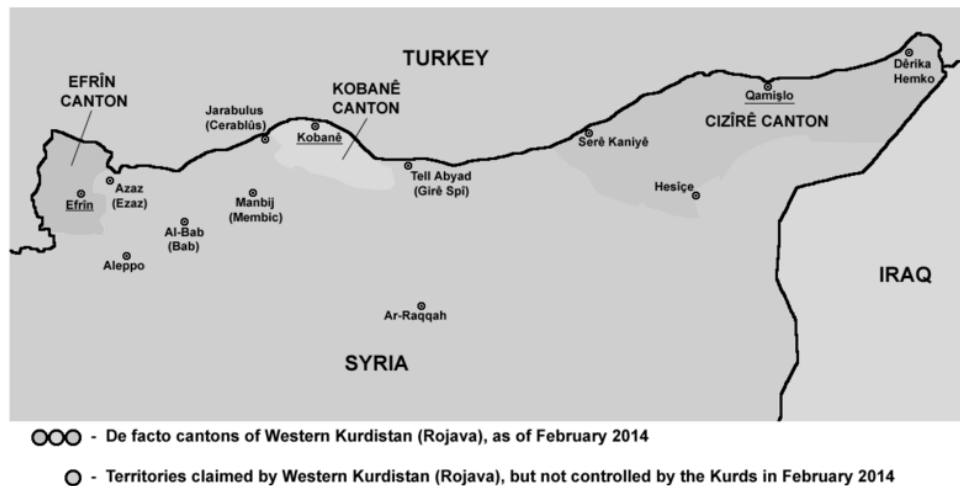


Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Statement of Dastan Jasim

The presence of Kurdish parties and political actors in Syria goes back to the 1920s and the activities of the Kurdish independence movement against the nascent nationalist rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. While political, ethnic, and religious minorities were either assimilated or ruthlessly oppressed, especially with the start of the rule of the late Hafiz al-Assad from 1971 on, it was not until the early 2010s that the start of the so-called Arab Spring and the uprisings in many different Syrian cities also enabled these actors to get engaged in the formation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

During the so-called Arab Spring, the all-encompassing security sector of the Syrian dictatorship that was ruled by Hafiz al-Assad's son Bashar al-Assad from 2000 on was not able to oppress public uprising in Syrian cities like Homs, Hama, and Aleppo while containing uprisings in the Kurdish cities of Afrîn, Kobanî or Qamişlo as well, which is why they mostly retreated from these areas. This enabled the local Kurdish actors under the auspices of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to declare the autonomy of the three cantons Afrin, Kobanî, and Qamişlo in 2012. In the following years, the political practice and administrative system of “democratic confederalism”, established by PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan were implemented.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rojava_february2014.png

The system is a bottom-up grassroots system that is mainly inspired by the theories of libertarian socialist thinkers like Murray Bookchin and was suggested to be the better political model to implement in the post-soviet space instead of the Marxist-Leninist model that was promoted by Abdullah Öcalan until his incarceration in 1999 and the so-called paradigm-change of the early 2000s. The idea behind this change is that instead of promoting the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist state as the solution to the Kurdish question, the question behind the Kurdish question exceeds the question of mere Kurdish self-rule but is encompassing the overall crisis of democracy and statehood in the region. In the proposed system of democratic confederalism, so-called “communes”, which are political plena of just a couple of households should organize themselves on different levels and in turn be organized on higher levels like districts and regions to allow for a grand-scale administration as well. Instead of people being ruled by a state that is built on a specific nation’s, religion’s, and class’ dominance, people should be ruled by themselves first and foremost. These communes shouldn’t be a Kurdish-only thing but be political institutions that all ethnic and religious groups can use as well.

