Surviving the Aftermath of Islamic State: The Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy

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Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS)

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Introduction

Since 2014, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) - and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG)[1] - has become an essential political and military force in the war against Islamic State (IS) in Syria. The support of the Western Coalition enabled it to take over the whole of the country's northeast and to establish an Autonomous Administration capable of supervising the population, the economy and the territory, despite it having an ideology foreign to the majority of the population. However, the fall of the IS 'caliphate' in 2019 endangered this politico-military order. The Syrian Kurdish movement's proximity to the PKK prompted Turkey to intervene at a time when victory against IS had undermined the perceived value of this movement and, with it, the American will to defend it.

Comforted by the fact that the US would not contest it on the ground, Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring on 9 October 2019. Its objective was to oust the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) –of which the YPG constitute elite battalions[2] – from the Turkish border strip and establish a 'safe zone' there. This zone is primarily intended for the relocation and resettlement of some of the Syrian refugee population currently residing in Turkey.[3] The military intervention was carried out by auxiliary forces from the Syrian National Army (SNA), making it possible to take over the region between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ain – more than 1,000 km² of territory.[4] On 17 October, the United States and Turkey agreed to implement a five-day ceasefire. The agreement also stipulated that Turkish armed forces would be the principal actors enforcing a 'safe zone' without specified geographical boundaries.[5] This effectively granted Turkey a blank cheque to achieve its explicitly stated ambitions, continuing its offensive along territory spanning from Jarablus in the west to the Iraqi border in the east – an area 440 km wide and 30 km deep.

Cornered, and convinced their American partner would not protect them against the Turkish offensive, the SDF concluded a military agreement with Damascus on 14 October under Russian auspices. The agreement authorised the return of limited numbers of Syrian troops to areas near the Turkish border. The Kurdish movement seems to have capitulated, allowing a return of the Syrian regime to a region it had abandoned seven years previously.[6] Although destabilised, the movement has not been

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[1] Founded in 2003, the PYD stems ideologically from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It has formed its own governance project in northeast Syria (referred to in this paper as the Autonomous Administration) since 2012 and became the main Kurdish political party in Syria. For simplicity, we also refer to it as the 'Kurdish movement' or the 'leadership of the Autonomous Administration'.

[2] The SDF were established in October 2015. It is a heterogeneous alliance of multi-ethnic armed groups that remains squarely under the command of the YPG which as, more trained and ideologically committed, constitute elite battalions.

[3] Following President Erdogan's announcement of an imminent Turkish attack in the area between the cities of Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ain, President Donald Trump caused surprise on 6 October 2019 by announcing by telephone to his Turkish counterpart the withdrawal of the US army from the same area. Then, on 13 October, US Defence Secretary Mark Esper announced Trump's decision to completely withdraw US troops from all of north-eastern Syria. Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Northern Syria," *The New York Times*, 13 October 2019, https://nyti.ms/2rS8dys

[4] The operation killed more than 450 civilians and displaced 200,000 people in one week. Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines – The Building of the Democratic System in North and East Syria," 19 December 2019, http://bit.ly/2TM3GsQ

[5] White House External Relations Office, "The United States and Turkey Agree to Ceasefire in Northeast Syria," 17 October 2019, http://bit.ly/2sHc2GJ; Semih Idiz, "Will Erdogan's Plans for Northern Syria be Realized?" *al-Monitor*, 4 October 2019, http://bit.ly/2s4PW0C

[6] From 2011, the Kurdish movement negotiated with Damascus to deploy in the three pockets of Kurdish settlement on the Turkish border in exchange for a commitment to fight the Syrian revolutionary movement alongside the regime. During 2012, the regime decided to partially abandon north-eastern Syria, leaving the YPG free to take control of Kurdish territories.

truly defeated and it still holds several cards in a game which is increasingly complex for all the actors involved. It retains control of territory, military forces, oil resources and governance structures, all of which allow it to maintain an alternative political order still functioning after the return of a regime more drained than ever. As such, it remains the only actor to persist in the war against IS with the support of the international coalition, the presence of which, however limited, stabilises the *de facto* governance model throughout the northeast.

Based on an analysis of the strategies of the main regional and international actors around and within the northeast, this study[7] first presents the new set of constraints and opportunities navigated by the Autonomous Administration and the SDF since October 2019. The paper then examines the key sources of the Kurdish movement's resilience, which have enabled it to cope with multiple pressures: war with Turkey; the resurgence of IS; attempts at disruption by the regime and then the return of its army; and US disengagement. Finally, the paper examines the sustainability of the current situation and the risks inherent in its fragile balance.

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[7] It is based on regular research in north-eastern Syria since 2012 and on regular interviews with representatives of the different parties involved in Moscow, Istanbul, Washington, Tehran, Ankara, Brussels, Paris, London and Beirut.

1. The Fragmentation of the North-Eastern Strategic Space

The failure of the United States to initiate a de-escalation process between Ankara and the leadership of the SDF signalled a green light for the Turkish offensive. However, this offensive did not go as planned. While it did compel the US to pull back and to implicitly condone the operation, it also led to the deployment of Russian and Syrian forces in the border strip. The upshot of the US withdrawal was a breakup of the status quo that had resulted from the war against IS, adding to the complexity of the strategic situation in the northeast.

1.1. The End of US Policy Contradictions

From the outset, the United States has always had a purely security-based approach to its partnership with the Kurdish movement. For Washington, the relationship was strictly 'mission-based'[8] and from 2014 centred around the fight against IS without developing any policy to mitigate the risks of long-term political consequences. The decision to support the Kurdish movement was made with a sense of the urgency of a rapid military response. With no credible alternative partner capable of mobilising immediately, the US supported the YPG[9] and organised the recapture of the territory controlled by IS, ultimately confining the organisation to Deir ez-Zor. The political project pursued by the leadership of the Autonomous Administration was a concern, but this concern was not addressed in a manner that could prevent events from unfolding.

Aware that the fight against IS boosted the military and political capacities of the Kurdish movement, and with it the risks of an eventual armed conflict with Turkey, US diplomats indeed did make efforts at negotiation. These efforts, however, were limited to issues of marginal importance to Ankara. The core issue – the relationship with the PKK – was never the explicit subject of negotiations. It took US diplomats more than a year between 2016 and 2017 to negotiate the establishment of an inclusive local council in the city of Manbij with Turkey and the Kurdish leadership.[10] They also spent ten months of fruitless discussion on the terms of a 'safe zone' along the Syrian-Turkish border. By avoiding the question of the Syrian Kurdish leadership's proximity to the PKK, Washington only delayed an inevitable Turkish intervention.

