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The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES/Rojava): Emergence, Governance, Legitimacy and Recognition

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem and Significance

Rojava, officially known since 2014 as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and since 2023 as the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) is an ambitious attempt at a sub-state self-rule governance structure. Established during the Syrian civil war, the governance model rooted in the concept of democratic confederalism following the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurdish longtime leader of the PKK currently imprisoned by Turkey, emphasises direct democracy, gender equality, pluralism and social ecology. Despite being established under dire conditions of war, regional hostility and embargo, the administration succeeded in building an internal structure, providing basic needs, encouraging pluralist participation and maintaining security for its inhabitants.

The record of Rojava's internal governance has not translated into formal external recognition. Despite its bottom-up council system, gender quotas and service provision under wartime conditions, Rojava remains unacknowledged as a legitimate political entity by other states. Outside actors have mostly interacted with it in tactical ways, especially during the fight against ISIS, but they have always refrained from formal support that could disrupt the traditional norms of sovereignty or the balance of power in the region.

The emergence of Rojava is best understood as the culmination of decades of Kurdish struggle and repression across the Middle East. This includes Ottoman-era marginalization of the Kurds and the 20th-century state-building projects that denied Kurdish identity in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. The Kurdish history combined with Abdullah Öcalan's ideological shift toward radical local democracy set the stage for the autonomous structures established in 2012.

However, the situation in Rojava raises a broader question: why do certain governance experiments achieve local acceptance but fail to secure external legitimacy within the international system? This thesis argues that internal governance assessed against good governance principles provides a degree of pragmatic and symbolic legitimacy but was not sufficient to translate into wider recognition. Rojava's external position was shaped less by its internal governance and more by geopolitical constraints such as Turkey's hostility, Syria's sovereignty claims, and international norms privileging state-centric principles over de facto authorities.

This study examines Rojava's governance through the lens of legitimacy theory and good governance principles, while situating these findings within the broader regional and international structures that ultimately shape its recognition. Starting with the historical context of Kurdish repression and struggle, this thesis explains the emergence of Rojava and the forms of legitimacy it was able to claim, while identifying possible limitations in its governance system implemented in conflict settings and the indisputable importance of external politics.

Throughout this thesis, the administration will be referred to as 'Rojava'. Although the latest formal designation changed to DAANES (2023), much of academic literature and policy reports continue to use the term 'Rojava'. To maintain consistency and avoid confusion, 'Rojava' will serve as the primary label. This thesis takes into account that Rojava is a Kurdish designation of Western Kurdistan.

1.2. Value-added Contribution

This thesis' aim is to contribute to a wider debate on the subject by combining governance studies, Kurdish political history, and selected theories from international relations. It examines both the internal and external dimension of Rojava in order to explore the following areas:

- The successes and limits of a Rojava's governance model in a conflict setting;
- The extent to which the internal governance quality, identity and security provision shape legitimacy in the case of Rojava;
- The issue of recognition in international relations and the relation between sovereignty norms and pragmatic engagement of external actors;
- Rojava's position within the regional and international environment.

The thesis will mainly focus on the following research questions:

- What are the main features of Rojava's internal governance institutions and how do they measure against selected good governance principles?
- How does the case of Rojava contribute to the discussion on legitimacy and recognition?
- What external constraints affect Rojava's prospects for recognition and external engagement?

1.3. Expected Outcome

The research tests the hypothesis that Rojava's governance model represents a significant and innovative attempt at local self-rule, promoting participation, inclusivity, stability, and

democratic principles in a highly conflicted environment. At the same time, it examines the supposition that these aspirations and achievements are insufficient to secure wider recognition due to powerful regional and external constraints.

While good governance reforms have strengthened institutional capacity and symbolically advanced democratic ideals, internal legitimacy has relied primarily on Kurdish identity and the provision of basic security in the vacuum left by the Syrian state following the Syrian revolution in 2011. The continued non-recognition suggests that external legitimacy is shaped less by governance quality than by regional context and wider geopolitics.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis consists of three parts. First, the internal governance is studied and assessed according to widely recognised good governance principles such as legitimacy, accountability, rule of law, inclusiveness, and effectiveness. The principles serve as a framework for evaluating Rojava's governance and understanding its performance. Second, theories of legitimacy help explain how governance is related to identity and performance to secure local acceptance. Weber's classical forms of legitimacy remain relevant, but conflict settings call for a more pragmatic approach related to identity and security. Third, the literature on de facto states and recognition helps situate Rojava's case in the wider geopolitical context. It emphasizes that recognition is rarely determined by governance performance but is often affected by globally recognised sovereignty norms, the role of external actors, and their geopolitical interests. The theoretical framework provides the thesis with the necessary background to examine the strengths and limits of Rojava's governance and helps provide an explanation to why internal legitimacy has not transformed into wider external recognition.

1.5. Structure

The thesis is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research problem and significance. Chapter 2 outlines the historical developments of Kurdish marginalisation, situating Rojava within the broader history of Kurdish struggles and the ideological evolution leading to the concept of democratic confederalism. Chapter 3 examines the governance model of Rojava, beginning with an overview of its institutional structures and then evaluating them through good governance principles. Chapter 4 focuses on the question of legitimacy and how it is earned and created in conflict settings. It shows that in Rojava, internal legitimacy has derived not only from the governance reforms but also from Kurdish identity, lengthy struggle and the provision of basic security in a context where the Syrian state failed to do so. Chapter

5 focuses on the external dimension by analysing the lack of external recognition during Rojava's existence. It explains sovereignty norms and institutional exclusion of Rojava from global fora and regional pressures such as Turkey's and Iraq's approach towards Rojava, Syrian government sovereignty claims, as well as the tactical engagement of great powers. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by consolidating the findings and reflecting on their broader implications for Rojava's governance, legitimacy and recognition.

1.6. Methodology

The thesis uses a qualitative and interpretative methodology in interpreting and analysing both primary documents as well as a wide range of secondary literature. The analysis focuses on internal governance, sovereignty, legitimacy, recognition, regional dynamics and external geopolitics. The thesis seeks to provide a fair and balanced account of events.

2. Historical Roots

2.1. Pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Period

Between the 16th century and World War I, Kurdistan existed as a fragmented borderland region spanning the Ottoman and Persian empires, both of which acknowledged its existence. Although not a unified state, Kurdish regions enjoyed a significant degree of local autonomy with tribal leaders as imperial vassals. Mountainous terrain and a remote frontier position made direct Ottoman or Persian control impractical, fostering a sort of mutual agreement where Kurdish elites governed in exchange for loyalty. The shared Sunni Muslim identity facilitated Kurdish tribes' and elites' incorporation into the Ottoman order and Kurdish leaders were seen as protectors of the Ottoman eastern frontier against Safavid Iran, making their loyalty strategically important (Van Bruinessen, 1992, p. 94-145).

The equilibrium shifted in the 19th century, when the reforms of the Ottoman Empire's government (Sublime Porte) pursued centralization and strengthening of state control through a set of Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876). Kurdish hereditary rulers were increasingly replaced with Ottoman appointees, weakening local authority. The 1858 Land Code encouraged tribal chiefs to register communal land under their names, deepening inequality and sparking local resistance (Degli Esposti, 2022, p. 27-28). As Akın argues, many studies emphasise that tribes functioned as 'active agents that engaged in mutual power relations with the Ottoman central government' (2022, p. 332). The 'independent nature of the tribal structure mainly contributed to the interdependency between the tribes and the imperial powers', a relationship that scholars

have described as a form of ‘flexible centralization’ based on negotiation between government and notables (Akın, 2022, p. 337 - 338).

Although Ottoman reforms dismantled the Kurdish emirates, they also created the conditions for new forms of Kurdish identity. In 1891, in order to co-opt the Kurds, Sultan Abdülhamid II established the Hamidiye regiments, tribal cavalry units made up largely of Kurds, to police the eastern provinces and counter Armenian revolutionary groups (later responsible for the Armenian genocide). While designed to bind Kurdish tribes to the empire, these regiments also gave some leaders greater autonomy, which later fed into opposition to Ottoman authority. Around the same time, the first Kurdish newspaper, *Kurdistan* (1898) began to circulate among Kurdish elites. Together, these initiatives linked tribal authority with emerging cultural nationalism, setting the stage for the coming Kurdish political activism in the early twentieth century (Bozarslan, 2008, p. 336).

Degli Esposti argues that until World War I, ‘the nationalist discourse, had […] an almost insignificant presence [while] [t]he Kurdish elite kept drawing its power from traditional sources of legitimacy and therefore, they neither challenged the Ottoman sultan nor imagined themselves outside the boundaries of Ottoman citizenship and Muslim identity’. Being Kurdish in this period largely meant tribal affiliation rather than national identity (2022, p. 29).

2.2. Post-Ottoman State Formation and the Kurdish Question

Kurdish political activism in the late 19th and early 20th century was led by urban intellectual elites in Istanbul, often from deposed emir families, who advocated administrative reforms and autonomy within the Ottoman framework, but failed to resonate with the rural Kurdish population. During the Young Turk era (1908) leading up to World War I, the concept of ‘Kurdishness’ as a separate cultural concept started to appear (Degli Esposti, 2022, p. 29-30).

The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), a secret deal between Britain and France, divided the Ottoman Arab provinces into zones of control. France took Syria and Lebanon, while Britain took Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine. According to Halhalli, the Kurdish people suffered the most from this arrangement, as it ignored their historical, cultural, and tribal affiliations, leading to a fragmentation of the Kurds across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The subsequent imposition of a Western-style nation-state system in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region further embedded the divisions (in Tugdar and Al, 2018, p.27). After World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) aimed to dismantle the Ottoman Empire and outlined a promise of Kurdish autonomy and possible independence, but Turkish nationalist forces rejected the Treaty and the

Mandate system, introduced by the League of Nations in 1920, assigned France the mandate over Syria (Atmaca, 2022, p.12).

Between 1920 and 1946, the French Mandate supported minority groups like the Kurds to counterbalance Arab nationalism. During this period, many Kurds fled repression in Turkey and settled in the northeast of Syria, especially around Qamishli and Al-Hasakah. As Savelsberg notes, the Mandate period allowed Kurds some space to organise and assert their identity, but the French did not particularly care for the Kurdish cause (in Romano and Gurses, 2014, p. 85-107). Despite the French effort to co-opt the Kurds, the latter joined anti-colonial movements, uniting with Arab tribes in 1923, playing a key role in the Great Syrian Revolution of 1925. Their participation underscored Kurdish engagement in wider nationalist movements for an independent and pluralistic Syria (Barakt, 2025).

