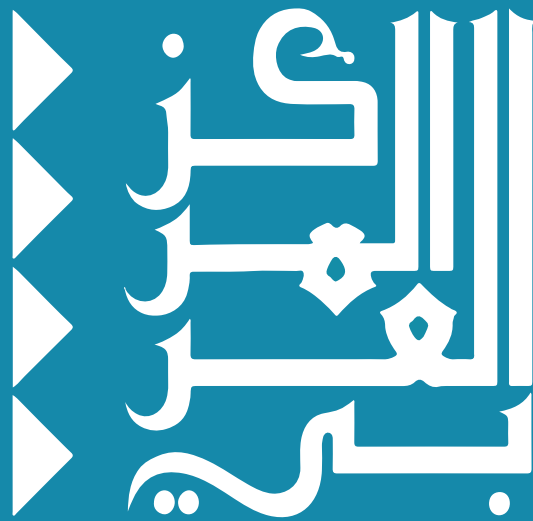


# Why Federalism Is a Bad Idea for Syria

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In the middle of the discussion about transition in Syria, Russia proposed the idea of a federal republic, according to deputy foreign minister Sergei Ryabkov. Could this choice be the best political solution to the crisis in Syria?

This Russian position gave a boost to the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratîk, or PYD), which not only proposed, unilaterally, a federal system for Syria, but also declared self-autonomy for a Kurdish region called Rojava in the summer of 2013, where the party maintains control.

The Syrians have already had a long and rich debate about the transition and which political system they should adopt in the future—assuming the Geneva peace talks lead to a meaningful outcome so they can transfer these ideas into action on the ground in Syria.

What kind of government will be created and implemented in post-civil war Syria will be very important; it can also be the key to the solution of the crisis in Syria today. According to some experts, federalism is the only system that could save the country. As is well known, federalism is a system of governance implemented by America's founding fathers as a means of settling historical conflicts between different states. It was also a way to join the union in such a manner that engenders divided sovereignty.

The situation of federalism in Canada and Germany does not differ from that of the United States. This suggests that countries that have adopted the federal system have had a history

of struggle between states or provinces and the federal government. This is not the case in Syria; in fact, it is just the opposite. There is no history of conflict by any of the various provinces with autonomous administration; therefore, the division became purely administrative and not political.

When Syria was under the French mandate, France established the "Syrian Federation" in 1922, which included what were then the states of Damascus and Aleppo and the autonomous Alawite territory. Subhi al-Khalidi was elected president of the federation. The Syrians, however, rejected the idea, and while working to achieve their independence, they sought to establish a "United Syria." Even the Syrian anthem emphasizes the idea of unity in the Syrian state. The overwhelming majority of Syrians appear to continue to believe in such a unity today. They perceive federalism, on the other hand, as paving the way for partition. This may prove to be untrue; however, there is in fact no meaningful history of federal thinking in Syria, and the PYD is the only party that advocates for the concept.

### **The Kurds and Federalism in Syria**

The Kurds have not had a unified voice throughout their history in Syria since the establishment of the first ethnically based Kurdish political party in 1957. Their situation worsened after the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, when they divided into two political groups: the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the PYD, which is the Syrian version

of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. The PYD gradually eliminated the presence of the KNC in their area by using different tactics, including assassination and kidnapping. This pushed all the KNC leaders to move into Iraqi Kurdistan or at least to stay silent about these practices.

The PYD in Syria benefited the most from the transformation of the Syrian revolution into an armed struggle. It then took advantage of the international war on terrorism—especially against ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)—in Syria. This is why, from the beginning, it established a well-armed and well-trained militia, the People's Protection Units, which constitute the military wing of the PYD. This Syrian branch of the PKK is also present in Turkey and has fought the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the other factions of the armed Syrian opposition in a series of battles, ending with a truce that forced most of the FSA factions to withdraw from Ras Al-Ayn—in northeastern Syria, on the border with Turkey—to control the city of Al-Shaddadi in 2012.

The Kurds in Syria were subjected to collective punishment and discrimination under the current Syrian regime since 1963, and for decades were the largest ethnic minority in Syria lacking basic rights and recognition. For the PYD, the federal system is the only one that could protect the rights of the Kurds in Syria.

With great support from the United States under the Obama Administration and its international alliance in 2015, the People's

Protection Units managed to take over huge areas of Al-Hasaka and the Aleppo countryside. The battle against ISIL in Ayn al-Arab, or Kobani, from September 2014 to January 2015, was the turning point for the PYD; the Obama Administration found in PYD a strategic ally on which it could rely in the fight against ISIL in Syria, without considering the atrocities the Syrian government was committing against the Syrian people or the transition unfolding in the country. Both the United States and the PYD found themselves in an alliance to serve their interests: Washington's focus was on eliminating ISIL from Syria, and the PYD's aim was to grab more territory to augment the area of its autonomous region of Rojava.