Free of any American political terms or conditions, for its part the movement followed a 'status quo' policy while setting up a military and administrative apparatus unparalleled in the region. At the same time, it maintained its proximity to the PKK, which, in turn, has been in open-ended conflict with Turkey since 2015. This situation has prevented the movement from establishing a lasting strategic alliance with the United States and constantly hinders the Autonomous Administration's access to more substantial stabilisation aid from Western countries. Meanwhile, the US administration kept its Kurdish partner under the illusion that a long-term relationship was in place,[11] even as President

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[8] This is the term used by the US administration to describe its engagement in the northeast. Interview with US officials, October 2019.

[9] According to a former US official in charge when the US/YPG cooperation began, US policymakers were perfectly aware of the risks, but they made their decision only after having explored all other possible alternatives (email exchange in January 2020).

[10] Control of the city of Manbij was then highly strategic. While the SDF attempted to link up with the Afrin region, Turkey in return launched Operation Euphrates Shield. The city has since lost its strategic significance except for its location west of the Euphrates, an area that Turkey considers to be its backyard. Interviews and observations in Manbij since 2017 and discussions with Turkish and American officials in 2017 and 2018 in Washington and Ankara.

[11] "The more long-term the relationship with the United States, the more an almost organic relationship developed with them, irrigated by constant reassurance about maintaining their presence in the northeast. We really began to believe that, for the first time in the history of our movement, we were building a sustainable strategic relationship. For that, we were ready to weaken our old fabric of contact with the states of the region," said a member of the Kurdish movement (interview in Raqqa, November 2019).

Trump frequently expressed his intention to withdraw all US troops from Syria entirely.[12]

At the end of October 2019, the withdrawal of US forces to Syria's far east abruptly resolved the contradiction between the US's alliance with Turkey and its partnership with a movement linked to the PKK. The remaining presence of American troops (fewer than 500) in the areas of Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah, Shaddadi and Qamishli[13] allows for pressure to be maintained on the remnants of IS and the detention centres for its activists. It also enables continued control of the Simalka border crossing with the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRG), through which comes the logistical support for the forces on the ground. However, President Trump's decision to ultimately keep US forces in place was not driven by strategic objectives; it was the notion of protecting the region's oil that persuaded the president to reverse his earlier announcement.[14]

By partially resolving the Gordian knot of its contradictory alliances, the US has scaled back its territorial control but at the same time reduced the political costs of its presence in Syria – particularly the tension with Turkey. If the president maintains his desire to disengage, the American position will remain unpredictable and unintelligible not only for the leadership of the Autonomous Administration but also Washington's Western allies, who wish to continue the war against IS along with various stabilisation programmes. This makes it difficult for the Kurdish movement to develop a viable strategy to exit the current quagmire, especially as escalating tensions between the US and Iran put the movement in a bind.

1.2.   Russia in the Northeast: A Halftone Engagement

Russia's position does not make the Kurdish movement's decision-making process easy. Moscow has seized the opportunity created by the US disengagement to return to the arena in the northeast. However, it struggles to define a clear strategy, constrained by having to reconcile multiple and partially contradictory objectives. These include reassuring Turkey, mediating between Damascus and the leadership of the Autonomous Administration, and supporting the deployment of the Syrian army. Russia is also currently focused on the battle in Idlib.

The US withdrawal allowed Russia to position itself in the northeast through an agreement concluded with Turkey on 22 October 2019. The agreement stipulates a cessation of Turkey's military advance, a withdrawal of the YPG from the 32 km-deep border strip and its replacement by the Syrian army and joint Russian-Turkish patrols.[15] Russian policy therefore shares some aspects of the American mediation repertoire (a safe zone, YPG withdrawal and mixed patrols). However, while its influence over the northeast expands, Moscow also inherits the contradictions of the American position and the struggle to de-escalate between the SDF and Ankara.

Russia has an advantage over the US in that it can propose an endgame to Turkey by integrating Damascus into the equation and championing a return of the regime as an alternative to the Autonomous Administration. It is in the Russian interest to foster an understanding between

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[12] In March 2018, the American president clearly declared his intention to imminently withdraw US troops. Christiano Lima, "Trump: 'I Want to Get out' of Syria," *Politico*, 4 March 2018, https://politi.co/38W2pnW. He later reiterated this intention in a telephone conversation with the SDF commander-in-chief, Mazloum Kobani (interview with the Kurdish military command, al-Hasakah, January 2020).

[13] According to a tacit agreement between Russia and the United States, the use of airspace is now divided into two zones of influence delimited by a meridian through Tall Tamr: west for Russia and east for the United States, interviews with American and Russian officials, November 2019.

[14] The same logic would have been used to define the limited number of soldiers. Interviews with American and Kurdish soldiers, November 2019 and January 2020; Robin Wright, "Trump's Baffling Plan to Pillage Syria's Oil," *The New Yorker*, 30 October 2019, http://bit.ly/34EQAPM

[15] Russian Presidential Office, "Memorandum of Understanding Between Turkey and the Russian Federation," 22 October 2019, http://bit.ly/370CbPJ

Damascus and the leadership of the Autonomous Administration which would shelter the northeast from a Turkish offensive, facilitate the return of the Syrian state and complicate the US presence even further. Moscow cannot, however, favour a compromise acceptable to the Kurdish movement without jeopardising its relations with Turkey. It can only appeal to the sovereignty of the Syrian state and therefore support the replacement, rather than protection, of the Autonomous Administration and the SDF by the Damascus regime.[16]

Even so, Moscow does not believe in the ability of Damascus and the Kurdish movement to find common ground. It believes that only a militarily-weakened SDF could make this rapprochement possible. Following this logic, Russia incited Turkey to wage military operations along the border strip[17] on the one hand, while on the other promoting a military agreement between the SDF leadership and the Syrian army to counter Turkey's offensive. A Russian diplomat formerly stationed in Damascus concisely summed up Moscow's realpolitik as follows: "We have little to offer the Kurdish movement other than military defeat or political suicide," while also acknowledging that Damascus lacks the capacity necessary to return to the region.[18]

Finally, the northeast is not a priority for Russia, which follows a policy of minimum engagement (maintaining good relations with the leadership of the Autonomous Administration, facilitating its rapprochement with Damascus and gently managing the return of the Syrian army). For the time being Moscow is prioritising a military advance against opposition-held areas in Idlib "where tangible results are still possible"[19] in what constitutes the last Syrian region not protected by any external power, as the northeast is by the US and Afrin and northern Aleppo governorate by Turkey. Moreover, while Russian diplomacy recognises the limits of its mediation between the Kurdish movement and Damascus,[20] it seems to prefer to wait for the final withdrawal of the Americans before furthering its engagement.