2.3. The Question of Statelessness

Following France's departure in 1946 and the arrival of the Ba'athist regime in the 1960s and 1970s, state policies sought to *arabize* Kurdish regions. The 1962 Census denied Syrian citizenship to those Kurds unable to provide sufficient documents proving their citizenship, and the 1974 Arab Belt project confiscated Kurdish land resettling it with Arabs (Barakt, 2025). According to Ramírez Díaz, Syria created 'a safe haven' for the Kurds fleeing Turkey only to use this as a pretext to strap them of their citizenship (2020, p. 307-308). The Ba'ath Party intensified repression, silenced Kurdish identity and neglected economic development in the northeast. More than 300,000 Kurds remained stateless and the regime portrayed them as internal enemies to the Arab nation (Eliassi, 2021, p. 40-41).

Repression peaked in 2004 with a violent crackdown on a Kurdish protest in Qamishli. The event deepened Kurdish alienation and helped build a collective identity demanding recognition laying the groundwork for Kurdish mobilisation when the Syrian uprising erupted in 2011 (Tejel, 2014, p. 217).

2.4. 20th Century Repression of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran

Turkey

Kurdish unrest in Turkey had already manifested in earlier uprisings such as the Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925) and the Dersim Rebellion (1937–38), long before the intensification of repression in the late 20th century (Balci, 2017, p. 58-73). The Kurdish political expression and demands for autonomy were systematically suppressed by the alleged 'Deep State' assimilation

and repression policies. Gunter refers to the 'Deep State' as 'a *mentality* concerning what Kemalist Turkey should be, namely strongly nationalist, statist, secular, and right-wing; not Islamist, multiethnic, reformist, and/or a member of the EU' (2014, p. 33). During the Cold War era, paramilitary networks targeted Kurdish separatism, culminating in a military coup in 1980 and harsh assimilation. In the 1990s, the Turkish state engaged in an intense military campaign against the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), characterized by security operations, forced evacuations and human rights violations, all aimed at suppressing the Kurdish insurgency and maintaining state control (Gunter, 2014, 24-33). According to Reissner and Leicht, the repressions created a context where armed struggle seemed the only viable path for Kurds, although the PKK later experimented with ceasefires and political initiatives alongside its military campaigns (1999).

Iraq

After World War I, Iraq's new Sunni Arab-led state repressed the Kurds. Arab nationalism under the Ba'athist regime intensified the divide between Kurds and Arabs, making ethnic tensions more pronounced than the Sunni-Shia sectarian differences. Kurdish resistance was violently suppressed, most notably in the Anfal Campaign in the 1980s, during which, Saddam Hussein's genocidal military campaign targeted the Kurdish population. Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War and an UN-established no-fly zone gave rise to a semi-autonomous administration called Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the North of Iraq and many displaced Kurds managed to return. Despite this, territorial disputes with the government persisted.

Unlike the PKK, Iraqi Kurdish parties such as the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) pursued their autonomy goals through negotiation and alliance-building including with the US during the Gulf and Iraq Wars to help dismantle the Saddam Hussein reign. The KRG became an ally of the US in the ISIS fight. A peculiar alliance was established with Iran, which sought to prevent the spillover of Iraqi Kurdistan into Iran by maintaining a pragmatic relationship (Yesiltas, 2014, p. 42-56).

Iran

Historically, Kurds in Iran experienced relative tolerance in the multiethnic empire, but by the 19th and 20th centuries nationalist centralization brought repression. The short-lived Kurdish state in the northwest Iran under Soviet rule – the Republic of Mahabad (1946), was swiftly crushed after the Soviets withdrew from the area. After 1979, the new Islamic republic rejected

Kurdish autonomy sparking armed conflict and brutal repression leading to executions of Kurdish leaders and exile.

Although Kurds in Iran did not experience the same level of systemic exclusion such as under the Ottoman rule or in subsequent Turkey or Syria, the increased assimilation tendencies of *persianization* marked the Kurdish population (Stansfield, 2014, p. 60 – 79).

Local contexts of Kurdish history and struggles in Turkey, Iraq and Iran and ideological divisions meant that Kurdish movements remained fragmented and regionally distinct, which would later affect Rojava's external support.

2.5. Origins of the PKK and Armed Struggle

The PKK emerged as a major challenge to the Kemalist westernized and centralist vision of Turkey in November 1978 calling for a creation of an independent Kurdish state based on a Marxist-Leninist model. A manifesto drafted in 1978 marks the organisation's transformation into a political organisation with a defined ideological programme. The party built its program around a nationalist struggle through a non-nationalist Marxist concept of class struggle and revolutionary ideas. The PKK's development saw several organisational changes within the party and intensified its Leninist vanguard model, in which a small group of highly committed politically educated revolutionaries leads the working class. Revolutionary violence was used deliberately to provoke state repression and, in turn, build national and revolutionary consciousness among Kurds. At the same time, a strong Stalinist-like personality cult formed around Abdullah Öcalan, the founder, and early members who opposed these developments were sidelined or eliminated, consolidating his uncontested leadership.

The military coup in Turkey in 1980 had a huge impact on Turkish society and played a role in pushing PKK towards Syria. The coup hit the Kurdish activism hard further suppressing their cultural and political expression and many Kurds faced arrest. Those who managed to avoid the mass repression regrouped in Syria and Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Syria provided the Kurds with a political space and training grounds under Hefez al-Assad's regime in northeastern Syria while using them as a political leverage against Turkey. Syria used the Kurds as a bargaining chip, threatening to support them unless Turkey made concessions. Turkey as a NATO member was a traditional enemy to Syria which was gathering with Soviet Union. Domestically, Kurds faced repression in Syria, however, as Michael Knapp states, 'only later would revolutionary organising get under way in Syria and in Iran as well. Until then, the PKK had to be careful not to jeopardize its safe haven [in Syria], which was crucial for its survival.' This enabled the PKK

to launch its guerrilla campaign in Turkey in 1984. During this period, thousands of Kurdish men and women from Syria also joined the PKK, crossing the border to fight in its guerrilla army (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 36 - 38).

Knapp, Flach and Ayboga argue that PKK maintained distance from the Soviet-style socialism and rejected authoritarianism and lack of direct democracy in the Soviet Bloc. It sought a more genuine sort of socialism emphasising democratic centralism and popular participation as well gender liberation – not only class or nation (2016, p. 37)

At a time when Islamism was on the rise in Turkey as another opposing current against Kemalism, the PKK was openly anti-religious portraying religion as a tool of oppression used by feudal elites. This stance softened in the 1990s, when the organisation sought broader popular support, adopted less hostile rhetoric towards Islam, and incorporated Islamic symbols into its political appeals to the Kurds (Karakoç, Sarıgi, 2019, p. 253). In 1993, women's liberation army YAJK (Union of Free Women of Kurdistan) was created and developed a concept of female participation and leadership with 40 percent representation of women in all areas of administration (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 37).

Mid-1990s marked a turning point of the conflict between the PKK and Turkey. PKK actively sought ceasefire but Turkish 'Deep State' resorted to a repeated repression. In the late 1990s, Turkey, controlling the water supply to Syria, threatened Syria with war unless it expelled the PKK, leading to a 1998 agreement in which Syria shut down PKK camps and forced Abdullah Öcalan to leave. Öcalan then faced a trial during which he proposed peace and ordered PKK forces to withdraw from North Kurdistan to South Kurdistan (mostly Iraq), which Turkey exploited to kill over 500 guerilla fighters. As he was imprisoned in solitary on Imralı Island, Öcalan immersed himself in Marxist theory, Middle Eastern history, and thinkers like Murray Bookchin, ultimately formulating the concepts of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy that fully reshaped the PKK's ideology which would later be a foundation for the Rojava revolution (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 38).

According to Khalaf, although the PYD (Democratic Union Party/Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat) in Syria acknowledges that many of its members (YPG – PYD's armed wing) received military experience thanks to the PKK, it also emphasises that the members are not longer PKK members and that the PYD has no formal affiliation with the PKK (Khalal, 2016, p.13). This reflects an effort to present the PYD as distinct from the PKK, a crucial issue in Rojava's international positioning. It is indisputable, however, that the PYD emerged from PKK

networks and Öcalan's ideology. Turkey views them as one organisation, while the U.S. treats them separately, partnered with the PYD despite condemning the PKK. Over time, governance experience and U.S. support have pushed Rojava further from its PKK origins (Provost, 2024, p.7).

2.6. Democratic Confederalism and Radical Local Democracy

The ideas that fuelled the Rojava revolution in northern Syria largely stemmed from Öcalan's adaptation of Murray Bookchin's rejection of hierarchical states, introduction of social ecology, libertarian municipalism, direct democracy, assembling, gender equality, ethnic and religious pluralism and economic self-sufficiency and cooperative economy. Öcalan's political framework recognises the deep ethnic, religious and tribal diversity in Kurdistan and Middle East that could accommodate the complexity of the region without relying on the nation-state order. He stresses self-governance on a local level through councils and assemblies as a way to empower marginalized communities. Gender equality became an essential pillar of democratic confederalism. According to Öcalan, 'patriarchy […] was the basis for the emergence of hierarchy and state repression, [as well as] state centrism, capitalism, and nationalism' (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 39). In his views, democratic civilisation has always existed as a resistance opposing the statist civilization. Kemalism and classical Marxism understood Middle East and Kurdish regions as underdeveloped – each in their own way. According to the Kemalist vision, it was less advanced and did not align with the capitalist and statist concept, while Öcalan viewed this as positive, making the region a 'fertile ground' for new social models (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 41).

Building on these ideas, Öcalan formulated radical local democracy and democratic confederalism as a practical project for the Kurdish movement moving away from the PKK's earlier goals of an independent Kurdish state. Radical democracy, as Elif Sarıcan explains, differs from direct democracy in that it is not simply about people voting on decisions themselves instead of electing representatives. Instead, it is about exploring and rethinking the roots of democracy. Radical democracy emphasizes collective self-determination rather than individual participation, emphasising community-based decision-making and organising the society in order to decentralize power evenly. Sarıcan explains the concept as structure-building where everyday life is shaped collectively and democratically (Sarıcan in Hames, 2025).

Öcalan emphasized organising society from bottom up through communities, councils and assemblies allowing local communities to exercise self-governance. The proposed framework

gathers people in social structures rather than hierarchical state institutions. Öcalan opposed the idea of real socialism and national liberation as according to him, these movements 'were […] trapped in the ideas of the state and state-making' (Akkaya, Jongerden, 2012, p. 2-6).

