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Northeast Syria's Journey: An Exclusive Interview with Syrian Democratic Forces Commander Mazloum Abdi

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Brief Analysis

A decade after the beginning of the 2011 uprising against Assad, the Autonomous Administration (AA) that controls the northeastern region of Syria faces numerous governance challenges. The author sat down with General Mazloum, the SDF commander in charge of protecting the AA, to discuss its current issues and potential future.

Under the protection of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has been trying to survive despite ongoing instability. However, the Autonomous Administration's external relationships have experienced multiple failures, and it has suffered numerous setbacks: the loss of [Afrin](#), [Tal Abyad](#), and [Ras al-Ain](#); the inability to develop a [constitutional path](#) forward, and administrative weakness. Against this backdrop, moreover, there are troubling reports that the AANES is shifting towards increasingly authoritarian methods to suppress dissent. The Autonomous Administration fears further cracks in its foreign partnerships given ongoing Russian-Turkish rapprochement, Ankara's [threats](#) to seize more of the AANES's territory, Tehran's support for the Assad regime, and fears of a repeat of the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal amid declining confidence in Washington's commitments to its Middle East partners.

All of this is fueling local discontent with the ruling authorities in northeastern Syria. As a result, the extent of the economic, social, cultural, and psychological decline of the population is palpable—particularly when compared to

the mood prior to Turkey's invasion of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain in 2019. Today in Northeastern Syria, poor services and conflicting but increasingly widespread [reporting](#) on human rights violations contribute to local public discontent. Its detractors see the Autonomous Administration's strategic communication as increasingly opaque, raising public distrust regarding its future and entrenching the public's loss of confidence in the governing body.

This difficult reality—which is tied to an increase in internal resentment, declining hope for the future, and a staggering increase in emigration—was the entry point for a conversation with the SDF commander, Mazloum Abdi, who leads a large group of forces that control a third of Syria and approximately 40 percent of its economy.

In response to a question on this general discontent in the areas he controls, General Mazloum said:

Mazloum: The Autonomous Administration has gone through many challenges and struggles since 2020, beginning with ISIS threats, and followed by Turkish attacks on Northern Syria, the coronavirus pandemic, and the economic blockade imposed on us. Our current crisis is economic, as it is throughout Syria, and we are working now to alleviate it. The battles have ended, and the people are wondering about and seeking their political future, which creates challenges for us. Nevertheless, if we compare our situation with that of our domestic neighbors, whether they are under Turkish occupation or the control of Damascus, our situation is much [better](#).

Sabri: What are those challenges, and is the Caesar Act among them? What are the proposed solutions?

Mazloum: Everyone must know that military methods alone are not sufficient to fight ISIS. A decisive victory can only be achieved amid economic and administrative support for Rojava. With regard to the [Caesar Act](#), the law had a negative impact on the economy, but it is not the main reason for these challenges. We have asked for the region to be exempt from these sanctions. There was a preliminary acceptance, and we are awaiting an official decision.

Sabri: How is your relationship with the government in Damascus?

Mazloum: Our relationships with the regime continue uninterrupted, and we want to resolve the differences between us. We have concluded that the Assad regime is not currently ready to reach solutions. The regime speaks from the position of the victor, and, from its point of view, it has the right to impose its decisions and return to the status quo of 2011.

Sabri: What do you think of the Syrian regime's position?

Mazloum: We do not accept a return to the past. The Autonomous Administration has existed for ten years, and they must accept it constitutionally. Also, with regard to the military file, by which I mean the SDF and *Asayish* (police units in Northeast Syria), the regime must recognize both of them. However, the regime is not yet prepared to take that step.

Likewise, a solution will not be reached without international parties putting constant pressure on the Assad regime. We believe that, in the event of an agreement between the East and West of the Euphrates under international sponsorship, all the issues in Syria will be resolved in due course.

Sabri: Who are those forces, and what do you think of the current meetings on Syria?

Mazloum: We believe that Russia and the United States are the main players in the region. If the two of them reach an agreement, it is our belief that they will be able to achieve progress on the Syrian file.

Likewise, we do not believe that the international meetings, whether in Geneva, Astana, or Sochi, will be capable of finding an exit because the sponsoring parties are not serious. Neither the regime nor the opposition close to Turkey want a solution because they are benefiting from the continuation of the conflict.

Sabri: Does Damascus's intransigence stem from Ba'athist ideology or from the support it receives?

Mazloum: The regime's obstinacy vis-à-vis dialogue and reaching solutions stems from the ideology and policy of

the ruling Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in Syria, which refuses to accept others.

Sabri: How are your relationships with the opposition?

Mazloun: Our relationships with the opposition are not good, especially after the occupation of Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al Ain, when the opposition dealt with Turkey and asked it to occupy those areas. We also have relationships with some opposition parties abroad, such as the [Moscow and Cairo platforms](#), and with prominent opposition figures. However, we do not have relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood group.

Sabri: As Kurds, how are your relationships with the main Kurdish forces, namely Erbil, especially given the [skirmishes](#) between members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the Peshmerga forces in the Kurdistan Region?

Mazloun: We in Rojava have no problems with the Region, we have [relationships](#) with its government, and we seek to build relationships with everyone, that is—with all parties and their leaders. However, the frequency of disputes has increased of late. For two decades, there was no fighting between the Kurds. While it is true that the Kurds did not achieve unity, they were not drawn into internal civil wars. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, everyone is fighting everyone, and internal wars [erupted](#) everywhere. However, among the Kurds there was no fighting. The Kurds resolve their differences through dialogue. The shedding of Kurdish blood is forbidden. It is true that during this latest period there were signs of danger, but this did not develop into an armed conflict.