1.3.   Turkey's Restrained Belligerence

Since 9 October, Turkey has seized the territory between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ain without facing major difficulties. Having only Arab recruits reluctant to fight the SNA troops originating mostly from the same region of Deir ez-Zor, the SDF quickly lost ground in Tall Abyad.[21] In the ethnically-mixed city of Ras al-Ain, the YPG managed to delay the Turkish advance but there were no illusions as to the inevitable outcome of the battle. Since the temporary truce of 17 October, Turkey and its SNA auxiliary forces have regained territory from the SDF corresponding to 1,100 km² or 60 villages, according to Autonomous Administration sources.[22] Following these territorial gains, Turkey

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[16] Interviews with Russian diplomats in Geneva, Ankara and Moscow, November-December 2019.

[17] Several sources confirm that during the first phase of Operation Peace Spring Russia was ready to let Turkey lead the military offensive on the city of Kobane. Interviews with diplomats and security officials, October-November 2019. Tass Russian News Agency, "Lavrov: Kurds' Interest in Sochi Memorandum Ebbing as US Troops Return to Northern Syria," 26 November 2019, http://bit.ly/2ttfZyY

[18] Interviews with Russian diplomats in Geneva, Ankara and Moscow, November-December 2019.

[19] Ibid.

[20] "We are in favour of an agreement between the PYD and Damascus, but we are exerting pressure on the Syrian government on a multitude of files, and we have only limited political credit. We cannot put pressure on Damascus to be more flexible on the Kurdish question because it has a cost in terms of our relations with Turkey." Interview with a Russian diplomat, November 2019.

[21] According to an SDF commander who defected during the battle: "There was no real fighting, the supervision by the Kurdish military cadres was minimal, we knew that we were facing relatives. The Kurds and the Turks decided to send the people of Deir ez-Zor to fight against each other." Interview in Deir ez-Zor, October 2019.

[22] Interview with a political adviser to the Autonomous Administration, November 2019. Turkish officials, on their part, admit that their SNA auxiliary forces suffered more losses after the establishment of the ceasefire than during the fighting in the first week: 63 dead until 17 October and 234 dead until 18 November. Interviews conducted in November 2019.

intends to take advantage of the agreement with Russia to gain a foothold in the rest of the border strip with joint Russian-Turkish patrols.

However, being hampered in its offensive by Western pressure and the deployment of Russian and Syrian forces, Turkey could neither significantly weaken the YPG's capability nor secure its southern border adjacent to the territories governed by the Autonomous Administration. Ankara asserts that the YPG has in effect maintained its presence in the 32 km-deep border area, despite Russia stating that 34,000 fighters have left. The SDF is also waging an asymmetrical war in the territory it has conceded to Turkey, which could lead Turkey to resume hostilities while negatively affecting the US partnership with the SDF.[23] In addition, the Russian-Turkish agreement of 22 October leaves open the question of governance in the northeast, allowing the Autonomous Administration to maintain its presence in the border towns – excepted in Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ain. Finally, the return of the Syrian regime – potentially acceptable to Ankara as a 'lesser evil' – would have the opposite effects to those expected by Turkey. According to Turkish officials, the return of the regime would protect the political order established by the Kurdish movement instead of replacing it.[24] Moreover, the presence of the Syrian army on the border with Turkey would change the nature of the conflict, transforming it into a conflict between states, which Ankara has sought to avoid. Operation Peace Spring was originally launched to neutralise a non-state actor.

Turkey therefore considers the current return to calm to be a temporary stage in a longer-term confrontation. It intends to progress gradually by taking the military initiative whenever the political context allows, and then pausing when international pressure grows too strong. Its objective of securing its southern border remains to this day.[25] In this context, American and Russian guarantees to prevent a resumption of hostilities remain fragile. Washington has lobbied Turkey for a truce and threatened sanctions to that end. However, by signing an agreement which grants Turkey the lead role in the implementation of a geographically-undefined safe zone, Washington indirectly guaranteed the deployment of Turkish forces over the entire border strip.[26] Furthermore, Turkey remains convinced that the threats of sanctions emanating from Congress are reversible, believing that the White House will eventually resume normalising relations with it. On the Russian side, the guarantees are even more tenuous. Moscow is indeed committed to deploying a small interposition force of a few hundred men together with the regime. However, it could be tempted – as it has been before – to incite a Turkish military operation as a lever to press the Kurds to accept an agreement with Damascus on the latter's terms.

In the end, Operation Peace Spring complicated the geostrategic equation in the northeast. Not only are the actors now involved more numerous (with the arrival of the Syrian army and Russia) but, above all, none have a long-term strategy or the means to implement one. All the forces present are content to micro-manage specific questions. Turkey is seeking to stabilise the conquered areas; Russia is somewhat occupied with resuscitating a regime on its last legs; and the US is concentrated in the far east with a mandate with unclear parameters. The northeast is thus set to become less a space for clear strategic confrontation than one for a multiplicity of bilateral negotiations on increasingly more specific short-term issues. These include the deployment of the Syrian army, the withdrawal of the YPG from the border strip, the division of airspace between Russian and American zones of influence and joint Russian-Turkish patrols.

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[23] Between 22 October and 20 December 2019, 43 attacks were recorded in the Tall Abyad-Ras al-Ain stretch, with a death toll of 72 civilians and 258 injured. A UN official said "Every time there is a bombing, the Turkish Foreign Ministry highlights it in its public messaging. In addition to the risk that these bombings might ultimately push Turkey to re-engage militarily, they are also supporting Turkey's narrative. For example, US officials now also refer to 'terrorist' operations in Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ain." Interview conducted in December 2019.

[24] Interviews with Turkish officials, November 2019.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

In this context, the Kurdish movement is struggling to follow a new political course. It remains with a *fait accompli* policy whereby it prevails, even though its military command is aware that faced with the Turkish threat a switch to politics is necessary. The movement's short-term approach therefore seems less the product of a conscious decision than a reflection of the broader fragmentation of the strategic game in north-eastern Syria.

