



Challenges to effective stabilisation assistance in northeastern Syria

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September 2024

XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

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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@xceptresearch.org.

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1. Introduction

Following the territorial defeat of Islamic State (Daesh) in 2019, western assistance has helped northeastern Syria emerge as a zone of relative stability in the country's deadlocked civil war.¹ The West's partner in the fight against Daesh, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has been able to establish a de facto statelet covering almost a third of Syria's territory with a population of approximately four million people.² The stability that has been achieved is fragile, however, and contingent on the continued presence of US-led forces.³ Internally, key constituencies in the northeast – particularly amongst the majority Arab population – remain distrustful of the ideological and ethnic underpinnings of the SDF project, and their grievances provide an opportunity for malign actors to exploit. Meanwhile, the SDF's external adversaries, namely Turkey and the government of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, have vowed to end the group's experiment in autonomy by force, raising the prospect of a return to violent conflict once western forces depart.

This paper examines why western support to northeastern Syria has been successful in enabling short-term stability but has struggled to lay the foundations for longer-term peace. It explores how the interaction between external interventions and local actor interests, incentives, and perceptions can shape and constrain the prospects for a sustainable end to violence. The research argues that two factors in particular are important. First, key actors in the northeast, including the SDF, its Kurdish political opponents, and local Arab elites, see themselves as being

part of a winner-takes-all competition for control of the post-Daesh political order, which disincentivises longer-term cooperation. Second, even where these competing groups are able to find common ground – for example, in a shared desire to prevent further Turkish incursions into Syrian territory – cooperation is undermined by a profound sense of uncertainty about the future, in particular over the continued presence of US forces. This uncertainty limits the extent to which rivals feel they can trust one another's ability to uphold promises. As a result, local conflict actors have often sought to instrumentalise external interventions as a means of strengthening their respective power and bargaining status, rather than see them as potential pathways to peace. Second, even though rival groups have cooperated tactically on issues of mutual interest, they have held off on committing to a more comprehensive agreement over the future of the northeast, instead jockeying for position in advance of what they anticipate will ultimately be an externally-imposed settlement of the Syrian conflict.

With renewed uncertainty over the near-term future of the US military deployment in Syria, Washington and its partners face a dilemma over their approach to the northeast. There is limited domestic appetite for either an open-ended military commitment or a more engaged, politically-driven approach to Syria that could advance a sustainable political agreement. Yet, without such an agreement, a US withdrawal will likely result in the collapse of a trusted counter-terrorism partner in the form of the SDF and conditions that favour a more pronounced Daesh resurgence. Faced with these challenges, is 'short-term' stability the best scenario that

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- 1 For background on the relative stability of northeastern Syria see, for example, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*, Middle East Report No.190 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018); *Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, Middle East Report No.204, (Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2019).
 - 2 Given an absence of census data, details of the demographic make-up of northeastern Syria are sketchy. Fabrice Balanche estimates the area is home to approximately one million Kurds, one-and-a-half to two million Arabs, and tens of thousands of Christians of various denominations (including Arab Christians). See Fabrice Balanche, *Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat*, (Paris: Group D'Etudes Géopolitiques, 2023).
 - 3 The United States has an estimated 900 soldiers in Syria, primarily in SDF areas, as part of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), the military component of the global coalition operating in both Iraq and Syria. See: USG, *Operation Inherent Resolve*, (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/WHO-WE-ARE/>

western policymakers can hope for? And, if a fundamentally different strategy in Syria is ultimately not possible, what else – if anything – can stabilisation efforts offer to mitigate potential flashpoints and make improvements on the margins?

2. Background and context

The evolution of western stabilisation assistance in Syria

Western stabilisation assistance in Syria is today primarily focussed on the country's SDF-controlled northeast, in territory previously held by Daesh. But in the years following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, support was provided exclusively to areas controlled by the mainstream opposition, a collection of predominantly Sunni Arab groups fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁴ Initially, this assistance aimed to build the capacity of the opposition to administer territory in preparation for the expected collapse of the Assad government, and involved support to local governance, policing, education, media, and civil society. But concerns over the growing influence of Islamist factions within the opposition, and a reversal in the FSA's fortunes following Russia's military intervention in 2015, saw a gradual decline in western funding, which largely dried up after Damascus retook key areas of northern and southern Syria in 2018.

By then, western governments had already long rethought their priorities in Syria. With the

emergence of Daesh as a major transnational threat from 2014 onwards, the US concluded that FSA groups lacked the cohesion, capacity, and will to re-direct their efforts away from the fight against Assad, and began providing support to the People's Protection Units (*Yeketiye Parastina Gel, YPG*),⁵ the armed wing of the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yeketiye Demokrat, PYD*). This support expanded in 2016 when, with Washington's encouragement, the YPG established the SDF as a multi-ethnic umbrella group to expand the anti-Daesh campaign into Arab-majority areas, within which it is the dominant faction. This rebranding exercise aimed to secure buy-in from non-Kurdish communities, and to sidestep the objections of the Turkish government, which has fought a decades-long counterinsurgency against the PYD's sister party, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK*).⁶

In the wake of costly, and ultimately unsuccessful, interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the partnership with the YPG-SDF was seen as exemplifying a new approach to enable the US to work 'by, with, and through' local actors to achieve security objectives, without having to commit significant ground troops itself.⁷ From the start, however, and in contrast to earlier stabilisation support to FSA groups, western engagement with the YPG-SDF struggled to articulate long-term political objectives. The then US president Barack Obama described the partnership as 'temporary, transactional, and tactical', and beyond a shared goal of defeating Daesh, the divergent interests of the West and those of the YPG-SDF began to emerge.⁸ In particular, and despite the initial hopes of the YPG-SDF, western governments have not provided diplomatic recognition of the de facto autonomous northeast, nor enabled the group to join the UN-sponsored sponsored

4 Frances Z. Brown, *Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018.)

5 Barak Barfi, *Ascent of the PYD and the SDF*, (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016).

6 Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, 'Dissecting the YPG: Operations and Strategies as the Defender of Rojava', LSE Middle East Centre, (2016).

7 Michael Ratney, 'Post-Conflict Stabilization: What Can We Learn from Syria?' *PRISM* 4:7, (2018); Michael Knights and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies: The US-Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

8 Dylan Maguire, 'A Perfect Proxy? The United States-Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership', *The Proxy Wars Project*, (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs, 2020).

political process by overcoming an effective Turkish veto.

The development of the PYD political project in Syria

The SDF, and the de facto statelet it has established, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), are the latest iteration of the political project of the PYD, which was formed in 2003 as an offshoot of the PKK.⁹ The PYD aims to implement the ideology of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, which has moved away from its Marxist-Leninist origins and calls for Kurdish nationhood to espouse ‘democratic confederalism’, a theory of stateless democracy that envisions self-organised communities operating through a network of communes and local councils.¹⁰

The first PYD governance structures emerged in 2012, when government forces withdrew from Kurdish-majority towns in northern Syria to focus their efforts on fighting the FSA. Self-rule was then declared two years later in three non-contiguous cantons: Afrin and Kobane in Aleppo governorate, and Jazira to the east, centred on the towns of Hassakeh and Qamishly in Hassakeh governorate.¹¹ PYD ambitions to unify the cantons in a single geographical unit and secure access to the Mediterranean Sea ultimately failed, but

from 2016 the project was able to expand beyond its Kurdish heartland on the back of a successful military campaign against Daesh, and was formally rebranded as AANES in 2018.¹²

In Arab-majority areas such as Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Manbij, AANES has sought to bolster its control by co-opting local elites, drawn primarily from Arab tribes, into its governance structures.¹³ But the PYD continues to exercise centralised control through a network of party cadres (in Arabic *kawader*, singular *kadro*) who exercise unofficial decision-making authority at different levels of the AANES hierarchy.¹⁴ The *kawader* are often drawn from the ranks of PKK veterans who have spent significant time at the group’s base in the Qandil Mountains in Iraq and include non-Syrian Kurds.¹⁵

Ethnic and communal dynamics in northeastern Syria

A further obstacle to western engagement moving beyond the ‘temporary, transactional and tactical’ has been a reluctance to be drawn into the local politics of the northeast and its complex ethnic and communal divisions. PYD aspirations are driven by a history of discrimination by the central government against Syria’s Kurdish minority, which accounted for roughly ten percent of the country’s pre-war population.¹⁶ Adopting Arab

9 Michiel Leezenberg, ‘The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: The Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16:4, (2016); Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, (London: I.B. Tauris 2019). Zeynep Kaya and Robert Lowe, ‘The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship’, in Stansfield, G.R.V. (ed.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (London: Hurst, 2017); Burcu Özçelik, ‘Explaining the Kurdish Democratic Union Party’s Self Governance Practices in Northern Syria, 2012-18’, *Government and Opposition* 55:4 (2020).

10 Crucial for this discussion is the fact that Öcalanist ideology includes a communitarian vision of ethnic groups – Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians etc – forming distinct ‘organic societies’. See, Leezenberg, ‘The ambiguities of democratic autonomy’.

11 International Crisis Group, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria*, Middle East Report No.151, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2014).

12 Sardar Mullah Darwish, ‘Kurds step up efforts to form self-government in northeast Syria’, *Al-Monitor* (2018).

13 Haian Dukhan, ‘Critical analysis of attempts to co-opt the tribes in Syria’, *LSE Middle East Centre*, (2019).

14 International Crisis Group, *The PKK’s Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, Middle East Report No.176, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017).

15 Elizabeth Tsurkov and Esam al-Hassan, *Kurdish-Arab Power Struggle in Northeastern Syria*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019); Leezenberg, ‘The ambiguities of democratic autonomy’.

16 David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

“PYD aspirations are driven by a history of discrimination by the central government against Syria’s Kurdish minority, which accounted for roughly ten percent of the country’s pre-war population.

nationalism as its official ideology, Damascus first denied citizenship to tens of thousands of Kurds in the 1960s and, among other things, has banned the use of the Kurdish language in education.¹⁷ And while it has portrayed itself as a protector of Syria’s minorities, the Baath Party, in power since 1963, has pursued a policy of ethnic and sectarian ‘divide and rule’, in the hope of preventing the emergence of a broad-based opposition.¹⁸ This has been particularly evident in the northeast, which given its heterogenous population and proximity to both Turkey and Iraq has been viewed with concern from Damascus as a potential target for external interference.¹⁹ The result has been an ‘ethnisation’ of communal relations and mutual suspicion between Arabs, Kurds, and other groups, with each community drawing on collective memories of historical grievances.²⁰ For example, concerns over the growing influence of Arab-led Islamist factions undermined support among Kurdish communities for the FSA in the

early years of the Syrian war.²¹ Similarly, for the Assyrian and Armenian communities, Daesh’s persecution of religious minorities in the northeast revived memories of the massacres committed by the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century, and has spurred Christian outward migration from Syria.²²

PYD governance has, in turn, fuelled resentment among Arab communities over issues including forced conscription into the YPG-SDF, and heavy-handed security measures in the name of counter-Daesh operations.²³ These have sparked periodic episodes of violent confrontation, most notably in mid-2023 with an uprising by tribal fighters in Deir ez-Zor prompted by the YPG-SDF’s arrest of its own local proxy, the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council Ahmad al-Khubayl, or ‘Abu Khawla’.²⁴ Syria’s Kurdish community is meanwhile deeply divided between supporters of the PYD and the political parties that sit under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), and repeated attempts to broker an agreement between the two, including with US and French mediation, have broken down.²⁵

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- 17 The number of Kurds denied Syrian citizenship had risen to as high as 300,000 people prior to the onset of the conflict. See Robert Lowe, *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered*, (London: Chatham House, 2006).
- 18 Heikko Wimmen, *Divisive Rule: Sectarianism and Power Maintenance in the Arab Spring: Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria*, (Berlin: SWP Research Paper, 2014).
- 19 Kheder Khaddour, *How Regional Security Concerns Uniquely Constrain Governance in Northeastern Syria*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017).
- 20 For a discussion of the history and greivences of Arab and Kurdish communities in the region, see Tsurkov and al-Hassan, *Kurdish-Arab Power Struggle in Northeastern Syria*.
- 21 Balanche, *Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat*.
- 22 Naures Atto, ‘The Death Throes of Indigenous Christians in the Middle East: Assyrians Living under the Islamic State’, in Cabrita, J. et al. *Relocating World Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).
- 23 International Crisis Group, *Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa’s Shaky Recovery*, Middle East Report No. 229, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2021).
- 24 On the 2023 uprising see, Amer Mohamed, *After an uprising and violent crackdown, Syria’s Deir ez-Zor is at a critical juncture*, (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Center, 2023); Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The SDF’s Insurgency Challenge in Deir ez-Zor*, (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2023).
- 25 Sirwan Kajjo, *Prospects for Syrian Kurdish Unity: Assessing Local and Regional Dynamics*, (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2020); Kayla Koontz, *Borders Beyond Borders: The Many (Many) Kurdish Political Parties of Syria*, (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2019).