Therefore, the United States was silent about the accusation that the People's Protection Units were committing crimes against the Arab villages, which were leveled to the ground and their inhabitants were displaced and robbed (as was done in Tel Abyad). These actions allowed the PYD to connect al-Qamishli to Kobani (or the Ayn al-Arab district).

Members of the PYD were widely accused of ethnic cleansing and dislodgement crimes targeting the Arabs. Tens of Arab-inhabited villages were wiped off the map in northeast Syria in 2014 and 2015 in preparation for autonomous regions that seem unlikely geographically and demographically.

In summer 2013, the People's Protection Units achieved a victory over the Al-Nusra Front (an Al-Qaeda-linked group in Syria, now known as Fath al-Sham) in Ras al-Ayn. Right after that, the

leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Alliance suggested creating a confederal entity that represents autonomy in three regions in southern Syria: Qamishli, Ayn al-Arab, and Afrin. This suggestion was rejected quickly by Turkey and by most of the Syrian opposition groups. And even though most Arabs, including Christians and Kurds, refused the idea, the autonomy plan was declared officially on December 21, 2014, in addition to the formation of a regional government and a constitution. The leadership of Iraqi Kurdistan refused this autonomy plan completely, stating that it aims to exclude all other Kurdish parts. The strongest reaction came from the Syrian National Coalition (the main Syrian opposition group), which declared its refusal to the Kurdish move and described the PYD as the "enemy of the Syrian revolution."

### Why Federalism Is the Wrong Option in Syria

In examining the Kurdish case in Syria, it is important to consider the following important points:

1. Kurds make up between 8 and 10 percent of Syria's population and represent the biggest non-Arab minority in Syria today. The Kurdish population is much larger in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. There are only about 1.6 million Syrian Kurds out of 23 million Syrians; therefore, it is not logical for them to impose their agenda or political system on the Syrian people as a whole.
2. Most of the Syrian Kurds live in Hasaka Province. Kurdish villages number about

445 out of 1,717 in Hasaka. There are additional Kurdish communities in the far north of Aleppo, in Kobani and the villages surrounding it to about 15 kilometers south and west of the city. Others live in Arab villages and in Afrin in the far northwestern parts of Aleppo. Kurds do not constitute the majority of the population in any region of Syria compared to the Arabs surrounding them. The Arab residents of Hasaka differ in their attitude toward the Syrian regime and refuse the idea of establishing a Kurdish entity in the country.

3. There is no geographical connection between the places of residence of Kurds in Syria, as Kurds are scattered throughout the country. For example, the distance between Qamishli and Kobani is about 300 kilometers, and there are no Kurds living in more than half of that area in between them. Similarly, the distance between Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) and Afrin is more than 100 kilometers, and this region is inhabited by Arabs and Turkmen. For the PYD to declare self-autonomy in their three cantons, they would have to connect the area geographically – this is basically what the PYD did after they took control of Tel Abyad, but when they tried to do the same in the northern Syrian city of Azaz, Turkish troops intervened quickly and stopped them. Further, it is difficult for Turkey to accept a Kurdish entity as its neighbor, especially now that Turkey has

declared the PKK and all its affiliates, such as the PYD, terrorist organizations.

4. Building on all of the above, it is important to consider how secure the Kurds feel about their rights within a political system that is accepted by all Syrians. The Syrian opposition has pledged to give the Kurds their civil rights and to treat all Syrians equally in terms of rights and duties. To be sure, any political solution in Syria should include the Kurds and assure their rights and citizenship. At the same time, the United States should not promise or support any type of autonomy to the Kurds in northern Syria. The Syrian people should develop their own democratic political system that includes full rights to all minorities in Syria, including Kurds.

It is not clear yet how the Trump Administration will handle the crisis in Syria. There is no grand strategy developed yet, despite the talk about safe zones inside Syria. It is not clear yet where the Syrian Kurds fit into this strategy.

The fight against ISIL should not reflect any demographic changes on the ground in Syria. Eliminating ISIL in Syria requires the participation of Arab groups; this is why any support to the PYD should not alienate the Arab tribes in the area, and it should assure them that the new Syria will offer full rights to all citizens without any discrimination based on ethnicity or religion. It is almost impossible to vanquish a terrorist organization like ISIL without unity. The people living in Hasaka should have strong support and representation to become a potent power against ISIL.

The Syrian people have experienced innumerable sacrifices and casualties. Looking to the future, it is clear that there can be no real peace and coexistence without national feelings that reflect bonding and cooperation across all areas and social and political groups in the country. The Syrian state and its political regime, in their current form, are no longer acceptable. The depth and breadth of the changes needed should not hinder the goal of a Syrian entity that unites all Syrians under a democratic national state, one that respects everyone's ethnic identity, rights, and dignity.

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