

# Challenges to Stability Assistance in Rojava: A United States Policy Option

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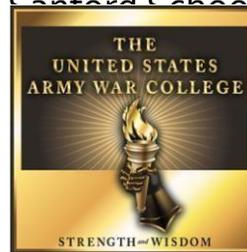
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## Abstract

The U.S.-led coalition has successfully liberated areas in northern Syria from ISIS through a coalition of Kurdish and Arab surrogates called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The military success of the SDF has given root to a federated self-autonomous region called Rojava despite fierce opposition from Turkey, the Syrian Opposition, and the Assad Regime. However, military success alone does not address the devastation and governance vacuum created during sustained armed conflict and brutal ISIS occupation. The rebuilding of Syria in the post-conflict era provides unprecedented opportunity to shape the country for those actors for those actors willing to take the risk. The complex array of internal and external stakeholders alone is challenging, but an in-depth understanding of each will provide clarity on the challenges and risk to help shape the rebuilding of Syria.

## Challenges to Stability Assistance in Rojava: A United States Policy Option

### Table of Acronyms<sup>1</sup>

<b>FSA</b>	<b>Free Syrian Army:</b> Armed opposition groups founded primarily by defectors of the Syrian Arab Army in 2011 to overthrow Assad.
<b>KDP</b>	<b>Kurdistan Democratic Party:</b> Iraqi Kurdish political party founded under Mustafa Barzani in 1946. Currently the majority power in the KRG under the leadership of Masoud Barzani.
<b>KNC</b>	<b>Kurdish National Council:</b> An umbrella opposition group of many Syrian based Kurdish parties sponsored by the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government.
<b>KRG</b>	<b>Kurdistan Regional Government:</b> Government of the Autonomous Region of Iraqi Kurdistan established in 1992.
<b>PKK</b>	<b>Kurdistan Workers' Party:</b> A Marxist-Leninist Kurdish militant party founded by Abdullah Ocalan in 1978 seeking Kurdish self-determination in Turkey. It is based in the Qandil Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan.
<b>PUK</b>	<b>Patriotic Union of Kurdistan:</b> Iraqi Kurdish political party founded in 1975 as opposition to the KDP.
<b>PYD</b>	<b>Kurdish Democratic Union Party:</b> Founded in 2003, the PYD is the dominant force of Kurdish majority areas in Syria. It established the Rojava governance project administered through subsidiary organizations.
<b>SDF</b>	<b>Syrian Democratic Forces:</b> Alliance of Arab and YPG/YPJ armed groups created in 2015 and dominated by the YPG/YPJ. It is supported by the U.S. counter-ISIS coalition.
<b>SNC</b>	<b>National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces:</b> A political coalition of Syrian opposition groups founded in 2012. Its goal is to overthrow the Assad Regime.
<b>TEV-DEM</b>	<b>Movement for a Democratic Society:</b> The PYD-dominated coalition leading the Rojava government.
<b>YPJ</b>	<b>Women's Defense Units:</b> The female armed service of the PYD. Part of the SDF.
<b>YPG</b>	<b>People's Defense Units:</b> The male armed service of the PYD. Makes up most of the SDF.

The Syrian civil war is entering its sixth year. The liberated areas from ISIS control in the northern provinces of Aleppo, Raqqah, and Hasaka are in dire need for stabilization. Under these circumstances, the coalition of Kurdish and Arab forces united under the banner of Rojava are looking for assistance from external actors in an effort to separate themselves from the Assad Regime and establish legitimacy. This provides opportunities to further U.S. foreign policy in the region. U.S.-led stabilization will address the conditions that allowed the growth of ISIS and demonstrate the legitimacy of the U.S.-led coalition to the Syrian people. It will hopefully also provide an environment where local Syrian can voice their concerns and determine their future – something Assad is unwilling to do.

While the U.S. coalition's military campaign of liberating ISIS-controlled areas through surrogates is tactically successful, it is not sufficient either to ensure stabilization in the region or to achieve broader U.S. policy objectives. Military success alone does not address the devastation and governance vacuum created during sustained armed conflict and brutal ISIS occupation. The other instruments of national power are required to consolidate any strategic gains we hope to attain in Syria.

The environment for stabilization is extremely complex with a wide array of actors and issues. The concept of stabilization used here is the ending or preventing of the reoccurrence of violent conflict and creating the conditions for normal economic activity and nonviolent politics<sup>2</sup>. This paper will identify some of the key challenges to U.S.-provided assistance in specifically Rojava. Acknowledging that there is a larger Syrian

and regional approach, I have limited my discussion to Rojava due to the larger complexities encompassing Syria as a whole, as well as the importance of Rojava for the strategic interest of the United States in efforts to defeat ISIS. A detailed look at the array of stakeholders' interest, goals, positions, capacities and interrelationships is required to appreciate the challenges of stabilization in the region. For this purpose, I utilized the United Nations framework for conflict analysis<sup>3</sup> focusing specifically on the stakeholder analysis phase of the process. The result is a stakeholder matrix that provides a profile of each key stakeholder and an overview of the logic and motives of their behaviors. While this is not the complete conflict analysis, it does highlight key challenges of stability assistance in Rojava.