2.   The Resilience of the Political Order in the Northeast

With no clear strategic options available, the leadership of the Autonomous Administration maintains its course, consolidating the institutional order patiently set up since 2012. Despite the largely alien character of its secular leftist ideology – combining the avant-gardism of a Marxist-Leninist party with ideas of democratic confederalism developed by the American radical leftist thinker Murray Bookchin – this institutional order has taken root not only in Kurdish-majority areas but in Arab territories as well. It persists despite the multiple pressures to which it has been subjected in recent months: the US withdrawal; Turkey's offensive; regime-led destabilisation campaigns; and the resurgence of IS. This process can be explained less by a rallying of the population to an ideological project than by three other factors: the integration of important sections of society in the Autonomous Administration bureaucracy; the population's mechanisms of re-appropriation of the Administration; and the absence of a credible alternative. In the end, the Kurdish movement is managing to assert itself as a coherent political entity and the sole credible actor to hold the ground and maintain pressure on IS.

2.1.   The Bureaucratisation of Northeast Syria

The primary source of the deepening roots of the movement is the bureaucratisation of local society. The economic resources accumulated in the territory and international aid have enabled the Administration to develop an imposing bureaucratic apparatus with more than 250,000 employees, including 70,000 soldiers, 30,000 police and 150,000 civil servants. Among the latter, 40,000 are teachers receiving a monthly salary of 120-200 US dollars, double the amount paid in the territory controlled by the regime.[27] The military are also better remunerated in comparison with the regime-held areas: while a Syrian army officer of intermediate rank sent to the north-eastern front with Turkey earns 43,000 Syrian pounds a month (the equivalent of 50 US dollars), a recruit of the same rank in the SDF may earn double or even triple that amount, depending on his seniority.[28]

After 2012, a significant number of civil servants, particularly teachers, tended to avoid working in Autonomous Administration institutions, considering them too unsustainable and preferring to maintain their positions in the public service linked to the central state. This trend has been partially reversed over the past year due to the economic crisis in the areas regulated by the Damascus government, which has been exacerbated by the tightening of sanctions. Although it cannot be quantified,[29] a significant proportion of civil servants formerly paid by Damascus have therefore joined the ranks of the Autonomous Administration, risking the loss of their central state salaries.

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[27] Interviews with members of the Autonomous Administration between September and November 2019.

[28] Spending for the year 2019 amounted to 45 million US dollars a month on the salaries of civil servants (Discussions with officials of the Autonomous Administration, August 2019). The bulk of the non-military budget is therefore largely absorbed by salaries, which translates into a political economy of patronage, among other things. For the details of this budget, see The Autonomous Administration of North-eastern Syria, Facebook, 14 January, 2020 (in Arabic), http://bit.ly/2GdYPIS

[29] Interviews with officials carried out during various stays in the northeast in 2018 and 2019.

Under the combined effects of the exodus of the middle class, the crisis in sectors providing large numbers of jobs such as agriculture, and the disaffiliation from the central state public service, the Autonomous Administration is steadily creating a real dynamic of re-bureaucratisation in the northeast. Of the 2.2 million people living under its control,[30] 250,000 derive their income directly from the Administration. Additionally, there are private-sector workers heavily supervised by the Kurdish movement, particularly in the construction and agriculture sectors, and the employees of organisations supported by the coalition states' stabilisation programmes. In total, almost 20% of the working population[31] find themselves dependent on an income that is directly or indirectly obtained from the political order established by the leadership of the Autonomous Administration.

This bureaucratisation of northeast Syria has two consequences. First, even if the distribution of salaries is insufficient by itself to produce political loyalty, it nevertheless creates a direct interest in the sustainability of the Administration among the beneficiaries, especially when coupled with the fact that there is no alternative in the present context of the financial collapse in Damascus. Moreover, with considerably lower numbers of civil servants still benefiting from a central government income,[32] the regime is less able to instrumentalise its salaried base to pressure or control the population in the face of the Kurdish movement.

The Autonomous Administration has truly demonstrated its resilience in the face of the instability created by the Turkish offensive. The low rate of defection among the ranks of its military structures attests to this. The main defections took place during the battle of Tall Abyad and in the city of Tabqa.[33] In other areas, numbers of recruits have not decreased.[34] For example, the Military Council of Manbij recorded 100 recruitments versus 30 departures in November 2019.[35] This means the recruitment rate has remained unchanged in the past several months. Likewise, in October the local authority in Deir ez-Zor registered almost 1,500 requests for recruitment into the Administration's security forces.[36]

2.2. Re-appropriation of Institutions from Below

The Autonomous Administration has been subject to opposition from within local communities in the past, and indeed still is. The logic of disaffiliation or non-engagement is important in certain circles, including among central state civil servants fearing the loss of privileges, middle-class people with reservations about the logic of indirect control by the executives of the Kurdish movement, and educated people in better-paid and politically less problematic non-governmental organisations. Disengagement in former IS strongholds as a result of both the policy of continual raids followed by the SDF and of pressure exerted by IS is also salient. However, over time the population has tended to re-appropriate the institutions of the Administration for various reasons. While residents continue to criticise the executives of the Kurdish movement for their lack of competence and their dominance over the Administration, they are nonetheless increasingly using the institutions and taking an active

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[30] Estimates from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), http://bit.ly/2TT0RGa

[31] Calculated on the basis of data on the age pyramid in Syria available at http://bit.ly/2Rj7fVH

[32] State registers record 23,000 civil servants still receiving their state salaries in the northeast. It is very likely that the true figure is higher, but any estimate remains speculative (interview with Sinan Hatahet, January 2020); Sinan Hatahet, "The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, 29 November 2019), http://bit.ly/2YiLUxm

[33] In Tabqa, a third of a local battalion abandoned their positions in protest against the military agreement between the SDF and the regime, but most of the deserters quickly returned to the ranks following an agreement with the local SDF commanders.

[34] Interviews with local Kurdish movement officials met in Manbij, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, September and November 2019.

[35] Interview with an adviser to the Manbij Military Council, October 2019.

[36] Interview with a security official in Deir ez-Zor, October 2019. By comparison, in December 2018, the first announcement of a US withdrawal caused many resignations from the ranks of the Kurdish movement.

part in their operations. Administrative procedures are becoming routine, the population is increasingly becoming familiarised with the functioning of the power structures, and they are learning to interact with the new political order in two different ways.

First, citizens try to constitute themselves in organised bodies to protect themselves against the arbitrary decisions of the Kurdish movement's executives. Joining unions, initially created by the movement itself and organised by profession, allows members – when they take control of the union – to establish a power relationship with the political decision-makers. This is the case, for example, of journalists, who have managed to weaken censorship and successfully press for the release of imprisoned colleagues. "The decrease in the pressure applied on us is a result of our unionisation," said one independent Syrian Kurdish journalist. "This allows us to be more critical. What is needed is to rely on the laws of the Autonomous Administration, or to engage in producing a new legal order to extend our room for manoeuvre, recall the leaders to their positions and claim rights."[37] Likewise, trade unions and those in private companies negotiate tax rates and influence the Administration's economic policies. The dynamics of this institutionalisation of society are ambivalent. The Kurdish movement's control is strengthened – non-unionised journalists find it more difficult to obtain appointments with officials, and lawyers who are not registered with the lawyers' association cannot be mandated – but practices of resistance or lobbying within the existing order are also generated.

