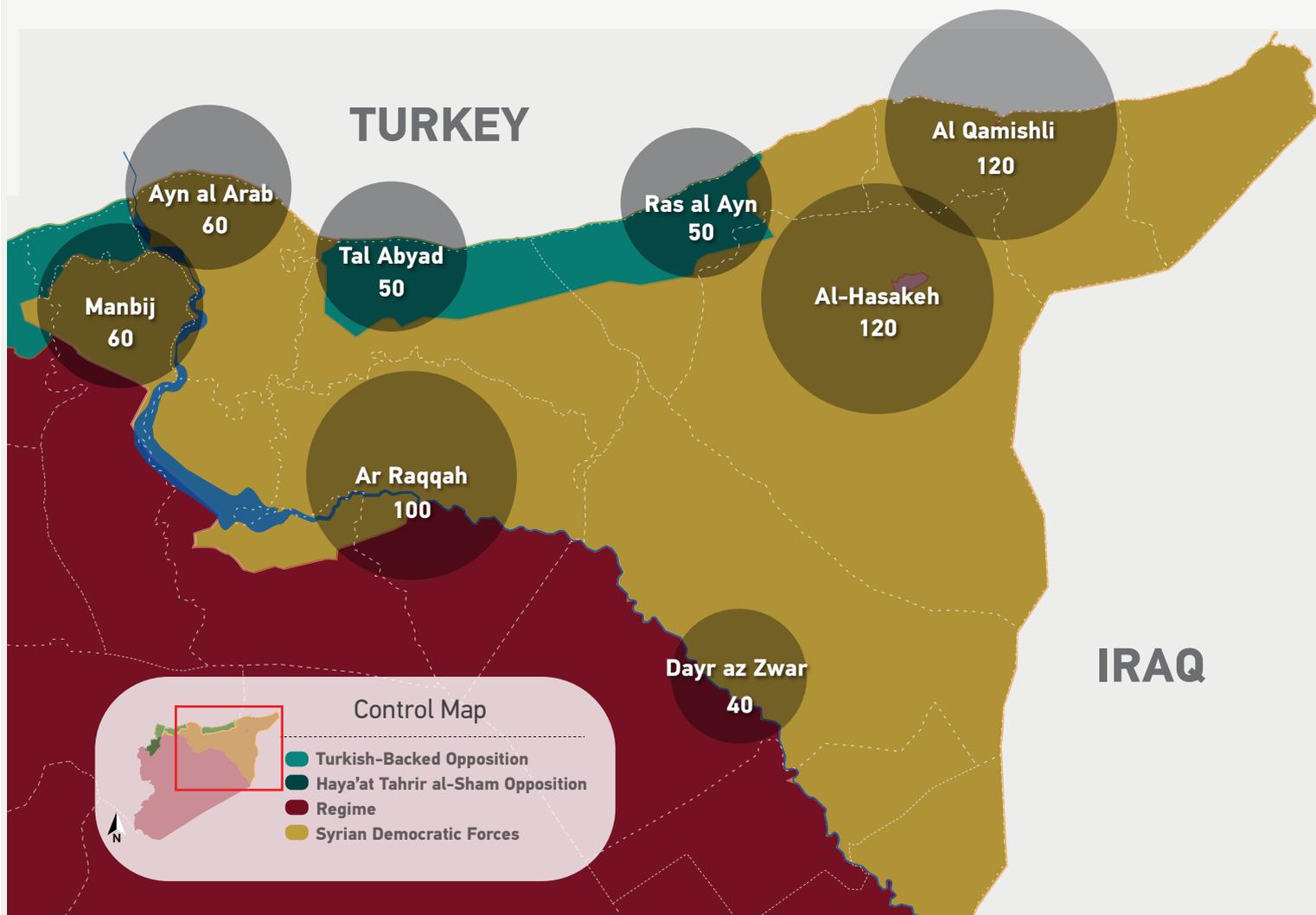
Interview List:

- A journalist and researcher from the city of Qamishli, currently residing in the Netherlands.
- A Kurdish working lawyer who is a prominent member of the Yekiti Kurdistan Party and coordinator of a development program in the region funded by the US State Department.
- A Kurdish journalist, a former member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), currently residing in Europe.
- A member of the Legislative Council in Ar-Raqqah.
- A member of the Committee of Five, which runs the Energy Committee on the Ar-Raqqah governorate's Civil Council.
- A member of the Al-Tabqa Military Council in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and a former commander in one of the Syrian opposition factions.
- A member of the Justice Council in NES (the highest judicial authority in the Autonomous Administration).
- An employee in the Humanitarian Affairs and Work Committee in the Autonomous Administration.

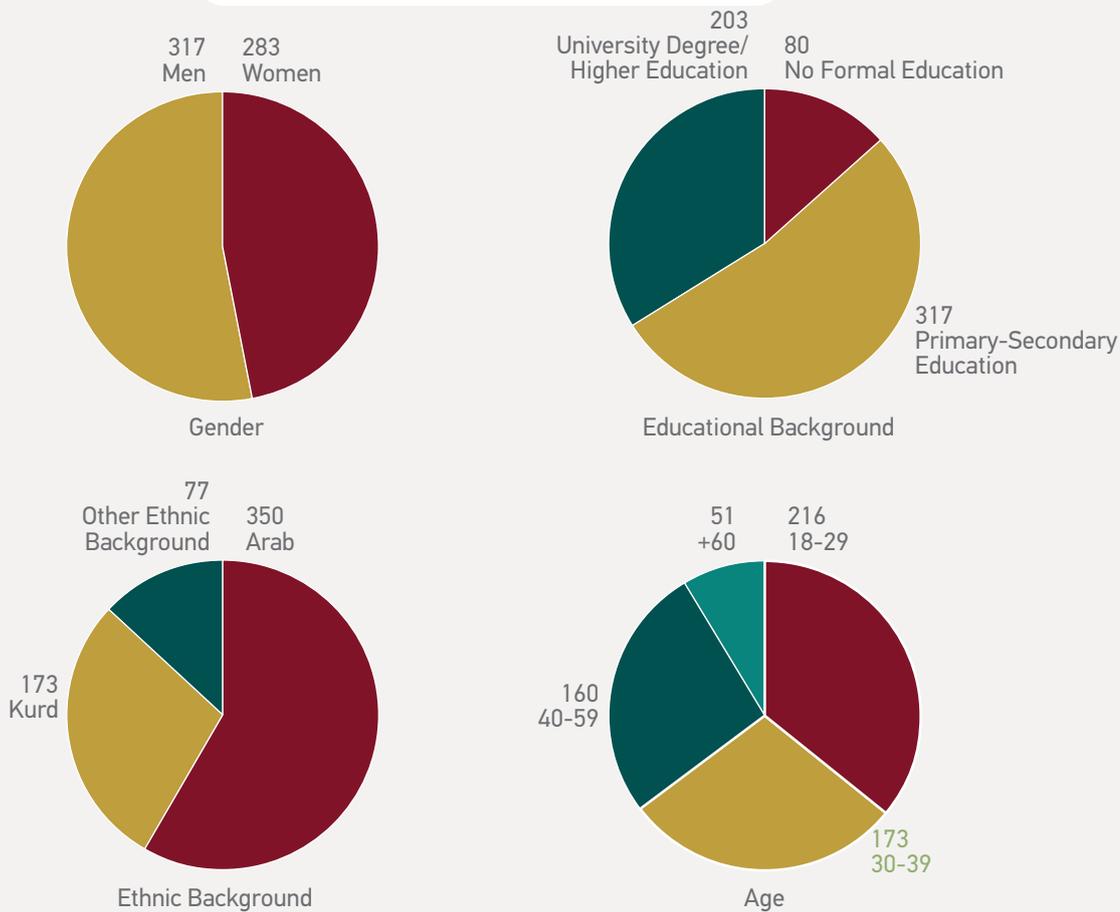
The interviews were conducted during August 2020, with OPC ensuring a safe interview environment for the respondents in order to obtain the most accurate information. The data obtained from the interviews was also cross-referenced between a number of respondents and fact-checked with open sources to ensure their accuracy; only information that fulfilled this requirement was featured in this research.

The survey sample comprised 600 Syrians (men and women) living in NES, of various national components of the region and from different levels of income and education. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the sample.

