

Challenges to effective stabilisation assistance in northeastern Syria

September 2024

William Smith

Introduction

Following the territorial defeat of Daesh in 2019, western stabilisation assistance has enabled northeastern Syria (NES) to emerge as a pocket of relative stability amid the country's ongoing conflict. The West's partner in the fight against Daesh, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has established a de facto statelet: the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which governs an ethnically mixed population of some four million people.¹ However, this stability remains fragile and is contingent on the continued presence of the US-led anti-Daesh coalition. If the coalition were to withdraw, Turkey and the Syrian regime would likely seek to eradicate the AANES from the region. This could lead to renewed hostilities and instability in NES, along with increased displacement and migration and the conditions for malign actors, including Daesh and Iranian-backed militias, to expand their influence.

This policy brief examines the reasons why western support to NES has been successful in creating short-term stability but has failed to lay the foundations for longer-term peace, between the SDF and both its domestic and external

adversaries.² It identifies two factors as being particularly important. First, intense competition over control of the post-Daesh political order in NES undermines the prospects of deeper cooperation between the SDF and its domestic opponents, including rival Kurdish parties and Arab communities. These competing groups seek to instrumentalise external support to advance their own interests at the expense of their rivals, leading to a mismatch between the objectives of western interventions and those of local actors. Second, structural conditions of violent conflict – namely anarchy and uncertainty³ – disincentivise rivals from committing to peace in the absence of a credible, external guarantor.

By understanding the challenges faced by existing conflict-management interventions in NES, this research aims to provide actionable recommendations to policymakers for future policy and programming decisions. It is based on extensive primary research, which comprised key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted both in NES with local stakeholders, and remotely with policymakers, practitioners, and subject-matter experts.

1 To ensure brevity, reference is made throughout to the SDF and AANES as the de facto authorities in NES. The PYD and its armed wing, the YPG, are the dominant political force within the NES authorities.

2 'Domestic' in this context refers to actors located inside the current geographical boundaries of AANES. 'External' refers to conflict actors in other parts of Syria, including the Damascus regime, as well as international actors.

3 As defined in international relations theory, 'anarchy' refers to a situation where there is no higher authority to reliably and efficiently prevent conflict between different actors in a given system.

Local actor interests, incentives, and perceptions

The SDF and AANES are the latest iteration of the Kurdish PYD's (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat) political project in Syria. An offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the PYD and its armed wing the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel) aim to protect the cultural and political rights of Syria's Kurdish minority, and to implement the ideology of PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. In the early years of the conflict, the PYD established itself as the dominant force in Syrian Kurdish politics, and has pursued a 'third way', distancing itself from both the mainstream Syrian opposition and the regime, with which it has largely avoided armed confrontation. In the wake of regime retrenchment in 2014, the PYD declared self-rule in three non-contiguous cantons. In 2015, encouraged by the US-led coalition, the YPG established the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as a nominally multi-ethnic force, with which it captured territory in Arab-majority areas from Daesh. AANES was formally established in 2018, with the SDF co-opting and forming tactical alliances with local elites to govern areas outside of the Kurdish heartland.⁴

NES is part of a complex, cross-border conflict system. The SDF's external adversaries, Turkey, the Syrian regime, Iran, and Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), cultivate ties with local proxies in NES and seek to exploit community grievances. This is also the case with Daesh, which pursues a low-level insurgency centred on eastern Deir ez-Zor. The SDF has meanwhile sought to hedge between the US-led coalition and Russia, seeking military assistance from both and a block to further Turkish military incursions⁵.