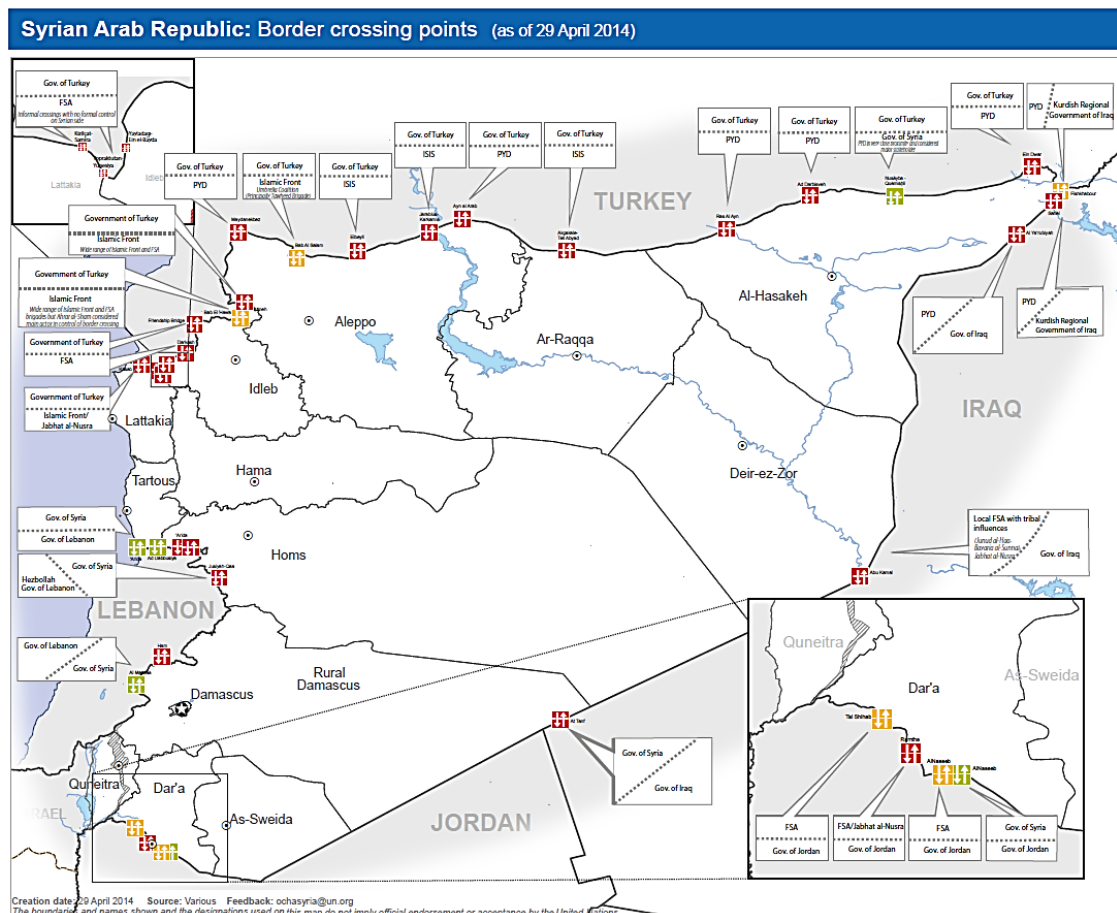
Therefore, the establishment of these communes was positively perceived by many ethnic and religious minorities in the region, which are greatly distributed over the territory of what is today the AANES.

This was of great importance, not only because in general, it was the first time in authoritarian modern Syria that a large-scale political system of democratization and participation was implemented but it was also a great step taken against the societal damages of the past “divide-and-rule” policy of the Syrian regime. While minorities like the Armenians, Assyrians, and Syriacs of Syria which are significantly smaller than the Kurds were pushed into the Ba’ath party system of obedience and sometimes given positions in the security sector that would keep them from eventually turning their backs on the state that is “protecting” them, groups like the Kurds were systematically underprivileged, stripped of their citizenship and discriminated against institutionally. This strategy not only pushed down any sort of secessionist movement but also led to great mistrust between these different groups for example in areas like Cizîrê which is in the northeast of Syria and consists of many different groups that were deliberately alienated and stratified in ethnic, religious and class categories. Therefore, the establishment of the communal system in 2012 and the AANES as an official entity in 2013 was a great step to allow these groups to self-rule and not raise the impression that this region is going to be a Kurdish-only project, while in the higher levels of the administration allowing for exchange and common organization among the different groups. This type of self-organization also continued on military levels. The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) were often working with other self-organized battalions for example Free Syrian Army (FSA) components that were more progressive than their counterparts that quickly evolved into Islamist and Turkish-backed elements, as well as Armenian and Syriac unions. With the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 these groups that first loosely kept control in the autonomous cantons from 2012 on now had to engage in an actual on-the-ground battle against the greatly equipped ISIS forces.

In this background following the establishment of official US-led coalition support under the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were founded as an official umbrella organization connecting these groups and organizing them while also allowing for their structures to prevail. One of those groups is the Syriac-Assyrian Military Council which was founded on January 8, 2013, and many similar units consisting of religious minorities were founded following this example in the years of the fight against ISIS, for example, the Martyr Nubar Ozanyan brigade, an Armenian corps, established in 2019. Another example of this type of successful organizing of non-Kurdish communities is the Manbij Military Council which was established during the liberation of the city of Manbij in 2016. The city that was under years of ISIS rule mostly is inhabited by Arabs that also had reservations about the success of the mostly-Kurdish troops in the war against ISIS but the establishment of the Manbij Military Council, a mostly-Arab group that consisted of the troops that liberated the city and were respected by locals for its famous figures like the prominent commander Abu Leyla who led many operations there and was killed in the battle, opened up the region to be integrated into the self-rule structures and to not stand suspiciously towards this process of democratization. What started as three de-facto autonomous cantons in 2012 quickly expanded into non-Kurdish and non-Muslim areas over the years and therefore while a heavy war was fought against ISIS, the process of communalization, integration, and officialization had to be promoted constantly.