A complex, cross-border conflict system

Western engagement has been further complicated by the fact that northeast Syria exists within a complex, cross-border conflict system involving multiple local, regional, and international actors. This includes Turkey, Russia, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, Iran and a number of Iranian-backed militias, as well as the Syrian government, all of whom pursue transactional and often changeable relations with AANES and the YPG-SDF.²⁶

Turkey, for example, sees the existence of a de facto Kurdish statelet on its border as empowering the PKK and potentially destabilising its own Kurdish-majority southeast.²⁷ Having vowed to eradicate AANES, it has already driven the YPG-SDF away from its border in three separate military operations between 2017 and 2019.²⁸ Peace talks between Ankara and the PKK, and hopes that the PYD would split from its sister organisation, fell apart in 2015 amid concerns that western support had strengthened the Öcalanist movement to an intolerable degree.²⁹ Damascus is also hostile to the continued existence of AANES but has found it useful to maintain working-level ties with the northeast, and the YPG-SDF and

the Syrian government have alternated between cooperation and confrontation as their interests dictate. This approach is in keeping with the Syrian government's earlier policy of support to the PKK, hosting Abdullah Öcalan between 1988 and 1998 not out of sympathy to Kurdish political aspirations but by a desire to undermine Turkey.³⁰ But the limits of the government's engagement with the YPG-SDF have been reflected in the failure of successive rounds of talks over the long-term future of the northeast, where the government has refused to offer significant concessions beyond vague assurances of 'decentralisation'.³¹

Russia, a key backer of the Syrian government, has warned the YPG-SDF to abandon its plans for self-rule and instead seek a deal with Damascus, but has also found it valuable to build ties with the group as leverage against both the US and Turkey.³² In return, the YPG-SDF, has been willing to hedge between Washington and Moscow, particularly after the partial US troop withdrawal in 2019 forced it to seek closer engagement with Assad. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant political force in the KRG, is engaged in a bitter struggle for control over Kurdish politics with the Öcalanist movement. But despite pressure from Ankara, with which it maintains strong working ties, to collaborate in the fight against the PKK,³³ the KDP has

26 On the obstacles posed by geopolitical rivalries, see Fabrice Balanche, *The United States in Northeastern Syria: Geopolitical strategy cannot ignore local reality*, (Stanford: The Hoover Institute, 2018), and Daphne McCurdy and Frances Z. Brown, *Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition: A Case Study of Eastern Syria*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021).

27 Francesco Siccardi, *How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021).

28 Salim Çevik, 'Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq', *SWP Comments* 37/2022, (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2022).

29 Öğür, B. and Baykal, Z., 'Understanding "Foreign Policy" of the PYD/YPG as a Non-State Actor in Syria and Beyond', in M. Yeşiltas and T. Kardaş (eds), *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, Strategy*, 43-77, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

30 Bayram Balci, 'Turkey's relationship with the Syrian opposition', (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

31 Ghady Sary, *Kurdish Self-governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition*, Research Paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme, (London: Chatham House, 2016).

32 Darwich, M. (2021), 'Alliance Politics in the Post-2011 Middle East: Advancing theoretical and empirical positions', *Mediterranean Politics* 26 (5): 635-656; Pusane, Ö. K., (2018) 'How to Profile PYD/YPG as an Actor in the Syrian Civil War: Policy Implications for the Region and Beyond', in Ö. Z. Oktav, E. P. Dal, and A. M. Kurşane (eds), *Violent Non-state Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases*, 73-90, Cham: Springer.

33 Mustafa Gurbuz, *Turkey's Ambitions in Iraq Play Out in Kirkuk*, (Washington, D.C.: Arab Center Washington DC, 2023).

opposed Turkish military interventions in Syria and continues to allow cross-border trade with AANES. Rather than see the collapse of a de facto Kurdish autonomous zone to its east, it aims to strengthen its Syrian partners in the KNC.

With some justification, the YPG-SDF has accused external actors of fomenting unrest among both Arab and Kurdish communities in the northeast, with the Syrian government's attempts to capitalise on the 2023 uprising in Deir ez-Zor an obvious example.³⁴ Daesh, which is pursuing a low-level but persistent insurgency also centred on Deir ez-Zor, is similarly looking to exploit Arab

“ The limits of the government’s engagement with the SDF have been reflected in the failure of successive rounds of talks over the long-term future of the northeast... ”

grievances in order to recruit and expand its influence.³⁵ For its part, the YPG-SDF maintains a complex relationship with the PKK, based in northern Iraq.³⁶ While a group of pragmatist officials centred on SDF commander Mazloum Abdi have established good relations with the US-led Coalition and pursue a ‘Syria first’ policy to consolidate the gains they have achieved in the northeast, a competing trend within the movement remains closer to the Qandil approach of prioritising the broader fight against Turkey.³⁷ A major challenge for western policymakers has therefore been to understand the extent to

which decision-making in the northeast is driven by Syrians prioritising local issues over Turkish and Iranian PKK veterans prioritising the broader ambitions of the Öcalanist movement.

3. Data collection methodology

The research conducted for this paper adopted a qualitative design, drawing on data collected primarily through semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) and supplemented by informal focus group discussions (FGDs), conducted primarily in Syria in July 2023. A purposive sampling approach was used to identify individuals with relevant insights into western conflict-management interventions among both local stakeholders in northeastern Syria and international policymakers, practitioners, and experts. In total, the research draws on insights provided by 85 respondents, including 64 Syrians, from 62 KIIs and five FGDs.

To enable the research to capture the broadest range of perspectives possible, the data collection approach identified respondents across different political and geographic divisions in the northeast. These included representatives of the YPG-SDF-led authorities, representatives of civil society and CSOs, and community members. Respondents were drawn from four main geographical areas: Kurdish-majority areas of Hassakeh governorate (primarily the towns of Qamishly and Amouda), the Arab-majority governorates of Raqqa and

34 Van Wilgenburg, *The SDF’s Insurgency Challenge*

35 International Crisis Group, *Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria*, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2022); Amer Mohamed, ‘After an uprising and violent crackdown, Syria’s Deir ez-Zor is at a critical juncture’. *Middle East Institute*. Publ. online 14 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/after-uprising-and-violent-crackdown-syrias-deir-ez-zor-critical-juncture>.

36 The PYD is part of the Association of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), the highest-level decision-making body of the Öcalanist movement that also includes the PKK and its Iraqi and Iranian offshoots. The KCK is dominated by PKK decision-makers. See, Leezenberg, ‘The ambiguities of democratic autonomy’.

37 Özçelik, ‘Explaining the Kurdish Democratic Union Party’s Self Governance Policies’.

Deir ez-Zor,³⁸ and the town of Manbij in Aleppo governorate (a majority Arab town but with a significant Kurdish and Turkmen population). A second round of interviews was conducted remotely, primarily with western policymakers, and Syrian and international practitioners and subject-matter experts. Data collected through KIIs and FGDs was transcribed, anonymised to protect the identity of respondents, and then coded and analysed using the theoretical framework described in the previous section.

Access challenges and security concerns represented an important limitation to the data collection approach. While the purposive sampling approach outlined above sought to identify respondents from across key political divides in the northeast, an inherent limitation was the fact that this did not include constituencies that are outwardly supportive of either the Syrian government or Daesh.³⁹ The research was also unable to ensure a representative gender balance among respondents. Traditional social norms mean that men continue to be disproportionately represented in positions of power in northeast Syria and, particularly in more conservative communities such as Raqqa, it was challenging to conduct interviews with female respondents.

4. Theoretical framing

This paper draws on two separate but related theoretical approaches to understanding challenges to conflict-management interventions and civil war termination respectively. Both challenge the assumption that success or failure in achieving long-term peace and stability is determined primarily by the specific characteristics of external interventions, such as their resources, timing, and sequencing. Instead, they emphasise the centrality of local conflict actors and their interests, incentives, and perceptions.⁴⁰

The first approach, derived from political economy analysis, focusses on how domestic bargaining between elites over power and resources undermines the prospects for sustainable peace.⁴¹ In the immediate aftermath of violent conflict, where the emerging political order is often in flux, belligerents find themselves in a 'winner-takes-all' moment that disincentivises cooperation.⁴² Conflict actors instead seek to instrumentalise external assistance – in the form of stabilisation, peacebuilding, or development support – and use these resources to advance their own interests.⁴³ The precise way in which different actors respond to and engage with external interventions therefore depends on their own relative power and relationship to others within the conflict system. Powerful elites seek to consolidate their position, often blocking externally-imposed

38 Because of a deterioration in security conditions, research could not be conducted in Deir ez-Zor itself and KIIs were conducted with Deiri representatives who either lived in, or had travelled to, Raqqa, Hassakeh, and Qamishli.

39 Damascus, for example, maintains a security footprint and deploys a pro-government militia in parts of Qamishli and Hassakeh and several communities in eastern Deir ez-Zor governorate have shown significant residual support for Daesh.

40 For critiques of approaches that emphasise the characteristics of interventions themselves, see: Melissa M. Lee, 'International Statebuilding and the Domestic Politics of State Development', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 25 (2022) and Susana Campbell and Aila Matanock, 'Weapons of the Weak State: How Post-Conflict States Shape International Statebuilding', *Review of International Organizations*, forthcoming.

41 Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand and Patrick Meehan, *Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict* (London: Stabilisation Unit, 2018).

42 Naazneen H. Barma, *The Peacebuilding Puzzle: Political Order in Post-Conflict States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Oliver Richmond and Jason Franks, *Liberal Peace Transitions*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

43 Patrick Meehan, *Synthesis Paper What are the key factors that affect the securing and sustaining of an initial deal to reduce levels of armed conflict?* (London: Stabilisation Unit, 2016).

reforms such as elections that threaten their power, while weaker opponents aim to challenge the status-quo.⁴⁴ Local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), backed by external donor funding aimed at creating an active civil society, may emerge as a new professionalised class of secondary elites who gradually become less responsive to the needs of community members and focussed instead on securing continued access to resources.⁴⁵ In the case of both primary and secondary elites, local actors may focus more of their efforts on capturing the resources and intentions of international actors than on trying to advance peace with each other.⁴⁶ An important implication of this approach is that, in instances where belligerents cannot identify a mutually-beneficial agreement, the ability of external actors to enforce a sustainable peace is limited.⁴⁷

“ A second theoretical approach argues that, even where rivals would prefer to reach an agreement rather than continue fighting, they are often unable to commit to a lasting settlement because of a profound sense of uncertainty about the future.