2.7. PKK, PYD, and the Syrian Kurds: PYD Formation and Underground Activity

Syrian Kurdish population ranges from 1.5 million to 3 million out of the overall Syrian population of 21 million and they are therefore, the second largest ethnic group in Syria. Systemic deprivation of rights and discrimination led to impenetrability to the Syrian political system. As a result, Kurdish political parties in Syria operated in clandestine regimes with no history of armed uprisings. They were largely influenced by Kurdish parties in neighbouring Turkey and Iraq. In 1957, the Syrian Kurds established the first Syrian Kurdish Party – KDP-S (Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria) directly inspired by the Iraqi Kurds, who followed a more traditional Kurdish nationalist agendas and were wary of the Turkey's PKK revolutionary anti-state ideas. During the 1980s and 1990s, the PKK, under Abdullah Öcalan, gained an initial base in northern Syria when Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, a Soviet ally, allowed the group to take refuge. This decision, influenced by water-related tensions with NATO-member Turkey, enabled the PKK to recruit thousands of Kurds for its guerrilla campaign against Turkey. KDP's influence in the region declined over time but never fully merged with the PKK's vision. After Öcalan's expulsion from Syria, many PKK members were also arrested and extradited to Turkey. Despite the expulsion and extradition, PKK mobilized a strong base in Syria which was well trained and politically organised. The base became the foundation for the 2003 establishment of the PYD and later its armed wing YPG (People's Protection Units) in 2011. The creation of the armed wing was a direct consequence of the violent crackdown of the Kurdish uprising in Qamishli in 2004 by the Ba'athist Syrian military forces. They quickly prevailed over other Kurdish parties in northern Syria (Van Wilgenburg, Fumerton, 2024, p. 3-5).

The 2011 Arab Spring led to widespread uprising and weaking of the Syrian State. This created the necessary conditions for the underground and clandestine networks to transform themselves into dominant political actors. Decades of PKK-inspired ideological work combined with the Arab Spring opportunity provided the setting stage for the emergence of Rojava.

2.8. Arab Spring, Syrian Uprising and the Emergence of Rojava

Following the Arab Spring protests in North Africa in 2010 and 2011 and a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests in the city of Daraa in March 2011, which marked the beginning of the

Syrian revolution, the Syrian government under the rule of Bashar al-Assad started losing power and territory to jihadists and rebel groups. The main threat was represented by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a rebel force made of defected Syrian soldiers and civilians; Islamist and Jihadist militias such as Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam. As Assad's army needed to protect Damascus and Aleppo against the jihadists and rebel groups due to their strategic positions, in opposition-controlled and Kurdish-majority areas, local, bottom-up governance structures began to form. In Hasakah province, rich in natural resources, the regime withdrew, leaving a vacuum filled by the PYD and YPG. Meanwhile, in neighbouring Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDP backed the creation of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria and trained thousands of fighters known as the Rojava Peshmerga. However, because the KNC joined the Turkey and West-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNC), which excluded the PYD, the YPG blocked these forces from entering Syria. As a result, the PYD-YPG emerged as the dominant Kurdish actor, with stronger organisation, military capacity, and territorial control, laying the foundation for the autonomous administration in Rojava (Galvan-Alvarez , 2020; Van Wilgenburg, Fumerton, 2024, p. 5).

In an attempt to appease public dissent, Al-Assad's government issued Decree 107 in 2011 to show openness and willingness to reform. The decree sought to decentralize and empower local councils framing the government as modernizing and responsive (Kostrz, Favier, 2019, p. 3-4). However, Kostrz and Favier argue that 'it left ultimate control over the work of local administrations to those most closely affiliated with the central power; [and] it [could] be used, therefore, to reinforce the regime's position at the local scale' (Kostrz, Favier, 2019, p. 3-4). Although intended to promote decentralization, local councils were ultimately dismantled once regime forces reestablished control over most of the country (Wimer, 2024, p.6). Rojava, due to its geographic distance, strong local network and early mobilisation of PYD-YPG was not dismantled. Despite its limitations, Decree 107 is relevant to the emergence of Rojava, as it temporarily opened space for local governance. The failure of the regime to grant real autonomy demonstrated the need for self-governance, providing a structural and political context that the PYD later exploited to establish its own administrative and military structures in northern Syria (Trichilo, 2019).

The conflict between Turkey and Assad's regime as well as the conflicting relation between the Kurds in the North-East of Syria and Turkey 'amounted to […] a form of tacit, and later more evident, collusion of the PYD with the [Syrian] regime … [in a] coalition known as the TEV-DEM' (Trichilo, 2019). TEV-DEM represents an 'umbrella organisation grouping the PYD and

other organisations focused on issues such as civil society, gender, youth and creating a parliament (Western Kurdistan People's Council)' (Narbone, Favier, Collombier, 2016, p.17-18). Thanks to the military combat force provided by the YPG/YPJ (YPJ being the all-female counterpart to YPG founded in 2013) against ISIS and a strong anti-Turkish sentiment, Assad's regime remained silent on the take-over of the northeastern regions and a creation of autonomous administration of three cantons Afrîn, Kobanî, Jazira, which are the Kurdish-dominated regions of northeast Syria (Trichilo, 2019).

The Hewlêr Agreement (September 2012), mediated by the KDP leader Masoud Barzani, brought together the rival Kurdish blocs in Syria. It established the Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC), with equal representation from the PYD-aligned People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK) and the KDP-backed Kurdish National Council (ENKS/KNC). This power-sharing framework marked an early attempt to unify Kurdish voices in the emerging Rojava administration.

The takeover of the first region by the YPG began in the area of Kobanî city already in July 2012, in which Syrian government forces let the buildings to the YPG in a non-violent and bloodless way. This marked the first concrete assertion of Kurdish autonomy in the Syrian conflict. The regime lacked the capacity to support the government soldiers in Kobanî in any way. The process of liberation quickly spread to other Kurdish-majority areas such as Dêrîk and Afrîn. These takeovers were accompanied by sporadic clashes and casualties, reflecting both local resistance and the uneven nature of the Syrian state's withdrawal. As Knapp, Flach and Ayboga emphasize, these early successes were less about capturing territory than establishing functional political and administrative structures, laying the foundation for a local governance system. The emergence of Rojava during this period illustrates how a combination of strategic opportunity, local organisation, and ideological vision converged to create a new form of autonomous administration in the midst of civil war (2016, p.53-56).

2.9. Rojava's Trajectory from 2012 to 2025

The period between 2014 and 2017 marked a military expansion for Rojava. Between 2014 and 2015, when ISIS tried to overrun a Kurdish-held Kobanî, YPG/YPJ and a U.S.-led coalition air support successfully combated ISIS. The success also marked a coordination between the U.S. and Rojava and a creation of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015, an umbrella force joining multi-ethnic militias. SDF played a role in the liberation of Manbij in 2016 and Raqqa in 2017, highlighting its military capabilities and adding them under the Rojava administration

(Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 116; DAANES' Social Contract, 2023). According to Lowe, Rojava created an international narrative emphasising its victimhood as well as its heroic successes and resilience against ISIS (2016, p. 11-12).

In 2018, Turkey's President Erdoğan carried out an operation called Olive Branch to target Afrîn. In 2019, an operation called Peace Spring to target the northeast of Syria to eliminate YPG/YPJ followed. The U.S. forces withdrew their forces from Syria in the same year which facilitated the Peace Spring operation, due to which Rojava lost 120-km-long strip alongside the border with Turkey. Although Afrîn was lost during Operation Olive Branch, Rojava's constitution-like document, the Social Contract (2023) still lists it as part of the broad Rojava framework under the combined 'Afrîn /Shehba' canton, reflecting both the symbolic claim to Afrîn and the administration of displaced communities now concentrated in village cluster of Shehba (Five years after Türkiye's Operation Peace Spring in NES , 2024).

The status of areas of control as of December 2024 can be seen in Annex 1. The areas administered by the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), pronounced in 2023 as the latest administrative model, overlap with territories held by the SDF, which functions as the military umbrella defending the territories of DAANES/Rojava. Rojava administration provides the civilian governance structures with the SDF securing the same geographic area militarily.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported in October 2023 that millions of people were cut off from water and electricity under Turkey's air attacks targeting electricity stations, oil facilities, water plants, and even medical infrastructure (Türkiye's Strikes Wreak Havoc on Northeast Syria, 2024).

The fall of Assad's regime added a new layer of uncertainty to Rojava. The interim government led by Ahmad al-Sharaa and backed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has not addressed the Rojava question as of 2025 and the negotiations remain inconclusive. At the same time, Turkey escalated operations against SDF-held areas (Gol, 2025). According to Sarıcan, although the Assad's regime was hostile towards the Kurds, the interim establishment might remain in the same pathway as under Assad's regime with further claims that a federal solution would pose a serious threat to Syria as a whole (in Hames, 2025).

In 2025, PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan called for the group's dissolution and disarmament. While this decision does not directly change Rojava's internal structures, which are not

formally tied to the PKK, it could ease Turkish military pressure and thereby expand the political space available to Syrian Kurds, as Gürbey notes (2025).

The overall history of the Kurds from imperial frontiers protectors to post-Ottoman fragmentation across four states was marked by Ba'athist repression policies, regional struggles, statelessness, marginalisation and denial of rights. The Kurdish identity was repressed and excluded from the political agenda or politicized for ulterior purposes. In Syria, a series of systemic discrimination policies culminated in violent crackdowns such as in Qamishli in 2004, which then reinforced collective identity and prepared the ground for mobilisation once state authority collapsed after 2011.

The PYD and YPG emerged from the organisational legacy of the PKK and the ideological framework of democratic confederalism. Syrian Kurds managed to transform this history of marginalisation into a project of autonomous governance. Rojava emerged not simply as an outcome of the Syrian civil war, but as an expression of a lengthy Kurdish struggle. The Kurdish historical background explains both the ideological foundations and the political urgency behind Rojava's governance model. The following chapter will examine the internal governance structures in practice, assessing how the administration sought to translate its ideals and aspirations into a governance model while facing conditions of war and internal as well as external constraints.