This for example happened with the constitution of AANES, the “social contract”, as it is called. The document that was set up after years of deliberation of judicial experts and other individuals in the executive committee to organize a constitution for the region with civilians

from many different regions and ethnic as well as religious backgrounds was first introduced in 2014 and updated in 2016. Issues like the right to native-language education and free religious expression and practice were crucial in this regard. Therefore, while the war against ISIS that was specifically targeting religious minorities like the Yezidis, Armenians, Assyrians, and Syrians was led and all these groups self-organized in military battalions that defended their areas, civilians in these regions also increasingly got engaged in the process of self-administration and many non-Kurdish groups that initially did not trust this type of bottom-up system saw in the very fight against ISIS that not only they can trust the AANES but that the system allows them to organize themselves socially, politically and economically. Since countries like Turkey and Iraq are almost completely isolating AANES in terms of their border crossings since its establishment, economic self-administration has also been of utmost importance to manage local agricultural production and to manage redistribution, and prices.



Source: <https://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-border-crossing-points-29-april-2014>

The levels of religious freedom achieved so far are almost unprecedented in the region. More than mere representation and quota-based symbolic inclusion, the communal system has allowed local communities to turn their already existing religious and social networks into institutionally linked settings that are autonomous enough to allow for free and regionally bound politics but also open enough to reconnect to other communes and groups that have systematically been alienated from each other by the Assad regime. This process continued until the final battle against ISIS in 2019 but it was greatly attacked and harmed starting with the first Turkish military incursions of Turkey into the region from the Operation Euphrates Shield of 2017 until now. Many of the existing communes were simply disturbed as people had to flee repeatedly. Political structures that were set up under great pressure for example in Afrin

where one of the oldest Yezidi communities of the region lives were destroyed, people became IDPs and were pushed into a situation of displacement and poverty that greatly harmed not only the livelihoods of these people but also the achievements made in terms of democratization and self-rule. The attacks that Turkey launched in October 2019 between the cities of Serêkaniyê and Girespî also endangered thousands of Assyrians that reside in the region and had to flee, only now to be mostly concentrated in and around the city of Tel Tamr which is under permanent Turkish shelling as of now.

The example of AANES shows that religious communities that have been separated and put into a permanent setting of fear and mistrust can be connected again by empowering structures of self-rule and self-defense, but all of this is only possible if these groups are sufficiently defended from attacks and displacement in consequence. The initial terror of ISIS was mostly contained in the last years but also exchanged with Turkish attacks, permanent airstrikes, systematic campaigns of ethnic cleansing in the areas occupied by Turkey, and ultimately the enabling of ISIS to conduct large-scale prison break attempts, as happened in January 2022. As far as US support for the SDF and Turkey simultaneously goes, the US approach in Syria and the overall region is at a crossroads. The US-Turkey cooperation that is ongoing since the early 20th century and specially framed in the overall NATO partnership of the two biggest NATO armies must be fundamentally recalibrated. Turkey has effectively endangered religious minorities in the region, like the mentioned Yezidis of Afrîn and Assyrians, Armenians and Syriacs of the Cizîrê region, which is most evident with its April 2022 shelling of civilian areas in Tel Tamr and the wounding of the Syrian Military Council commander Orom Maroge. While ISIS was conducting its record prison break of January 2022 that killed 121 SDF troops, Turkey did not intervene but further attacked SDF troops from the North that were busy containing the ISIS threat from Hassakeh. Almost all ISIS fighters that have ever entered Syria since 2014 have done so over the Turkish border and repeatedly research has shown that Turkey armed, equipped, and medically treated jihadist troops in the region. Further appeasement of Turkey by the US, specifically by the recently proposed selling of F-16 fighter jets to Ankara, will further escalate the situation, give Turkey more political leverage in its operations against civilian positions not only in Syria but also in Iraq as of now and will ultimately destroy all progress made with regards to religious freedom and most importantly self-administration and self-defense in the last 10 years.

I recommend the US administration not only halt all military support to Turkey but also investigate the involvement Turkey has had in not only systematic ethnic and religious cleansing in the region but also the spread of ISIS after 2014 as well as its various comebacks after 2019. These investigations should further not only be limited to reports but actual legally binding international cases against Turkey and the militias fighting for it. I strongly recommend the US administration push Turkey to engage in serious peace negotiations with the PKK as all the present attacks are happening under the pretense of Turkey's alleged fight against PKK terrorism. Not only is a peace deal between these two parties of utmost importance for religious freedom and bare survival in Syria but also in Turkey and Iraq where this war is costing hundreds of people's lives yearly and displacing thousands, among those some of the most oppressed and endangered religious communities in the world. The current actions of Turkey are destabilizing the only ally of the United States in Syria and the overall war against Terror, the SDF, and each and every weakness in this alliance can and will be used by not only Russia which is increasingly controlling air and land space in the North-West of Syria but by Iran as well which is increasingly setting up positions in Deir Ez-Zor and wants to prepare a retake by Bashar al-Assad. Religious freedom is a fundamental principle of any liberal democracy and the hard-won freedom and democratization in AANES are under attack.