Key research findings

Views on western stabilisation assistance

Western support is seen as having delivered crucial short-term stability in NES, preventing attacks by external adversaries and a breakdown of domestic order, while ensuring the return of the basic means of survival. According to one NES official, without the coalition's presence, "there would have been fighting between Kurds and [other] Kurds, and between Kurds and Arabs".⁶

There is broad support across key political divides in NES for continued western engagement and collective fears about a coalition withdrawal, which would be interpreted locally as a precursor to a Syrian regime or Turkish incursion. As one expert commented, "if the US said it is leaving tomorrow, I wouldn't be surprised if we saw protests from people demanding that it stay, even from people who hate AANES".⁷

However, there is also a general frustration around the lack of a clearly defined political strategy. Stabilisation support has largely avoided the complex issue of long-term governance arrangements for NES. This is seen as problematic by both supporters and opponents of the SDF, with each seeking what interviewees referred to as a "political intervention" on their terms.⁸

The challenge of domestic bargaining

NES is deeply fragmented along communal lines, however both the authorities and community members tend to play down divisions. They often acknowledge that local conflict is at its core a competition over resources, but frequently frame the grievances in ethnic terms. In addition to deep-seated political and ideological differences with Kurdish parties sitting under the umbrella of the KRG-aligned Kurdish National Council (KNC),

4 For background on the PYD, see Harriett Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria*, London: I.B. Tauris (2019); Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, 'The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship', in G.R.V. Stansfield and M. Shareef (eds), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, 275-287, London: Hurst (2017).

5 May Darwich, 'Alliance politics in the post-2011 Middle East: Advancing theoretical and empirical perspectives', *Mediterranean Politics* 26, No.5 (2021).

6 Interview with AANES official, Qamishly, July 2023.

7 Telephone interview with Syrian researcher, October 2023.

8 Interview with NES official, Qamishly, July 2023; focus group discussion participant, Raqqa, July 2023.

the SDF has faced significant opposition from the majority Arab population. The NES authorities are often dismissive of other political traditions in NES, with one official arguing that “democracy is a new idea for the Arabs”,⁹ while Arab respondents feel marginalised and view the SDF as “Kurdish colonisers”¹⁰ and complain of discrimination. Arab communities are deeply fragmented politically, with fluid tactical support for AANES, Turkish-backed opposition groups, the regime, and narrow tribal affiliations.

However, there is an overarching sense of resentment among much of the Arab population about being ruled by a project perceived to be secular and Kurdish, which has resulted in periodic episodes of unrest.

Increasing communal fragmentation is driven by the anarchic conditions of war whereby the collapse in Syrian state control has left individual communities responsible for their own security. In the words of one respondent, “the nation is gone. It’s like a house where the father has left, leaving each son sitting in his own room and having loyalty only to that room”.¹¹ Given that each community is acting in “its own narrow interests”,¹² individuals have become more aware of, and sensitive to, communal differences.

Fragmentation is exacerbated by efforts to politicise collective memory. Residents are aware that Arab-Kurdish tensions are, at least in part, the legacy of the regime’s divide-and-rule policies. Political entrepreneurs are exploiting the collective memory of communities to ‘ethnicise’ contemporary political disputes.¹³ This includes the Kurdish resentment around the resettlement of Arab families in the 1970s aimed at reducing the Kurdish demographic ‘threat’.

Competing groups and communities seek to instrumentalise or capture external support to advance their own interests. As political settlements analysis would predict, rival groups in NES view themselves as being in a ‘winner-takes-all’ competition.¹⁴ The SDF is seeking political recognition and for stabilisation assistance to be channelled directly through AANES so as to consolidate its position.¹⁵ Arab respondents meanwhile call for what they consider to be a “just”¹⁶ intervention that reflects their demographic strength, based on the idea that “in a democracy, the majority should be the government”¹⁷

The challenge of commitment problems

Even where rival group interests coincide – e.g. in preventing a regime takeover – pervasive uncertainty about the future undermines the prospects of peaceful dealmaking. NES faces a commitment problem;¹⁸ in the absence of a reliable third-party guarantor, adversaries cannot credibly not renege on peace agreements, and instead revert to violence. This is because all sides know that the SDF’s relative power will decline significantly if the coalition withdraws. Residents who believe that the regime will ultimately return to NES - or that Turkey will invade - are incentivised to hedge and avoid closer engagement with AANES, for fear of “burning their boats”.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the SDF will not grant greater political rights to an Arab population that it believes is committed to use its demographic strength to turn against AANES and the Kurdish minority.