3. Internal Governance

3.1. Consolidation of Power during Rojava's Early Governance

The PYD played a central role in consolidating and coordinating the emerging structures. In 2011, it established the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK) to formalize the work of multiple local councils that had existed and operated before in a clandestine way. Elections were held within existing informal councils in Kurdish-majority areas, bringing together representatives from communes and some civil society actors. However, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) – formed in the same year under the patronage of Massoud Barzani, then President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and closely aligned with the Syrian opposition - was not integrated into these structures. The KNC was opposed to the MGRK, regarding it a project dominated by the PYD and sidelining other Kurdish parties in the region. The KNC positioned itself with groups supported by Turkey and Western powers such as the Syrian National Council (SNC) incompatible with PYD's ideas. As a result, the

MGRK thus served as a transitional, PYD-led coordinating body rather than a genuinely multiparty parliament. (Knapp, Jongerden, 2016, p. 88-89; Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 111-112).

In the same year, the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) was created as a broader umbrella coalition to operationalize Öcalan's principles of democratic confederalism and ensure their implementation. TEV-DEM linked communes and councils to higher decision-making bodies and played a key role in formalizing governance until the 2016 Social Contract revisions codified new federal institutions. Although TEV-DEM has since stepped back from a formal role, it remained influential as a civil and political coalition (Barkhoda, 2016, p. 82-83).

3.2. Relationships with the Syrian Government

After the withdrawal of regime forces from Rojava to focus on battles in other parts, Rojava maintained a tense yet pragmatic relationship with the Syrian government. Provost characterizes the coexistence as precarious. Unlike most of the anti-Assad opposition, PYD chose not to engage in aggression but rather negotiation. This resulted in a non-aggression pact with the Syrian government which saved the Rojava territory from major attacks. In exchange, PYD did not object to small parts of the territory with symbolic presence of the government - i.e., the government's party offices or Syrian courts (2024, p. 6-7). Lowe describes this as a 'a marriage of convenience'. Some fatal clashes did occur, for example, in Qamishli in 2016, but cooperation continued against common enemies such as Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS (Lowe, 2016, p.8).

This has also earned some critique accusing Rojava of complicity. The U.S. troops withdrawal and Turkish attack in 2019 strengthened the relationship with the Syrian government against the Turks. Still, the relationship with the Assad regime was far from being an alliance and remained very complex. Clashes persisted and Rojava convicted suspects collaborating with the Syrian regime for disclosing intelligence and vice-versa (Provost, 2024, p.6).

It is important to note that this complex relationship dates to the 1980s when Hafez al-Assad sheltered the PKK thus allowing the PYD to form under the surveillance of the Syrian intelligence. After the 2011 events, Bashar al-Assad made some concessions to the Kurds, such as granting citizenship to stateless inhabitants (Lowe, 2016, p.8).

The coexistence of Rojava's administration and the Syrian authority produced a sort of an overlapping jurisdiction, particularly in the 'security squares' where the regime courts continue

to operate. While Rojava established its own network of social justice system, the regime courts continue to function at all levels of litigation (Syria Report, 2023).

Overlapping authority has created ‘legal paralysis’ in property matters. Since 2021, Rojava courts have suspended most ownership cases pending a new land registry launch, while the Syrian administration continued to run the official land registry. Therefore, the citizens had to use the Syrian administration to any transactions related to land property without any guarantee that such arrangement would be recognised in the future.

This dual system left the residents dependent on regime, yet unable to secure rulings in Rojava courts, producing frozen transactions. The arrangement has resulted in a layered system in which the inhabitants of Rojava have to navigate between two court structures in dispute settling (Mauvais, Amin, 2023).

3.3. Multi-ethnic Inclusion and Arab–Kurdish Relations

The Social Contract establishes representation for Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmens, Circassians, and Chechens, as well as religious groups including Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis (DAANES’ Social Contract, 2023, Preamble). In theory, it stresses multiculturalism rather than Kurdish leadership. In practice, critics argue that the system is dominated by the Kurdish PYD. Many Arabs and minorities see their participation as symbolic, with real decision-making concentrated in Kurdish hands (Stein, Burchfield, 2019, p.10).

Arab–Kurdish relations continue to remain fragile. While some Arab tribes cooperated with the PYD and SDF, others saw Rojava as a project of Kurdish dominance. Efforts at inclusion through quotas and language rights often stalled. The 2015 case of Tell Abyad illustrates tensions - after capturing the town from ISIS, the PYD imposed its own administration and rejected Arab demands for proportional representation of 65% requested to reflect the local population. Many Arabs and other ethnicities in PYD-controlled areas felt marginalized and distrusted as potential ISIS sympathizers (Lowe, 2016, p.8-9).

Despite pluralist rhetoric, the multi-ethnic model is often criticized as offering representation without real influence.

3.4. Geographical Scope

In 2014, the geographical scope of Rojava formally encompassed the cantons of Afrîn, Jazira, and Kobanî as stated in the The Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Afrîn, Jazira,

and Kobanî (2014, Preamble, Art.3). The first version of Rojava's Social Contract explicitly states that Rojava is intended as a part of a 'a future decentralized system of federal governance in Syria' (The Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Afrîn, Jazira, and Kobanî, 2014, Art.12). In 2016, the cantons were reorganised under the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), reflecting a federal turn and expansion beyond Kurdish-majority areas. The term 'Rojava' (West Kurdistan) was later dropped as its geographical scope expanded to Arab-populated regions such as Tell Abyad, Manbij or Raqqa (Gunes, 2020, p. 330-331). The 2023 Social Contract reintroduced an explicit territorial framing. It also lists the cantons by name, including Afrîn/Shehba, maintaining Afrîn within the official framework despite its occupation by Turkey following the 2018 incursion (DAANES, 2023, Art. 91).

3.5. The Governance Model of Rojava

Rojava has developed a governance system that is distinctive in both its ideological inspiration and its practical organisation. Its institutional framework is rooted in democratic confederalism, the political theory developed by Abdullah Öcalan, which emphasises decentralisation, gender equality, ecological sustainability, and participatory democracy. The model departs significantly from the centralised state tradition of Syria and the wider Middle East, instead presenting a multi-layered structure in which authority is formally exercised from the bottom up. Following the latest Social Contract revision in 2023, governance is formally structured across the following levels: communes, neighbourhood/district councils, town/city council, canton councils, regional councils, and the federal institutions of Rojava (DAANES' Social Contract, 2023).

3.5.1. The Commune System

At the foundation of Rojava's governance lies the commune, which operates at the level of the neighbourhood or village. Communes provide a space to address everyday decision-making, dealing with issues such as service provision, local disputes, and community initiatives. They also elect delegates to higher councils, embedding a principle of representation into the wider political structure. In theory, communes are the primary source of legitimacy, with higher bodies deriving their authority from them (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016. p. 88-90).

3.5.2. Councils and Layered Governance

Above the communes are a series of councils operating at district, municipal, and regional levels. These bodies coordinate policy across wider territories and link local needs to regional decision-making. Each council is structured to include committees responsible for areas such

as health, education, economy, and defence. The system is designed to be pyramidal rather than hierarchical, in which authority formally flows upward from the base rather than being imposed from above. The delegates' recall mechanism gives communes the right to withdraw their representatives if they fail to act in the community's interest, aiming to prevent elite entrenchment (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga 2016, p.88).

Above the regional councils sits the federal structure institutionalised through the Social Contract. This level coordinates governance across the cantons and regions, providing a framework for shared legislation, constitutional oversight, and external representation. It reflects an attempt to balance the bottom-up principles of democratic confederalism with the need for coordination and coherence across a fragmented and conflict-affected territory (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016. p. 116-117; Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, 2016).

3.5.3. The Co-Chair System

An innovative and flagship principle of Rojava's governance is the co-chair principle which requires that every body, across communes and councils is led jointly by a man and a woman. The concept is further reinforced through parallel women's councils which intervene and monitor cases and take care of disputes that are gender-conditioned (Bodette, 2024).

3.5.4. The Social Contract

The Social Contract functions as a constitution-like document for the Autonomous Administration, defining its political vision, institutions, and rights. The 2014 version codified the project by enshrining principles of democracy, women's liberation, pluralism, and communal self-governance, while establishing legislative, executive, and judicial councils alongside mechanisms such as the co-chair system and autonomous women's councils. It also formally recognised fundamental freedoms - including religion, press, and opinion (Wimmer, 2024, p.7-9).

The 2016 revision marked a federal turn, broadening its scope to represent a more multi-ethnic population (Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, 2016, Preamble). It established the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the sole legitimate defence force, reflecting the integration of YPG/YPJ with allied Arab, Syriac, and other militias (Art. 64). The revision introduced clearer rules on representation with 60% of directly elected representatives and 40% delegates ensuring ethnic, religious and civil group participation (Art. 50). In terms of rights, it abolished capital punishment, guaranteed freedom of the press, and declared the

right to self-defence as ‘sacred’, while adding new oversight bodies such as the Social Contract Council and the High Commission for Elections (Art. 18; Art. 37; Art. 31; Ch.7; Art.7, para.3.) The administration did not claim secession, but the geographical scope was largely broadened in 2016 (Wimmer, 2024, p.7-8).

The 2023 revision deepened and extended these commitments by strengthening rights protections with explicit references to due process (DAANES’ Social Contract, 2023, Art. 56), Taken together, the Social Contract operates both as a framework for governance and an aspirational declaration of democratic confederalist ideals, even if its implementation has been uneven under conditions of war and embargo.

3.5.5. Elections

Wimmer argues that the elections model is different from the Western system, where political competition usually reflects an ideological alignment of the voters. Instead, the voting in the 2017 elections was shaped by identity and loyalties. Many voters backed the Kurdish National Council (KNC), linked to Barzani, while others supported the multi-ethnic ‘List of the Democratic Nation’ dominated by the PYD and influenced by Abdullah Öcalan’s ideas. This pattern suggests that the political choice was driven more by ethnic and communal affiliation rather than by programmatic platforms, consolidating the PYD’s leading role in the region. In addition, a 2016 law stipulated that the elections were supposed to take every two years. (Wimmer, 2024, p. 11-12). In practice, the closest elections were planned for 2024 under the new 2023 Social Contract, however, never took place because of the Turkish airstrikes (Broomfield, 2024).