Second, an absence of explicitly stated rules governing the internal functioning of the Administration's institutions allows for informal settlement of conflicts through contact with the movement's leaders. For example, the absence of administrative courts in the judicial system forces residents to go through the executives of the Kurdish movement to amicably resolve administrative problems, land disputes and other types of conflict. The executives of the Kurdish movement are accessible at all times and keep "the door always open."[38] A number of 'reconciliations' have been settled in this way, leading to the release of people (rightly or wrongly) accused of collaboration with IS or a reduction in their sentences. Informality also creates space for the development of corrupt practices, which further strengthen ties with the Administration instead of weakening them.

Moments of conflict also create space for negotiation, ultimately allowing the population to negotiate the terms of their interactions with institutions. In doing this, they participate in the consolidation of the institutions. The residents first address the executives of the Kurdish movement, who negotiate a solution directly with them and then redirect them to the movement's official institutions, which are implicitly under their control, to confirm the decision. An executive of the Kurdish movement stationed in Raqqa explained this informal process as follows: "People trust us because they understand that we are effectively in charge. However, we are gradually increasing the jurisdiction and functions of the courts by transferring files to them. Our role is to strengthen the civil institutions. In the beginning there were no institutions. The only interface between the locals and authority was the military. Then people got used to it. Now they come to see us first. We then give our advice to the court. The institutions are still weak and still listen to us, but our advice is informal. Ultimately, our goal is to gradually reduce these practices and let the institutions gain autonomy."[39]

Faced with an ideologically alien administration, but one now increasingly well-understood, the population is accommodating the governance model. The re-appropriation of institutions allows residents to tame the authoritarian dimension and sometimes reap benefits from it, while avoiding a transformation of their grievances about the Administration – its corruption, arbitrary arrests and lack of capability – into open disputes.

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[37] Interview with a journalist in Qamishli, September 2019.

[38] Interview with residents of Deir ez-Zor, November 2019.

[39] Interview with an official of the Kurdish movement, Raqqa, November 2019.

2.3.   The Exhaustion of Protest Dynamics: Consent by Default

The resilience of the political order put in place by the Kurdish movement stems from the absence of any credible political alternative. This represents a dynamic of consent by default, whereby the Administration is accepted as a 'lesser evil.'[40]

Politically, this was illustrated by the small scale of mobilisation during the Turkish offensive in October 2019. This phenomenon of street exhaustion is not new but seems to be expanding. Between April and June 2019, protests in Deir ez-Zor's SDF-controlled countryside never gathered more than 100 people, but they succeeded in enduring over time, eventually compelling the authorities to engage in dialogue.[41] According to the demonstrators, at this time the Administration privileged dialogue over arrests (which were rare, with the detainees always freed) and accepted several of the demonstrators' demands, including a reduction in petrol prices, repression of smuggling networks and an increase in the power of the population.

In October 2019, despite attempts at destabilisation emanating from pro-regime networks and certain demonstrations organised by Syrian opposition circles, the population remained silent. In spite of rumours in the Damascus-controlled media about the 'return of the regime,' pro-regime protests failed to gather more than 20 people in the city of Raqqa in October. As for the networks of revolutionary activists mobilised in the first phase of the revolution, they are struggling to mobilise due to Turkey's overshadowing of opposition dynamics. Although tolerated by the Autonomous Administration, an anti-regime demonstration organised in Raqqa on 3 November by the activists of 2011 gathered just 60 people. This was despite the activists mobilising with a claim that 32,000 of the city's residents would be persecuted by the regime in the event of the return of its security services.[42]

If the military agreement between the SDF and the regime in mid-October could have represented a favourable moment for various low-intensity mobilisations, attempts at destabilisation were quickly stifled by the Kurdish forces. In Raqqa, the SDF imposed a curfew "to control the troubles linked to a possible activation of pro-regime networks"[43] and the security services arrested the instigators for raising regime flags and singing pro-Bashar chants, including some dignitaries close to Damascus.[44] In Manbij, a former opposition bastion, the SDF ended the mobilisation of pro-regime networks which greeted the passage of regime convoys heading to the frontline. They also arrested a large number of people who announced an anti-regime strike on 25 October, an announcement followed by limited action.[45]

The weakness of these mobilisations contradicts assertions regarding Damascus's ability to easily mobilise tribes or local notables against the Administration. In fact, the population finds pro-regime networks unattractive enough to not spark organised mobilisation, while the regime has failed to capitalise politically on the uncertainty caused by the redeployment of its army.

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[40] Interview with a former commander of the Free Syrian Army, Tabqa, September 2019.

[41] The causes of the mobilisations evolved over time and differed according to the places of mobilisation: exasperation over the confiscation of oil revenue by the Administration; calls for a real delegation of power to the local population; protests against collateral damage in coalition raids in the former IS bastions east of Deir ez-Zor; or calls to liberate the territories held by the regime on the east bank of the Euphrates at Deir ez-Zor.

[42] Interview with organisers of the demonstration in Raqqa, November 2019.

[43] Interview with an official in the Kurdish movement in Raqqa, November 2019.

[44] Interviews in Raqqa with pro-opposition activists, security officials and local NGO leaders, October and November 2019.

[45] Interview with activists and security officials in Manbij, November 2019.

The exhaustion of protest dynamics also demonstrates the capacity of the Autonomous Administration to clientelise society by involving it in its governance structures, while limited arrests make it possible to contain the real dynamics of the disruption of allegiances. "Unlike in December 2018, when Trump's announcement of a US departure greatly boosted reconciliation in favour of the regime, such a movement did not take place following the announcement of the agreement between the SDF and Damascus. The counter-example in Daraa, where dignitaries engaged in reconciliation were murdered, has aborted the tendency toward reconciliation."[46]

Ultimately, this resilience of the governance model has enabled the vast majority of the population displaced by Operation Peace Spring to remain in the territory managed by the Administration. For example, in Kobane, Turkish bombardment resulted in massive population departures to surrounding villages, but the exodus lasted no more than a week. As for those displaced from the Tall Abyad-Ras al-Ain area, assisted by local and international NGOs the Administration managed to put in place emergency responses for more than 200,000 people.[47] Its ability to take care of displaced people explains why fewer than 15,000 people are currently refugees in Iraq.[48]

3.   Containment of Security Threats

The resilience of the Autonomous Administration's governance model also allows the Kurdish movement to avert the three main security threats that the Turkish offensive helped amplify: risks inherent in the deployment of the Syrian army; a resurgence of IS; and the situation in camps and detention centres.