Figure 1: Characteristic Distribution of Respondents Sampled

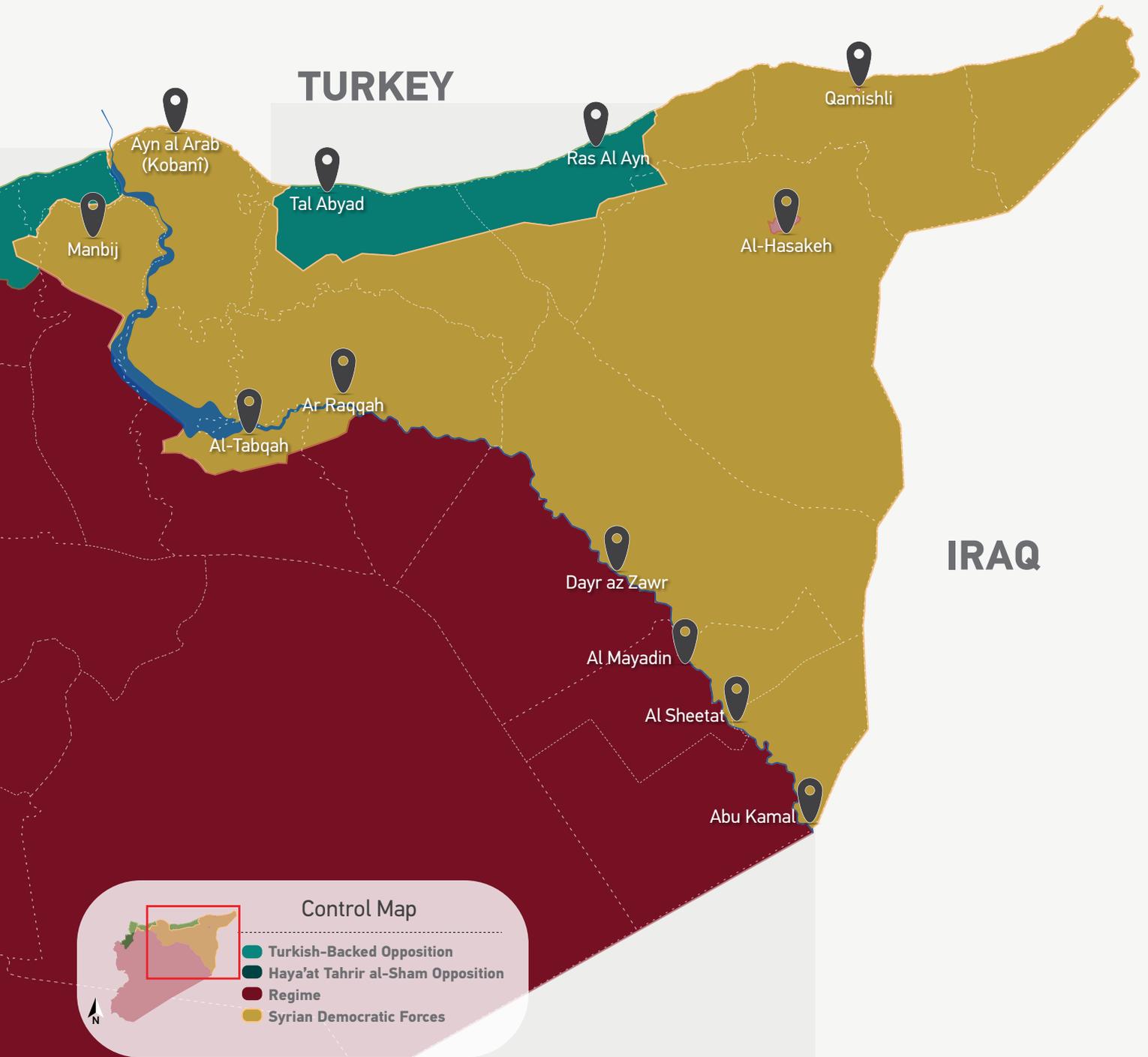


Summary of Sample Characteristics



3. Historical Context

Figure 2: Northeast Syria (NES)



3.1 | The Formation of NES and Internal Factors of Conflict

The area of prairie between the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers, historically known as Mesopotamia, is one of the first areas in which ancient agricultural settlements emerged.

The presence of Arab clans and tribes in this region dates back to before the Hellenistic era (300-100 BC). The cities of Mesopotamia were considered among the most prominent of the ancient era, but as a result of two waves of Mongol/Tatar invasion, their metropolitan areas receded and most turned into semi-arid desert during the 1300s—especially those extending within the borders of present-day Syria—but some small towns and villages remained, such as Ras al-Ayn in Al-Hasakeh governorate.¹

Later, during the Ottoman rule of the region from the 1500s until the 1900s, the region, which came to be known as Jazira (the island), witnessed continuous migration by Bedouin tribes from the Nejd region of present-day Saudi Arabia—as a result of tribal conflicts and the rise of Wahhabism there. This brought the lower Jazira deserts under the influence of Arab tribes such as Shammar, Anza, Al-Aqeedat, Jabour and Tay,² while villages and small towns located in the upper Jazira, like Ras al-Ayn, were within the influential sphere of Kurdish tribes.

Beginning in the 1700s, the region witnessed attempts by the Ottoman authority to settle the scattered Bedouin tribes, but it failed due to climatic reasons and primitive irrigation methods which couldn't reclaim areas that had become wasteland over time.³ These policies successfully returned during the mid-1800s when irrigation methods were reasonably developed, and Ottoman sultans offered extensive land holdings to the tribes. This led to the emergence and expansion of cities such as Dayr az Zawr (which developed from Deir al-Ateeq) and Al-Mayadin (an expansion of the village of Al-Rahba on the Euphrates). Until the end of the Ottoman rule, municipal authorities continued to lure Arab and Kurdish tribes alike to settle down.⁴

The Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 led to the division of the Jazira area between three countries whose modern boundaries remain; the mountainous part of it is located in Turkey, the central plains in Syria, and the lower part ends at the Iraqi city of Tikrit.⁵

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- 1) Mohammad Jamal Barout, *The Historical Formation of the Syrian Jazira*, Doha, The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013, Page 49.
 - 2) Max Von Oppenheim, Erich Braunlich, Werner Caskel, *The Bedouins*, Translated by Mahmoud Kabebo, London, Al-Warrak Publishing, 2007, Vol. 2, Page 217.
 - 3) Halil Inalcik, Donald Quataert, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire 1600-1914*, Vol.2, Translated by Qasim Abdo Qasim, Beirut, Al-Mada Al-Islami Publishing, 2007, Page 343
 - 4) Barout, *The Historical Formation of the Syrian Jazira*, Page 81.
 - 5) Ahmed Wasfi Zakaria, *The Tribes of the Levant*, Al-Fikir Publishing House (DFL), 1983, Part I, Page 21.

The cities of NES violently destroyed the Bedouin culture as part of comprehensive resettlement programs that also carried economic incentives such as reduced taxes. These programs did not end in NES until the 1930s, with the emergence of new cities such as Al-Hasakeh and Qamishli during the period of the French mandate.

Nevertheless, successive authorities used the Bedouin tribes to strike each other, resulting in “mini civil wars”⁶ (in today’s terms) between the Bedouins in order to break old ties and establish modern settlements to boost agricultural production.

Nationalist tensions did not emerge despite the clashes, as tribal confederations have always included Kurdish-Arab Bedouin alliances. Because tribal conflicts were not based on national or ethnic affiliation, NES was saved from memories of massacres that occurred later in neighboring countries, such as in Iraq and Turkey during the twentieth century with the rise of national statehood.

Despite the weakening of tribal military influence in NES since the mid-1800s, moral influence and the remoteness of central authorities from NES villages and towns allowed the continued presence of tribal sheikhs—specifically for the Arab component. These sheikhs enjoyed renewed sponsorship from the Assad regime in the 1970s and assumed positions within the bureaucratic frameworks of the Ba’ath Party and the People’s Assembly, the security services, and the army.

The Turkish State’s wars against Kurdish revolutions within their borders had all but eliminated Kurdish leaderships, including the leaders of the large tribes there, which extended into Syria. Meanwhile, Kurdish political and military movements in Iraq and later in Turkey played a fundamental role in organizing Syrian Kurds within the broader regional Kurdish cause. The Assad regime’s discord with both Iraq and Turkey have helped pave the way for Kurdish political movements to operate inside Syrian territories.⁷

Stripping one-third of Syrian Kurds of their citizenship in 1962 contributed to the political linkage of Syrian Kurds with the larger Kurdish movement in surrounding countries; these movements polarized Syrian Kurds. The oldest Kurdish political party established in Syria—the Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP-S, also known as Al-Parti)—has enjoyed support from Iraqi Kurdistan’s regional leadership since the 1960s. Since the 1980s, however, the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) has also attracted many Syrian Kurds to join its fight against Turkey.

