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Northern Syria's New Democratic Federal System

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Articles & Testimony

On March 17, the PYD declared the establishment of the Founding Council of Democratic Federal System in Rojava and announced the declaration of a democratic federal system for northern Syria. Analyzing the result of this declaration can provide a better view of the PYD's strategic policies and goals and how they are directing incidents in what is quickly developing into Kurdistan of Syria.

This declaration presents a gateway to understanding the current activity and future developments of the federal system of northern Syria. First, the declaration's use of the geographic term "northern Syria" suggests that the new democratic entity intends to control the whole of northern Syria -- from the easternmost canton of Afrin to Kobani and Jazeera. Under this definition, the federal system of Rojava would seek to represent not only the Kurdish areas of Northern Syria but also Jarablus and other hotly contested areas in the north, currently under the control of opposition forces. This phrasing also provides the opportunity to include Raqqah were it recaptured from ISIS.

The written declaration of the federation uses political theory and history to define the new system's intentions and legitimacy. "Syria" and "Kurdistan" are presented as separate geographic entities; there is no reference to a "Syrian Kurdistan." Establishing the separation of these two geographic areas may be intended to position any efforts towards a federalist system in Syria as a Kurdish initiative, rather than an allowance from the Syrian central government.

In regard to the international community, the paper is critical of the West's policies towards Syria as demonstrated in the Geneva Talks. It argues that those representing the Syrian opposition in the Geneva talks have ideologies not far removed from those of ISIS, "Which makes the process of solving Syrian problems and issues even more difficult." The paper also claims that Turkey and other countries in the region are supporting and organizing extremist groups such as ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front, and Ahrar al-Sham -- groups that are fighting against Kurdish

interests and Syrian democratic citizens.

Similarly, the paper criticizes the First World War's successful powers divided the Middle East. It characterizes the process as failing to consider ethnical and religious issues when defining boundaries and having instead applied "Neocolonialism." The resulting nationalist states were established to appease Arabic nationalists, and these boundaries suppressed the region's abundance of ethnic and religious minorities.

Ideologically, the paper is deeply rooted in Marxist thought. It argues for free society and justice against what it deems the "nationalist autocratic system,... power and capitalist hegemony,... and stage of consumption." However, the paper also attempts to embrace communal religious culture on while refuting the Turkish and Islamist claim that the PYD system is anti-religious. The paper shows interest in Abrahamic religious cultures, and presents the belief that Abrahamic prophets' efforts are have made real developments to the moral and ethical values of the region.

The document in particular challenges the Ba'athist identity of Iraq and Syria and its negative impact in the two states from 1963 onwards as an ideology that warped communist and religious ideals. The authors argue that by co-opting these ideals, "The Ba'ath Party managed to mislead and exploit Islamic and communist individuals. Ba'athists enslaved people, and the party became despotic, using a combination of militarism and violence against the people". This distancing from Ba'athism demonstrates that the relationship between northern Syria and Syria's Ba'athist Regime in Syria has split. The condemnation of the Ba'ath party also appears to be a strong statement that the party will cannot return to its former policy of not recognizing non-Arab ethnicities or the party belief that Kurds did not deserve rights of citizenship in Syria.

On the basis of this ideology, the document argues that democratic communities—specifically the Democratic Federal System in Syria—can help solve the Middle East crisis and prevent further divisions in the region. The text suggests that the era of the nationalist state is over and calls instead for a decentralized democratic society in Syria. In this model, the Syrian state and its social systems should be committed to reconstructing the political, legal, defensive, ideological, and economic bases in Syria in accordance to democratic rather than sectarian values.

Consequently, the document calls for the adoption of a "Democratic Social Treaty" in Syria. Division and partition of Syria's communities cannot solve Syria's current crisis. Instead, the paper insists that democratic federalism is the only successful option for Syria, a model that would help establish self-sufficiency among Syria's diverse communities of Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmens, Circassians, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Alawites, Yazidi, and other ethnic and religious groups.

It is worth noting that the democratic federal system in Rojava is intended to organize a federal system on the basis of "a new social-political administrative settlement." In effect, this suggests that the new government will have little room for historical motivations, differences, or geographical borders that contradict the federal system. This theory appears to stand in contrast to the Iraqi Kurdistan model, in which federalism is based on geography and history rather than purely administrative boundaries.

Objectives and Obstacles

Based on the ideas outlined in these founding documents, the overall objective of the democratic federal system is to provide basic rights and freedoms for all Syrian constituents and establish a new democratic structure in lieu of the dissolved state of Syria. The northern Syrian system in particular emphasizes the preservation of women's freedoms and gender equality. It also demonstrates a belief that the system will be able to ensure a peaceful transition of power through free and fair elections. The democratic federal system also intends to provide equal distribution of land, water, and power resources among Syrians.

The ideology of the paper also links the guarantee of Syrian unity to the implementation of democratic federalism in Syria. The objective is incredibly optimistic, suggesting that this system can ultimately bypass the national borders

of failed states to create a democratic federalist system in the entire Middle East region.

The announcement of the democratic system in Rojava has emerged as a consequence of the geographic and political realities of the Kurdish issue continuing to develop in a fractured region. It still remains to be seen whether the international community and the United States will ultimately come to accept the legitimacy of this nascent democracy in the Middle East, especially in light of those countries' delayed responses to similar attempts at reform during the beginnings of the Arab Spring.

However, these entities cannot continue to operate in the region without providing a clear position on the new developments in Northern Syrian. The United States can either leave the YPG and PYD to face the pressure of Syria's Ba'ath party, extremists, Turkey, Arab Gulf proxies, and ultimately left to the fate that Russia and Iran might have in store for them. Or the United States can, in cooperation with the European Union, take steps toward cooperating with this democratic entity, frustrating the designs of Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

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