3.1.   The Border without Territory: Controlling the Return of the Regime

From the perspective of the Kurdish movement, the military agreement between the SDF and the Syrian regime concluded on 14 October 2019 fulfils two objectives.[49] Militarily, it transforms the Syrian Army's limited presence into a "political deterrent force"[50] without challenging the SDF's control of territory and resources. It therefore consolidates the position of the Autonomous Administration's leadership before moving forward in negotiations with Damascus.

At the military level, the Kurdish movement has managed to impose its own vision of the 'regime's return' on Damascus. While the regime has consistently refused to return to the borders without a simultaneous redeployment in the main territory itself, the Kurdish movement has adopted the opposite position by expressing readiness to move back from the border area but retain control of the territory and the governance structures that organise it. One member of the Autonomous Administration said "The call for the deployment of the army at the borders is in accordance with our principles [...] For us, the border is a question of sovereignty and belongs to the central state."[51] Unlike what happened

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[46] Interview with a former opposition activist in Raqqa, November 2019.

[47] 63 schools were requisitioned in al-Hasakah to accommodate the displaced, and 70,000 were hosted by residents. The majority of people displaced from the Ain al-Issa camp, which was completely destroyed during an attack by the SNA, were resettled east of Raqqa in the al-Mahmoudiyya camp as part of a relocation plan organised by the local city council. Discussions with local NGOs operators and the current director of the Mahmoudiyya camp, Raqqa, November 2019.

[48] Interview with a security official in the KRG, November 2019.

[49] "For now, we only have a military understanding. It matters politically though. It allows a minimum of trust on the regime side to be created; they cannot accuse us any more of being secessionists." Interview with a member of the Kurdish movement, December 2019.

[50] An expression used by a Kurdish military official to indicate the transition to a situation of interstate war between Turkey and Syria. Interview, al-Hasakah, January 2020.

[51] Interview with an official from the Autonomous Administration, October 2019.

in Afrin in 2018,[52] the regime accepts the Kurdish movement's terms in the northeast and concedes, under Russian pressure, to what it had always refused, "to protect an enemy from another enemy."[53] From this point of view, far from being a capitulation by the SDF seeking protection from Damascus, the 'return of the regime' turns out to be a concession by Damascus.

The Syrian army is therefore only returning to the border with a limited contingent force of 2,200 men[54] accompanied by a few hundred members of Russia's military police. This deployment is closely controlled by the Kurdish forces, which impose highly restrictive rules of engagement. First, the Syrian army battalions must deploy to pre-defined military positions. Second, their movements cannot be made without a Kurdish security force escort. Third, no 'war and peace' decision may be taken unilaterally. Finally, the Syrian army cannot exercise any control over the local population.[55] Failure to comply with these rules has led to numerous arrests of Syrian army members by the SDF or the Kurdish security forces.[56] Meanwhile, the Syrian army's attempts to set up new checkpoints or take over public buildings and schools in Qamishli have been aborted by the Kurdish security and military forces.

The extreme weakness of the Syrian army units increases their dependence on the SDF, particularly in terms of logistics. Their lack of food is aggravated by a misappropriation of supplies, stolen by officers who then sell them to soldiers. On the front line, an SDF commander also complained about the arrival of the Syrian army, which exposed the front line to danger instead of reinforcing it. This helplessness was illustrated in the fighting north of the city of Tall Tamr, where more than 400 soldiers fled in the face of an attack by pro-Turkish forces, allowing them to advance several kilometres on 30 October 2019. "At Tall Tamr, the army has sent reinforcements and artillery, but that doesn't work. The morale of the soldiers is at a low point. They are demotivated, and often hungry."[57]

Aware of both the weakness of the regime (militarily, but also economically) and its intransigence,[58] the Kurdish movement intends to retain control of territory and resources in order to negotiate from a position of strength when the time comes.[59] If negotiations with Damascus are blocked for the moment, the Kurdish movement maintains its objectives unchanged. Foremost among these is achieving a "comprehensive political solution"[60] through constitutional changes that would confirm the institutional order in place since 2012.

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[52] Shortly before the Turkish intervention in Afrin, Damascus and the YPG leadership had unsuccessfully discussed a return of the regime to prevent the looming offensive. While the YPG offered Damascus a limited return to a border deployment, Damascus believed that only the return of the state in place of the Autonomous Administration institutions had any chance of deterring Ankara. Interview with an adviser to the Syrian president in Beirut, March 2018.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Interviews with the SDF military command, al-Hasakah, January 2020.

[55] Interviews with SDF military commanders, October and November 2019. Field observations in Tabqa, Kobane/Ain al-Arab, Manbij, Raqqa, and Tall Tamr, October and November 2019.

[56] Observations in Tall Tamr and Raqqa, November 2019.

[57] Interview with an SDF commander on the Tall Tamr front, October 2019.

[58] According to a political figure in the Kurdish movement, "Damascus is not ready for talks. The government is awaiting the departure of the United States or a new attack by Turkey before approaching us for national dialogue. At the same time, we will never accept a dismantling of the SDF or our security apparatus for the simple reason that the regime is politically and militarily too weak." Interview with a Kurdish movement political cadre, Qamishli, October 2019.

[59] "Negotiations with the regime will take a long time. It's not a story of two or three weeks. To return, the regime needs resources that it does not have. It won't be able to come back for a long time. And by then, the regime will need us because it cannot hold the Sunni street in the east, while we can." Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

The Syrian regime, meanwhile, remains closed to political debate or any bilateral discussion of the power structure,[61] considering that any such reforms must be part of a national process under its aegis. It refuses to dissociate the return of its civil administration and that of its security apparatus, and therefore opposes any gradual process consisting of opening negotiations by seeking spaces for institutional cooperation, as was illustrated by discussions on co-management of the Tabqa dam.[62] Finally, Damascus attempts to fragment the representation of the northeast by engaging not only with representatives of the Autonomous Administration but also tribal dignitaries, the educated elite and other Kurdish parties with the objective of 'depoliticising' the negotiation by confining it to the cultural field. In other words, the regime intends to open a dialogue with the Kurds as a minority and not with the Autonomous Administration as a political actor.[63] Thus, during the only entirely political meeting held in early January 2020, the regime invited a delegation of political parties from the northeast, replacing the representatives of the Administration. Before negotiations on the terms of a solution, therefore, disagreement persists over the very identity of the parties in the negotiations.