But these parties, especially the PKK, did not have clear programs for Syria itself, which

6) Lady Anne Blunt, *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates in 1878*, Translated by Assad Fares, Nidal Khudur Mayouf, Damascus, Al-Malah Publishing, 1991, Page 67

7) Barout, *The Historical Formation of the Syrian Jazira*, Page 801.

meant that Kurdish policy inside Syria was linked to the Kurdish struggle for liberation outside it. This left the aspirations of these Kurdish political activities outside of Syria and its Kurdish regions.⁸

The region has been administered by the central Syrian government since the 1970s, by reviving tribal ties and feeding them bureaucratic and social influence in the provinces of Dayr az Zawr and Al-Raqqah, and by linking any Kurdish political activity exclusively to the interactions and conflicts outside Syria. Under motivation and pressure from the regime, any Kurdish politician who had a clear project or discourse regarding Syria was restricted or arrested.⁹

The Assad regime also fueled the national conflict between Arabs and Kurds—specifically within Al-Hasakeh province, which includes areas of greater mixing. The regime imposed Arabization on the Kurds and their areas of presence, prohibiting any Kurdish cultural or linguistic expressions within the public sphere (speaking Kurdish in the university, school, or army was forbidden), and the names of Kurdish villages and towns were changed into Arabic. Arab Ba'athist leaders in the area spearheaded those policies, where stirring nationalist tensions in the region over several decades has been one of the most prominent regime policies.

The favoring of Arabs over Kurds was clear in the bureaucratic centers of government; in turn, any political currents among the Arabs other than the Ba'ath were brutally suppressed (the political bureau of the Communist Party, for example). Meanwhile, Kurdish parties were often overlooked—on the condition that they adopt national programs that did not focus solely on the Kurdish areas of Syria.

The local aspects of Kurdish politics were broadly restored following the 2004 uprising, led by Kurds across several areas of the country and headed by NES, with the traditional Kurdish parties restoring some of their previous influence as a result of the regime's suppression.¹⁰

Regime policies reinforced the tension that turned bloody following the advent of the "Islamic State" (ISIS) in the region, especially after the Yezidi Kurd genocide in Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS literature and media publications referred to the Kurds as infidels who must be fought against and targeted Kurdish areas in Syria with military operations. But these policies of eliminating ISIS contributed to ethnic discrimination, despite much resistance against ISIS within Arab regions, and eventually led to the commission of massacres, such as the al-Shaitat massacre in 2014.

8) OPC interview with a journalist and former member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

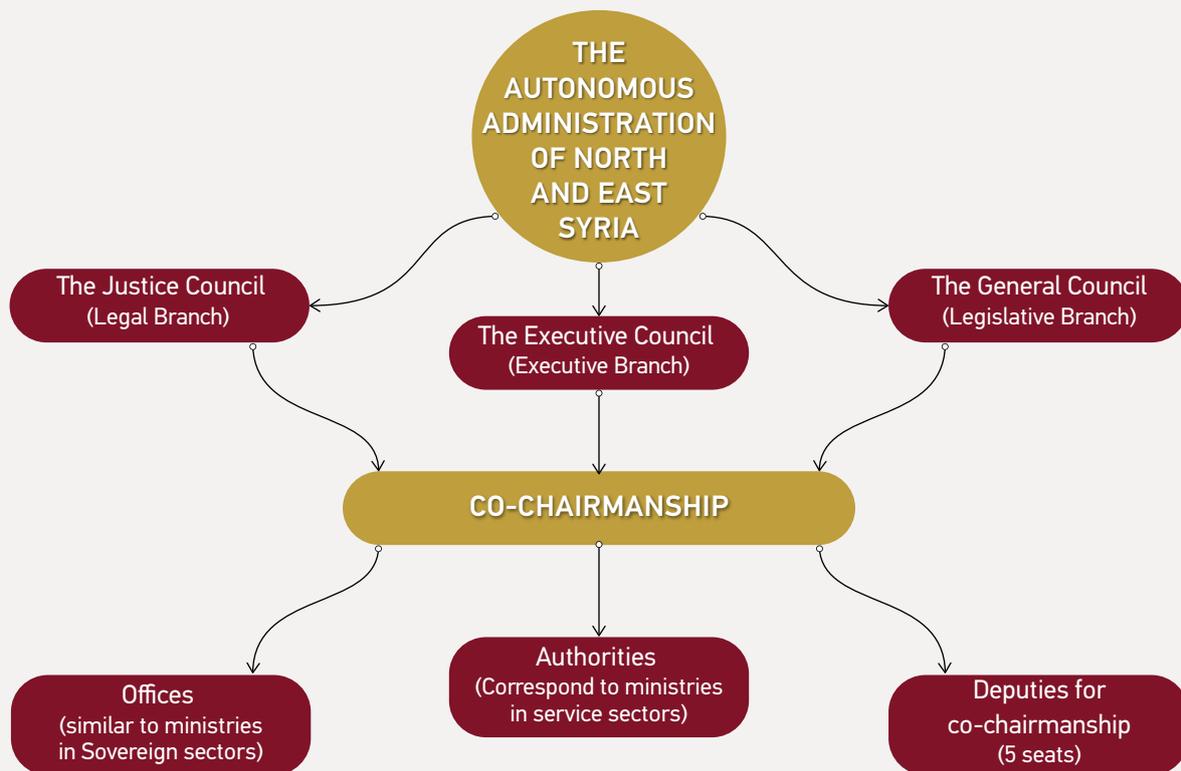
9) OPC interview with a defected judge and a member of the Justice Council in the Autonomous Administration.

10) OPC interview with a journalist and researcher from the Jazira region.

Today, several highly volatile factors are emerging in the region, including the military strength of tribes, the cross-border linkage of Syrian Kurdish entities, and associating local Syrian Kurdish political strategies with conflicts in other countries such as Turkey.

3.2| Power Structure in the Autonomous Administration Areas

Figure 3: The Organizational Structure of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.



The Democratic Autonomous Administration was established in early 2014 as a result of a dialogue between Kurdish parties represented by the People’s Council of West Kurdistan and the Movement for a Democratic Society—both of which reflected the position of the PKK-supported Democratic Union Party (PYD)—and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), backed by the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, soon a majority of KNC parties announced their withdrawal from the agreement and from the Administration, as a result of the PYD’s control of primary Administration functions such as security. Since then, the Autonomous Administration has become an expression of the PYD’s political platform, with key PYD figures or former PKK members assuming the most prominent positions within the Administration.

Following the expulsion of ISIS from most NES lands, the Syrian Democratic Council [the political cover for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)] held meetings that did not include the KNC and established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in the fall of

2018, becoming the de facto ruler over most of NES since that time.

The current Autonomous Administration consists of three councils; executive, legislative, and justice. The Executive Council is divided into a presidency office, representatives' offices, bodies, and offices that manage services affairs and key functions in the region, such as security, defense, and finance.

But when interviewed by OPC, a member of the Justice Council said: "In fact, the authority is in the hands of the Executive Council, which is associated with the PYD-PKK. We don't have the ability to change many of the decisions affecting the other authorities, which dramatically narrows our ability to make decisions and improve the conditions of the people, especially with the presence of [PKK] personnel in all bodies and establishments of the Administration."

At the local level, the Administration has branch offices of the central bodies and local administrations called communes, which manage the affairs of local communities according to this theoretical division upon which the Administration was founded.

At its inception, the Administration adopted a social contract charter demanding cultural, linguistic, and religious rights for all components and turning Syria into a federal state.

Local authorities are purported to possess broad powers, but several factors contribute to a tendency to centralize the administration and make decisions only within the Executive Council, then issue those decisions via its local bodies and offices.

The majority of employees in areas under Autonomous Administration control work in establishments affiliated with the Administration, which affords them an acceptable standard of living, since the salaries they receive are better than in bodies and establishments affiliated with the regime or the opposition in northwest Syria. But this may have adverse effects on the area's economy in the long run; because the local economy is so dependent on employment within the Autonomous Administration's civil service or military forces (the SDF), any internal structural transformation will have wide impacts on the livelihood of residents.

The leadership of the Autonomous Administration sought to give local administrative positions to Arab tribal leaders, but these Arab leaders often complain about lacking effective authority and that all decisions come from the center or from PKK personnel. A member of the Tabqa Military Council said during an interview with OPC: "We already hold positions in our region where tribal affiliations are taken into consideration, but we do not make any decisions; rather, all decisions come from the [PKK] personnel or the leadership of the SDF. This is evident to our community residents, who no longer trust us because we have little influence on the Administration in our areas."

The region is experiencing a distribution of PKK personnel among civil offices and agencies. Corroborated testimonies from leading figures in the Autonomous Administration, in both Arab and Kurdish regions, reported the existence of some kind of PKK members network from which individuals are appointed formally or informally within Administration-affiliated committees and departments. These appointees are called “cadres,” and once installed they make the decisions on key issues, from recruitment to important bids in a given agency.