By contrast, a second theoretical approach argues that, even where rivals would prefer to reach an agreement rather than continue fighting, they are often unable to commit to a lasting settlement because of a profound sense of uncertainty about the future.⁴⁸ Fears over the long-term intentions of their rivals and the likely trajectory of their relative power give rise to a ‘commitment problem’, whereby in the absence of a third-party guarantor belligerents cannot credibly commit to uphold the terms of an agreement.⁴⁹ Non-state armed groups in particular face significant risks if they agree to demobilise and disarm after fighting a government opponent, as there will be little to prevent the latter from renegeing on the terms of the deal to inflict a crushing military defeat.⁵⁰ The literature on commitment problems accords greater importance to the role that external interventions can play in brokering peace, primarily through their ability to act as third-party guarantors. As Barbara F. Walter argues, “if combatants do not believe outsiders will faithfully verify or enforce compliance, or they see outsiders failing to commit sufficient resources to the task at hand [...] combatants will refuse to abide by their agreements”.⁵¹

Explanations for the failure to achieve lasting peace derived from domestic bargaining and commitment problems are not mutually exclusive and may, instead, be mutually reinforcing.⁵² For example, an actor that believes its rival’s power is likely to decline over time, as support from external backers dries up, has little reason to

44 Shahr Hameiri, and Fabio Scarpello, ‘International development aid and the politics of scale’, *Review of International Political Economy* 25:2, (2018); Mathijs van Leeuwen et al. ‘The ‘local turn’ and notions of conflict and peacebuilding – Reflections on local peace committees in Burundi and eastern DR Congo’, *Peacebuilding*, 8:3, (2019); Barnett and Zürcher, ‘The Peacebuilder’s Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood’, in Paris, R. (ed) *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the contradictions of postwar peace operations* (London: Routledge, 2009).

45 See, for example, Bojan Baća, ‘Three stages of civil society development in the Global East: Lessons from Montenegro, 1989-2020’, *Political Geography* 109 (2024); Richmond and Franks, *Liberal Peace Transitions*.

46 Cheng et al., *Synthesis Paper*.

47 Lee, ‘International Statebuilding’.

48 Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Barbara F. Walter, ‘Bargaining Failures and Civil War’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, (2009).

49 James D. Fearon, ‘Rationalist explanations for war’, *International Organization* 49:3, (1995); Lee, ‘International Statebuilding’.

50 Walter, ‘Bargaining Failures and Civil War’.

51 Walter, *Committing to Peace*.

52 Lee, ‘International Statebuilding’.

offer concessions that might lead to a near-term agreement and may instead double down on its demands for a larger share of the pie. The research therefore draws on both approaches and tries to analyse the extent to which they interact with each other.

5. Policy relevance

In 2018, US special envoy Michael Ratney posed a series of questions about the future viability of western assistance to Syria, raising the question of whether the country's northeast would require 'indefinite stabilisation', or what critics might term a 'forever war':

*Without a viable political process that leads in a realistic timeframe toward a resumption of central state control, what are the prospects for maintaining stability? If security could be guaranteed, could local authorities function as the government indefinitely without connection to the capital? [...] Under what conditions could the foreign security guarantor depart? Does it effectively become impossible to depart in the absence of a stable arrangement with the central state? [...] Do these efforts create areas permanently in insurrection against the central state, and is such a scenario sustainable?*⁵³

Nearly six years on, these questions remain unanswered, and have become ever more pressing in the wake of repeated suggestions that the US is looking to withdraw troops from Syria.⁵⁴ This paper aims to provide some tentative answers to these and other questions. Is temporary stability the best that policymakers

can hope for in northeast Syria? What would be required in order to support a more sustainable outcome? And what would be the likely trade-offs of such an approach?

Beyond Syria, this research has broader relevance for conflict-management interventions, particularly given the shift towards 'light-footprint', security-led interventions by western states, not only against Daesh in Syria and Iraq, but also in the Sahel and elsewhere.⁵⁵ How can policymakers reconcile these approaches, which are often centred on counterterror operations through train-and-equip programmes, with the emphasis that the US and UK definitions of stabilisation place on supporting locally legitimate governance and linking interventions with higher-level strategic objectives?⁵⁶ By prioritising short-term security, do such interventions ultimately run counter to the objectives of supporting longer-term stability?

“ The public debate around Western policy on Syria is highly charged and often generates a binary view on the question of whether the US and its partners should have done more... ”

The public debate around western policy on Syria is highly charged and often generates a binary view on the question of whether the US and its partners should have done more, or whether they should have even intervened in the first place. As has been noted elsewhere, this debate often downplays the agency of local actors in

53 Michael Ratney, 'Post-Conflict Stabilization: What Can We Learn From Syria?', *PRISM* 4:7, (2018).

54 Charles Lister, 'America is Planning to Withdraw From Syria – and Create a Disaster', *Foreign Policy*, (2024).

55 Stephen Biddle, 'Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency', *Daedalus* 146:4, (2017); Alex Thurston, *An Alternative Approach to US Sahel Policy*, (Washington, D.C.: Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 2023).

56 Stabilisation Unit, *The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A guide for policy makers and practitioners*, (London: Stabilisation Unit, 2019); US Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, *Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of US Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas*, (2018).

responding to and, in turn, shaping external interventions.⁵⁷ This paper aims to provide a more nuanced discussion, recognising the inherent challenges and trade-offs involved in conflict-management interventions.

6. Defining the problem: the limited objectives and success of western stabilisation support in northeast Syria

US-led western stabilisation efforts in northeast Syria began in earnest following the YPG-SDF capture of Raqqa from Daesh in mid-2017, when the UN estimated that up to 80 percent of the city had been left uninhabitable by fighting.⁵⁸ At the time, the US Special Presidential Envoy to the coalition, Brett McGurk, outlined an approach to US assistance that was explicitly less ambitious than the costly interventions previously pursued in Iraq and Afghanistan:

*This is not reconstruction; it's not nation building. Stabilization is demining [and] rubble removal so that trucks and equipment can get into areas of need. It means basic electricity, sewage, water, the basic essentials to allow populations to come back to their home.*⁵⁹

This section provides a brief overview of how this vision has translated into stabilisation initiatives since 2017 and examines the views of respondents to consider how different groups in the northeast perceive the successes and limitations of western assistance.

Limited stabilisation

McGurk's narrow framing of stabilisation omitted a key element of the US government's own definition of the concept, which describes it as an "inherently political endeavor" that aims to support "locally legitimate authorities and systems to peaceably manage conflict and prevent violence".⁶⁰ Instead, US-led stabilisation assistance since 2017 has focussed on the more limited objective of achieving the "lasting defeat" of Daesh,⁶¹ rather than supporting political dealmaking, either between the constituent groups of the northeast, or between the YPG-SDF and its external adversaries in Damascus and Ankara. Indeed, during the Raqqa offensive, the US commander of the coalition's military component went as far as to say that he did not think it was Washington's responsibility to ensure that its local partners were seen as "a suitable force" by non-Kurdish populations.⁶²

57 Nicholas Danforth, *Lessons of the Syrian Conflict: Toward a Better Intervention Debate*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2021).

58 Michael J. McNerney et al., *Understanding Civilian Harm in Raqqa and Its Implications for Future Conflicts*, (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2022).

59 Brian Reeves and Tamara Cofman-Wittes, 'No easy way out of reconstructing Raqqa', *Brookings Institution*, publ. online 6 November 2017. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/no-easy-way-out-of-reconstructing-raqqa/>

60 US Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, *Stabilization Assistance Review*.

61 Vedant Patel, 'Fourth Anniversary of the Global Coalition's Territorial Defeat of Daesh/ISIS in Syria and Iraq', US Department of State, (2023). Available at: <https://www.state.gov/fourth-anniversary-of-the-global-coalitions-territorial-defeat-of-daesh-isis-in-syria-and-iraq/>

62 Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, 'Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Townsend via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq', US Department of Defense, (2017). Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1297228/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-townsend-via-teleconference-fro/>

Western governments have pursued this objective through a combination of security assistance to the YPG-SDF and civilian-led initiatives that focus on the rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, support to livelihoods and education, and civil society empowerment.⁶³ These are delivered by both multi-donor programmes, such as the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF),⁶⁴ and bilateral efforts led by USAID and the State Department.

By de-emphasising the political dimensions of stabilisation, western donors have been able to provide immediate and vital assistance without waiting for progress on the moribund national-level political process, something they have made a condition for support to full-scale reconstruction efforts in Syria.⁶⁵ Moreover, by retaining a narrow focus on countering violent extremism objectives, they have sought to sidestep Turkish objections to their engagement with the YPG-SDF. This has been achieved by channelling the majority of stabilisation programming through a network of newly-established civil society organisations (CSOs), rather than working directly with AANES structures.⁶⁶ The dilemma, as one former US programming official describes it, is that AANES governance structures in Arab areas are “deeply unpopular [and] generally not responsive”, while CSOs represent the “surest way to get things done and are seen by locals as being more legitimate and representative than a local council that has some kadro running it”.⁶⁷

“ Local CSOs argue that the decision to implement activities through them rather than AANES enabled Western programmes to better identify community needs, which in turn “had an important role in making local people feel like they had a role in deciding priorities”.

This approach has achieved some important results, with interviewees from across different political divides emphasising the critical role that western engagement, and in particular the US military presence, had in delivering immediate stability to the northeast. First, stabilisation assistance enabled a degree of normal life to return in areas that experienced significant destruction in the fight against Daesh. An illustrative response by one Raqqawi resident, and critic of the YPG-SDF, is that “had it not been for US programming at the beginning [i.e. after Daesh] Raqqqa would not have been fit for human life”.⁶⁸ Local CSOs argue that the decision to implement activities through them rather than AANES enabled western programmes to better identify community needs, which in turn “had an important role in making local people feel like they had a role in deciding priorities”.⁶⁹

63 See Global Coalition, ‘10 ways the coalition and its partners are stabilising areas liberated from Daesh’, (n.d.). Available at: <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/10-ways-the-coalition-and-its-partners-are-stabilising-areas-liberated-from-daesh/>

64 See USAID, ‘Program Updates’ (n.d.) Available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/syria/program-updates>

65 Western governments have said they will not fund reconstruction efforts in Syria prior to a genuine political transition in Damascus. See International Crisis Group, *Ways out of Europe’s Reconstruction Conundrum*, Middle East Report no. 209, (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2019). For an assessment on the effectiveness of US stabilisation assistance to the northeast, see: McCurdy and Brown, *Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition*.

66 These CSOs operate for the most part as privately-run organisations, rather than voluntary grassroots initiatives, and emerged after 2017 with encouragement from the US government. Operating primarily in Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor, the Arab-majority areas most affected by the fight against Daesh, CSOs were established with US encouragement to channel stabilisation funding to the northeast following the defeat of Daesh. They are run, for the most part, as private organisations rather than as voluntary associations.

67 Telephone interview with former US stabilisation official, September 2023.

68 Interview with CSO representative, Raqqqa, July 2023.

69 Interview with CSO representative from Deir ez-Zor, Hassakeh, July 2023.

“The main benefit of the *munazamat* is to provide financial support to their employees and their families”.