Faced with a regime too inflexible to open up space for political negotiations but too weak to impose itself, a wait-and-see attitude remains prevalent on both sides. The main challenge for the Autonomous Administration thus remains to use the regime to somehow secure the borders while preventing it from taking advantage of its new positions for the purpose of destabilisation.

3.2.   Controlling the Population and Bypassing the Territory: The Limited Resurgence of Islamic State

The resurgence of IS represents the second security threat to be managed by the Administration. The Turkish offensive led to a 63% increase in IS activity and accelerated the dynamics of the organisation's networks.[64] Containing IS is doubly crucial for the Administration: locally, because the organisation's nuisance capacity remains strong; and internationally, because there lies the added value of the SDF.

Arm-wrestling between the SDF and the new IS militant networks is taking place in eastern Deir ez-Zor, the organisation's former stronghold. Initially, the IS attacks in the territories captured by the SDF heralded the resurgence of a classic insurgency, recalling the Iraqi scenario following the departure of US forces in 2011. Once the Caliphate's territory became minimal in summer 2018, IS launched a war of attrition in the areas taken over by the coalition and its local allies. Despite its limited means, the group continually harassed the Kurdish security forces' positions, threatening or killing any person, clan or family that moved too close to the Autonomous Administration.[65]

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[61] According to an adviser to the Syrian president, " 'Absorption' of the Autonomous Administration can only be done within the framework of the existing legal order (law 107 on decentralisation) and certainly not according to a constitutional arrangement as claimed by the Kurdish movement, which considers that only a constitution more favourable to its demands could ultimately serve as a guarantor of an agreement with the regime." Discussions with an adviser to the Syrian president, June 2019.

[62] As a Kurdish politician remarked after a visit to Damascus, "the regime will never negotiate on a pure return of services. It will always want to link the return of the state to the return of the regime." Interview, October 2019.

[63] On a visit to Qamishli on 5 December 2019, General Ali Mamlouk, head of the National Security Bureau, refused to receive representatives of the Administration and contented himself with meeting tribal notables and pro-regime personalities, inciting the former to encourage their flock to leave the ranks of the SDF. Interviews with executives in the Kurdish movement, January 2020.

[64] Rojava Information Centre, December 2019, ibid.

[65] The example of the Nijriss family in the village of Darnaj is revealing. After starting a rapprochement with the Kurdish movement in early December 2019, this family was immediately put under pressure and three of its members engaged in the Administration were killed.

In order to distance the Administration's population and facilitate the reconstitution of its networks at the local level, IS encourages residents to repent. This religious concept – *tawba* or *istitāba* – has been used purely politically to reverse local political allegiances in IS's favour. At the start of summer 2019, these practices of repentance remained discreet. The targets were invited to repent either individually, in meetings with IS activists or publicly in local mosques during Friday prayers. In July 2019, the repentance practice grew in scale, expanding to the collective level. In the town of Abu Hardub in eastern Deir ez-Zor province, a list of all the village officials was posted at the entrance to the mosque, calling on them to repent in public and leave the local institutions. This resulted in the immediate collapse of the Autonomous Administration institutions, with only a few teachers continuing to teach in the schools.[66]

However, the example of Abu Hardub was not emulated elsewhere, as IS now seems to favour a strategy of infiltration of and interference in institutions rather than open confrontation. This is illustrated particularly by the multiplication since September 2019 of arrests of people occupying important positions in the Administration while at the same time maintaining relations with IS. For example, the president of the local council of the village of Sweidan was arrested by security forces on charges of collecting money for IS. A majority of the local Autonomous Administration officials have received threats or have indeed been targeted with attacks. Those who were spared became suspected of collusion with the organisation as a result. Such suspicions are significant enough to push former informants to cease collaborating with the Kurdish security agencies in case their contacts themselves are colluding with IS.[67]

IS has thus tightened its grip on the population and has also achieved this by other means. These include: implicit compromises with local dignitaries or community leaders, forcing the latter to cooperate with the organisation at the security level; conducting nightly vice squad (*hisba*) patrols; re-establishing more organised networks within an identified hierarchy;[68] and maintaining a network of employed civil servants.[69]

The principal objective appears to be to mobilise resources. Local reports suggest IS is collecting almost $1 million a day in 'tax revenue.'[70] Oil trade operators in the desert areas east of Deir ez-Zor are particular targets and some pay the organisation tens of thousands of dollars a month. IS also taxes smugglers, ferry boats on the Euphrates and officials in the Autonomous Administration.[71] Those who do not pay up face threats, anonymous attacks on their families or sound bombs thrown at their homes at night.[72]

Furthermore, these population control methods also aim to weaken the Autonomous Administration's security structures, forcing them to behave as a bunkered occupation force which carries out repeated raids and highly intrusive security operations in local communities. In other words, IS is opting less for the collapse of institutions or the reconquest of territory than for the creation of an environment favourable to the accumulation of resources. The resurgence of IS, measured in terms of its ability to

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[66] Interviews with local notables, August and September 2019.

[67] Interviews with local officials and security personnel, Deir ez-Zor, September-October 2019.

[68] The basic unit is the sector (*qiṭāᶜ*), which includes groups of villages. Each sector is structured with a security officer and a *zakāt* officer and tends to operate relatively independently of the other sectors. Coordination takes place through meetings of security leaders from different sectors, including those stationed in areas held by the regime in Deir ez-Zor.

[69] In early October, a person was arrested with a pay packet containing $300,000. Interview with a security official, Deir ez-Zor, October 2019.

[70] Interview with local notables, December 2019.

[71] An irrigation official had to pay $5,000. Muataz al-Hefeil, head of the local council in Dhiban, had to pay $10,000 to protect himself and finally decided to go into exile in al-Hasakah.

[72] Interviews with local notables, Deir ez-Zor, September 2019.

conduct armed operations, recruit and mobilise resources, is very real.[73] However, it seems unlikely that the organisation would wish to launch a large-scale insurrection against the Kurdish movement or the coalition forces.[74] In the event of a US departure, IS would prefer to use its strongholds in the SDF areas as launch pads for battles against the regime and its local Iraqi allies, which it considers more feasible militarily and ideologically more relevant as adversaries (given their Shia and Alawite identities).