3.5.6. Justice and Security

The justice system in Rojava emerged as the Syrian justice system could not be considered a reliable tool for the citizens in Rojava. It evolved into a layered model that combines direct local mechanisms with more formal institutions. At the foundation are peace committees, participatory bodies designed to resolve disputes through mediation and restorative justice. These committees, including women’s peace committees for gender-related issues handle the majority of cases and are generally well received, though critics note the lack of legal training and transparency. More serious crimes are referred to higher courts, and at the top, cantonal and constitutional courts operate under the oversight of a ‘justice parliament’ present in each canton (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. xx, 66, 166-168, 238; Drott, 2014). While the Social Contract commits Rojava to observe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and

international human rights principles such as abolishing the death penalty, Human Rights Watch identified gaps in due process and persistent PYD influence seen in arbitrary and politically motivated arrests. The due process gaps were partly addressed in the 2023 revision which introduced a provision on a ‘fair process’ (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 113; HRW - Under Kurdish rule: Abuses in PYD-run enclaves of Syria, 2014). Prevost and Krause report that the judiciary demonstrates a somewhat low quality of judicial appointments, lack of professional and legal training as well as forensic expertise (Prevost, 2025, p. 10-11; Krause, 2019).

Security is maintained by the Asayîş (Internal Security Forces), conceived not as state police but as a community defence force. They work alongside the YPG/YPJ, intervene in cases beyond the capacity of peace committees, and are accountable to people’s councils and human rights commission tasked with training the Asayîş on human rights and overseeing the regularity of their activity. Asayîş are not a life-long profession but rather a rotating system in which the members are trained and educated. The Asayîş include women’s units focused on gender-based violence and employ around a 25% women, reflecting the co-chair model of governance (Sarıcan in Hames, 2025; Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 172-173; Barbarani in Rolland, 2023, p.31-32). Despite efforts at accountability, reports by HRW point to lacking evidence when arresting, political prosecutions, and PYD dominance undermining the overall independence. While Rojava authorities have contested these allegations, the divergence between democratic ideals and practical implementation highlights the fragility of justice and security institutions in a conflict setting (HRW - Under Kurdish rule: Abuses in PYD-run enclaves of Syria, 2014; The Democratic Self-Rule Administration’s Response to the Report of Human Rights Watch Organization, 2014).

3.5.7. Military Dimension

The YPG and YPJ emerged after 2012 as defence forces against external threats leading territorial defence and combat operations, formally under representative councils but heavily influenced by PYD dominance. Their defence of Kobanî in 2014–2015 won international recognition. With U.S. support they became the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Formally, the SDF answers to the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). The military successes of the YPG/YPJ and SDF gave Rojava political legitimacy at home and abroad (Rolland, 2023, p. 8-9).

3.5.8. Syrian Democratic Council

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) was created in 2015 as the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), bringing together various representatives of different ethnic and social groups under a co-chair system. It serves as the civilian counterpart of the SDF and provides external representation in negotiations with the Syrian government and foreign actors[1], although its role is not codified in the Social Contract. Unlike TEV-DEM, which coordinated internal governance, the SDC functions as Rojava's diplomatic and political umbrella, with membership based on appointment rather than universal elections (Rolland, 2023, p. 18-19). It is described as the executive body of Rojava (Danish Immigration Service in Rolland, 2023, p.19), yet in practice it remains dominated by the PYD, a dominance reinforced by its appointment-based membership rather than universal elections (Rolland, 2023, p.18–19). The SDC is regarded more as a vehicle of representation than as a fully democratic institution.

3.5.9. Economic Governance and Social Ecology

Rojava's economic governance is rooted in the concept of social economy that prioritizes cooperatives - collectively owned and democratically run enterprises designed to meet local needs and strengthen solidarity. Emerging in 2012 amid war and embargo, councils and commissions focused on survival by regulating prices, distributing essentials, and diversifying agriculture. Although the Jazira region holds oil and wheat, decades of Ba'athist neglect left it among Syria's poorest regions. Proceeds are shared between self-government and worker cooperatives, with communes guiding production for self-sufficiency and collective welfare (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 192-199; Wimmer, 2022). Yet embargoes, scarcity, war, and competition with private and public enterprises hinder progress, leaving the cooperative project an ongoing experiment far from its aspirations (Rebrij, Ayo, 2022).

Linked to this is the commitment to social ecology, which treats resources as shared goods. During the 2012–2013 water crisis driven by climate change, overuse, and Turkish dams communities built collective systems for water-sharing, rain collection, and crop diversification to ensure resilience (Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, 2016, p. 214-221).

[1] Ilham Ahmed, co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council hosted in France as a part of delegation to discuss the US military withdrawal and Turkish incursion threats. France24, 2018. *Kurds urge France to play bigger role in Syria amid US troop withdrawal*. [online] France24. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/20181221-kurds-france-role-syria-us-trump-troop-withdrawal-USA-Ilham-Ahmed-Riad-Dara

3.6. The Internal Governance Assessed Against Good Governance Principles

The institutional framework of Rojava is rooted in democratic confederalism, emphasising decentralisation, inclusiveness, gender equality, and participatory democracy. To evaluate the governance model in Rojava, the analysis builds on conventional principles of good governance identified by Graham, Amos and Plumptre (2003, p. 3) and Van Doeveren (2011, p. 301-318), which have been widely adopted in both academic and policy debates. These selected principles collected by the scholars for the purposes of this these are: legitimacy and voice, accountability and transparency, rule of law, inclusiveness, and effectiveness and responsiveness. Together they provide a useful lens to evaluate the quality of internal governance in Rojava, its ambitions and possible limitations in the governance model.

In Rojava, the governance model is embedded in the Social Contract that lays out the aspirations and mechanism to implement the ideas. The table below lists the selected principles with corresponding aspirations from the Social Contract (as discussed in Chapter 3), as well as concrete mechanisms and their limitations.

Table of Governance Record in Rojava:

Principle	Aspirations under the Social Contract	Implemented Mechanism	Limitations
Legitimacy & Voice	• Direct and radical local democracy from the bottom up • Multi-ethnic and gender-inclusive institutions • Regular elections every two years	• Commune system • Co-chair principle • Recall of delegates • Elections	• PYD dominance across institutions and constrained pluralism • Exclusion of rival parties (KNC) • Arab and other minorities' inclusion often symbolic • Elections postponed after 2017 • Commune mergers reduced citizen closeness to decision-making[2]
Accountability & Transparency	• Press freedom • Decision-making entrusted to citizens • Oversight of political and economic processes	• Local councils and assemblies • Cooperatives to run distribution equally and in a transparent manner • Monopoly prohibition[3]	• Reported media restrictions[4] • PYD dominance undermines proper oversight and recall mechanism

[2] Wimmer, C. (2024). Council democracy and the Social Contract in North and East Syria. *Transcience: Journal of Global Studies*, 16(1), p.12. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Available at: https://www2.hu-berlin.de/transcience/Vol15_No2_S1_S24.pdf

[3] Art.42 of Social Contract 2014

[4] The media in Rojava are overseen by the Higher Council for Media through a licensing system, which is often criticized as a tool of political control. Party-affiliated media dominate with reported cases of restricted reporting. Retrieved from: Muna Dajani, *Journalism in Rojava (I): Media institutions, regulations and organisations*, *openDemocracy*, April 5, 2019. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/journalism-rojava-i-media-institutions-regulations-and-organisations/

Rule of Law	• Restorative justice • Adherence to international human rights treaties and principles	• Death penalty ban • Due process • Court of Protection of Social Contract • Human Rights Commission to train and oversee the Asayîş • Peace committees and community justice	• Non-transparent and politically motivated arbitrary arrests • Unjustified detention • Lack of professionally trained judges and forensic expertise • Superimposition with the Syrian system
Inclusiveness & Gender Equality	• Guaranteed representation of women and ethnic minorities through quotas • Equality as a main principle of governance	• Co-chair system • Minority quotas • Parallel women's structures (YPJ and women's councils)	• Minority participation often symbolic • Arab-majority areas less empowered
Effectiveness & Responsiveness	• Decisions on issues affecting daily life with the communes and economic councils (food, fuel, electricity, water, security)[5]	• Local communes/councils responsible for delivery of services based on needs • Cooperative economy for agriculture, trade, energy • Community-accountable security forces • Commune merging to improve efficiency	• War and embargo • Uneven service delivery[6] • Limited financial and professional resources

Rojava's governance system stands out for its innovative and participatory approach. The commune system, co-chair principle, recall mechanisms, and minority quotas represent a bottom-up approach that seeks to enhance participation and equality. Gender equality commitment is one of the most progressive and far-reaching principle implemented through women's representation across political, military, and social structures. The institutional system based on local councils, peace committees or cooperatives demonstrate strong commitment toward accountability and transparency. Restorative justice and community-based security forces also enhance participation and accountability. Economic councils reflect a model designed to be adaptive and responsive to crises. Altogether, these features represent a serious attempt to commit to principles of good governance to secure a safe development in the region.

At the same time, implementation reveals some structural constraints and contradictions, such as the PYD dominance across institutions. Their prevalence across institutions undermines pluralism and renders minority participation often symbolic, particularly in Arab-majority areas. Elections have been postponed since 2017, and commune mergers led to reducing citizen

[5] Wimmer, C. (2024). Council democracy and the Social Contract in North and East Syria. *Transcience: Journal of Global Studies*, 16(1), p.10. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Available at: https://www2.hu-berlin.de/transcience/Vol15_No2_S1_S24.pdf

[6] In their report, Siddiqui et al. (2024) present Qamishli as a case study to show how uneven service delivery of electricity, water, and fuel undermines wellbeing and overall inequalities across northeast Syria.

proximity to direct participation and decision-making. Media restrictions and politically motivated arrests and arbitrary detentions weaken transparency and the rule of law. Externally, the war conditions, embargoes and international non-recognition further hinder service delivery, leading to uneven provision of water, electricity or healthcare. These pressures expose a gap between aspiration and practice. Rojava's governance system is ambitious in design and progressive in its commitments, yet fragile in implementation and constrained by both internal PYD dominance and external pressures.

4. Legitimacy in Conflict Settings

While these benchmarks remain an important lens for assessing institutional performance, in fragile and conflict-affected contexts they represent one layer of legitimacy. Empirical evidence suggests that loyalty and authority also rest on other sources such as identity, resistance, and security provision. These dimensions complement the good governance framework, and together they provide a fuller picture of how legitimacy operates in settings such as Rojava.

Classical sociological theories, such as Max Weber's, suggest that legitimacy is a concept that transforms mere power into a recognised and stable authority. It is not only the ability of an actor to impose control, but more importantly, the belief among the governed that rulers have the right to rule. Weber further explains that when authority is legitimate, people obey not out of fear but out of eagerness. As a result, a functioning social system is created without the use of force (Sociology Institute, 2022). However, Weber presumes that power is concentrated in state's hands and exercised indivisibly by one authority. In fragile contexts power is frequently fragmented. Legitimacy can be attached to leaders, movements or armed groups instead. The support is often, specific, short-term and changeable. In fragmented, hybrid orders, legitimacy is highly situational - people may comply with one actor for security, turn to another for identity or services, and at the same time resent or resist them, showing that legitimacy in conflict settings rarely equates to broad consent (Easton 1965, 1975, in Von Billerbeck, Gipper, 2017, p. 4-5).