Second, western engagement following the defeat of Daesh has helped prevent a return to full-scale hostilities, both by freezing the frontlines between the YPG-SDF and its external opponents, and by providing a guarantor to prevent infighting between the northeast’s constituent groups. In the words of one SDC official, without the US presence “there would have been fighting between Kurds and [other] Kurds, and between Kurds and Arabs”.⁷⁰ A similar perspective was provided by interviewees from Arab-majority communities, where Kurdish forces were accused of committing abuses earlier on in the Syrian conflict.⁷¹ One argued that, once western governments began to engage the YPG-SDF, “these abuses were contained to a certain degree [...] and at the very least it meant that ethnic tensions didn’t lead to a direct confrontation”.⁷² Operating alongside the YPG-SDF, counter-terrorism operations have also degraded Daesh to the extent that the group has been unable – at least in areas controlled by AANES – to significantly revive its operations beyond a low-level insurgency.⁷³

Third, stabilisation assistance has provided direct benefits in terms of salaries and capacity building support for the, admittedly, small segment of the population employed by western programmes

and their local CSO partners, referred to locally as *munazamat* (‘organisations’). “The main benefit of the *munazamat* is to provide financial support to their employees and their families”, one Raqqa-based employee of a US programme argued, suggesting that “for every ten people you employ you [indirectly] support another 50 or so”.⁷⁴ Local staff can expect to earn at least around \$1,000 per month, up to 50 times more than the average AANES employee. Describing the importance of these inflows of cash to communities that continue to have limited livelihoods opportunities, the head of one CSO operating in Deir ez-Zor suggested that without these high salaries, “people would be stealing from each other in the streets”.⁷⁵

The limitations of a limited approach

Despite these positive effects, western assistance has drawn considerable criticism from beneficiary communities. This is, undoubtedly, inevitable in any post-conflict intervention, particularly one where recovery needs far outstrip limited donor funds, which have diminished further as international attention shifted to the war in Ukraine.⁷⁶ The prioritisation of areas most affected by Daesh, both in terms of levels of destruction (e.g. Raqqa) and the residual threat of the group’s operations and ideology (e.g. Deir ez-Zor) has provoked resentment elsewhere, in particular the Kurdish areas of the Jazira that were never occupied by the jihadist group.⁷⁷

70 Interview with SDC official, Qamishly, July 2023.

71 On these allegations, see Amnesty International, *We Had Nowhere Else to Go: Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria*, (London: Amnesty International 2015).

72 Telephone interview with Syrian stabilisation practitioner, December 2023.

73 Mohammed Hassan, *Why ISIS Cannot Bring the Caliphate Back to Life*, (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023).

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

75 Interview with CSO representative from Deir ez-Zor, Qamishly, July 2023.

76 There are no publicly available figures on the scale of external donor support to the northeast; however, AANES officials suggest that funding levels as a whole – including humanitarian support – have dropped by between 40-50 percent since a peak in 2017.

77 Focus group discussion, Manbij, July 2023; interview with Kurdish CSO representative, Qamishly, July 2023.

Many interviewees, including representatives of local CSOs implementing stabilisation projects, criticised what they perceived as a mismatch between community needs and western priorities, with the latter often fluctuating according to the latest donor trend.⁷⁸ Viewed from this perspective, programming began to shift away too soon from essential infrastructure rehabilitation and basic services to less tangible issues, such as promoting community cohesion, at a time when the local authorities were unable to fill the gaps.⁷⁹ The most recent area of focus has been supporting the reintegration of suspected Daesh affiliates and their families from the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps, where tens of thousands of predominantly women and children are detained indefinitely, prompting concerns of an unsustainable status quo. And while addressing the challenge posed by the camps is undoubtedly important – one AANES official described it as a ‘time bomb’ and the head of a Raqqa-based CSO suggested it represents a ‘coming threat to the region’⁸⁰ – prioritising support to individuals who are widely viewed locally as terrorists, regardless of whether or not they are actually Daesh affiliates, is likely to fuel resentment.⁸¹

Finally, interviews with both AANES officials and community members from different parts of the northeast highlighted a perception that western assistance has failed to develop beyond an emergency response. Several individuals commented on the fact that, while continued humanitarian assistance is essential, communities need development projects that can allow them to exploit the region’s resources.⁸² For one Syrian who has advised several stabilisation initiatives, western support is “neither relief nor reconstruction; it’s [caught] between the two”.⁸³

From these criticisms, it might be assumed that groups in the northeast seek the US and its

partners to simply increase the scale of their support for recovery efforts. Indeed, as one AANES official notes, people “wonder why the West isn’t doing more”. But, as the following section explores, the question of how assistance is provided – and who it is seen to benefit – is almost as important as that of how much is given.

7. Domestic bargaining as an obstacle to sustainable peace in northeastern Syria

By working around, rather than through, AANES structures, western assistance has sought to avoid being pulled into in the complex politics of the northeast, particularly the question of the region’s long-term governance arrangements. But because stabilisation is never a neutral endeavour, it inevitably creates winners and losers, especially in contexts of deep political division. This section examines respondent views on the distributional implications of western support, drawing on the domestic bargaining framework outlined in section four.

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

79 Telephone interview with Syrian former employee of western stabilisation programme, Raqqa, June 2023.

80 Interview with AANES official, Raqqa, July 2023; Interview with CSO representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

81 Interview with civil society representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

82 Interview with AANES official, Raqqa, July 2023; Interview with civil society representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

83 Telephone interview with Syrian stabilisation practitioner, December 2023; interview with AANES official, Raqqa, July 2023.

Inter-communal divisions in northeastern Syria

AANES portrays itself as a model of coexistence where all ethnic and sectarian groups, or *mukawanat*, are represented; a region in which, in contrast to government-controlled areas of Syria, “doesn’t have ethnic conflicts.”⁸⁴ And while in a majority of interviews respondents sought, at least initially, to downplay inter-communal tensions, they tended to draw on ethno-sectarian stereotypes when discussing members of other community groups in the northeast. Most obviously, Arab interviewees, including AANES employees, frequently refer to ‘the Kurds’ as a synonym for the authorities, with one local researcher pointing to a widespread perception across much of the northeast that “everyone who is Kurdish belongs to the Party [i.e. the PYD]”.⁸⁵ As one Raqqawi noted, while more well-informed individuals are aware that not all Kurds support AANES and the YPG-SDF, “people in general [...] will say: ‘[he is] Kurdish’, they won’t say: ‘he is someone who is close to the Self Administration [AANES]’”.⁸⁶ This is perhaps hardly surprising; key decisionmakers are, overwhelmingly, drawn from the Kurdish community, and while officials stress that ‘democratic confederalism’ is a model for all of Syria’s *mukawanat*, they present it first and foremost as a solution to the country’s ‘Kurdish issue’.⁸⁷

Because of the secular underpinnings of the PYD project, respondents often frame Arab-Kurdish tensions in the northeast in cultural terms. A significant amount of the opposition to AANES’ de facto constitution came, in conservative Arab communities, in response to clauses that were seen as an attack on tribal or religious practices,

including polygamy.⁸⁸ One female interviewee in Deir ez-Zor criticised the ideological training on Öcalanist thought she says she was forced to attend in her capacity as a AANES local council member as a requirement that “goes against people’s religion and is seen as a Kurdish imposition”.⁸⁹ Moreover, while Arab residents sometimes derisively depict the YPG-SDF as uneducated outsiders from ‘the mountains’ – a reference both to the PKK’s base in Qandil and the historic association between Kurds and the mountains of southern Turkey and northern Iraq – the latter often reciprocate by attacking Arab political culture. A senior official in Qamishly, for example, dismissed demands for greater local autonomy in areas such as Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor on the grounds that “democracy is a new idea for the Arabs who, until now, have had only the Ba’ath and the Muslim Brotherhood” as political models.⁹⁰

“The collapse of centralised, authoritarian regimes suddenly left individual communities responsible for their own security and vulnerable to a security dilemma...”

The argument that ethno-sectarian tensions are an important factor in the northeast is not to suggest that the region is split by primordial conflicts or ‘ancient hatreds’, as some analysis of the Syrian war has implied.⁹¹ Rather, it is entirely compatible with rationalist theories of war and the concept of ‘emerging anarchy’, first used to describe the communal violence that followed

84 Interview with AANES official, Raqqqa, July 2023.

85 Interview with Kurdish researcher, Raqqqa, July 2023.

86 Telephone interview with civil society activist, Raqqqa, December 2023.

87 See, for example, Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Mashru’ al-Idara al-Dhatiya, (n.d.), Available at: <https://pydrojava.org/قّييات اذلا-قرا دللا-عورش م/>

88 Interview with Kurdish researcher, Raqqqa, July 2023.

89 Interview with Arab former AANES employee, Raqqqa, July 2023.

90 Interview with SDC official, Qamishly, July 2023.

91 For an example of this approach, see: James Stavridis, ‘Syrian Ghosts’, *Foreign Policy* (2015).

the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s.⁹² The collapse of centralised, authoritarian regimes suddenly left individual communities responsible for their own security and vulnerable to a security dilemma, where defensive measures taken by one group to ensure its safety prompts the other to respond in kind, setting in motion a downward spiral.⁹³ Several interviewees portray the northeast in similar terms, whereby the retreat of the Syrian state in 2011 meant that “each group started to look [only] to their own narrow interests”.⁹⁴ According to one Raqqa resident, the impact of over a decade of conflict has been that: “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”.⁹⁵ The result, as many of the interviews conducted as part of this research suggest, is that ethno-sectarian tensions risk becoming more pronounced the longer a sustainable solution to the conflict remains out of reach. Commenting on this problem, one Arab woman respondent from Raqqa suggested that “during the war we discovered that we have lots of sects [tawā’if] whereas before the war we just thought in terms of Muslims and Christians [...] with the war we became more racist”.⁹⁶ An Assyrian civil society activist in Qamishly made a similar claim, suggesting that while there is at present only a “hidden conflict that hasn’t yet reached the stage of an open conflict [...] at any moment there could be an explosion between the *mukawanat* because there is an extremist viewpoint within each”.⁹⁷

“ There is at present only a “hidden conflict that hasn’t yet reached the stage of an open conflict [...] at any moment there could be an explosion between the *mukawanat* because there is an extremist viewpoint within each”.

As well as being fuelled by the structural conditions of war, growing ethno-sectarian tensions in the northeast also appear to be driven by the actions of ‘political entrepreneurs’, groups and individuals who seek to exploit divisions for their own political gain.⁹⁸ For example, a number of respondents viewed current tensions as the result of a decades-long policy of ‘divide and conquer’ by the Syrian government. An Arab former AANES employee interpreted what she saw as the YPG-SDF’s repressive policies in Deir ez-Zor as being “linked to old problems [...] between a Deiri football team and the Kurds”, referring to violent unrest that followed a football match in 2004, which Damascus exploited to portray the Kurds as US proxies.⁹⁹ The example provides an illustration of how the collective memory of a community can be reactivated by contemporary events, with the respondent adding that “there is a perception among the Kurds that the regime supported the Arabs, and even today the Kurds hate Deir ez-Zor as they were the victims of the incident, even though it wasn’t our fault”.¹⁰⁰ Others referred to the impact of a government decision in the 1970s to

92 Barry R. Posen, ‘The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict’, *Survival*, 35 no.1 (1993).

93 *Ibid.*

94 Interview with CSO representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

95 Interview with Arab employee of AANES, Raqqa, July 2023.

96 Interview with Arab civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

97 Interview with Assyrian civil society activist, Qamishly, July 2023.

98 On the concept of ‘political entrepreneurs’, see: James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, ‘Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity’, *International Organization* 54:4, (2000).

99 For background on this incident, see Robert Lowe, ‘The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered’, MEP Briefing Paper 06/01, (London: Chatham House, 2006).

100 Interview with Arab former AANES employee, Raqqa, July 2023.

relocate thousands of Arabs, primarily from Raqqa governorate, to create the so-called ‘Arab Belt’ in the Jazira region. Mention of this policy, which aimed to reduce the demographic superiority of the Kurdish population in areas of the Jazira, suggests that it continues to affect communal dynamics in the northeast.¹⁰¹

It is not just historical memories of Arab-Kurdish tensions that have been revived by the conflict since 2011. An Assyrian Christian from Qamishly explained how the cohesive communal relations that existed at the start of the war began to change with the emergence of jihadist factions, particularly after Daesh attacked a collection of Assyrian villages to the east of Hassakeh. In his reading, “this [...] started a wave of anger against Islam, because people here see Daesh as representing Islam”, with residents of the Christian quarter in Qamishli often refusing to rent properties to prospective Muslim tenants “because of the idea that all Muslims are Daesh”.¹⁰² The same respondent noted how members of the local Christian community draw on collective memories of the past to respond to these contemporary traumas, recalling how “on the anniversary of the Ottoman massacres against the Christians in Turkey [that took place in the early twentieth century] lots of people made speeches full of racist language”. Another Assyrian interviewee meanwhile argued that the Syrian conflict had revived Christian fears of *dhimma* status, referring to the historical legal position of Christians and Jews under Islamic rule.¹⁰³

Ethnic or political divisions?

