

ARABS AND KURDS IN SYRIAN SELF-RULE

Rojava survives for now

The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria has had talks with the Damascus government on its de facto autonomy, without success. But tensions between Arab and Kurdish populations are decreasing

Mireille Court and Chris Den Hond | Translated by Charles Goulden

ILHAM Ahmed is a Kurd from Afrin and executive chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the political arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control all of Syria's northeast. This Arab-Kurdish alliance is defending an experiment in self-rule, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, or Rojava ('west' in Kurdish).¹ Ahmed said: 'We want tomorrow's Syria to include autonomous regions. We want a new constitution that will have decentralisation written into it.' We were talking in Ain Issa, a small town between Kobane and Raqqa, and the new administrative capital of Rojava.

In July Ahmed headed the SDC's delegation to Damascus for its first talks with the Syrian government. The two sides had already met officially at Tabqa, where the hydroelectric dam on the Euphrates is in urgent need of repair. Only the government can supply engineers and replacement parts for the defective sluice gates. Though the SDC and the government may be able to cooperate at a technical level, a political entente remains unlikely in the short term. Ahmed said: 'As we listened to the government talk, we realised that they only see the talks as a tactic. They are not making a serious effort to achieve progress.' The Syrian opposition, based in Istanbul, did not attend the meeting. 'We are the real opposition,' said Ahmed. 'Most armed groups on the ground are extremists, and they are backed by Turkey. Trying to reach an agreement with these radical and jihadist groups would be suicide for us.'

The SDC negotiators went to Damascus without setting preconditions. Ahmed's deputy and fellow member of the delegation, Hikmet Habib, an Arab from Qamishli, explained: 'We don't have big slogans like "Down with the regime of Bashar al-Assad". That's not a key aim. What's more important is to amend the constitution and change the basis of Syria's political system. We have a huge democratic deficit. Decisions are taken in Damascus and the whole system rests on a few families who govern the country.'

Assad has several times sworn to recapture all of Syria's territory, last December accusing the Kurds of being traitors. Yet this May he said on television that he was still prepared to talk to the SDF, though he was careful to refer to the institutions established in Syria's north and east as 'temporary structures'. Now negotiations between the government and the SDC are frozen until the situation in Idlib is resolved; the government means to take the town back from the jihadists.

After the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) recaptured Kobane in 2015, with the help of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Kurds chose not to declare Kurdistan independent but to establish a 'democratic federation' inspired by communalism, without challenging the borders drawn. Arabs, Turkmens and other communities were very wary of the Kurds, fearing that they would be punished for the Syrian authorities' ill treatment of the Kurds. 'The Kurds suffered greatly from the Baathist regime's policy of assimilation,' Habib recalled. 'As soon as the SDF liberated the areas held by ISIS, we made great efforts to restore confidence by setting up reconciliation committees and councils



Fighting with the Syrian Democratic Forces: Qamishli, 11 November 2018

on which everyone was represented. Today, it's fair to say that 60% of SDF members are from Arab tribes. The SDF is estimated to have around 40,000 fighters, male and female.

Who to support?

Until 2017 Rojava was made up of three Kurdish-majority cantons: Afrin, Jazira and Kobane. Since the taking of Raqqa in October 2017, and the loss of Afrin this March, it includes more Arabs and fewer Kurds, which makes a robust alliance between them important. The strange atmosphere in Qamishli, capital of Jazira canton, shows how complicated the situation is, with entire districts remaining under government control. The Syriac Christian population is split between supporting the government and joining the self-rule project. Elizabeth Gawryie, a member of the autonomous administration representing the Syriac Christian community, and also of the negotiating delegation, spoke about sharing resources, especially oil – the major wells are under Rojava's control. 'Syria is a rich country. The coming negotiations must address the distribution of revenue. We have suggested to Damascus that bilateral committees be created on public services, healthcare and the economy.'

The administration needs to find a solution to problems in education. One of its original priorities was to establish a school curriculum in Arabic, Kurdish and Syriac, with new content in non-scientific subjects. Musim Nebo, a teacher, said: 'We don't have any problem with the Damascus curriculum for scientific subjects, as they are universal. But we do have major problems with the curriculum for subjects such as history, sociology and geography, which ignores non-Arab communities.' In August, a few dozen Syriacs in Qa-

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A Kurdish mechanic

mishli demonstrated against the new curriculum, chanting slogans in support of Assad. They were angry that the autonomous administration had stopped teaching in Syriac in the public education system, and disappointed that diplomas from schools run by the administration were not recognised by Damascus, or abroad. The administration said it had decided to suspend classes in Syriac in the public sector because most Syriac children are privately educated. Some private schools, run by the Church, were temporarily closed for refusing to adopt the new curriculum. A compromise was finally reached: the new curriculum is to apply only to the first two years of primary school. After that, private schools are allowed to continue with the Damascus curriculum, which ensures that their diplomas are recognised.