In conflict zones, legitimacy does not primarily stem from state institutions but emerges from shared identity, local communities, traditional leaders, networks, kin groups, tribes or villages. Where state fails to provide basic services like security, health or education, it is common that a community structure steps in. Legitimacy, therefore, stems from the community leaders rather than distant and distrusted government authorities. Fragile states should be understood as hybrid political orders, where legitimacy emerges through the interaction of formal state

systems, traditional community norms, and global influences, rather than being fully concentrated with the state (Boege at al, 2008). Although not fully criticizing the liberal peacebuilding frameworks, which assume that democracy and institutional quality guarantee legitimacy, Paris argues that such views have been repeatedly criticized for overlooking the dynamics and realities of conflict zones (in Brahm).

Empirical examples from conflict settings show that identity, resistance and security are needed to provide an actor with a certain degree of legitimacy. In conflict settings, it does not inherently imply that all individuals consent to the governance voluntarily. Hezbollah in Lebanon combines the narrative of resistance positioning itself as a defender against Israel, a provider of social welfare and has a solid political base (Khatib, 2019). The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq relies on Kurdish nationalism, provision of security and stability, more democratic governance compared to its host state as well a 30% female quota representation in the Kurdistan National Assembly (Alkış, Sever, 2024).

Rojava's legitimacy rests largely on Kurdish identity, historical struggle but also on an aspirational multi-ethnic idea of self-rule and security provision in a power vacuum. It presents itself as inclusive through co-chair structures, minority quotas, and multilingual policies. This vision echoes theories of radical democracy where legitimacy arises from incorporating marginalized voices.

In reality, however, the practice is limited by the PYD dominating political and security structures. For non-Kurdish groups legitimacy is less about genuine power-sharing and more about the protection and limited recognition the system provides. According to Khalah. many Arabs or Syriacs acknowledged the PYD's ability to deliver basic services with Syriacs even collaborating militarily with the PYD against ISIS. Yet Arab activists in places like Manbij often distrusted the PYD, seeing it as authoritarian and appointing local councils loyal to the party. Khalaf stresses that sustainable legitimacy for Rojava 'implies a non-authoritarian approach that enjoys social and political trust … based on real participation and representation from these societal components and non-coerced acceptance of the Rojava institutions' (2016, p. 24). He argues that '[a] failure to move past security and stability will greatly diminish the long-term prospects for the survival of the Rojava project' (Khalaf, 2016, p. 2).

The picture that emerges from conflict settings such as Rojava is that internal legitimacy can be built through identity, resistance, and service provision even in the absence of strong state institutions. Yet, no matter how well governance functions on the ground, external recognition

is governed by different logics. Theories of de facto states suggest that recognition is not a reward for effective governance but a blend of geopolitics, sovereignty norms, and great-power interests. In Rojava's case shows that while its institutions have managed to secure a certain degree of local compliance and survival, its international position remains blocked by external actors and conventional state-centric frameworks.

5. External Dimension: Recognition and Contemporary Constraints

5.1. Recognition and Sovereignty

The Montevideo Convention (1933) sets out four criteria of statehood – permanent population, defined territory, government and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. However, the recognition of entities fulfilling these requests remains precarious due to reasons such as unilateral succession or external dependence. The constitutive theory of recognition states that statehood depends on recognition, while declaratory theory holds that recognition is an acknowledgment of the mere existence of a state. Although the Montevideo Convention portrays recognition as declaratory, in practice, recognition is often based on constitutive theory. Unrecognised entities are denied access to rights emerging from recognition which are otherwise accessible to recognised states, leaving the de facto states in insecure positions despite fulfilling the criteria listed by the Montevideo Convention. The non-recognition may have serious consequences. Despite the contested status, unrecognised states are bound by international law and are not exempt from universal norms. However, while obligations under international law apply, the unrecognised entities are prevented from asserting their rights by being denied access to courts, participating in international institutions leaving them in a limbo between duties and rights with no legal personality. If a quasi-state operates based on its own laws and institutions, other states and courts may not acknowledge those laws because the entity is not a recognised state (Bachmann & Prazauskas, 2019, p. 396–413).

According to Pegg, self-declared regions occupy a grey zone in the international system regarded by international relations and political science scholars as an anomaly diverging from the dominant binary framework of either being a recognised state or a non-state actor. De facto states exercise a form of control over a designated territory and population, yet lack de jure recognition, making them anomalies in a state-centric international order (2017, p. 3-4). Caspersen and Kolstø similarly argue that the absence of recognition does not inherently negate statehood but rather creates a unique model. In their synthesis of de facto state literature, they identify five common elements: establishment through victory in civil war; insecurity created

by continued state of non-recognition; forced displacement of population; dependence in some form from an external partner or a state intervening in internal affairs and exposure to international normative pressure (Caspersen, 2008; Kolstø, 2006, as cited in Pegg, 2017, p. 4). Caspersen and Kolstø's model can be only partially applied to Rojava. Its emergence was tied to a military success during the Syrian conflict and its significant role in combating ISIS. Like other de facto states, it faces insecurity tied to the lack of recognition and vulnerability caused by regional realities. However, unlike de facto states such as Nagorno Karabakh marked by the displacement of Azerbaijanis, or Abkhazia, where Georgian populations were expelled, Rojava presents itself as a multi-ethnic and inclusive project. Its reliance on external partners also reflects the patron-state dynamic, but in a far more evolving and inconsistent manner given shifting geopolitical alliances.

Ahram highlights that sovereignty in the Middle East can be best understood as a tension between de jure states, which hold juridical recognition despite often lacking territorial control, and de facto states, which exercise actual authority over a territory but remain excluded from recognition. This is the case typically in failed states where a war context speeds the de facto state emergence. De facto states hold out the prospect of reshaping the political map to reflect better the local realities, but in practice they depend on patron states for survival (Ahram, 2017, p. 346-350). At the same time, lack of conventional recognition provides de facto states with a stimulus to build robust internal system to survive and to be able to defend themselves, thus earning possible acceptance in the international community (Casperson, 2012 in Pegg,2017 p. 6).

Ahram describes how of de facto states can become 'nested' in de jure states through tacit agreements, producing multiple governance systems rather than an absolute estrangement of the entities. This dynamic is evident in the PYD's tacit accommodation with the Assad regime after 2012, which allowed it to consolidate control over territories while formally remaining within the Syrian state. The weight of international norms, strongly favouring the status quo, ensures that Rojava's effective governance cannot easily translate into de jure statehood. Some de facto states operate as 'governments-in-waiting' opposing the regime but preserving territorial integrity (i.e. the SNC) thus remaining legible to international actors by articulating their ambitions through principles of sovereignty and secession (Ahram, 2017, p. 353).

Rojava, in contrast, challenges this pattern: it exercises territorial authority and fulfils many of the formal criteria of statehood while explicitly rejecting the nation-state model and classical

sovereignty. Öcalan's rejection of statehood makes it harder for Rojava to position itself as a potentially recognisable entity within the existing world state system (Ahram, 2017, p. 351–362). This ideological stance makes Rojava an uneasy fit for existing recognition frameworks and the non-categorization of Rojava reveals the limits of recognition theory focused on state-centrism. Its unique situation highlights how political entities that reject statehood altogether remain marginalized domestically and externally from the international legitimacy.

Krasner's analysis explains a disjuncture between the formal norm of sovereignty and the actual practices in international relations. While sovereignty is regarded as a foundational principle, 'concert powers' have frequently treated recognition selectively, imposing conditions on weaker states, or intervening in the domestic affairs when suitable (Holsti, 2000, p. 157–162, reviewing Krasner, 1999).

5.2. Legal and Institutional Barriers

Legal and institutional constraints prevent de facto states from accessing the instruments of international law and cooperation. Treaty-making power is inherent for states under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT, Art. 6). According to Article 6 of VCLT, every state possesses the capacity, and it cannot be restricted. The provision concerns only recognised states and does not apply to de facto states or unrecognised entities. Unlike Kosovo or Palestine, thanks to being internationally mandated or widely recognised, they have been able to access treaties (Dörr & Schmalenbach, 2018, p. 115-121). Rojava does not enjoy universal recognition in this sense.

The principle of the international prohibition of the use of force is complex in Rojava's case. Article (2)4 of the UN Chater bans states from military actions aimed at suppressing an act of self-determination. Yet precedents seen in international practice have shown that the protection remains vague for self-determination movements that do not emerge from colonial context. Unlike colonial examples that enjoy wide external recognition, movements like Rojava have not been shielded against a repression by another or a parent state, with the exception of armed support under the campaign against ISIS (Radpey, 2020). Therefore, in international law, Rojava is in a precarious situation. It benefits from the norm prohibiting the use of force, but in practice, it lacks necessary guarantees to enforce consequences on a possible attacker. Rojava may rely on ad hoc agreements rather than benefit from collective security guarantees.

The question of membership in international organisations or financial institutions highlights the paradox of Rojava's position. Such membership is reserved for sovereign states or rare

cases with external recognition. Rojava, however, falls outside these categories as it explicitly disavows the state design altogether. Unlike the SNC, it has no access to UN aid, leaving its institutions bypassed in international aid distribution.

5.2.1. Access to Humanitarian Aid Channels

Humanitarian aid and international assistance were often routed through the central Syrian and Turkish governments rather than reaching Rojava directly. Despite the UN Security Council resolutions aiming at facilitating cross-border access, the Syrian government continued to use humanitarian aid as a tool of control diverting the aid away from territories outside its control. In Rojava, aid reached people mainly through non-governmental organisations including Médecins Sans Frontières liaising directly with armed groups and using discreet convoys or airlifts to cut-off communities. The UN and WHO were frequently criticized for operating mainly through state-approved partners such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent or Syria Trust for Development, thus restricting its ability to provide humanitarian assistance (Seven, 2025, p. 1-6). The diversion and selectivity in delivery weakened Rojava's ability to access resources, administer refugee camps like al-Hol, and respond effectively to crises, including the 2023 earthquake that hit parts of Turkey and Syria, all of which underscore the missing legitimacy as a necessity for effective governance (Ahmad, MacTavish, Christie, 2024, p. 106; Apelblat, 2021).