Sabri: Regionally, we have witnessed the rise of Ibrahim Rasi in Tehran, and there are negotiations on the nuclear file. What is the impact of these developments on the situation in Syria and on the Autonomous Administration?

Mazloun: Everything is linked to the outcome of the negotiations with the United States. From our perspective, we do not want our region to be part of either the regional conflict or the U.S.-Iran conflict. We have told them this. However, Iran was supposed to play a positive role in the Syrian file by virtue of its influence on the Syrian regime.

Sabri: In the event of an agreement with Iran, will your role in the region decline vis-à-vis the West?

Mazloun: I do not think so. Our problems with Iran were resolved even before the arrival of the Americans. There are currently no problems with Iran, and if there are problems, they appear far from us, although they affect us.

Sabri: Some Gulf states are making efforts at rapprochement with the regime. Does this overture affect your relationships with those states?

Mazloun: Theoretically not. We are not against their relationships with Damascus; however, this relationship must not be at our expense or the expense of the Syrian people. If their relationships with the regime reflect positively on the problem, we support them. However, when the regime sees power in these relationships and increases its aggression, then these relationships will turn into something negative.

Sabri: Is there hope of achieving peace with Turkey?

Mazloun: In general, we want to resolve our differences with Turkey through dialogue. We, as the SDF, have repeatedly made it clear that we are not a party to the war between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party. We are ready for any meeting with them. The main problem with the government in Ankara is that the current rapprochement between the Justice and Development Party and the Nationalist Movement Party led by Bahçeli aims to wage war against the Kurds. They reject the presence of a Kurdish entity in Syria and have said they will not repeat the mistake of Iraq. However, I think this aggressive approach will not last. Currently, they are getting weaker, and under domestic and international pressure, they will ultimately take the next step (dialogue).

Sabri: How do you view your relationships with Russia?

Mazloun: We have strong military coordination and relationships, as well as common military points. Our political

relationships are present and ongoing, and we want Russia to increase its role. They have played the role of mediator between us and Damascus, and we believe Russia is the party that can directly influence the regime.

Sabri: But Russia, which played a role in Daraa, reneged on its pledges and helped Damascus.

Mazloun: The situation in Daraa differs from here. Daraa was defeated militarily, and then reconciliation occurred. We were not defeated, nor did we accept reconciliation. We have political agreements, and Russia came because we asked them to on account of the Turkish state. The situation here is more complicated, and there is more than one guarantor. Thus, it is difficult for Russia to do something similar, and it needs this region.

Sabri: What about the issue of the previous Russian-Turkish exchanges?

Mazloun: Russia no longer has anything to offer Turkey. Russia clarified its position and announced that it would not accept Turkey's occupation of any Syrian new territory.

Sabri: Your relationships began with the Obama administration and continued with Trump and now Biden. During which period were your relationships better?

Mazloun: Frankly, we got to know Obama in Kobani, and our cooperation against ISIS continued until the end of his term. We continued with Trump; however, the Trump administration linked its commitments to the Autonomous Administration with the military elimination of ISIS, which caused those problems between us. The Trump administration's actions harmed this region and the gains that we and the U.S. military achieved together. Subsequently, the Trump administration sensed a mistake and tried to avoid mistakes. We find that there is a difference between the current Democratic administration and the former Republican one. We see more institutionalized decisions, and we feel they are more transparent with us, as they share and discuss with us issues specific to the region and to us. They have clear commitments, including remaining here and not withdrawing.

Sabri: How have the repercussions of the Afghanistan withdrawal affected you?

Mazloun: In the beginning, there was fear and concern among the people and those in political circles. However, the American political and military parties had meetings with us and assured us that Syria is not Afghanistan, the SDF is not the Afghan Army, and they are two separate files.

Everyone warned us, even ISIS and Al-Qaeda! The Assad regime and all the parties told us that we should not trust America. Everyone said that America would withdraw from here just like in Afghanistan. Every party wanted to invest in this area.

Sabri: Why do you want the U.S. army to remain in Syria?

Mazloun: In short, we are not asking the U.S. army to stay here forever, nor to protect us. Rather, we tell them they must stay until a political solution is reached. Yes, we defeated ISIS, but the war against ISIS remains ongoing. To stand against ISIS, we need to reach a political solution. In short, we want to turn America's stay here into grounds for reaching a political solution.

Sabri: Ultimately, where do you think Syria is going?

Mazloun: Personally, I am optimistic. The Syrian regime will be forced to change its positions. The domestic, economic, and international situation will not allow it to return to 2011. Furthermore, the international powers have begun to sense that the Syrian problem must be resolved. The entities that want to choose war, such as Turkey and the Syrian regime, have no future. Those calling for dialogue will advance. If that dialogue begins, we will be present in it, as we have been a concrete reality here for ten years. I believe that, in 2022, those steps will begin, and we will see progress in the political process.

The situation that is developing in the region, extending from the Iraq-Syria border to the end of the administrative

borders in Manbij, needs greater attention from the international coalition. This attention means not only military cooperation but must also contain clear support for the leaders and parties of that region to have greater involvement in the political process in Syria. Washington must explicitly declare its political agenda for Syria, and Turkey's incomprehensible aggression against that region must be countered. Russia's wishes in opposition to Washington's partners in Syria must be discouraged, and there must be pressure to reach a constitutional solution with Damascus and a greater push to develop the skills of local administrations in the fields of governance, the economy, and humanitarian and social programs, with constant reminders and pressures on those administrations for a broader commitment to issues of freedoms and human rights. ❖



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