The commitment problem also makes future conflict more likely between the SDF and both Damascus and Ankara, and precludes any possibility of the group breaking with the PKK. The SDF favours a negotiated deal with Damascus,

9 Interview with NES official, Qamishly, July 2023.

10 Interview with CSO head, Raqqa, July 2023.

11 Interview with CSO head, Raqqa, July 2023.

12 Interview with CSO head, Raqqa, July 2023.

13 Barry R.Posen, ‘The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict’, *Global Politics and Society*, 35, no.1, (1993).

14 Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand and Patrick Meehan, “Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict” (UK Stabilisation Unit, 2018); Naazneen H. Barma, *The Peacebuilding Puzzle: Political Order in Post-Conflict States*, (2016).

15 Interview with AANES official, Raqqa, July 2023.

16 Focus group discussion participant, Raqqa, July 2023.

17 Interview with Syrian employee of stabilisation programme, Raqqa, July 2023.

18 See, Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, Princeton University Press: (2002).

19 Interview with NES official, Qamishly, July 2023.

but cannot agree to disband as this would remove the only deterrent to a regime attack. Similarly, a settlement with Turkey requires the SDF to affect a clear break with the PKK, a move described by one expert as being “potentially suicidal” in the absence of a long-term, external guarantor.²⁰

The commitment problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in war, the true intentions of all sides are ultimately unknowable. Actors therefore rely on historical memory as a guide to likely future behaviour.²¹ The withdrawal of US troops in 2019 and Washington’s mixed messaging on the nature of its support to the SDF weakens the latter’s negotiating position. Similarly, Russia and the regime’s failure to abide by the terms of previous ‘reconciliation’ deals with Syrian rebels undermines trust in the feasibility of a political deal.²²

The disconnect between western stabilisation support and the absence of a coherent political strategy also creates perverse incentives for AANES. As one expert notes, the message this sends to the SDF is that “you could be absolutely fantastic as an administration and implement good governance, but we still won’t recognise you; conversely if you behave badly, we won’t stop working with you”.²³ This encourages a vicious cycle of poor administration and popular discontent, with officials incentivised “to make as much money as possible as you don’t know when you’ll leave”.²⁴ Carefully planned and adequately resourced mediation and dialogue could play a useful role, both in terms of conveying the UK Government’s messaging to interlocutors in NES and in building connectivity between conflict actors. However, as with other forms of engagement, HMG should be aware of the risk of local actors seeking to instrumentalise mediation and dialogue efforts.

The absence of a clear vision for the political future of NES has led to a widespread sense of hopelessness and enabled the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. People believe the fate of the region is entirely in the hands of external actors and see the West’s ambiguous stance as reflecting a desire to divide and weaken both NES and Syria. In Arab areas, the claim that

life was better under Daesh²⁵ is a concerning reminder of how the hard-won gains of stabilisation assistance can be easily undermined.

Policy implications and recommendations

Several important policy implications arise from this research:

- **A withdrawal of coalition forces would almost certainly result in the collapse of AANES in its current form,** prompting a race between Ankara and Damascus to fill the void, limiting the ability of the West to prevent the expansion of Daesh and other malign actors in NES.
- **Without deeper engagement by western partners, underpinned by a coherent political strategy, the conditions for long-term peace and stability are unlikely to emerge.** In the absence of a credible external guarantor, there is little hope that the SDF will achieve what it sees as an acceptable deal with Damascus or that it will fully break from the PKK. Externally, the SDF will continue to hedge between Russia and the West, and prioritise a security-driven approach to governing NES, further weakening the hand of pragmatic voices in the movement. Other groups in NES, including Arab partners of the SDF, will also hedge, fearing the likelihood of future AANES collapse.
- **Simply increasing the scale of stabilisation support, or focussing on specific thematic issues such as good governance, will not address these structural challenges, but there are things policymakers can do to make marginal improvements in the short-term.** Conflict actors will continue efforts to instrumentalise external support to increase their relative power and the SDF will resist changes it fears would be seen as a concession or sign of weakness. Interventions that seek to work ‘with the grain’ of actor incentives can help to manage tensions and reduce flashpoints (see next point).