5.2.2. Exclusion of Rojava in Geneva Peace Talks

The Geneva peace talks were established under the UN auspices in 2012 to provide a political platform reuniting various stakeholders including Assad regime representatives, Syrian opposition and non-governmental organisations for ending the Syrian conflict. The settlement was anchored in the Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) calling for a new constitution of Syria and subsequent UN-supervised elections. Repeated peace talks were eventually blocked by Russia in 2022. However, Rojava, represented within the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) was not involved in the talks (Kürkçü, 2025). This exclusion was primarily due to Turkish objections – Turkey consistently vetoed even the Kurdish participation not related to the PYD. Other stakeholders, such as the U.S. or Russia, did not challenge Turkey's approach prioritizing wider consensus. Although the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) included some Kurdish representatives from the Kurdish National Council (KNC), these were aligned with Turkey and did not represent the dominant Kurdish political forces in Rojava. Some Kurdish figures were included in civil society representatives, but Turkey vetoed most prominent Kurdish figures

from being represented, particularly those linked to Rojava (Turkmani, Theros, 2019, p. 4-5; Hauch, 2021, p. 90).

The Geneva talks, eventually suspended in 2022 under geopolitical pressures, exposed how state-centric logics and external vetoes undermine inclusivity (Turkmani, Theros, 2019; Kürkçü, 2025). As Belhadj-Klaz warns, diplomacy shaped by bilateral exchanges risks marginalising central actors of Syrian society on the ground, leaving the process under-represented and lacking legitimacy (in Langrand, 2025).

Rojava's underrepresentation in the peace talks reflected the absence of a framework to ensure that a substantial portion of Syria's population had a place at the table as an important stakeholder in the country's political transition discussions.

5.3. International Visibility through Anti-ISIS Struggle

Rojava earned its international visibility from its fights against ISIS rather than its internal governance model. In 2012, after Assad's withdrawal from the Kurdish-majority areas, the YPG and YPJ swiftly stepped in to fill the security vacuum (Knapp, Flach & Ayboga, 2016, 134). Their importance grew during the siege of Kobanî in 2014 and 2015, when the Rojava forces resisted ISIS in cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition airstrikes, the battle gained global attention. With the establishment of the SDF in 2015, which broadened participation beyond the Kurds, more international actors became involved to advance the cooperation. This cooperation culminated in territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019 (Crisis Group, 2017; Congressional Research Service, 2022).

Rojava's military forces carried a political relevance as well. The uniqueness of YPJ, involved in the fight, portrayed Rojava as an entity based on democratic and equal principles in contrast to ISIS (Demir, 2023, p. 150-152). Military success and international relevance, however, brought limited success to Rojava. The SDF dependence on the U.S. revealed the fragility of instable alliances, highlighted by the U.S withdrawal in 2019 with successive Turkish incursions. Victory against ISIS did not translate into long-lasting security guarantees nor inclusion in peace talks.

5.4. Regional Pressures

5.4.1. Turkey's Hostility

Turkey's hostility remains the main regional obstacle to Rojava's own political trajectory. It views PYD and YPG as an extension of PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organisation

in Turkey. Additionally, Turkey's broader doctrine treats any Kurdish entity as a threat to national integrity. This outlook is embedded in Turkish state policy and an expansive definition of terrorism to any actors linked to the PKK. In case of Iraq, Turkey accepted the Kurdistan region in Iraq as a pragmatic partner due to its rivalry with the PKK (Lowe, 2016, p. 10). This framing has allowed Turkey to justify multiple military incursions in Rojava (Radpey, 2020).

At the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Turkey positioned itself strongly against Assad, cancelled bilateral deals and supported opposition forces of Free Syrian Army (FSA), later Syria National Army (SNA). According to Dag, Turkey reorganised the opposition groups to form the SNA integrating Islamist militias with links to jihadists. These groups shifted their focus from fighting the central Syrian government to occupying territories and threatening the Kurds. Turkey's policy in Syria evolved from seeking Assad's overthrow to prioritising the suppression of Kurdish autonomy, even aligning with Russia and tolerating Assad's regime in order to secure its anti-Kurdish agenda and push out the Western actors (2023, p. 57–59, 61–63).

Turkey's opposition to Rojava is not limited to military operations but extends to diplomacy, with attempts to exercise a veto over Rojava's international representation. Dag underlines that Turkey has blocked the Kurds participation in the Geneva Peace Talks and has leveraged its NATO membership to limit the Western support for Rojava through Sweden's and Finland's promise to abandon assistance for Kurdish groups (2023, p. 66–67).

Since 2018, Turkish air strikes on Rojava and military operations such as Operation Olive Branch and Peace Spring have resulted in occupation of large parts of northern Syria, justified as self-defence based on Article 51 of the UN Charter. Turkey explicitly justified the incursion in a letter sent to the UN Security Council (Turkey, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, 2019). Radpey argues that these interventions lacked a valid legal basis and instead led to violations of the prohibition on the use of force and breaches of the right to self-determination (2020). Reports from the UN and Amnesty International documenting mass displacements and extrajudicial executions raise concerns of the annexation through Turkish administrative integration in the occupied zones (Radpey, 2020).

Dag emphasises that such practices as well as the EU and U.S. missing condemnation extended the anti-Kurdish doctrine into Syria and were used in an attempt to dismantle Rojava's administration rather than legitimate self-defence and maintenance of security in the region (Dag, 2023, p. 61–63, 67-69).

5.4.2. Iraq and KRG

For the Iraqi government, which was aligned with the Assad regime, Rojava is not an immediate security threat but rather raises concerns of a precedent for possible stronger separatist claim within Iraq. For the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), however, Rojava is a direct competitor. PYD's close ties to the PKK unsettle the Kurdish KDP party, which prioritises state-like institutions and international relations (Hasan and Khaddour, 2021, p.3-4).

Charountaki notes that the PYD views the KRG less as a partner than as an actor advancing regional and international agendas, and even as a vehicle for the policies of the KNC and the Syrian Coalition within Rojava in sharp contrast with Rojava's self-rule initiative. The relationship is marked by several recurrent clashes including mutual office closures or the KDP's decision to dig a kilometres-long trench alongside the Syrian-Iraqi border to block and control the cross-border movement (supplies, goods, people). KDP presented it as means to contain ISIS, while Rojava interpreted the move as embargo. PYD and KDP Peshmerga also oppose each other in their political affiliation. While PYD is linked to the PKK, KDP historically promoted traditional leadership aimed at eventual independence (2015, p. 346).

At the same time, during the 2014 siege of Kobanî, the U.S. relied on the KRG as a disguise to its emerging partnership with the YPG/YPJ. As Crisis Group observes, the U.S. partnered with the YPG/YPJ in the anti-ISIS fight but was aware of Turkey's hostility towards the PKK. Therefore, the decision to channel arms indirectly, publicly claiming they were delivered via the Iraqi Kurds and arranging a limited deployment of KDP Peshmerga fighters to Kobanî, eventually helped the U.S to deliver arms to the YPG/YPJ. From Rojava's perspective, the same KRG that obstructed Rojava with embargo measures was at the same time instrumentalized by the U.S. to disguise direct U.S. military assistance (Crisis Group, 2017).

5.5. Global Powers and Constraints for Rojava's Governance and Recognition

5.5.1. The United States

The U.S. has played an important yet ambivalent role in Rojava's governance. The support was instrumental in the Kurdish-led fight against ISIS and the coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) helped significantly. At the same time, it remained tactical and constrained by geopolitical calculations and its alliance with Turkey. The U.S. treated Rojava as a temporary partner framing the support as counterterrorism partnership, not as political backing for Kurdish autonomy. The lack of formal engagement eventually led to the U.S. military withdrawal from northeast Syria in 2019 under President Trump. This gave way to the

Turkish incursions in the Kurdish-dominated areas. As a result, many Kurds saw this step as a betrayal, consistent with a pattern of global powers using the Kurds as proxies (Ahmad, MacTavish, Christie, 2024, p. 103-104).

The contradictions of U.S. policy have had direct implications for Rojava's governance and recognition. While the U.S. forces have engaged the SDF in limited security cooperation, broader political engagement remained constrained by the U.S.' commitments to NATO and Turkey's opposition to the Kurdish autonomy. The U.S. thus remains an essential yet paradoxical actor being indispensable in military terms but unwilling to extend further recognition. Eventually, this has left local achievements in governance persistently undermined by global power alliances and commitments.

5.5.2. The European Union

The European Union has consistently framed its foreign policy related to Syria in terms of humanitarian aid and stabilization efforts. The EU has been the largest humanitarian donor to Syrians since 2011, contributing billions through the Brussels-organised conferences and the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF) (Kurda, 2022, p.124–126). The policies have included sanctions against the Assad regime and support for civil societies. The EU backed the limited UN efforts, yet its approach remained confined largely to gathering donors and reaffirming existing commitments. The conferences concerning Syria's future organised by the EU offered a stage for Syrian civil organisations, giving them prominence, but did little to shift the conflict dynamics or to revive a halted peace process under the UN (Van Veen et al, 2021, p. 23-27).

Under the Assad regime, the EU as well as most of its member states recognised politically the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as a 'legitimate representative of the Syrian people' (Hausch, 2021, p.3). EU's Syria strategy was not designed to strengthen the SNC's position inside Syria, but to enhance its international legitimacy by supporting its participation in the Geneva peace talks and assisting with preparations. Therefore, this recognition functioned primarily on the diplomatic stage (Hauch, 2021, p.3-4).

By contrast, when it comes to humanitarian aid delivery, the EU had to operate through the internationally recognised Assad government. This follows from the EU adherence to the UN mandates and operational frameworks. The UN Security Council resolutions made the Assad administration the formal entry point for aid whenever cross-border authorisations were closed, leaving the regime in control of what aid reached the non-regime areas. The practical effect after the January 2020 closure of the Al Yaroubiya crossing in Iraq (because of the Russian and

Chinese UNSC vetoes) was to cut off the UN deliveries from Iraq into Rojava, thus re-routing the EU-funded aid through the Assad administration and subjecting it to regime approval (Hall, 2022, p. 7-9).

The EU's reluctance towards direct support of Kurds stems from two main factors: its consistent adherence to Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the need to avoid direct confrontation with Turkey, which strongly opposes the recognition of the Kurdish-led Rojava (Kurda, 2022, p. 137-138). As a result, Rojava's authorities have been left without institutional access to EU funding streams and dependent instead on NGO aid and fragile cross-border arrangements. NGOs can sometimes coordinate with the Rojava Humanitarian Affairs Office (HAO) and local councils, but without the UN cross-border authorisation they face funding limits, practical obstacles, as well as risking their own position, so they cannot replace the UN aid delivery (Hall, 2022, p. 8-9).