Regarding the security structure within Administration areas, former PKK members constitute the majority of security and military leadership of the People’s Protection Units (the YPG), one of the main components of the SDF.

A “Center for Studies” based in Qamishli city operates in an “unofficial capacity” but serves as the operations room for security forces and operations in the region. It consists of Turkish PKK members, an administrative staff of Syrian Kurds, and several surrounding protection units made up of PKK members based in residential apartments. A journalist and researcher from Qamishli, when interviewed, said: “This Center serves as the backbone of the security administration in the region, and it is in the hands of the PKK.”¹¹

This Center determines the roles, security operations, and security deployment forms throughout NES; giving orders to sub-centers, for example, to conduct raids based on these orders.

In addition, popular organizations established by the PKK in the late 80s and early 90s support the role of the cadres in local government institutions or agencies. They also aid in putting pressure on parties and individuals who oppose the policies of the PYD.

The most prominent of these organizations are:

- The Martyrs’ Families Foundation, which include the families of the fighters who died while fighting alongside the PKK in Turkey
- The Revolutionary Youth Movement “Ciwanên Şoreşger,” a Marxist-Maoist style movement that includes young people 14-18 years old.

Such organizations enjoy a great deal of power, enabling them to enforce the policies and positions of the PKK on the population and harass other parties; for instance, two months ago, they sabotaged the front display of the headquarters of one of the KNC-affiliated parties in NES.

A journalist and researcher from the region, who currently resides in Europe, stated in our

11) This center was also alluded to by a leader in the Military Council of Tabqa city, and a member of the Justice Council (the highest judicial authority in the Autonomous Administration), whom OPC met during the preparation of this study.

interview, “These organizations have contributed to the expulsion of Kurdish parties from [NES], specifically the [KNC] parties, through harassment and threats to the leadership of these parties.”

3.3| Political Differences Among Kurdish Parties

The differences between the PKK and KDP go back to the mid-80s, when the PKK refused to coordinate with the KDP before carrying out large-scale military operations in Kurdish areas within Turkey.¹² Leaders of the KDP considered the PKK as trying to dominate the leadership of the Kurdish movement, while the PKK accused the KDP of participating in Turkey’s anti-PKK military operations in northern Iraq during 1996 and 1997.

In the early 90s, Turkish President Turgut Özal led efforts to promote relations with Iraqi Kurds in the atmosphere following the Gulf War and the liberation of Kuwait. This contributed to the continuing dispute between the PKK and the KDP, as the PKK believed the Turkish State was the primary enemy among the countries controlling various parts of Kurdistan in the region.¹³

It is possible to trace the continuing differences among Kurdish parties in Syria by the convergence or divergence between the KDP and the PKK in Turkey over the past years. Their relationship has influenced potential diplomatic settlements among Syrian key players, though that linkage has never been permanent and was certainly never the only reason.

A number of Kurdish parties reacted quickly to the events of the Syrian uprising that began in mid-March 2011, launching the “Kurdish National Movement Parties Initiative” less than a month after the outbreak of protests in the country.

By October 2011, Kurdish parties’ political intents in Syria had taken shape. The majority of key Kurdish parties held discussions to establish the KNC, including KDP-Syria (Al-Parti), and the PYD. However, despite its participation in the founding meetings, the PYD refused to announce joining the KNC, confirming the differences between the two main parties in the Syrian Kurdish arena.

On 26 October 2011, the establishment of the KNC was announced, which included a number of the most prominent Kurdish parties, within which the balance of power tilted toward Al-Parti and its alliance with Iraq’s KDP. Before the end of the year, the PYD-affiliated Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM) established the People’s Council of West Kurdistan, a coalition of Kurdish parties and community organizations led by the PYD.

12) OPC interview with a journalist and former member of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

13) Cengiz Candar, *Mesopotamia Express*, Translated by Abdulqader Abdulli, Beirut, The Arab House for Science and Publishing, 2014, Page 81.

3.4| A Review of The Negotiation Process

Figure 4: Timeline of Key Agreements Between the Kurdish National Council and the Democratic Union Party and its Affiliated Bodies.

Agreement	Date	Agreement Sponsors	Negotiating Parties	Key desired outcomes	Reason(s) for Agreement
Qamishli MoU	19 Jan 2012	A local agreement among Kurdish forces	The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP-Syria) The Democratic Union Party (PYD) Yekiti Kurdistan Party The Kurdish Democratic Left Party in Syria The Kurdish Left Party in Syria The Communist Party of Kurdistan	Mutual recognition and joint coordination regarding key issues.	The articles of the agreement were overrun and replaced with articles from Hawler 1
Hawler 1	11 Jun 2012	Iraqi Kurdistan	The Kurdish National Council (KNC) The People's Council of West Kurdistan	Establishment of a joint higher body.	The agreement wasn't implemented; the signing of Hawler 2 was an attempt to rescue it.
Hawler 2	23 Nov 2012	Iraqi Kurdistan	The Kurdish National Council (KNC) The People's Council of West Kurdistan	Develop the negotiation to form a local governance body	The negotiations lasted for six months and resulted in a declaration of good faith, followed by the initiation of the Self-Administration project, which was never implemented.
The Interim Administration for the Kurdish and Joint Areas Project	08 Sep 2013	Local agreement among Kurdish forces	The Kurdish National Council (KNC) The Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Agreement on forming a joint local governance body	Failed; the PYD unilaterally established the Democratic Self-Administration.
Duhok	22 Oct 2014	Iraqi Kurdistan	The Kurdish National Council (KNC) The Democratic Union Party (PYD)	A Kurdish higher political authority that included the two negotiating parties plus independents.	The agreement didn't succeed because the PYD insisted on excluding the other parties from key administrative roles, such as security and economy.

Early in 2012, the two party consolidations that came to be represented by the Kurdish National Council and the People's Council of West Kurdistan signed an agreement of preliminary principles in order to create an atmosphere for trust-building, mutual recognition, and joint action and coordination. The negotiation process continued until June 2012, when the two parties signed the "Hawler 1 Agreement," which provided for the formation of a joint supreme body of the two councils "to coordinate political and diplomatic action and joint response, and to develop a unified political project focused on the domestic and national principles of the Kurdish nation in Syria."

The Kurdish forces that signed the Hawler Agreement continued negotiating the implementation mechanisms. It was agreed—in principle—to form a Kurdish supreme body that would act as a centralized entity or authority for the Kurdish parties in Syria, and three subcommittees to coordinate the management of daily affairs in Kurdish regions: the Security Committee, the Service Committee, and the Policy Committee.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Society Organization—representing the PYD and supported by its affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG)—had imposed military and security control over most Kurdish-presence areas in the country, especially in NES. This followed the elimination of all previously armed factions of the KNC, which had rejected military confrontation between the Kurds of Syria, and preferred to withdraw rather than risk endangering civilians.

As a result, organizations directly linked to or affiliated with the PYD became the most influential on the ground, weakening the presence of other Kurdish parties—especially the KNC parties, including Al-Parti. This led to renewed mistrust and the exchange of accusations between the parties, nearly canceling the Hawler 1 Agreement. In late November 2012, as an effort to salvage the agreement between the disputing parties—especially because the second Geneva Conference on Syria was approaching, requiring a collective representation and action by Kurdish forces—the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, gathered the Syrian Kurdish forces at Hawler again.

The Hawler 2 Agreement emphasized the stipulations from Hawler 1, and initiated a negotiation process between all parties to establish self-administration for areas controlled by forces loyal to Kurdish parties in Northeast Syria and in Afrin. Negotiations lasted for several months, until the end of the summer of 2013.

In August 2013, Asia Al-Abdullah, the co-chair of the PYD, announced that negotiations to form a local administration for the region had passed to the second stage, during which a legislative council would be formed with the task of establishing the Autonomous Administration. On 8 September 2013, the KNC and the People's Council of West Kurdistan signed an agreement in Qamishli city related to "The Interim Administration for the Kurdish and Joint Areas Project." However, the agreement did not last for long, as the KNC withdrew

from the understanding regarding the Autonomous Administration before the announcement in January 2014. This placed the Administration under the influence of just one party—the PYD and its subsidiary organizations.

