

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Baraa Sabri is a scholar and political writer from Syria located in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. He works with international humanitarian and non-governmental organizations and writes in several well-known Arab newspapers and specialized research centers on Middle East political and social affairs.



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](#) (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/05/the-meaning-of-operation-olive-branch/>), [Tal Abyad](#) (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/06122019>), and [Ras al-Ain](#) (<https://tass.com/world/1084181>); the inability to develop a [constitutional path](#) (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1103822>) 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](#) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-plans-military-action-against-syrian-kurdish-ypg-if-diplomacy-fails-2021-10-15/>) 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](#) (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/23/thousands-foreigners-unlawfully-held-ne-syria>) 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](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/economic-future-northeast-syria>).

**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](#) (<https://www.congress.gov/bills/116/congress/house-bill/31/text>), 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.



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

**Mazloum:** 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?

**Mazloum:** 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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## RECOMMENDED

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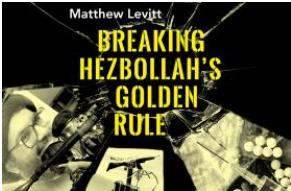
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