3.3.   Controlling the Situation in the Camps

Beyond the east bank of Deir ez-Zor, IS's second site of resurgence is in the prisons and camps holding its members' relatives. Controlling the 24 prisons in the northeast, which are overcrowded with more than 10,000 former combatants, constitutes a real challenge for the Autonomous Administration.[75] Several uprisings have taken place in the detention facilities in al-Malikiya and Shedadeh, in addition to several attacks on the Kasra prison in Deir ez-Zor, Ghoweiran in al-Hasakah and Suwar.[76]

As instability in the camps increases, the situation in al-Hol camp, which was already highly precarious before the Turkish offensive, is further deteriorating. The camp's administration has registered around twenty assassinations since July 2019. The true figure is certain to be higher due to concealment of the bodies of the executed people.[77] This deterioration can be explained by a reduction in the number of security personnel by more than a third due to the Turkish offensive, with 150 guards out of a total of 400 sent off to the front against Turkey.[78] In addition, the security forces lack radios, surveillance equipment and other items. They are themselves regularly attacked. This obliges them to remain entrenched and to limit their patrols, especially at night. The police arrest approximately 50 people a day attempting to escape the camp, while a similar number are estimated to succeed in doing so. Attacks target checkpoints around the camp. Smuggling networks allow prisoners to maintain regular communication with the world outside and clandestine phones are commonplace.

Female foreign prisoners are generally deemed the most radical. Faced with their growing influence over the Iraqi and Syrian sections of the camp, the authorities have decided to isolate the foreigners' quarter. However, this measure remains ineffective as the influence of the foreign detainees endures through the establishment of a religious police force (*hisba*).[79] According to administrative officials, the control and regulation abilities of the Kurdish authorities are reaching their limits.[80]

The Administration has succeeded in organising all the other camps under its control with a system of 'communes,' making it possible to ensure the distribution of certain services, to collect information and

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[73] The death toll from IS attacks has remained at 30 to 50 victims a month and the attacks tend to be professional (car bombs and assaults on public buildings). According to someone close to the organisation, the movement today has the men and resources to carry out an insurgency capable of causing 150 to 200 deaths a month in the areas held by the SDF.

[74] Such an insurgency does not seem to be the current objective because "operating at maximum capacity would attract too much attention." Interview with an IS supporter, December 2019.

[75] Notably since the call by the head of the Islamic State to attack the detention centres. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, (in Arabic), Syria TV, 17 July 2019, http://bit.ly/2r6kwqg

[76] Discussions with judges and military and security officials in Deir ez-Zor, Qamishli and Shedadeh, October and November 2019.

[77] Some bodies were found by chance in the septic tanks. Interviews with residents and with al-Hol camp officials, October 2019.

[78] Interview with al-Hol camp officials, October 2019.

[79] The barriers between the different sections do not prevent passage, observations in al-Hol camp, October 2019.

[80] Interview with al-Hol camp officials, October 2019. For more details on the situation in the camps and managing the parents of activists, see "Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS," Report n° 208 (London, Istanbul, Beirut, Al-Hol: International Crisis Group, 18 November 2019), http://bit.ly/2s38I8D

to appoint interlocutors in the camps (especially in Roj camp, where a significant number of foreign ex-combatants are being held). However, the foreign section of al-Hol camp has been successfully resisting attempts at regulation. This lack of control facilitates the restructuring of IS cells in the camp. IS courts now operate in the camp and death sentences are being carried out, while the morality police punish behaviour deemed deviant and an 'awareness-building committee' spreads ideas and facilitates recruitment.[81]

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[81] Interviews with al-Hol camp officials, November 2019.

Conclusion: The Status Quo Deadlock

At the end of November, after the first round of confrontation between Turkey and the SDF concluded with no clear winner or loser, the northeast settled into what appears to be a state of paradoxical and precarious calm, which does not necessarily augur the end of the war.

In the short term, Turkey's military operation has resulted in a paradox in which the non-state actor targeted thought to be the weaker party – the Kurdish movement – has attained the greater gains, while the more powerful state actors (Ankara, Moscow and Damascus) are either embarrassed or stuck in a wait-and-see situation. Despite its loss of part of the territory it controlled, the Kurdish movement has retained its military capability and governance structures, with the exception of the areas between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ain. Its access to oil resources is guaranteed by the redeployment of US troops to the country's far east. Meanwhile, Turkey's military advance has been constrained by the combined effects of the deployment of the Syrian army, its agreement with Russia and the risk of US sanctions. Turkey even finds itself confronted with a costly destabilisation campaign in the recently conquered territory. Russia has inherited the contradictions of Washington's position, limiting the scope of its engagement in the northeast while it prefers to wait for the US departure. Finally, the Syrian regime is struggling with its own weaknesses and the resilience of Autonomous Administration institutions.

Despite its relative strength on the ground in terms of military power and governance capacity, the position of the Kurdish movement remains unstable and problematic in the long term due to its strategic vulnerability. On the one hand, Turkey perceives it as an 'existential threat' and is ill-inclined to abandon the military option. On the other hand, the movement is faced with an alignment of state interests in favour of an integral return of the regime instead of the maintenance of the Autonomous Administration, which Damascus considers a secessionist project, Ankara considers a 'PKK mini-state,' Tehran considers a US ally opposing the 'Axis of Resistance' and Moscow and the Syrian army consider an obstacle to the military victory they have pursued since 2015. Politically, the precarious calm is thus too ill-balanced to last.
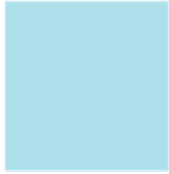
Too powerful for Turkey to not react again, the movement's position depends on a fragile status quo. It has lost its strategic wager of converting its military partnership with the US into a strategic alliance.[82] It will not be able to survive in the long term without a "political initiative,"[83] whether in the form of rapprochement with Damascus or de-escalation with Turkey. Such a switch to politics, however, seems highly improbable for the moment because, given the positions of Ankara and Damascus, the costs – in terms of the concessions needed to strike a deal – are just too high for the movement. In the absence of an alternative, a resumption of military operations by Turkey over time is very real. Additionally, the increase in various security pressures (from Turkey, IS and the regime) in a context of escalation between the US and Iran risks multiplying the number of localised conflicts, putting the northeast political model under great strain. This scenario would be likely to complete an arc of crisis already in formation extending from the steppes of Homs to the Hamrin Mountains south of Kirkuk – an arc characterised by weak state regulation and the assertion of multiple militia dynamics, IS being not the least of them.

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[82] Patrick Haenni, "The Strategic Impasse Of the Öcalanian Movement in Syria" (in French), Middle East No. 41, January-March 2019.

[83] Interview with the SDF military command, al-Hasakah, January 2020.
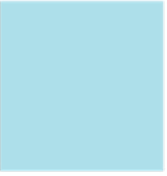
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