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Syria

# Federalism might be an Option, but Inclusiveness is a Must

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV498 - July 2016 -

Publication date: Wednesday 27 July 2016

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**On March 17, 2016, the “Federal Democratic System of Rojava – Northern Syria” was established officially in areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Following a meeting of more than 150 representatives of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian parties in the city of Rumaylan in north-eastern Syria, participants voted in favor of the union of three “cantons” populated by Syria’s most sizeable Kurdish community (Afrin, Kobanî®, Jazirah) .**

The Asad regime and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces [popularly known as “the Coalition” (al-I’tilaf)] have both stated their opposition to this announcement, while Washington, despite its support for the PYD, and Turkey have both declared they would not recognize this federal entity. The Syrian revolutionary streets also stood against federalism, as was evident from the many placards raised in demonstrations on Friday, March 18 and the following, considering it as a step towards separatism and division.

According to [a survey](#) conducted between November 2015 and January 2016 by the independent Syrian-led civil society organization [The Day After Tomorrow \(TDA\)](#), respondents in both regime (86.7%) and opposition-held areas (67.4%) agree on rejecting federalism, while proponents of federalism almost reach a consensus in Kurdish-led Self-Administration areas (79.6%) [2]. These results show that a Kurdish-Arab divide exists and that the first imperative regarding any future political system in Syria is dealing with the “Kurdish issue”, although it is not the only requirement as this article will show.

The objective here is to raise a discussion on the kind of political system that could best serve the interests of the underprivileged classes to guarantee democracy and social justice and, at the same time, address the Kurdish issue in Syria. The issue of this article is therefore not to concentrate on the current federal system of Rojava – Northern Syria as that would require another article.

## The Kurdish Issue

Although there have been some recognitions of the Kurdish issue, the far majority of the Kurdish parties – and actually of the Kurdish population in Syria as well – are not satisfied by the way most Arab opposition political parties consider the Kurdish issue as simply and uniquely a citizenship issue.

In other words, the Arab opposition believes that Kurds are normal Syrian citizens who have been deprived of some of their rights and that the problem is therefore limited to the single issue of the census in 1962, which resulted in around 120. 000 Kurds being denied nationality and declared as foreigners, leaving them, and subsequently their children, denied of basic civil rights and condemned to poverty and discrimination [3].

There were between 250,00 and 300.000 stateless Kurds in the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, roughly 15 percent of the estimated two million total Kurdish population in Syria. The far majority of the opposition political parties have not been ready in any way to recognize the Kurds as a separate “people” or “nation” and are not ready and willing to listen to demands for federalism and administrative decentralization. The demand for a federal system in Syria is a demand of the quasi majority of Kurdish parties in the country despite their political differences and rivalries.

We have to understand that the demand for a federal system by the Syrian Kurdish political parties is rooted in

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decades of [state oppression](#), and this since the independence of the country in 1946, on a national basis (policies of quasi systematic discrimination against Kurds, policies of colonization in the framework of the “Arab Belt” and cultural repressions at all levels), but also has socio-economic consequences as we will see later in the text.

The majority of the Syrian Arab opposition did not address or even acknowledge this reality, mirroring the regime’s position. . The Turkey-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) and, other representatives of the opposition to the regime met in Istanbul in mid July 2011 to establish a “National Salvation Council.” The Kurdish representatives [walked out](#) of the conference in protest after the other delegates refused their request to change the name of the country from the Syrian Arab Republic to the Republic of Syria.

The first chairman of the SNC Burhan Ghaliun refused the [Kurdish National Council](#) (KNC, a coalition of Kurdish parties close to the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government)’s main demand for federalism in a post-Asad Syria, calling it a [“delusion”](#). Ghaliun also infuriated Syrian Kurds by comparing them with [“immigrants in France”](#) in November 2011, implying their exteriority to Syria.

In December 2011, the SNC offered to recognize the Kurds as a distinct ethnic group in the new constitution and to solve the Kurdish issue through “the elimination of oppression, the compensation of victims, and the recognition of Kurdish national rights within a Syria of united land and people.” However, talks between Ghaliun, KNC head ?Abdul Hakim Bashar, and Iraqi Kurdistan president Mas ?ud Barzani in Erbil in January 2012 ended in an impasse. The KNC sought “political” decentralization, which means formal autonomy, but the SNC refused to discuss more than “administrative” decentralization.