When reflecting on the causes of Syria’s communal disputes, many individuals acknowledge that, at heart, they represent a “conflict over resources [...] and not an ethnic conflict”.¹⁰⁴ These disputed resources include political decision-making authority, control of revenues generated by trade with the KRG and Damascus, and the question of who gets to communicate directly with – and receive support from – the US-led coalition.¹⁰⁵ However, because local politics are heavily divided along identity lines, disputes over resources and inter-communal differences often coalesce.

“When reflecting on the causes of Syria’s communal disputes, many individuals acknowledge that, at heart, they represent a ‘conflict over resources [...] and not an ethnic conflict’.”

AANES represents a new de facto reality for the residents of the northeast. One Assyrian respondent reflected on the fact that “northeastern Syria is a new name for us”;¹⁰⁶ international policymakers and practitioners frequently refer to the areas by the acronym ‘NES’, but this is a geographical label that emerged only with the defeat of Daesh. Within this newly imagined geographical and political space, the

101 For background on the ‘Arab Belt’ policy and its continued impact on community dynamics, see Radwan Ziadeh, ‘The Kurds in Syria: Fueling Separatist Movements in the Region?’, Special Report 220, (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2009).

102 Interview with Assyrian civil society activist, Qamishly, July 2023.

103 Interview with representative of Assyrian political party, Qamishly, July 2023.

104 Interview with CSO representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

105 A frequent complaint among interviewees was the northeast authorities’ alleged monopoly over key sectors of the economy, including the importation of cement, sugar, and steel. Representatives of an Arab-led SDF group in Manbij complained about being denied direct access to the coalition and instead having to receive salaries and equipment via the Kurdish SDF leadership, interview with SDF representatives, Manbij, July 2023.

106 Interview with representative of Assyrian political party, Qamishly, July 2023.

long-term status of the post-Daesh political order is unclear. An Arab civil society activist described how local groups are engaged in a struggle for the future of “the nation”, arguing that “we first need to agree among ourselves how to organise”.¹⁰⁷ A Kurdish civil society activist in Jazira similarly commented that: “Arabs and Kurds are now in a region where [...] we haven’t chosen to live together. We are trying to convince ourselves it was the right choice, but we are struggling to do so. We are very different from one another”.¹⁰⁸ As a result, the stability that currently exists in the northeast is widely seen as resting on shaky foundations. The same respondent, for example, compared the current situation to the atmosphere of inter-communal suspicions that existed under centralised Baathist rule: “we didn’t kill each other, but not because we loved each other. People just tried to live day-to-day and ignore the issues [that divided them]”.¹⁰⁹

As noted in the previous sections, while different constituent groups would like to see more western assistance directed to the region, they seek it on their own respective terms. One senior SDC leader criticised the “failure” of western governments to turn their support “into a political project”, whether by extending political recognition to AANES, pushing for the PYD to be included in UN-sponsored peace talks, backing the YPG-SDF in its negotiations with Damascus, or simply by channelling funding through AANES structures. In the view of this official, more politically informed support would help “to change what is [only] de facto into what is needed” for the northeast.¹¹⁰ Another official summarised the authorities’ expectations by saying that

“the people who liberated the northeast from Daesh [i.e. the YPG-SDF] have a project, and this should be supported”,¹¹¹ referring to the Öcalanist objective of implementing ‘democratic confederalism’, or what one official jokingly referred to as creating “a PYD emirate”.¹¹²

While a number of Arab interviewees also explicitly spoke of the need for a more politically informed approach by western governments, they referenced strikingly different objectives. For example, one Raqqa-based CSO employee argued that “a western intervention would be a political intervention...that is just.”¹¹³ For Arab respondents, this generally refers to extending greater political freedoms to their communities in recognition of their demographic superiority. Many articulated their preference for a form of majoritarian democracy that would allow them to retake power from what is widely perceived as rule by Kurdish ‘colonisers’;¹¹⁴ on the grounds that “in a democracy, the majority should be the government”.¹¹⁵ The authorities exhibit a similarly maximalist approach to their vision of the post-Daesh political order, arguing against the idea of sharing power with rivals on the grounds that “dividing the cake between different groups [...] would lead to chaos like in Iraq or Lebanon”.¹¹⁶ This zero-sum mindset helps to explain why initiatives that have encouraged either a form of power sharing, such as the Kurdish-Kurdish talks, or decentralised governance; for example the Sons of the Jazeera and Euphrates reform process has encountered significant push-back from the authorities.¹¹⁷

107 Interview with civil society activist from Manbij, Raqqa, July 2023.

108 Interview with Kurdish civil society activist, Amouda, July 2023.

109 *Ibid.*

110 Interview with SDC official, Qamishly, July 2023.

111 Interview with AANES official, Raqqa, July 2023.

112 Interview with SDC official, Qamishly, July 2023.

113 Focus group discussion with current and former local employees of stabilisation programmes, Raqqa, July 2023.

114 Interview with CSO representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

115 Interview with local employee of western stabilisation programme, Raqqa, July 2023.

116 Interview with SDC official, Qamishly, July 2023.

117 For background on the Kurdish-Kurdish talks, see: Rena Netjes and Lars Hauch, ‘The Gordian knot of Kurdish unity talks in Syria’, MENASource, (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2020). For the reform process see: Amin al-Aasi, ‘Multaqqa “Abna al-Jazeera wa al-Furat”’: Takrees Sultat Amr al-Waaq’ie’, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* (2020).

Splits within the mukawanat

While it represents perhaps the most obvious form of inter-communal split in the northeast, it would be misleading to view politics exclusively through the lens of Arab-Kurdish tensions. Instead, northeastern Syria exhibits a hyper-localisation of division – what one Assyrian respondent described as extensive “splits within all the *mukawanat*”.¹¹⁸ The most obvious example is, of course, the intra-Kurdish split between the PYD and KNC. But it is also reflected in tensions between, and within, Arab tribes, between host communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and between neighbouring geographical areas.

“According to one Arab AANES employee, “when people have problems they resort to their ethnic community and not to the Self Administration to solve them”.

Once again, these divisions are understood locally as being driven by the structural conditions of war and the bargaining opportunities they create. As an example, the two largest tribes in Deir ez-Zor, the Agaidat and the Baggara, are engaged in a struggle for influence over the civil council, which is part of the AANES administrative hierarchy through which the YPG-SDF co-opts

local elites, and which is widely perceived as corrupt.¹¹⁹ Similarly, tensions have emerged between IDPs from Deir ez-Zor city and the rural communities in which they now live over access to jobs and humanitarian assistance, with the former reportedly being made to feel that “people from the countryside are more deserving”.¹²⁰ Interviewees from Raqqa, meanwhile, describe a situation of increasing “community fragmentation”.¹²¹ Regular episodes of tribal conflict, often sparked by relatively minor personal disagreements, spiral into significant violence, often occurring across multiple locations.¹²² As with Arab-Kurdish tensions, interviewees attribute this form of disintegration to the “absence of institutionalised government”, and to the apparent failure of AANES to establish reliable and effective security and justice provision. According to one Arab AANES employee, “when people have problems they resort to their ethnic community and not to the Self Administration to solve them”.¹²³

Further complicating the idea that dynamics in the northeast can be understood through the lens of ethnic or religious divisions is the fact that individual members of different communities experience these conflicts in quite distinct ways. Female interviewees, for example, highlight the fact that women “suffer the most” from the ongoing effects of violent conflict, and that repressive social norms, which in some cases emerged only with the rise of Daesh, are often dressed up as deep-rooted “customs and traditions” (*aadat wa taqalid*), particularly in Arab tribal areas.¹²⁴ This has resulted in resistance to donor programmes that, either implicitly or

118 Interview with representative of Assyrian political party, Qamishly, July 2023.

119 Interview with CSO representative from Deir ez-Zor, Hassakeh, July 2023; interview with CSO representative from Deir ez-Zor, Qamishly, July 2023.

120 Interview with Arab former AANES employee from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, July 2023. These observations reflect findings from other research in northeastern Syria. See, for example, Alex Fischer, Haid Haid, and James Khalil, *Youth Disrupted: Impact of Conflict and Violent Extremism on Adolescents in Northeast Syria*, XCEPT, (2022).

121 Interview with Arab AANES employee, Raqqa, July 2023.

122 For example, while the author was conducting field research in Raqqa in July 2023, violent clashes broke out between armed members of the al-Holesat and the al-Mojedema tribes over a property dispute in the city, resulting in the death of a local woman. Similar cases are regularly reported by local media sources.

123 Interview with Arab AANES employee, Raqqa, July 2023.

124 Interview with female civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

explicitly, support women's empowerment, due to what one male respondent described as a "gap between western values and our values".¹²⁵ In some instances, when these programmes invite local residents to attend workshops or trainings, "men don't let women leave the house and attend",¹²⁶ leading one female respondent from Deir ez-Zor to suggest that donors focus their efforts on addressing male perceptions of women's rights: "if we want to free the women of Deir ez-Zor, we first need to free the men".¹²⁷

“ One female respondent from Deir ez-Zor suggested that donors focus their efforts on addressing male perceptions of women's rights: “if we want to free the women of Deir ez-Zor, we first need to free the men.”

Gender equality, one of the tenets of Öcalanist thinking, is therefore a source of tension between AANES and conservative communities in the northeast. As noted in a previous section, when AANES developed plans to announce an updated version of its de facto constitution, some of the opposition from residents in Deir ez-Zor related to clauses related to women's rights and the banning of polygamy.¹²⁸ One Arab woman civil society activist in Raqqa argued that while "the Kurds have a good policy when it comes to the status of women", the problem is in its implementation, with AANES often promoting underqualified individuals to positions of authority.¹²⁹ Another Arab woman respondent, a former AANES employee in Deir ez-Zor, complained that although "today women

have a greater presence in public life and in the administration", the reality is that "it is the men who always control the women [...] when you go into an [AANES] office, you'll see the woman just sitting in the corner".¹³⁰ Gender equality is also an example of an issue that has been 'ethnicised' in the inter-communal tensions of the northeast. One female Arab respondent in Raqqa, for example, drew a distinction between the opportunities made available to women from the Kurdish and Arab communities under AANES, arguing that "a Kurdish woman is able to speak and people will listen because they know she will have support [from the authorities]".¹³¹

Instrumentalising external support

As rival elites compete with one another for power and influence in post-conflict political orders, they are incentivised to seek opportunities to instrumentalise external support and resources to strengthen their relative position. Although the YPG-SDF initially hoped that its partnership with the Global Coalition might lead to international recognition of AANES,¹³² decisionmakers also pragmatically engage with western governments in the hope of achieving more immediate goals. This includes having stabilisation funding channelled directly through AANES structures and remaining the direct conduit for the coalition's security assistance. These, as one civil society activist noted, "are all examples of recognition [of AANES], to one extent or another".¹³³

A Kurdish lawyer with ties to the authorities summarised the issue by saying that "the Self Administration thinks the US should give them