In the fall of 2014, the advance of ISIS toward the Kurdish city of Kobanî (Ayn al-Arab), on the border with Turkey, posed a serious challenge to all Kurdish forces, especially after the advance of ISIS in neighborhoods within the city and the displacement of most of its residents, who were afraid that ISIS would massacre them. At the time, Kurdish forces tried to overcome their differences and Kobanî witnessed the entry of Peshmerga forces from Syria, a gathering of KNC forces who were retrained in Iraqi Kurdistan and unified into a Syrian Peshmerga as a reserve of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In that atmosphere, Kurdish forces held a meeting in the Iraqi Kurdistan city of Dohuk. An agreement was reached, providing for the establishment of a Kurdish supreme authority which would oversee the distribution of power between the two main parties, and would include Kurdish independents and parties outside the two main political organizations.

But the agreement did not last long. After removing the threat against Kobanî and liberating the city from ISIS, there was an almost complete break between the two parties. The KNC became representative of the Kurdish component within the Syrian National Coalition—the main Syrian opposition alliance. The PYD and the YPG became the main controllers in areas where the Democratic Autonomous Administration enjoyed influence and later became the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Today, the dialogue between Syrian Kurdish parties, under American auspices and direct French support, brings several basic issues raised in previous agreements to the forefront. The terms of the recently announced initial agreement on a Kurdish authority seem close to those agreed upon in Dohuk in 2014; the primary demands to be fulfilled in order to reach a stable and lasting agreement between the Kurdish political forces in Syria:

- The power-sharing principle
- Opening the way for political activity in NES for the various coalitions
- Stopping the encroachment of popular PYD/PKK organizations over the Kurdish opposition

In April 2019, rounds of negotiations began between the KNC and the Kurdish National Unity Parties (a political grouping of Kurdish parties led by the PYD). In late July 2019, the two coalitions announced an initial agreement preceded by the announcement and blessing of Mazloum Abdi, the commander of the SDF, and Eldar Khalil, a member of the PYD-affiliated Democratic Society Movement. Both men regarded the initial agreement at Dohuk as the

main reference for dialogue between the two parties.

The second round of dialogue reached an agreement on basic points before the end of September 2019, such as establishing a supreme Kurdish authority that would be responsible for Kurdish public policies in Syria and would supervise the work of the Autonomous Administration. It was clarified in a press conference that the two main parties would equally share 80% of the supreme authority's seats, while the remaining 20% of seats will be allocated to independents and minor Kurdish parties. Reaching these two agreements is considered vital in moving forward with the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue and achieving stability in the region.

The recent revival of the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue in Syria has resurfaced at a time when new players are seeking influence in NES. An agreement between the various Kurdish factions will lead to stabilization. But any new breakdown in the agreement, and the loss of any hope for reconciliation, could be incentive for those forces to fight more directly—which may further exacerbate the situation to the point where ending it politically may not be possible. This outcome should be strenuously avoided. The Recommendations section of this report provides proposals to aid the French authorities in attempting to incentivize the parties to reach an agreement.

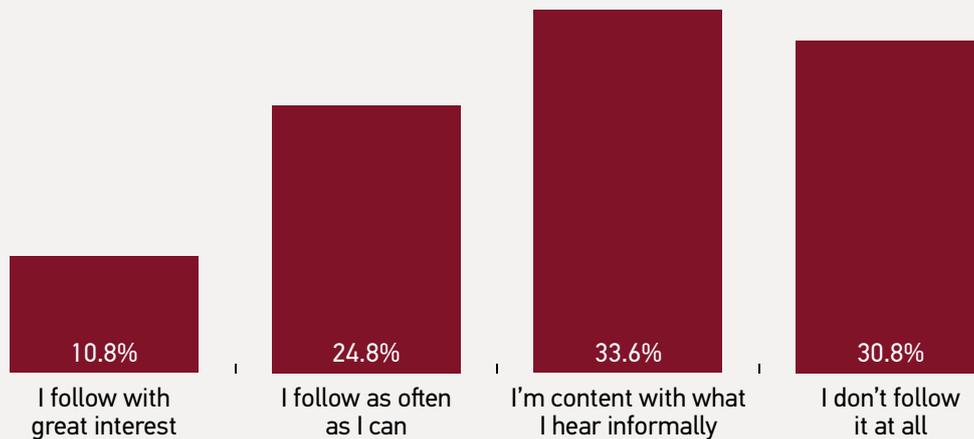
4. Research Findings

4.1 | Public Interest Requires Accessible Information

The rate at which people follow developments related to a political, social, or economic issue is the most common gauge of their interest and how much of an influence they consider it to be on their lives and livelihoods. The first three questions of our survey focused on the extent that respondents follow developments in this dialogue, the means they use to do so, and the amount of information they obtain.

Figure 5: Extent of Interest in Kurdish-Kurdish Dialogue Developments

To what extent are you following the current negotiations between the main Kurdish forces?



The percentages demonstrate the population's lack of avid interest in following developments related to the dialogue, or being content with casual sources, despite the importance of this dialogue in establishing a new form of government in the region.

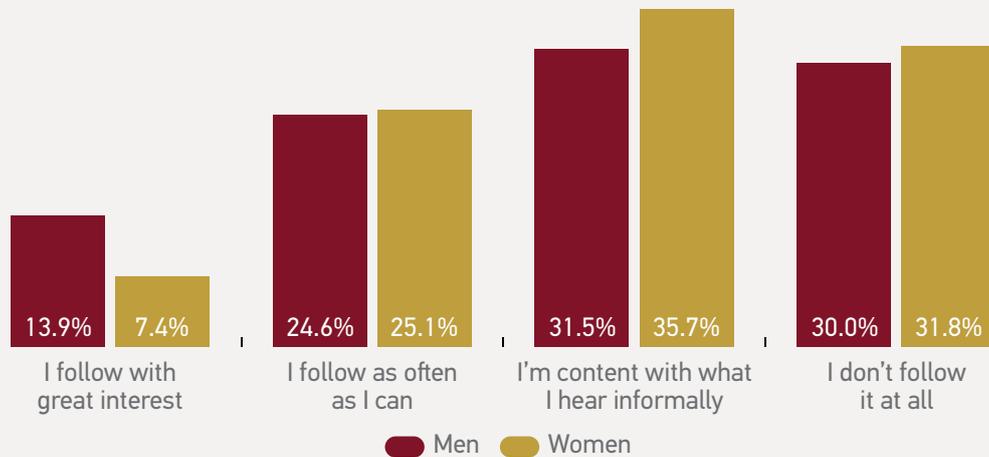
The fate of previous agreements helps explain the lack of interest; the public is cynical about the ability of political forces to maintain and stabilize a new agreement after the successive failures of previous agreements, and perhaps frustrated with the capacity of the current power structure of the Autonomous Administration to remake itself in favor of more pluralism and the inclusion of various parties in the decision-making process.

As a result, most of the population considers the current dialogue between the Kurdish forces and parties a matter for political elites, far from their daily life and not influencing them enough to bother paying much attention to it.

Looking at the subsets in this poll reveals that rates of follow-up and attention differ radically when looking at gender and at ethnic diversities in the region.

Figure 6: Extent of Interest in Kurdish-Kurdish Dialogue Developments Breakdown by Gender

To what extent are you following the current negotiations between the main Kurdish forces?



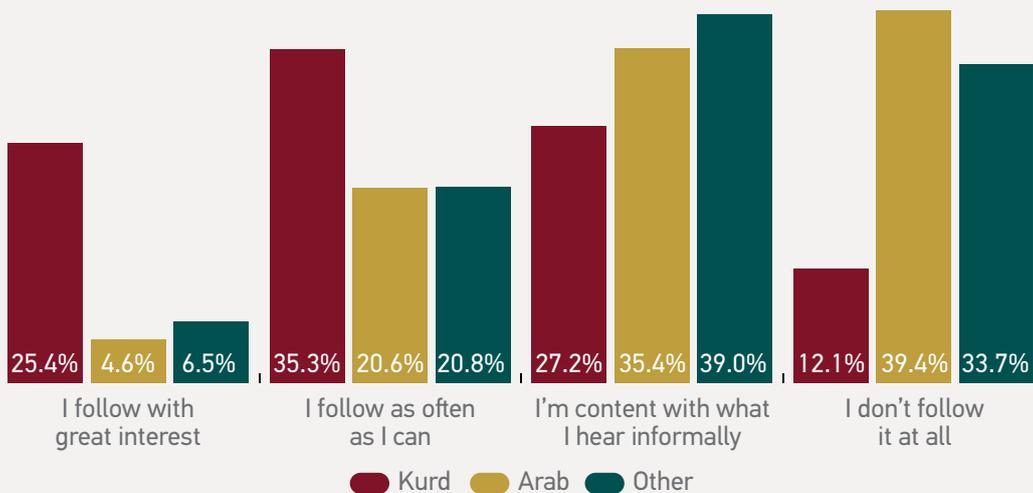
Although more men follow with great interest than women, attitudes tend to balance and equalize between the sexes in the rest of the survey, in terms of being content with informal community information sources.