In late February 2012, all Kurdish parties in the SNC – with the exception of the Kurdish Future Party, headed by Fares Tammo – suspended their membership and joined the KNC after Ghalioun’s renewed commitment to discuss only administrative decentralization.

Tension between the KNC and the SNC increased considerably following the latter’s publication of its statement “National Charter: The Kurdish Issue in Syria” in early April 2012. The document eliminated language recognizing a Kurdish nation within Syria that had been included in the final draft statement of the “Friends of Syria” meeting held in Tunisia in February 2012. This resulted in the withdrawal of the KNC from unity talks with the SNC and Turkey being accused of excessively influencing the SNC’s policy.

Nonetheless, the KNC joined the Coalition on August 27, 2013. Since the Riyadh Opposition Conference in December 2015 [the KNC is also part of the High Negotiation Committee in Geneva](#). This did not prevent however, the continuation of chauvinist attacks or comments on Kurds generally from Coalition members.

For example, on March 29, 2016, the chairman of the opposition’s delegation in Geneva, former general As?ad Al Zo ?bi, said on Orient television that “the Kurds made up 1% of the population and they only wanted to get their papers during the era of president Hafez al-Asad to prove they are â€˜human beings’.”

At the same time, the Coalition has provided no guarantees regarding any possible federal or decentralized state in a future Syria, rather characterizing these solutions as undermining the unity and integrity of the Syrian territory and people and therefore being unacceptable.

In general, no solution for the Kurdish issue and an inclusive Syria can be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper “people” or “nation” in Syria and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria and elsewhere; this clearly does not mean being uncritical of the policies of the leadership of the PYD or any other Kurdish political party.

It is the unity of the Syrian people, including Arabs and Kurds, on the basis of a democratic and inclusive program that will allow their liberation and emancipation against the counter-revolutionary forces of the Asad regime and the Islamic fundamentalists.

To eliminate from the discussions the Kurdish issue under the assumption that it allows more unity within the opposition and less problems is actually a recipe for division and lack of confidence between the various components of the Syrian people.

## Socio-Economic Injustice

The other issue around a decentralized or federal state is related to the redistribution of wealth and socio-economic injustice in the country. For context, Syria's economic growth, which was on average 5% during the years preceding the beginning of the uprising [4], has not benefited the underprivileged classes; in fact, inequalities in terms of wealth have continued to increase.

For example, according to a [UNDP report](#), between 1997 and 2004, the Gini coefficient [5] rose from 0.33 to 0.37. In 2003-2004, 20% of the poorest accounted for only 7% of total expenditure, while 20% of the richest were responsible for 45% of the latter. A trend which has continued to grow up to the outbreak of the revolution.

Economic growth during both Asad regimes was chiefly rent-based, depending on oil export revenues, financial assistance received or offered because of a particular political position [6] and capital inflows including remittances. This rent-based growth was anti-developmental in many ways.

The new agent of investment under the Asad regimes encouraged artisanal and low quality investment in services, real estate, transport and family-based projects that served private as opposed to public interests [7].

The abovementioned UNDP report revealed that, on the eve of the uprising in March 2011, the unemployment rate stood at 14.9% according to official figures, and 20-25% according to other sources. [The youth unemployment rate](#) was 48%, six times higher than the rate of unemployment among adults.

In 2007, according to the same UNDP report, the percentage of Syrians living below the poverty line was 33%, approximately seven million people. 30% of the population was just above this level. Even the regime-controlled Syrian General Federation of Trade Unions deplored in 2009 that "the rich have become richer and the poor poorer (...) (and) low income earners who make up 80 percent of the Syrian population are looking for additional work to support themselves [8]."

This increase in poverty and social inequalities had also gender consequences as for example the rate of unemployment among young women was nearly four times that among young men in 2007 [9]. Women had lost around 50% of their total jobs between 2001 and 2007, and the gender gap in access to employment was also greater in rural than in urban areas [10].

Neoliberal policies have satisfied the upper class in Syria and foreign investors, especially from the Gulf monarchies and Turkey, which were not hostile to the Asad regime prior to the revolution, at the expense of the vast majority of Syrians, who have been hit by inflation and the rising cost of living, while public services and investments (health system, education, housing) were diminished considerably [11].