125 Interview with civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

126 Interview with former AANES employee from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, July 2023.

127 Interview with former AANES employee from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, July 2023.

128 Interview with Kurdish researcher, Raqqa, July 2023.

129 Interview with former AANES employee from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, July 2023.

130 Interview with former AANES employee from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, July 2023.

131 Interview with female civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

132 Interview with AANES official, Raqqa, July 2023.

133 Interview with civil society activist from Manbij, Raqqa, July 2023

money and let them spend it as they want, but the US uses the *munazamat* as it gives them greater oversight”.¹³⁴ And while the policy of implementing stabilisation activities through local CSOs has to some extent helped to reduce the pressure on the authorities to deliver essential services themselves, it has also “created competition between CSOs and the [AANES] councils, as the councils see them as competition rather than partners”, as one Syrian researcher explained.¹³⁵ According to an SDC interviewee, it has also contributed to a perception that AANES is “seriously deficient” in terms of its ability to deliver services.¹³⁶ “Each organisation [implementing projects] has its own name and that is what people see on the ground,” another official complained.¹³⁷

Local critics of the YPG-SDF have also seen western engagement in the northeast as a potential opportunity to strengthen their relative bargaining power. While Arab interviewees overwhelmingly believe that the West has sided with what they see as a Kurdish-led project and “aims at keeping the SDF in power”,¹³⁸ the opportunity provided by stabilisation assistance to establish a CSO and secure external funding has created a network of new “powerbrokers”.¹³⁹ Although not a threat to the YPG-SDF’s overall control, these new ‘secondary’ elites represent potential rivals for access to valuable resources. According to one CSO head, individuals are incentivised to establish their own organisation “not out of a belief in civil society [but] just to get funding and salaries”.¹⁴⁰

The intensity of the competition between AANES and local CSOs was reflected in repeated

attempts by the latter to form an NGO coalition, with the aim of conducting external advocacy and increasing collective bargaining power with both the authorities and international donors. Perceiving this as a potential challenge to its authority, AANES blocked these efforts before agreeing to a US-backed initiative in 2020, in which a CSO widely perceived as having ties to the PYD played a leading role. One Syrian adviser to a US-funded programme derisively referred to the resulting ‘Coalition of Civil Society Organisations in North and East Syria’ as AANES’ “ministry of civil society”.¹⁴¹ Several groups that joined the initiative claim they did so after being told that securing future donor funding was conditional on membership in the coalition and criticised it for failing to advance the interests of civil society. For example, according to one founding member, the coalition was not given the opportunity to provide feedback on AANES’ proposed civil society law.¹⁴²

It is not only the comparatively lucrative inflows of stabilisation funding that are the source of competition between rival groups in the northeast, but also the political capital offered by external mediation and peace-making initiatives. The KNC, for example, appeared to see the value of the US and French-brokered Kurdish-Kurdish talks in terms of the ability of western governments to put pressure on the PYD to make concessions, rather than in terms of the benefits of dialogue itself. In a separate initiative, where a European donor planned to work through an international NGO, the KNC refused to participate, on the grounds that, as a non-governmental actor, the implementing partner was not a “powerful guarantor”.¹⁴³ Similarly, one civil society

134 Interview with civil society representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

135 Interview with Syrian researcher, London, August 2023.

136 Interview with CSO representative, Raqqa, July 2023.

137 Interview with AANES official, Raqqa, July 2023.

138 Interview with civil society activist, Manbij, July 2023.

139 Telephone interview with former US official, September 2023.

140 Interview with CSO representative from Raqqa, Qamishly, July 2023.

141 Telephone interview with Syrian adviser.

142 Interview with CSO representative from Raqqa, Qamishly, July 2023.

143 Interview with senior KNC official, Qamishly, July 2023.

participant in a European-funded initiative spoke enthusiastically of a dialogue session where the head of the SDF in Deir ez-Zor “came to Raqqa and was put under the spotlight in front of outsiders”.¹⁴⁴ According to this respondent, therefore, the event was successful not because it facilitated an opportunity for transformative peacebuilding, but because CSO representatives were able to criticise the authorities in the presence of external observers, who would in turn report to their western donors.

8. Commitment problems as an obstacle to sustainable peace

The discussion on domestic bargaining in the previous section highlighted the often mutually incompatible goals of competing groups in northeastern Syria, and the ways in which communal fragmentation risks are becoming more entrenched over time. The logical conclusion of this analysis might appear to be that there is simply no peace to be kept in the northeast, and that external interventions that seek to do so will inevitably fail. But the research also identified several important areas where rivals have, in theory, sufficient common ground to favour a mutually beneficial deal over a return to violent conflict. Drawing on the commitment problem approach outlined in section four, this section analyses interviewee responses to explore why these shared interests have failed to translate into more durable agreements.

Despite an assumption by some that the YPG-SDF’s ‘domestic’ opponents would prefer to see the region fall under the control of Turkish-backed opposition groups or the Syrian regime, an overwhelming majority of interviewees expressed concern at the prospect of the collapse of the northeast’s de facto autonomy. Even outspoken critics of AANES frequently describe it as the “best of the worst” (*afdal al-sayi’een*), or the least bad option when compared with the likely reprisals of government security forces or the lawlessness that would likely follow from a takeover by opposition factions.¹⁴⁵ One Arab resident of Raqqa argued that both “the return of the regime and the Turkish [backed] brigades would be unacceptable [...] the only solution is to improve the existing administration; there is no other option”.¹⁴⁶ This has resulted in a degree of tactical cooperation between groups that have otherwise divergent preferences, and support for the presence of coalition forces across different political divides. One Syrian researcher describes a seemingly paradoxical situation where:

*People don’t like the US or its policies but at the same time they see it as a stabilising factor [...] 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 and want AANES out.*¹⁴⁷

The problem is that local officials and residents alike are aware that the viability of the northeast as a de facto autonomous region is dependent on the continued presence of the US. One SDC figure cautioned that “if it [the US] withdraws, there will be a disaster”, while an Arab civil society figure put it more bluntly, arguing that “as soon as the US leaves, there will be nothing left called the SDF”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Interview with CSO representative from Deir ez-Zor, Hassakeh, July 2023.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with former AANES employee from Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, July 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Arab AANES employee, Raqqa, July 2023.

¹⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Syrian researcher, October 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

The realisation that US forces will inevitably withdraw from Syria at some unspecified time in the future gives rise to a commitment problem. Adversaries may have an interest in striking a mutually beneficial deal that avoids the pain of further fighting but, in the absence of a reliable external guarantor, they are unable to as one or more sides cannot credibly promise to adhere to its terms. Commitment problems arise when the relative power of two or more groups is expected to shift over time, or because the true intentions of an opponent are ultimately unknowable.¹⁴⁹ For the YPG-SDF, these problems apply both on a 'domestic' level, with other constituent groups in the northeast, and externally with the group's adversaries in Damascus and Ankara.

External commitment problem

The YPG-SDF has long expressed a preference for a negotiated settlement with the Syrian government. But, as one Syrian expert noted, its external opponents have concluded that the group is "not going to last, because the moment the westerners leave, they will [be able to] eat this model [AANES] alive."¹⁵⁰ As a result, Damascus has shown little willingness to offer concessions in Russian-brokered talk with the YPG-SDF, demanding instead that the group be folded entirely within the Syrian armed forces.¹⁵¹ In its public messaging, the Syrian government and its allies regularly call on the YPG-SDF to accept its terms and break with the US. For example, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has warned that "no one can trust the Americans or rely on agreements with them as their fate will be betrayal

[...] the Americans betrayed the Kurds overnight and sacrificed them and left them", in a reference to the partial US troop withdrawal in 2019.¹⁵²

The YPG-SDF is keenly aware of this dilemma. And while there is undoubtedly a bloc within the movement that favours pursuing a 'Syria-first' strategy – prioritising a consolidation of gains achieved in northeast Syria over the PKK's broader objectives in fighting Turkey – the result is that there are few prospects of the YPG-SDF being able to significantly distance itself from its sister party. Encouraging the YPG-SDF to break from the PKK was an (sometimes implicit) assumption of early US policy but one that today appears illusory. Without an explicit security commitment from its western partners, the potential advantages of such a move – such as gaining admission to the UN-sponsored Geneva talks – are far outweighed by the risks. The PKK represents a highly capable fighting force, and in its absence there would be fewer deterrents to an adversary reneging on a peace deal and capturing the northeast by force. Moreover, any move by the YPG-SDF leadership to distance itself from Qandil would also likely face significant threats from the PKK itself.¹⁵³ As one expert on the northeast points out, referring to the cyclical nature of western policymaking:

The reality of US foreign policy and politics is such that there's no such thing as a long-term guarantee, it will thus never be rational for NES decisionmakers to put their careers and lives on the line with the expectation that the US will protect them.¹⁵⁴

149 Fearon, 'Rationalist explanations of war'.

150 Telephone interview with Syrian researcher, September 2023.

151 Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 'Qa'id Quwwat Suriyya al-Dimuqratiyya Yuhadid Shartayn li-al-Tawasul ila Ittifaq ma' al-Nitham al-Suriy', Al-Quds Al-Arabi, (2029). Available at: <https://www.alquds.co.uk/اي-طرش-ددج-ي-طي-طارق-مي-دل-اي-روس-تا-وق-دئ-اق/>

152 Arabi 21, 'Nasrallah Yaskhar min 'Alaqaat QSD b-Amriyya ba'd Qurb al-'Amaliyya al-Turkiyya', Arabi 21, (2020). Available at: <https://video.arabi21.com/story/1213886/كي-كرت-لا-ة-ي-لم-ع-ل-ل-ب-رق-د-ع-ب-ا-ك-ي-رم-أ-ب-د-س-ق-ة-ع-ن-م-د-رخ-س-ي-ه-ل-ل-ل-ر-ص-ن/>

153 There have been persistent rumours of a split between the PKK leadership in northern Iraq and the leader of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, including reports that the former sought to replace Abdi with a commander less amenable to US influence. See: Khaled Al-Jara'atly, 'Tayyaran Daakhil QSD: Amreeka wa al-Muktasabaat Yamna'an al-Saddam', Enab Baladi, (2023). Available at: <https://www.enabbaladi.net/653534/م-ي-تا-ب-س-ت-ك-م-ل-ا-و-ا-ك-ي-رم-أ-ب-د-س-ق-ل-خ-ا-د-ن-ا-را-ي-ت/>

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

The partial US withdrawal in 2019 “had a profound impact on trust”¹⁵⁵ in US commitments and encouraged the YPG-SDF to hedge, or what one official describes as an effort “to balance between the different parties to the conflict”, including Russia.¹⁵⁶ But even when the prospect of full diplomatic recognition disappeared, the YPG-SDF has continued to hope that western partners will help to strengthen its negotiating position with Damascus and complain it has been undermined by the inconsistent stance and messaging of the US.¹⁵⁷ While former special presidential envoy Brett McGurk reportedly encouraged the YPG-SDF to negotiate with the Syrian government, his successor, and others within the US administration, cautioned against dealing with Damascus.¹⁵⁸ One adviser for an organisation specialising in mediation that sought to support the YPG-SDF’s negotiations noted the contradictions of European government donors. They “wanted very clearly to keep Damascus out of northeastern Syria. Their goal was maximum pressure on Damascus, constitutional changes, everything. And yet, they forbade direct engagement” between the organisation and AANES.¹⁵⁹ SDC interviewees, meanwhile, argue that a lack of both diplomatic support and direct financial assistance to AANES “undermines the Self Administration in the eyes of the regime, Russia, and Iran”, and makes a mutually acceptable agreement less likely.¹⁶⁰

Domestic commitment problems

Residents of the northeast are equally aware of the YPG-SDF’s dilemma. A Raqqawi civil society

activist and critic of AANES noted that “the SDF has two backers: the US and Qandil. Its bet with the PKK is due to the fear of a US withdrawal”.¹⁶¹ And just as an ‘external’ commitment problem effectively rules out any prospect of the group splitting decisively with the PKK, a ‘domestic’ commitment problem disincentivises it from pursuing governance reforms within the current borders of the northeast.