The data may express an increasing frustration among women about the political developments in the region, which may stem from their perception that the representation of women in those forces is unfair, or that such representation may curtail their own political aspirations in the region's future politics and governance.

Looking at the ethnic background subset, a wider polarization appears.

Figure 7: Extent of Interest in Kurdish-Kurdish Dialogue Developments Breakdown by Ethnic Background

To what extent are you following the current negotiations between the main Kurdish forces?

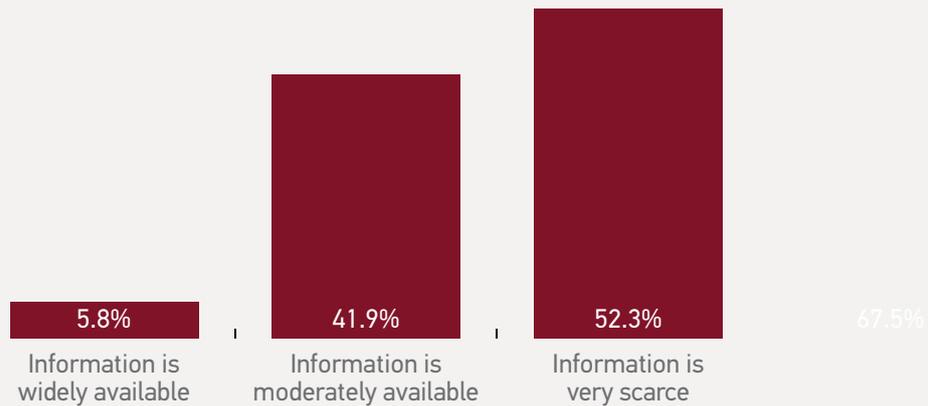


Here we see a clear gap between Kurdish Syrians and other components of the NES population. This may reflect an invisible national tension between those components; avoiding such tension must be one of the primary tasks of the Autonomous Administration.

Failure to do so could result in, among other things, an explosion of these differences in the future, threatening the security and stability of NES and Syria as a whole.

Figure 8: Perception of Public Availability of Negotiations Progress

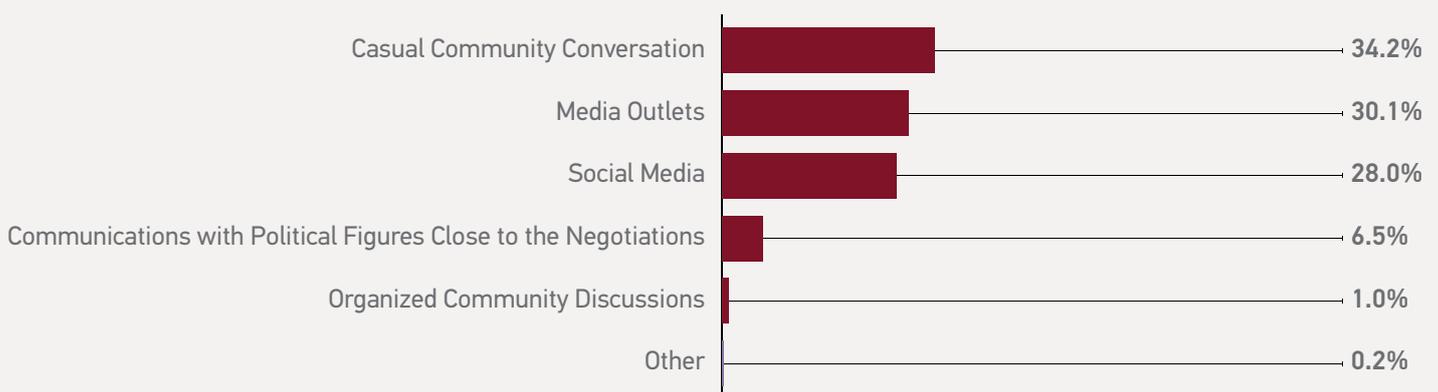
To what degree do you think information about the progress of the negotiations is available to the interested public?



Respondents' opinion reflects the tendency of the Kurdish political forces to not declare or provide detail about the latest developments and what agreements have been reached—perhaps for reasons of security, or from the risk of conflicting news in the media which may affect negotiations. However, the lack of accurate information is likely to affect residents' interest in the dialogue, which would, of course, affect their interaction with its outcomes.

Figure 9: Sources of Information About Kurdish-Kurdish Dialogue

What sources do you personally depend on to learn about the developments of the negotiations?



Traditional media and social media are still considered the broadest sources for communicating information. In the case of the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue, word-of-mouth also stands out, giving special importance to the role of the social sphere in mediating and voicing political changes in the region. This can be a positive opportunity to strengthen local frameworks, encouraging the population to engage more fully in and perhaps influence political discussions.

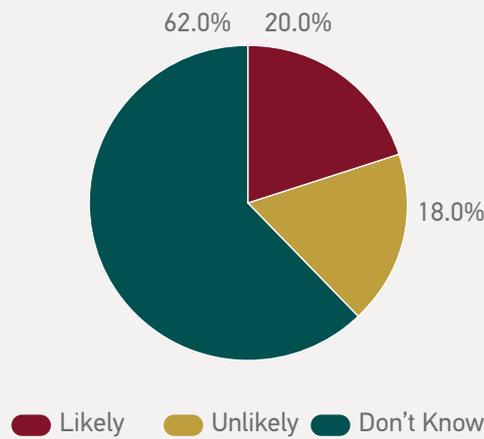
But this in turn carries risks in the form of transferring some of the social imbalances that apply to relations between women and men, and the preference that societies in the region usually give to men in such matters. These risks can be overcome with the promotion of positive discrimination through direct intervention and the creation of women-friendly spaces to discuss developments. This doesn't seem to have been achieved so far, for either women or men—only 1% of those interested got their information from organized community discussions.

4.2 | An Unclear Horizon

Our sample indicates a blurred expectation of whether a lasting, stable agreement can be reached. Whether this is from cynicism or an under-informed public is unclear.

Figure 10: Public Expectation of Dialogue Success

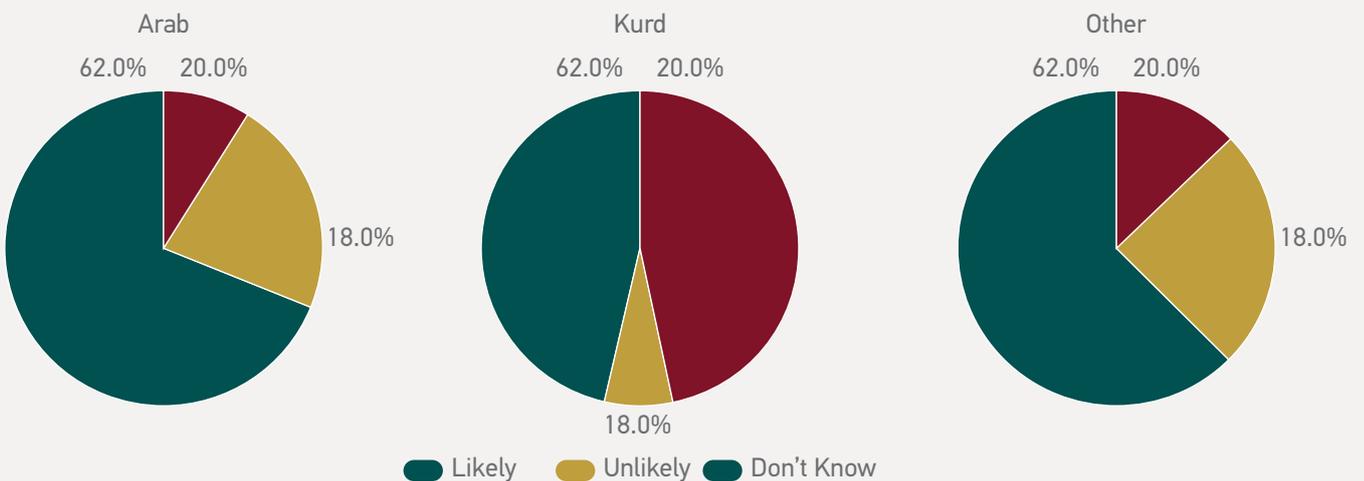
Do you believe that the negotiations will lead to a genuine agreement between the two parties?



Ethnic background clearly affects the respondents' choices, however.

Figure 11: Public Expectation of Dialogue Success Breakdown by Ethnic Background

Do you believe that the negotiations will lead to a genuine agreement between the two parties?