In this framework, regional structural injustices existed indeed before the uprising in 2011 and were increased with the accelerated neo-liberal policies of the regime of Bashar al-Asad. On the eve of the upheaval, the proportion of poor people was higher in rural areas (62%) than in urban ones (38%). Poverty was more widespread, more rooted and more marked (58.1%) in the north-west and north-east (the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, ar-Raqqa, Deyr az-Zawr and al-Hasakah), where 45% of the population lived [12]. Just over half (54.2%) of all unemployment was found in [rural areas](#).

In addition to this, before the beginning of the popular uprising, the geographic concentration of business was as followed:

Governorates distribution for micro enterprises (less than 5 workers):

– Damascus and Rural Damascus: 27.36%

– Aleppo 21.72%

– Homs 9.93%

– Hama 6.06%

– other governorates 34.93% (10 other governorates)

while governorates distribution for small enterprises (between 5 to 14 workers)

– Damascus and Rural Damascus: 29.40%

– Aleppo 41.55%

– Homs 5.89%

– Hama 4.70%

– other governorates 18.46% [13].

Foreign private investments were also concentrated in the two cities of Damascus and Aleppo in unproductive sectors (real estate, tourism, services such as bank insurances companies), while other regions and rural areas were left out of any kind of economic development and of provision of services.

In addition to this the most impoverished areas of the country were the areas mostly populated by Kurds such as in the north-eastern Jazirah. The Jazirah was the region with the highest level of illiteracy rate and poverty, hosting 58% of the country's impoverished population before the occurrence of the 2004 drought.

In 2010, poverty increased considerably reaching 80 per cent of the Jazirah inhabitants, as the impact of four consecutive droughts since 2006 had been dramatic for both small-scale farmers and herders. [14]. . In addition to this, the Jazirah region produced two thirds of the country's grains (and 70% of wheat) and three quarters of its hydrocarbons. Despite the industrial underdevelopment of the Jazirah, and the scarcity of industrial installations in the region, which accounted for only 7% of the overall sector, this plain was nevertheless important. For example, 69 per cent of Syria's cotton was produced in the region, but only 10 per cent of cotton threads were spun there [15].

Of course, all ethnic groups in the area, Arabs, Syriacs-Assyrians, and Kurds, suffered from economic marginalization.

There are other examples of social inequality linked to areas inhabited by Kurds before the uprising in 2011. Unlike other informal working class areas in Damascus, the Zorava neighborhood was not provided with schools or public dispensary, while many other essential services were not available as well [16].

In the city of Qamishli, Kurdish suburbs were still largely suffering from lack of sewers, potable water and electricity, while Christian and Arab neighborhoods had been improved and upgraded (paved roads, electricity, street lights, refuse collection) in the 2000s [17].

The issue of wealth redistribution in society and across the different regions will have to be tackled in any future political system in Syria. On this perspective, the Coalition's economic policies are problematic because they support

the same neoliberal policies along the lines of the Asad regime in contradiction with the interests of the underprivileged classes. We must not forget that the popular revolution in Syria began as a result of social economic injustices and widespread poverty, in addition to political issues.

The socio-economic injustices in the society and across regions must be linked to the democratic issue, and more particularly to the participation of local populations in the decisions of society at all levels: municipalities, governorates and the state. The experiences of the “liberated” areas and local popular councils are in this perspective something to maintain in any future Syrian democratic state. Participation from below of the underprivileged classes in managing their societies at all levels has actually been the most significant element in the revolution.

According to the abovementioned TDA survey, the population actually wants to maintain this experience, as we can see in its support for some form of decentralization in a way “to endorse the allocation of broad competencies to local authorities, and this support explicitly increases in opposition-held areas (if) compared with regime-controlled areas. It seems that the absence of the state in opposition-held areas has contributed to increased support for decentralization, and the spread of positive perceptions about it (...) (especially) the idea that it enhances ‘participation in governance’ tops the list of advantages.”

## Conclusion

The basis for any future democratic Syria must include indeed the democratic and social empowerment of the underprivileged classes to manage their own societies.

In this perspective, a possible decentralized and/or federal state could best answer some of the issues discussed in the article, notably by respecting the principle of self determination of the Kurdish population in providing more tools and power to manage their affairs, on one side, and in trying to correct regional social injustices, on the other. Such an option would also strengthen participation from local population in decision making processes.