According to Apelblat, even when the European Commission announced in 2021 that 20% of its €130 million humanitarian package for Syria would go to the north-east, the lack of recognition meant that aid to Rojava could only be delivered through Damascus-controlled channels. In practice, this allowed the Syrian regime to decide what reached the region's five million inhabitants, leaving Rojava to complain that even COVID-19 vaccines and medical supplies marked for Rojava were withheld (Apelblat, 2021; HRW, 2020, Syria: Aid Restrictions Hinder Covid-19 Response).

This contrasts with the role of individual member states, particularly France, which has pursued a more direct relationship with Rojava, mainly by maintaining military deployments in Rojava and provision of trainings (Kurda, 2022, p.130–132). Overall, the EU has positioned itself as a humanitarian leader in Syria, yet it has avoided extending political recognition or institutional support to Rojava. By prioritising sovereignty norms and stability in its relations with Turkey, by being bound to UN structures that channel assistance through Damascus and while engaging with the SNC only at the diplomatic level, the EU has limited its role to aid provision and donor support, leaving Kurdish authorities on the margins. This cautious approach underscores the EU's enduring paradox in the conflict, being a central financial actor with limited political influence (Kurda, 2022, p.136–139).

5.5.3. Russia

Although Rojava does not seek outright recognition, it presents its project in terms of decentralisation within a Syrian framework. Russia, however, regards even this limited attempt

at autonomy as a challenge to state sovereignty and opposed the Rojava-U.S. pragmatic relations. It further sought direct contacts with Kurdish representatives, hosting delegations in Russia, deploying military police in the northeast of Syria and pushing for the integration of Kurdish forces into Syrian army (Warsaw Institute, 2020). At the same time, it avoided endorsing Kurdish autonomy, insisting that any settlement initiative should remain strictly within the framework of Syrian sovereignty. Russia's engagement with the PYD/YPG was highly pragmatic and transactional, providing the Kurds with occasional diplomatic and security guarantees, while ultimately steering the region back toward a state-centric position. While Kızılkaya, Hamdi and Salma (2017, p. 16–23) highlight Russia's balancing act between Turkey and the Assad regime, these moves can also be interpreted as Russia's positioning as a mediator, offering the Kurds tactical help but ultimately subordinating their aspirations to its broader state-centric strategy.

In 2018, Russia offered the SDF protection if it handed the territory of Afrîn to the Assad regime, which the SDF rejected. However, during the Operation Olive Branch in 2018, the Turkish invaded Afrîn. The SDF then agreed to Russia's protection of the surrounding territories. When the U.S. forces decided to withdraw, the SDF resorted in the same solution – a deal with Russia and the Syrian government against further Turkish incursions (Rolland, 2023, p. 9-10). When Turkish incursions such as Operation Peace Spring (2019) threatened Rojava, Russia offered tactical mediation but also tolerated Ankara's limited occupations as part of wider bargains (Dag, 2023, p. 62).

According to Robinson, Russia uses its humanitarian aid channels as a tool of soft power. It has established a network of several entities associated with the state, creating thus a 'shadow system' to parallel and undermine the one of the UN (2021).

Russia's role in Syria was therefore pragmatic, aimed at reinstalling Assad's power and presence close to oil infrastructures. The U.S, on the other hand, sought to block the Russian dominance in the controlling of the resources. The war in Ukraine further weakened Russia and limited its ability to remain present in Syria. Turkey deepened its cooperation with Russia by receiving discounted gas and trading with its veto powers in NATO in favour of Russia. For Rojava, these dynamics meant that Russia tolerated Turkish incursions and used the Kurdish forces for bargaining and transactions (Dag, 2023, p. 63-67; Levin, 2023).

The implications of Russia's help to Rojava were tactical – Russia offered guarantees in critical moments but adhered to the sovereignty norms. It subordinated the Kurds militarily by connecting their protection with concessions towards the Assad regime.

6. Conclusion

The case of Rojava offers an insight into a promising autonomous project while highlighting the limits posed by its own governance without formal recognition. The events of 2011 and the Syrian civil war as well as the ideological legacy of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan laid the groundwork for Rojava's emergence. Amidst war, Rojava emerged with aspirations of democratic confederalism, decentralization, participatory democracy, gender equality and minority inclusion. The institutions and mechanisms Rojava managed to establish and implement were remarkable under the conditions it had to face: ongoing civil war, regional hostility and contested legitimacy and recognition at an international level.

Measured against conventional good governance principles, Rojava demonstrates an innovative approach to self-governance and exposes the fragility and limits of the governance model in practice. The commune system, co-chair model and women's councils represent structural and forward-thinking mechanisms to implement its ideological aspirations in the conflict-torn zone of northeast Syria. Despite tangible success, further evidence shows that the implementation has been uneven. The governance model is dominated by the PYD, which restricts the promise of pluralism. Arabs and other minorities have reported symbolic inclusion without substantive representation. Service delivery in the region has been hindered by conditions of war and embargo. In spite of institutional shortcomings, the governance model proved to have earned sufficient legitimacy for local populations to accept and sustain Rojava's administration in the absence of a reliable and functioning Syrian state authority. The thesis further shows that legitimacy in conflict zones is multi-layered and does not depend solely on institutional successes. As well as service provision, it is tied to identity, struggle and security.

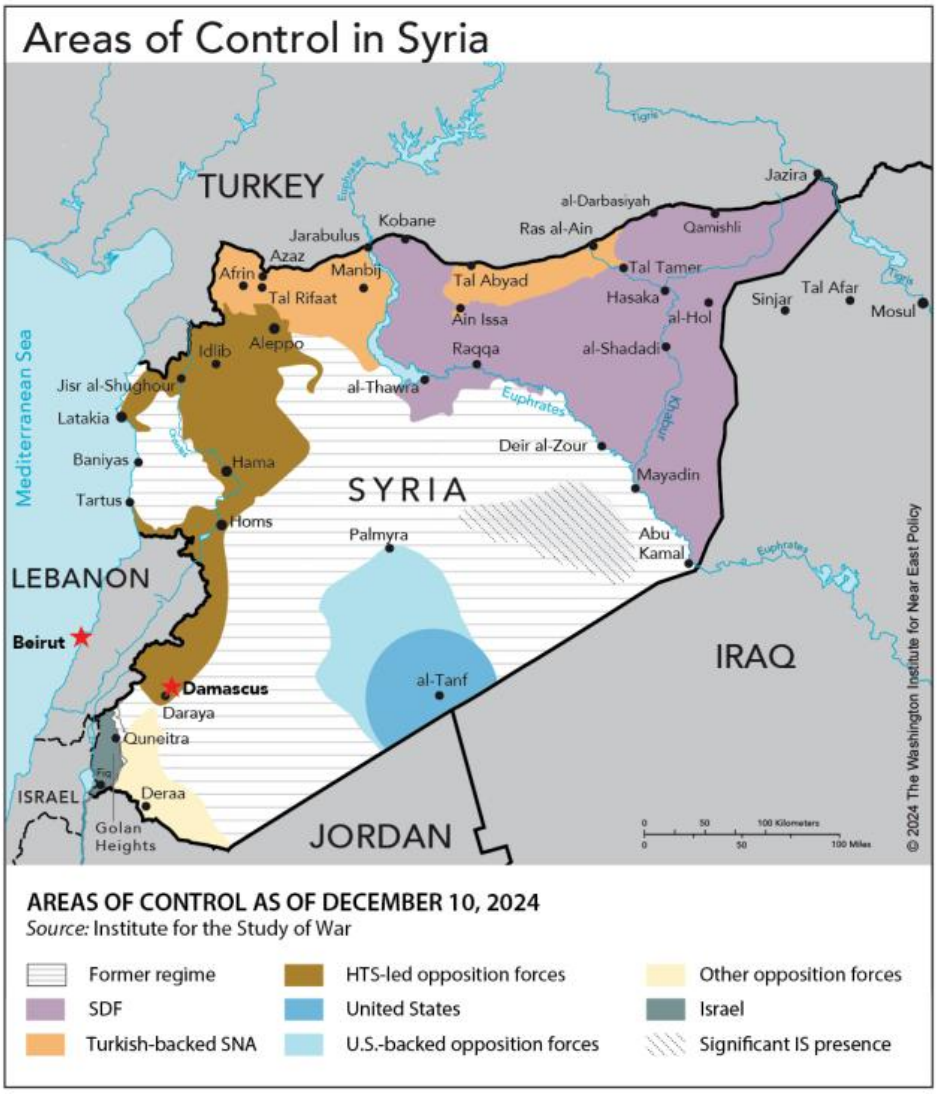
At the same time, internal legitimacy is not a decisive factor in determining survival and acceptance within the international system. Recognition depends on alignment with geopolitical interests and widely accepted sovereignty norms. Although Rojava has demonstrated a solid record in the fight against ISIS, it has been systematically excluded from formal recognition. Regional hostility, Turkey's use of its veto, Syrian territorial sovereignty claims and the cautious pragmatism of the United States, European Union and Russia have limited the engagement with Rojava to tactical cooperation without extending its political

legitimacy. Moreover, Rojava's explicit anti-statist orientation – manifested through its commitments to a decentralized and non-state form of governance – renders it misaligned with the international order premised on state sovereignty. The theoretical framework of de facto states helps explain the gap, suggesting that recognition is shaped more by international politics rather than by performance itself.

Rojava's experience illustrates both the potential of non-state governance and the constraints imposed by the state-centric international system. It shows that legitimacy is a multi-layered matter rooted in identity, security and service provision. Overall, it has little bearing on external recognition unless it aligns with geopolitical interests. Within international relations, Rojava's case highlights the enduring strength and centrality of sovereignty norms in contexts where alternative political models are being tested.

The autonomous administration represents a rare experiment in governance that offers practical lessons in radical democracy. At the same time, its future remains caught between the realities of regional dynamics, international engagement and non-recognition. The thesis concludes that while Rojava has succeeded in building a functioning administration in dire conditions, its trajectory continues to be shaped less by the quality of its governance than by the regional and global structures within which it is embedded.

Annex 1. Power-sharing map.



Source: Levy, I. (2024) *Supporting the SDF in post-Assad Syria*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 13 December. Available at: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/supporting-sdf-post-assad-syria

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