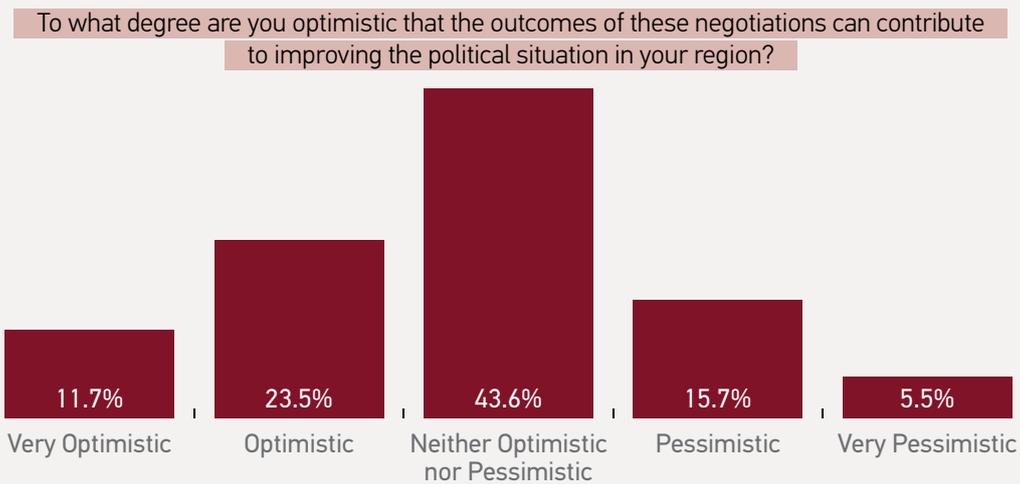


The extent of Arab interest in the current negotiations is reflected in the levels of optimism about the results of this dialogue, but other factors may play a role in Arabs' tendency to be pessimistic about reaching a Kurdish-Kurdish agreement—the lack of trust in one of the negotiating parties, or deeming this or that side as unable to reach a real political agreement. However, presently the contact between Arabs in NES and the KNC is rare, as a result of the expulsion of most KNC parties from Syria in 2012-2013.

4.3| Political Conditions in Syria and the Region Following the Agreement - Cautious Optimism

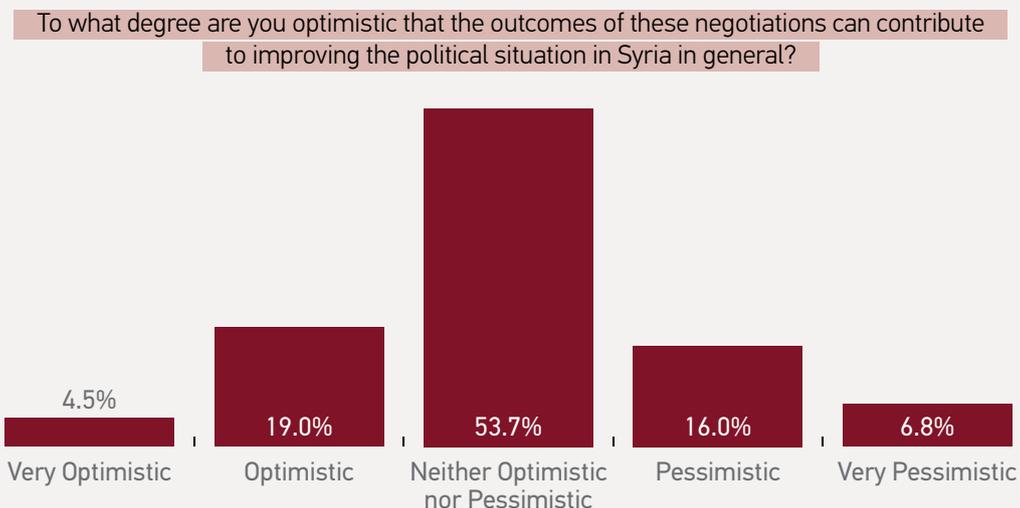
The studied sample reveals a slight optimism about the ability of the outcomes of the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue to improve the political situation in the Jazira region.

Figure 12: Optimism Level of Negotiations Improving Jazira Regional Politics



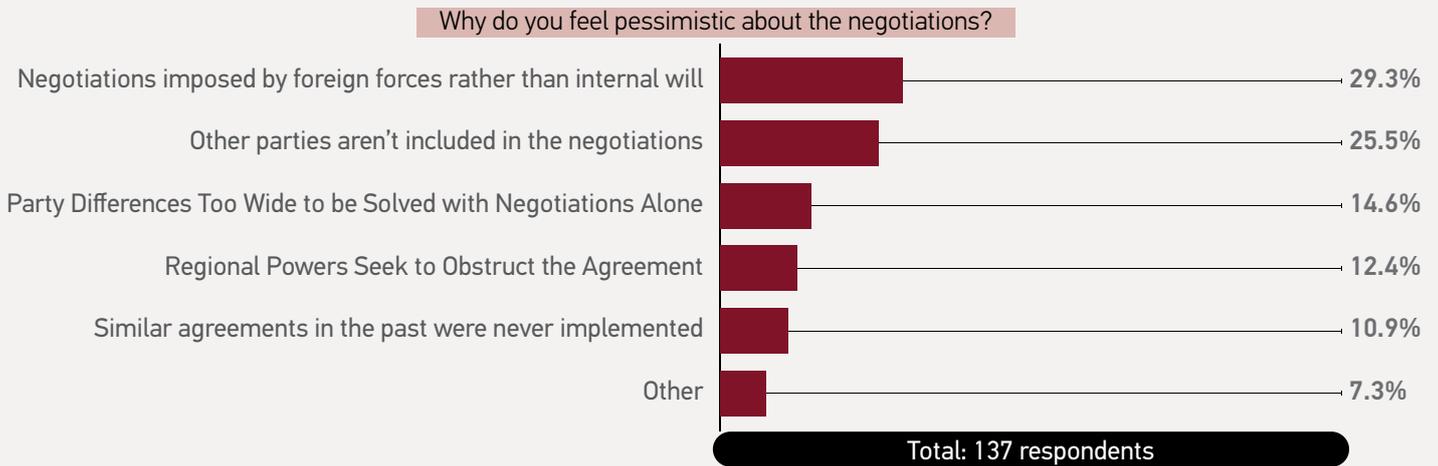
But uncertainty increases when relating the current dialogue to the overall political situation in Syria.

Figure 13: Optimism Level of Negotiations Improving Syrian National Politics



This mostly neutral opinion may be a result of the Syrian political track straying from the kitchen-table concerns of the average Syrian, as well as the vicious circle of outside influences from other countries interested in Syrian outcomes.

Figure 14: Reasons for Pessimism Regarding the Negotiations



Those expressing pessimism about the negotiations tend to explain their position by referring to the fact that the negotiations were imposed by external forces rather than by an internal will, and because of the lack of participation of various minor parties in the negotiations. This could be read as a referendum by these other NES parties on the refusal to include them in the dialogue. Indeed, some news has already leaked about the inclusion of Arab factions and other NES parties in the dialogue. But to date, no clear outcomes of the dialogue have effectively clarified the role of the other parties, especially since talk of a supreme Kurdish authority did not mention the inclusion of other NES components in that authority. A glaring omission, given that the supreme authority will supervise not only the decisions of the Kurdish parties, but the work of the Autonomous Administration and the SDF as well.

This is clearly evident when dividing the sample according to the variable of ethnic background in this question.

Figure 15: Reasons for Pessimism Regarding the Negotiations Breakdown by Ethnic Background

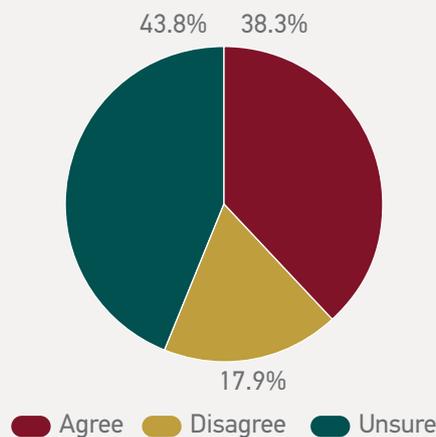


Four answers stand out; three were major reasons for two of our subset strata. The lack of other party inclusions and the perception that the talks have been imposed by outside forces mainly concern respondents of Arab and Other backgrounds. Kurdish respondents appear more concerned that the PYD-led Autonomous Administration doesn't want to share its current power (those of Other backgrounds tend to agree), and that the differences between the parties are simply too wide to be wholly solved across a bargaining table.