However, the implementation of a decentralized or federal state is not a guarantee per se to achieve an inclusive and democratic system. Indeed, all future options in Syria, whether federal, decentralized or else, will need to take into account these issues in a secular political framework encouraging the participation from below of the underprivileged classes and in which democratic and social rights of all Syrians without gender, ethnic and religious discriminations are guaranteed. This means notably providing the underprivileged classes with the rights to organize politically in their workplaces, society, and neighborhoods, to defend their interests.

The issue at core is to protect the freedom and dignity of the people as the popular movements have demanded since the beginning of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010-2011, including in Syria, against authoritarian and unjust regimes.

[Syria Untold](#)

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[1] Unlike Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, Syria’s roughly 2 million Kurds inhabit several non-contiguous regions. Before the uprising, approximately 30% of the Syrian Kurdish population lived in the highlands northwest of Aleppo, known as Kurd Dagh. The Ain al-?Arab-Kobani region, where the Euphrates flows into Syrian territory, was home to roughly 10%, while 40% lived in the north-eastern half of the al-Jazirah governorate. The remainder is settled in urban neighborhoods across the country, such as the Hayy al-Akrad suburb of Damascus. See Gary C. Gambill, Gary C.,

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"The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria", in Middle East Forum, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2004). Available at <http://www.meforum.org/meib/article...>

[2] Ten surveyors conducted face- to-face interviews with 1304 respondents, of whom 722 were men and 582 women. Respondents were drawn from different geographical areas in Syria: 814 from the opposition-held areas, 167 from the Kurdish-led "Democratic Self-Administration", 323 from regime-controlled areas

[3] The 120,000 included the Kurds classified as "foreigners" (ajanib) on their identity cards, who cannot vote, own property, or obtain government jobs (but are not, however, exempt from obligatory military service), and the "unregistered" (maktumin) who cannot even receive treatment in state hospitals or obtain marriage certificates. They are not officially acknowledged at all and have no identity cards

[4] FIDA (2009), "République Arabe Syrienne, Programme d'Options Stratégiques pour le Pays", p.1. Available at <http://www.ifad.org/gbdocs/eb/98/f/...>

[5] The Gini coefficient is calculated on the basis of income distribution and it is the most commonly used measure of inequality. The coefficient varies between 0, which reflects complete equality and 1, which indicates complete inequality

[6] For example, at the Baghdad Arab Summit in 1978, which was organized to oppose the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David agreement, Syria was awarded a \$1.8 billion annual grant for a ten-year period to reward its "struggle" against Israel.

[7] Matar, Linda, The Political Economy of Investment in Syria, (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), p. 131

[8] Hinnebusch, Raymond and Zintl, Tinti, "Syrian Uprising and Al-Assad's First Decade in Power", in Syria from Reform to Revolt Volume 1, Political Economy and International Relations, (Syracuse University Press, 2015), p. 293

[9] Aita, Samir (2009), "Labour Markets Performance and Migration Flows in Syria", p. 6. Available at <http://www.economistes-arabes.org/C...>

[10] Idem p.3

[11] Matar, Linda, idem, p. 20; Goulden, Robert (2011), "Housing, Inequality, and Economic Change in Syria", in British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 38(2), p.192; Perthes, Volker, Syria under Bashar al- Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change, (London: Adelphi Paper, 2004), p. 29

[12] FIDA (2009), "République Arabe Syrienne, Programme d'Options Stratégiques pour le Pays".

[13] Seifan, Samir, Syria on the path of economic reform, (Fife, Scotland, University of St. Andrews: Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010), p. 57

[14] United Nations (2011), "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter", p. 5. Available at <http://www.srfood.org/images/storie...>

[15] Myriam Ababsa, "The End of a World, Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007-2010)", in Syria from Reform to Revolt Volume 1, Political Economy and International Relations, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), p. 201.

[16] Abboud C., "Les Quartiers Informels de Damas : une Ceinture de Misère", in Dupret, B., Ghazzal, Z., Courbage, Y., et Al-Dbiyat, M. (dir.), La Syrie au Présent. Reflets d'une Société

[17] Tejel, Jordi, Syria's Kurds. History, Politics and Society, (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 119