20 Telephone interview with western expert on Syria, November 2023.

21 Robert Powell, ‘War as a Commitment Problem’, *International Organization* 60, No.1 (2006).

22 See, PYD (2020a), *Badran jiya kurd: nahnu lasna ma’ tas’id ‘askariy ‘ala khalfiyat sira’atin duyaliya wa iqlimiyya*, Partiya Yeketiya Demokrat, 8 January Available online: <https://pydrojava.org/ن-حن-درک-ای-ج-ن-اردب> (Accessed 4 March 2024).

23 Interview with humanitarian official, Hassakeh, July 2023.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Focus group discussion, Raqqa, July 2023.

- **A pervasive sense of uncertainty about the future undermines the gains achieved through stabilisation.** In addition to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, ethnic and communal divisions risk becoming more entrenched in NES, providing opportunities for malign actors to exploit.

Drawing on these implications, this paper offers the following policy recommendations:

- 1. Revisit the logic of engaging in NES.** Do western governments a) see this as a tactical intervention to contain Daesh and other malign actors but not necessarily to address root causes of conflict? or b) seek to leverage engagement to support a political solution in Syria? Answering this will determine whether recommendation 2 or 3 is most appropriate.
- 2. Leverage the coalition's presence to begin a political process that could find a more sustained, negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis.** Assuming option b) applies, developing and articulating a plan for how the coalition can remain over the mid- to long-term would help the SDF to address the 'commitment problem' that undermines the prospects of a negotiated deal with Damascus (and Ankara). The presence of a credible, external guarantor would encourage the regime to re-think its current maximalist negotiating position with the northeast.
- 3. Conduct scenario planning for a coalition drawdown.** Assuming option a) applies, policymakers should immediately plan for the likely implications of a withdrawal, particularly given the possible implications of the upcoming US elections. Western governments should learn the lessons of the aftermath of the Russian-backed regime takeover of southern Syria in 2019, which exposed their Syrian partners to significant risk.
- 4. Regardless of long-term strategic aims, prioritise actions in the short-term that reduce the likelihood of a flare-up of tensions in NES.** Western governments can encourage the SDF to curb practices that provoke unrest, particularly in Arab-majority areas, including the use of the AANES education curriculum in schools, limited transparency of administrative decisions, forced conscription of the civilian population, and stringent security measures in the name of counter-terrorism. To do this, governments should explore options to increase direct engagement with NES officials.

- 5. Adopt a clear, consistent, and comprehensive messaging strategy.** Local actors in NES see current messaging as confusing and contradictory, and unable to reach a broad cross-section of the population. Repeated assurances that the coalition does not plan to withdraw seem unconvincing given the longer-term uncertainty of its mission. An approach to communications that can articulate a clearer link between existing interventions and a desired political endgame in Syria, particularly one that engages communities that do not have direct access to western officials in NES, can help to fill a gap that at present allows the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

About the author

William Smith is an independent consultant and researcher with over 10 years' experience working on Syria, including as research lead for two UK-funded stabilisation programmes. He has broader policy and research experience as a UK government Deployable Civilian Expert (DCE), working as lead analyst for HMG's Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS) for the Middle East peace process and as a stabilisation adviser with the UK's deployment to the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali.

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This publication is a product of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

This research is part of XCEPT's workstream on how conflicts connect across borders. It is one of several awards supported by the XCEPT Research Fund to investigate multi-actor interventions in cross-border conflict settings.

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