4.4| Questions About Facets of the NES Dialogue

Figure 16: Agreement Regarding Question 1

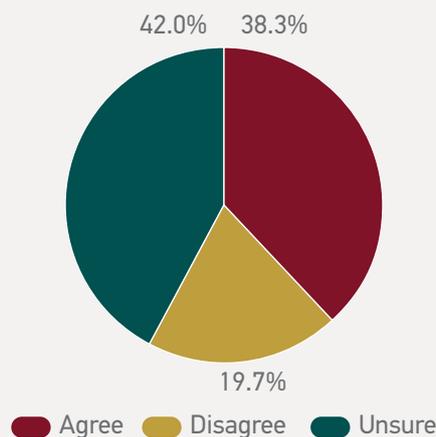
To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
 "This agreement is the last chance to spare the region future"



The sample shows cautious optimism when talking about this dialogue as the last chance before disasters occur in the region, which may underline the fear in the region's population about the consequences of dialogue failure. Conversely, positive outcomes that facilitate stabilization in the region may well experience wide acceptance.

Figure 17: Agreement Regarding Question 2

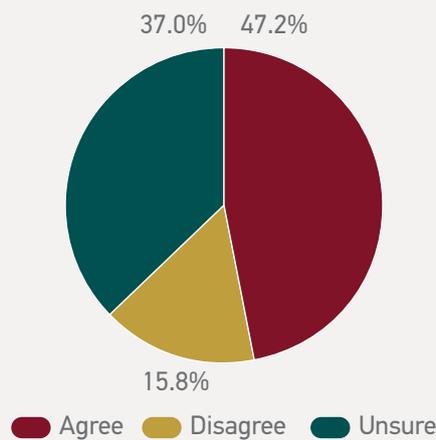
To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
 "The initial agreement between the two sides is promising and meets the aspirations of the public."



For the most part, respondents aren't sure if the negotiations promise what the public is pleading for in terms of a stable ruling body in NES, but considerably more see promise than do not.

Figure 18: Agreement Regarding Question 4

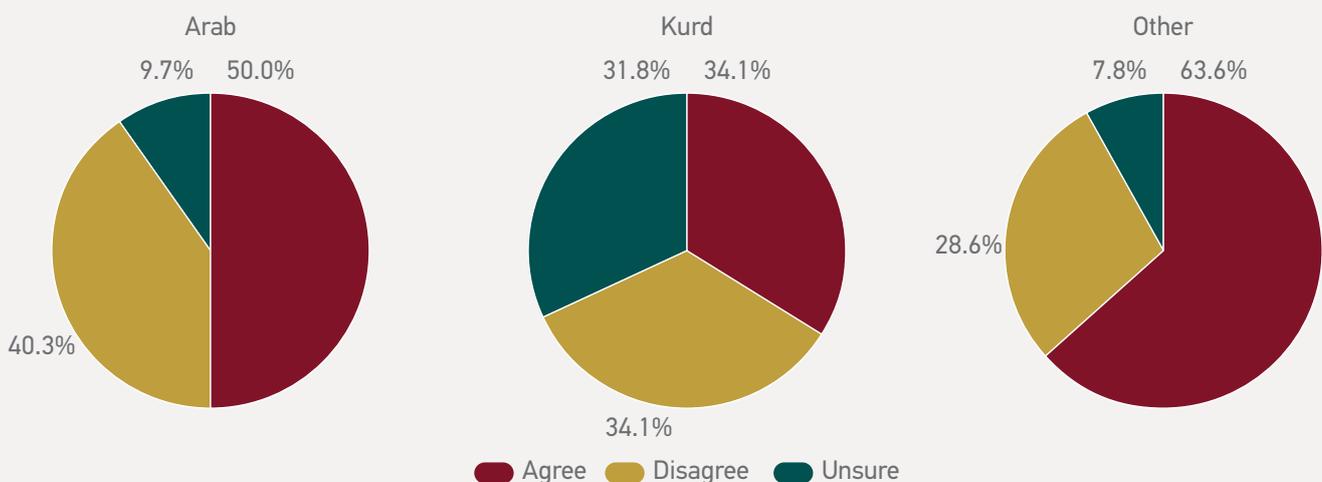
To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
 "The negotiations serve the interests of the sponsoring countries more than the interests of the Kurds in Syria."



A plurality of the study's respondents feel that the political dynamics caused by the negotiations do not entirely stem from the local interests of the Kurds. However, that differs when looking at the ethnic background subset.

Figure 19: Agreement Regarding Question 4 Breakdown by Ethnic Background

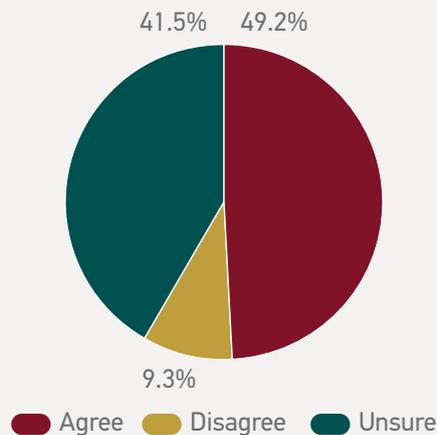
To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
 "The negotiations serve the interests of the sponsoring countries more than the interests of the Kurds in Syria."



Respondents of Other ethnic backgrounds show a high tendency to agree with this statement, Arabs about half, and the Kurdish respondents were split nearly evenly among the three options—meaning it's not a simple issue for them.

Figure 20: Agreement Regarding Question 5

To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
 “The success of the agreement means consolidating a special de facto political situation for the Kurds in Syria.”

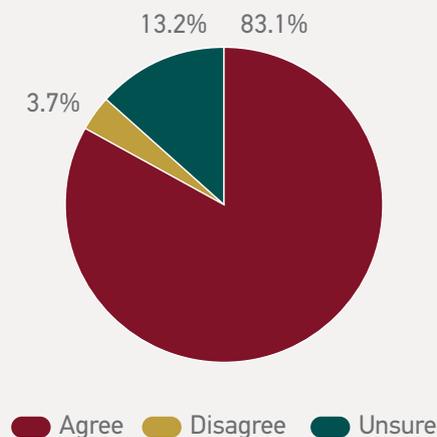


Almost half of the respondents agree there’s no standard solution to the broad coalition of political factions among Syrian Kurds. Very few are certain a standard solution would work. The background is complicated, the present is complicated, and so the solution will, by necessity, have to be at least somewhat convoluted.

This matches pretty much everything else we’ve covered in relation to the circumstances of Kurds in Syria—it’s complicated. And because it is, convincing a majority of residents in NES that peace and stability are attainable, especially in the face of so many unimplemented agreements over the years, is going to be equally complicated.

Figure 21: Agreement Regarding Question 6

To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
 “The ongoing negotiations need to include other components in the region.”



Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed that all components of NES must be included in future negotiations in order for a truly stable political landscape to be achieved. This position offers a positive starting point around which to gather all of the region's residents, and can be used as a metric for determining if the Kurdish-Kurdish talks are ready to go to the next level—the process of expanding the Autonomous Administration to include the rest of the parties.

The current political polarizations, as a result of a single political party assuming power throughout the entire region and its near-absolute dominance over the Autonomous Administration, have certainly contributed to public concerns. Strengthening of political diversity in the region and the participation of all parties in the Autonomous Administration—rather than their current exclusion—will alleviate these fears.

5. Recommendations

1. The French authorities need to pressure the negotiating parties to make meaningful concessions, as an agreement will ultimately result in stabilizing the country. The French Government might also choose to incentivize the negotiating parties by offering certain benefits upon the reaching (and maintaining) of an agreement. These benefits can include, for example, support for improving the region's oil refining capacity or administrative support to various civil institutions in NES.
2. Encourage the negotiating parties to take action to increase publicly available information on the developments of the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue in Syria, whether through regular channels of news outlets and social media or through extensive community discussions with the population, including discussions promoting the presence and participation of women and the most vulnerable by creating safe and friendly spaces for them. This will encourage residents to interact with the current negotiations, and raise the level of their ability to influence them.
3. Support independent regional media in order to provide balanced and credible information to the public, and pressure the Autonomous Administration to allow journalists from local media outlets to cover political affairs.
4. Press the Autonomous Administration to regulate the activities of informal organizations such as the Revolutionary Youth Movement and the Martyrs' Families in order to relieve tensions with the rest of the Kurdish political parties, who report harassment by these organizations as one of the reasons behind their exit from NES.
5. Craft a statement of intent by the French Foreign Ministry, addressing the general populace of NES, in support of the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue, in which France explains its reason for supporting the talks, with emphasis on the importance of these negotiations to the stability of the region, and its desire to support a stable NES as part of its role in supporting overall stability in Syria.



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