In Kobane, we attended a town meeting, a gathering where local people come to settle pressing issues. One resident, Hevi Zora, denounced those who sent their children to schools outside Rojava as hypocrites: 'Why do a few rich people, and even members of the autonomous administration, send

their children to Arabic schools in Latakia, Aleppo or Damascus, when the rest study here in Kurdish?' A week later, a decree was issued that any member of the authority who sent their children to a regime school would be sanctioned.

Yet inter-community relations do seem to be improving, and the institutions are working. In Qamishli, the co-chair of the legislative council, Hakem Khalo, told us: 'Here, in Jazira canton, the state was not redistributing anything. Its centralised system has never taken other ethnic and religious communities into account. The Syrian regime believes it can get back to the pre-2011 situation, but many Arabs are now involved in the autonomous authority's system. They sit on civilian councils in Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and Deir al-Zor. They realise they can look after their communities much better than before.'

'We're waiting for a political solution'

In Tell Abyad, a little town close to the Turkish border, the atmosphere was tense. ISIS had a social base here before the SDF forced it out in 2015, after bitter fighting. There is constant interference from Turkey and its allies. The town also has a sad past, being in an area where the Baathist regime dispossessed local Kurds and replaced them with Arab settlers during the 1960s. Reshad Kurdo's family lost their land, but as he explained, the Kurds are careful not to act revengefully: 'When the SDF liberated Tell Abyad from ISIS, we didn't force anyone out. We didn't take back the land the Arabs took from us 50 years ago. We've decided to wait for a political solution.'

A Kurdish garage mechanic was less optimistic: 'Even if we built a heaven on earth, the Arabs wouldn't trust us. They think the Kurds want to take over.

And we fear the Turks will do the same thing here as they did in Afrin.'

People were distressed by any mention of Afrin. Turkey's occupation of the Kurdish-majority area was traumatic; this January, after negotiations, Russia allowed Turkey to invade it. The international coalition led by the US and France turned a blind eye, and the 'international community' seemed indifferent to the massacre of the Kurdish forces that had chased ISIS out of Kobane and Raqqa, and saved the Yezidis in Sinjar from ISIS. People told us about violence against Kurds after the fall of Afrin. In June, Human Rights Watch reported that 'Turkey-backed armed groups in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have seized, looted, and destroyed property of Kurdish civilians in the Afrin district of northern Syria. The anti-government armed groups have installed fighters and their families in residents' homes and destroyed and looted civilian properties without compensating the owners.'² Human Rights Watch is still waiting for authorisation from Turkey to continue its investigation on the ground.

We could not reach Afrin, and could only go as far as Manbij, Rojava's westernmost town; defended by the local military council, it is an example of peaceful coexistence between communities. Syria is a mishmash of contradictory alliances. The Kurds in Afrin, west of the Euphrates, were protected by Russia, which abandoned them. The Kurds east of the Euphrates and in Manbij are now under the protection of the international coalition, although no one knows for how long. People there feel international air cover is vital, otherwise the Turkish or Syrian armed forces will have no trouble in crushing Rojava.

We crossed the Tigris, the border between Syria and Iraq, in a small boat, and travelled across northern Iraq to the Kandil mountains, where the PKK has its troops (the PKK is Turkey's pet hate and, according to some, controls all things Kurdish in Syria). Here we met Riza Altun. It was the first time a senior PKK leader had spoken to journalists since Mam Zeki Sengali, a Yezidi PKK commander, was killed by a Turkish missile in a targeted assassination in August. Throughout the interview, we could hear but not see a drone above us, yet Altun was unflappable: 'We are surrounded by contradictions. Originally, the US did not have the strategic intention of supporting the SDF. The Kurds know very well that the US is an imperialist state, but we have to maintain this paradoxical relationship, because our survival is at stake.' He added that the bounty which the US recently put on the heads of a number of PKK leaders shows how fragile the alliance really is ●

Mireille Court is a coordinating member of Solidarity Kurdistan; Chris Den Hond is a journalist. They co-edited *La Commune du Rojava: L'alternative kurde à l'Etat-nation* (The Rojava Commune: the Kurdish alternative to the nation state), Critica-Syllepse, Brussels/Paris, 2017

¹ See Mireille Court and Chris Den Hond, 'Experiment in self-rule in Rojava', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, September 2017. ² Syria: Turkey-backed groups seizing property', Human Rights Watch, 14 June 2018, www.hrw.org