“As one civil society activist in Raqqawi puts it: “if there were elections, we [the Arab community] would elect the people we want and not the people they want [...] they’re afraid of someone else getting influence and banning the *kawader*”.

As discussed in the previous section, in the areas it captured from Daesh, the YPG-SDF is widely perceived as a Kurdish-led project ruling over an Arab majority population. As in other contexts where an ethnic or sectarian minority group is in power in a situation of ‘emerging anarchy’, following the collapse of central state authority, the YPG-SDF has rational reasons to fear for its future survival. If members of a demographic majority, in this case the Arab population, are able to convert their numerical superiority into political power, they cannot credibly commit not to exploit their comparative advantage against the minority group.¹⁶² The possibility of the Kurdish community once again being discriminated against under Arab-majority rule is hinted at in calls made by

155 Interview with SDC officials, London, February 2024.

156 Interview with senior SDC official, Qamishly, July 2023.

157 Telephone interview with western expert on Syria, August 2023.

158 Rudaw, ‘SDF: 400 US forces ‘insufficient’ to fulfil anti-ISIS mission – report’, *Rudaw* (2019). Available at: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/30032019>

159 Telephone interview with western expert on Syria, August 2023.

160 Interview with SDC officials, London, February 2024.

161 Interview with civil society activist, Raqqawi, July 2023.

162 James D. Fearon, ‘Ethnic War as a Commitment Problem’, Presented at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (1995).

some interviewees for a form of majoritarian democracy in the northeast. As one civil society activist in Raqqa puts it: “if there were elections, we [the Arab community] would elect the people we want and not the people they want [...] they’re afraid of someone else getting influence and banning the *kawader*”.¹⁶³

Some western policymaking and programming approaches have, at least implicitly, been predicated on the idea that if AANES enacted meaningful reforms, including holding free elections for local councils, it could generate the domestic legitimacy required to provide a more secure foundation for its long-term survival. However, and in keeping with findings from broader research on obstacles to democratization and governance reform, AANES decisionmakers have avoided enacting meaningful changes not because they are unaware of the merits of ‘good governance’, but because of rational concerns about their potentially destabilising effects.¹⁶⁴ Given the mutually incompatible demands of competing groups in the northeast, and the absence of a credible guarantor for the continuation of both AANES as a political project and the political and cultural rights of the Kurdish population, it is unrealistic to imagine that the YPG-SDF would feel secure enough to risk the basis of its governance model. One Syrian expert summarised the problems posed by reform measures by saying that, “given the context today, they [the YPG-SDF] will lose control and therefore in the short-term [they] need to maintain control until there is a political solution”.¹⁶⁵

Western signalling compounds the commitment problem

The effects of this commitment problem are compounded by the reluctance of western actors to engage more deeply on governance reforms in the northeast. One expert argued that current western policy “creates an environment of pervasive uncertainty which makes it very difficult for anybody to plan towards even a medium-term future”.¹⁶⁶ The expert cited the example of the US government commissioning an assessment of the authorities’ plans to hold elections, before concluding that its involvement would provoke Turkish objections, and deciding not to share the findings of its report with AANES. Local officials reportedly described the experience as like “being sent to a doctor and having a whole bunch of examinations and then not being told their diagnosis”.¹⁶⁷

“One expert argued that current western policy “creates an environment of pervasive uncertainty which makes it very difficult for anybody to plan towards even a medium-term future”.

According to another expert, the message the West sends to AANES by largely avoiding questions of governance 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,

¹⁶³ Interview with civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

¹⁶⁴ See, for example, Sonja Grimm, ‘European Democracy Promotion in Crisis: Conflicts of Objectives, Neglected External-Domestic Interactions and the Authoritarian Backlash’, *Global Policy*, 6 (2015); Sonja Grimm and Julia Leninger, ‘Not all good things go together: Conflicting objectives in democracy promotion’, *Democratization*, 19:3, (2012)

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Syrian researcher, London, August 2023. Another Syrian expert provides a similar perspective, arguing that SDF officials are ‘scared to lose control, as that means they’re out, because there’s no political solution’. Telephone interview with Syrian peacebuilding expert, October 2023.

¹⁶⁶ Telephone interview with western expert on Syria, August 2023.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

“The result, according to one civil society activist in Raqqa, is that ‘people fear the SDF as a military force, but as a government it has no real role and people see it as weak’.”

activist in Raqqa, is that “people fear the SDF as a military force, but as a government it has no real role and people see it as weak”.¹⁷⁴ Not only does this leave people wanting to maintain some distance from an administration they believe will not retain power, but it may also encourage ambitious partners of the YPG-SDF to believe the group is sufficiently weak to allow them to push for greater concessions, as demonstrated by the revolt led by the head of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council in summer 2023.¹⁷⁵

The impact of uncertainty

In an environment of pervasive uncertainty, community members and officials alike are highly sensitive to any perceived signalling by western governments, in an effort to better understand the future political trajectory of the region.¹⁷⁶ One SDC member recalled a conversation with a resident who, having seen a convoy of US military vehicles crossing the border from the KRG, presumably as part of a standard troop rotation, took it as a sign that coalition forces would remain deployed in the northeast.¹⁷⁷ Another respondent in Manbij, which is close to both Turkish-controlled territory and a Russian military base, suggested that if US

troops were to raise their flag in the city it would have a greater stabilising effect than any formal stabilisation initiative. Such a move would, he argued, “show that we’re part of the coalition’s area” and reassure residents that Manbij would not be handed over to either Turkish or Syrian government control.¹⁷⁸ Similarly, interviewees in Raqqa recalled feeling greater confidence that “things were moving in the right direction” prior to the partial US withdrawal in 2019,¹⁷⁹ as “every day [...] people would see US vehicles and feel reassured”. Today, meanwhile, western officials have greater difficulty travelling to Raqqa due to the deployment of Russian forces in the governorate.¹⁸⁰

Several interviews hint that uncertainty about the future may also contribute to a broader sense of hopelessness and a perceived lack of agency on the part of local actors. Multiple interviewees argued along the lines that Syria’s future is “completely in the hands of external forces”, with regional and international powers treating the fate of local people as “a gift” to be handed over in their dealmaking.¹⁸¹ In addition to encouraging a growing number of people to try to smuggle themselves out of the country in search of a better life,¹⁸² several individuals suggested that this sense of despair is reflected in increasing short-termism in people’s decision-making, including greater emphasis on consumption than saving, and less interest in community issues. According to one resident of Raqqa: “people feel they no longer own their society, and when you go out into the street you just see rubbish and chaos [...] people have withdrawn into themselves”.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁴ Interview with civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

¹⁷⁵ Telephone interview with Syrian researcher, October 2023.

¹⁷⁶ Almost all interviewees referred to the uncertain political future of AANES-controlled northeastern Syria

¹⁷⁷ Interview with SDC officials, London, February 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Focus group discussion with Manbij residents, July 2023.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Arab AANES employee, Raqqa, July 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Kurdish resident of Raqqa, July 2023.

¹⁸¹ Interview with civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

¹⁸² Interview with SDC officials, London, February 2023.

¹⁸³ Interview with civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

Finally, uncertainty, and the apparent contradictions of western engagement on Syria, appears to create the conditions for the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. A significant number of interviewees, including local officials and current and former employees of stabilisation programmes, expressed a belief that the West is deliberately looking to divide and weaken Syria in a bid to control the region. One CSO member in Raqqa, for example, argued that counter-terrorism efforts are “just a pretext to allow the US into the region to achieve its objectives”. He cited the coalition’s decision in 2017 to allow Daesh militants safe passage out of the besieged city to spare further civilian casualties as evidence of western collusion with the jihadist group.¹⁸⁴ Others, while critical of the ideology and practices of Daesh,¹⁸⁵ argued that life was, in many respects, better under the caliphate than it is today.¹⁸⁶ One Raqqa resident argued that “under Daesh the city was flourishing as money was being spent on the city [but] today the money is going elsewhere, but we don’t know where to,” citing a widely held belief that the oil and agricultural wealth of the northeast is now being diverted outside, either to the US or to fund the PKK’s fight against Turkey.¹⁸⁷ Meanwhile, a discussion with a group of community figures working on a western-funded initiative to reintegrate families returning from the al-Hol camp, revealed similar views. One person questioned why the West is “leaving its people in al-Hol while talking to us about peace”, in reference to the reluctance of European governments to repatriate citizens who joined Daesh.¹⁸⁸

9. Implications and policy recommendations

Interviews with stakeholders across the different political divides in northeastern Syria suggest that western conflict-management interventions have achieved some important successes. These include containing the threat of a resurgent Daesh, preventing a return to large-scale intra-communal violence, and enabling the resumption of something approaching normal life. Despite significant differences in interests and preferences, a number of constituencies in the northeast see the continued existence of AANES as their best hope for maintaining this stability, albeit for some with the proviso that it undertakes significant reforms.¹⁸⁹ For Arab communities, particularly in areas with links to the FSA-affiliated Syrian opposition, autonomy for the northeast prevents the punitive security response that would follow the return of the Syrian state apparatus, or fears of displacement by Iranian-backed militias. And for Kurdish communities, including the PYD’s political rivals, it prevents a repeat of the chaos and demographic change that resulted from three military operations by Turkey and its Syrian proxies between 2016 and 2019. This convergence of short-term interests has resulted in a degree of tactical cooperation, for example between the YPG-SDF and Arab tribal figures entrusted with maintaining local security,

184 Interview with civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

185 It is worth noting that the possibility of a Daesh resurgence in northeastern Syria was not cited by many respondents as a primary concern for the future. Residents of Deir ez-Zor, particularly the eastern part of the governorate where Daesh cells are most active, noted the group’s ability to operate relatively openly in certain areas, including demanding ‘taxes’ (zakat) from residents and threatening people who cooperated with the SDF. But elsewhere, more immediate security concerns predominated. In addition to the threat of a Syrian government return, respondents in Raqqa tended to emphasise the growing problem of inter-tribal violence.

186 Focus group discussion with current and former employees of stabilisation programmes, Raqqa, July 2023.

187 Interview with woman civil society activist, Raqqa, July 2023.

188 Focus group discussion with community representatives, Raqqa, July 2023.

189 This is a conclusion echoed by others. For example, Qasem Albasri argues that “[t]he optimal scenario for this region, in the near future, would be to maintain the SDF’s presence and the support of the international coalition, but with equitable representation and wealth distribution”. Qasem Albasri, ‘The SDF’s Pyrrhic Victory: What Sparked the Deir ez-Zor Rebellion?’, *Al-Jumhuriya* (2024), Available at: <https://aljumhuriya.net/en/2024/02/02/the-sdfs-pyrrhic-victory/>

and an emergent sector of CSOs implementing basic services with western funding.

These achievements should not be downplayed. In the absence of clear and easily achievable alternatives, western governments intervened in northeastern Syria with explicitly limited ambitions and, as such, have largely achieved what they set out to do, at relatively little cost to themselves. But it is also clear that this near-term stability is dependent on the continued presence of US forces, and liable to fall apart once their deployment comes to an end. When considering the question of why western assistance has struggled to lay the foundations for longer-term peace and stability, it might be tempting to answer that this was simply never what it intended to do. Indeed, the US and its partners have actively tried to avoid being drawn into resolving the question of northeastern Syria's long-term governance arrangements. But this research suggests that it is also important to consider the role played by local conflict actors themselves, their interests, incentives, and perceptions, and how these interact with both external interventions and the structural conditions of war.

In doing so, the research has identified two fundamental obstacles to the emergence of sustainable peace and stability in the northeast, and the ability of external interventions to support those outcomes. First, the fragility of the political order that has emerged following the defeat of Daesh, and the deep divisions over interests and preferences between key constituencies, encourages competition rather than cooperation between conflict actors. Second, even where the interests of these groups overlap to the extent that short-term, tactical cooperation emerges, pervasive uncertainty over the future – and in particular over the longevity of the US military deployment – undermines prospects for this to develop into a more sustained, strategic partnership.

This section sets out the implications of these two problems for northeastern Syria, the broader Syrian conflict, the stability of the wider Middle East, and western conflict-management interventions in other contexts.

Implications for northeastern Syria

- **Externally, the YPG-SDF will continue to hedge with the adversaries of its western partners and will struggle to steer a course independent of the PKK.** The uncertainty of the West's commitment means the YPG-SDF must continue to engage closely with Russia and the Syrian government to preserve the hope of a negotiated deal with Damascus. But knowing that the US will eventually withdraw, Damascus has little reason to offer terms that would be acceptable to the YPG-SDF. For similar reasons, it is inconceivable that the YPG-SDF sufficiently distances itself from the PKK to meet Turkish demands.
- **Within the northeast, the YPG-SDF will continue to prioritise security over local legitimacy.** Maintaining strong centralised control is seen by key decisionmakers as preferable to devolving power to communities, which they fear could fatally undermine AANES. By pushing for significant governance reforms, such as the idea of holding free and fair local elections, western donors will encounter significant resistance.
- **A security-first approach will perpetuate a cycle of mistrust between the authorities and communities at a time when ethnic and communal tensions risk becoming more entrenched.** YPG-SDF policies exacerbate the inter-communal tensions that are common in post-conflict situations and which, in Syria, are partly the legacy of authoritarian Baathist rule. This does not mean that a return to largescale violence along ethnic lines is inevitable, but it does provide opportunities for malign actors to exploit grievances. It is important to note that Daesh does not necessarily have to create a narrative of 'Kurdish oppression' of Arab communities – this narrative is already widely internalised in many communities.

- **Influential constituent groups in the northeast, including current partners of the YPG-SDF, will pursue a ‘wait-and-see’ approach.** Believing that a military takeover by the Syrian government – or by Turkey – is the most likely long-term scenario for the region, local actors often avoid close engagement with the YPG-SDF for fear of future retaliation. They also pursue hedging strategies, for example in the case of Arab tribes, maintaining ties with Damascus that allow them to switch allegiances when circumstances change.
- **Pragmatic voices within the YPG-SDF will likely see their influence decline further.** The limits of stabilisation assistance, most notably the decision not to invest significantly in AANES structures, weakens the hand of those who prioritise maintaining the gains achieved in northeast Syria over the Öcalanist movement’s broader struggle with Turkey.

Implications for the wider Syrian and regional conflict system

A combination of indivisible demands and commitment problems make the prospects of a sustainable, long-term deal between the YPG-SDF and both Damascus and Ankara that ensures the survival of AANES extremely unlikely.

- **The YPG-SDF’s external foes will double down on plans to eradicate rather than accommodate AANES.** Both Turkey and the Syrian government are confident they will outlast the western military presence in the northeast, and therefore have few incentives to engage in meaningful talks with the YPG-SDF. Contradictory signalling from the US as to the desirability of YPG-SDF engagement with Damascus further weakens the group’s

negotiating position, reducing the prospects that it can secure significantly better terms than FSA-affiliated groups achieved in Daraa in 2018.¹⁹⁰ In the shorter term, these external actors will continue to seek to destabilise the northeast with the aim of further undermining the group and pressuring the US to withdraw its troops.

- **The Turkey-PKK conflict will continue, with slim prospects for a resumption of peace talks in the short- to medium-term.** Ankara saw the growth of the PYD’s political project in NES as a reflection of the PKK’s growing regional strength, and this contributed to its decision to break off talks with the Qandil-based leadership in 2015. Continued support to the YPG-SDF has strained western relations with Ankara to a significant degree and undermines the prospects for third party mediation between Turkey and the PKK.¹⁹¹ Moreover, Turkish military successes against the PKK in recent years – and a belief that AANES will eventually collapse – further reduce incentives for Turkey to pursue talks.

Implications for western policymaking in Syria

Western capitals face a number of hard choices in their policy choices on Syria. With the prospects of a political transition in Damascus more remote than ever, policymakers must decide whether their engagement in the country’s northeast can ever achieve more than short-term, tactical gains in preventing the advance of malign actors, including Daesh and Iranian-backed militias.

- **The ability of the US and its partners to influence outcomes is more nuanced than many assume.** External actors cannot simply dictate the terms of a peace settlement or build

¹⁹⁰ FSA-linked rebels in Daraa secured the most generous terms of any ‘reconciliation’ agreement between the Syrian government and opposition groups. However, Damascus has regularly taken steps to renege on the terms of the deal. For background, see Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, ‘Syria’s Reconciliation Agreements’, *Syria Studies*, 9:2, (2017).

¹⁹¹ Howard Eissenstat, ‘A rocky outlook for Turkey-US unhappy marriage’, (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2023).

stability through increased stabilisation funding. But western governments retain influence in more subtle ways. The current military deployment, while in itself insufficient to fully address commitment problems in the northeast, could be leveraged to push for concessions from different actors, including the YPG-SDF, the Syrian government, and Turkey.

- **A US troop withdrawal would almost certainly result in the collapse of AANES in its current form, and a possible race between Ankara and Damascus to exert military control over the northeast.** This would significantly curtail the ability of western governments to prevent a future Daesh resurgence in Syria; the Syrian government has to-date shown itself unable to effectively address the challenge.
- **Domestic bargaining over the post-Daesh political order means that local actors will look to instrumentalise western support to advance their particular interests.** The YPG-SDF will push for more stabilisation funding to be channelled through central AANES structures, rather than independent CSOs, as a way to further cement its control. Its political opponents will meanwhile, will seek closer engagement by western actors to pressure the YPG-SDF to enact reforms and therefore increase their relative power.
- **The provision of stabilisation support in such a context therefore carries obvious conflict sensitivity risks that need to be carefully managed.** This applies most obviously to the competition between AANES and independent CSOs for external funding. However, it also applies to the tensions between an emergent ‘elite’ of CSO members and the wider community, who in many cases appear to resent the disproportionate benefits that the former enjoy from stabilisation funding. The fact that a majority of western stabilisation actors are not able to deploy staff in country further complicates the task of adequately understanding and monitoring these risks.
- **The ambiguities of western support may inadvertently empower those in the broader Kurdish movement who advocate continued armed struggle with Turkey.** As noted above, pragmatic voices within the YPG-SDF who have advocated for close engagement with the west have been left disappointed by the west’s “failure to turn [its support] into a political project”.¹⁹² This likely empowers those in the movement who support closer alignment with the PKK’s prioritisation of the struggle with Turkey.
- **An atmosphere of uncertainty in the northeast has the potential to undermine the positive effects of western stabilisation assistance by enabling the spread of misinformation, corruption, and short-term thinking.** This includes, for example, a belief that the region is deliberately being kept in the limbo of a frozen conflict as part of a western plot to either weaken the Sunni Arab majority or undermine the Kurdish movement. Within this environment, the argument that life was better under Daesh has been able to take root.
- **Ultimately, while an increase of western assistance in its current form will not address the fundamental challenges at the heart of the conflict, it could – done correctly – lead to positive improvements on marginal issues.** For example, conditioning support to AANES to encourage the YPG-SDF to reign in abuses by local security forces and to reduce its more extreme ideological expressions (e.g. trainings on Öcalanist thinking for AANES employees) would help to reduce tensions and potential flashpoints in Arab-majority communities.

¹⁹² Interview with SDC official, Qamishli, July 2023.

Implications for western policymaking beyond Syria

This research has relevance for western conflict-management interventions beyond Syria more broadly, particularly in light of the ongoing discussion over the relative merits of small-footprint, security-focussed interventions that place less emphasis on the political elements of stabilisation doctrine.

- **Interventions can achieve important short-term ‘wins’ in terms of improved stability without resolving difficult long-term questions around political strategy.** Given the considerable challenges involved in trying to achieve more, this may constitute success, particularly for governments that must think in terms of short-term electoral cycles, and which do not have to ‘own’ the longer-term consequences of interventions.
- **However, interventions that are not aligned with a coherent and realistic strategy, underpinned with a clear vision of a desired political ‘endgame’, will struggle to support sustainable peace and stability.** A decision to avoid taking an overt political stance does not mean that an intervention is neutral. This echoes findings from other contexts, including western stabilisation assistance to the Syrian opposition,¹⁹³ and nation-building efforts in Afghanistan.¹⁹⁴ It also reflects the emphasis of UK stabilisation doctrine.¹⁹⁵
- **A future US withdrawal from NES that sees the collapse of AANES will inevitably be portrayed by many as another example of ‘betraying the Kurds’.**¹⁹⁶ It remains to be seen whether this will have implications for the

credibility of the US approach of conducting future military operations ‘by, through, and with’ local partners.

Policy recommendations

- 1. In the immediate term, the US and its partners should publicly commit that they are not preparing to withdraw from northeastern Syria or avoid calling on the YPG-SDF to cut a deal with the Syrian government.** Steps to the contrary will inadvertently weaken the group’s negotiating position while a precipitous withdrawal could lead to its collapse.
- 2. Western partners should revisit the logic of their northeast strategy and critically reflect how efforts can realistically contribute to achieving stated objectives given resource constraints.** This should involve acknowledging the extent to which domestic bargaining and commitment problems undermine the prospect for long-term peace and stability and, by extension, the enduring defeat of Daesh.
- 3. Conduct detailed scenario planning for a future drawdown or withdrawal of coalition forces.** Policymakers should begin work now to avoid a repeat of the scenario of southern Syria in 2019.¹⁹⁷ Scenario planning for the northeast should consider the likely implications of either a Turkish or Syrian government takeover of the area for different local communities, including the prospects for Kurdish political and cultural rights, and the impact on the ability of malign actors to expand their foothold.

193 Brown, ‘Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance’.

194 See, for example, SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, (Arlington, Virginia: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021).

195 HMG, *The UK Government’s Approach to Stabilisation*, (London: UK Stabilisation Unit, 2019).

196 Steven A. Cook, ‘There’s Always a Next Time to Betray the Kurds’, *Foreign Policy*, (2019).

197 A Russian-backed offensive in 2019 led to the rapid collapse of FSA-linked opposition forces, putting individuals who had worked with western-funded stabilisation initiatives in serious danger of reprisals by Syrian security forces.

4. Pursue clear, consistent, and comprehensive messaging to communities in the northeast.

The communications strategy of various western actors is viewed by most actors in the northeast as confusing and contradictory, which enables the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, and undermines the value of other stabilisation efforts. Repeated assurances that the US does not plan to withdraw are unconvincing to most people. A revised communications approach should be comprehensive in the sense that it reaches communities that do not have direct or regular access to western officials in the northeast.

5. On the assumption that there remains appetite to support a more sustainable political solution in either the northeast or in Syria as a whole, consider how western engagement can help conflict actors overcome their existing commitment problems.

The YPG-SDF, for example, will not be able to reach what it sees as a satisfactory deal with Damascus when negotiating from a position of weakness because of the absence of a credible external guarantor.

6. Even in the case that there is no interest to support more than a short-term intervention in the northeast, focus on activities that can achieve an improvement 'on the margins' and avoid flashpoints.

Intense domestic bargaining between the YPG-SDF and others has the potential to cause periodic flare-ups of violence. Encouraging AANES to avoid exacerbating communal tensions, for example by tackling administrative corruption, reducing the ideological dimensions of its rule in Arab areas, and curbing repressive security measures, would help to reduce these incidents. Carefully designed and properly resourced dialogue can help to identify areas of mutual interest and opportunities for tactical cooperation between the authorities, their political opponents, and local communities. Meanwhile, a greater focus on conflict sensitivity, facilitated for example by deploying

staff with relevant experience inside northeast Syria, would help donors to better address some of the trade-offs associated with current programming, including the challenges of implementing activities through a network of CSOs.



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