### **Defining Rojava**

Rojava is the de-facto semi-autonomous region under the control of the TEV-DEM political coalition led by the majority Kurdish party the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Rojava encompasses portions of Syria's three northern provinces of Aleppo, Raqqah, and Hasaka but continues to expand as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberate areas from ISIS control as they move towards the ISIS capital of Raqqah. The Rojava movement seeks to create a federalist form of government centered on each of the three cantons: Afrin, Kobane, and Jazeera. Each canton is governed by local councils and assemblies through what is termed as the Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA) system<sup>4</sup>. Each canton is decentralized with various councils for each government function such as judicial, educational, parliamentary, diplomatic, and security<sup>5</sup>. TEV-DEM under the leadership of the PYD serves as the overall parliament that coordinates all three cantons. The pre-war population of the Rojava region is

approximately 2 million with varying ethnic diversity of Kurdish, Arab, Syriac Christian, Turkoman, and other minorities<sup>6</sup>. The SDF continues to expand its territory by liberating the city of Manbij and surrounding areas near Raqqah resulting in a growing population of both Internally Displaced Persons and local citizens. The most current estimation is from the Kurdish National Congress which estimates 3-4 million<sup>7</sup>.

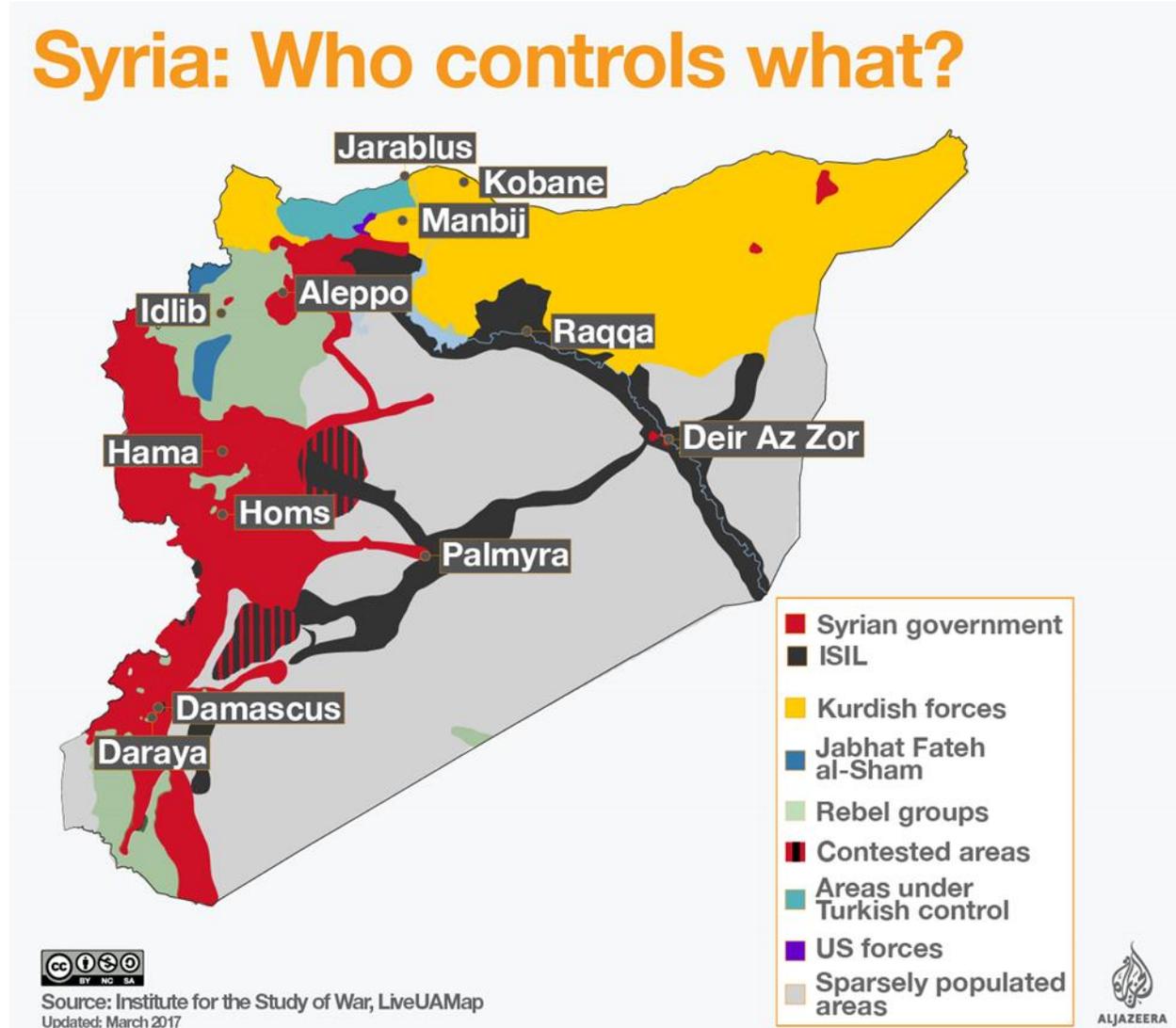
Rojava provides governance for its diverse population under wartime conditions with limited international assistance. The most critical area in need of stabilization is governance due to the direct tie to Rojava's legitimacy. The PYD has dominated the political environment in the creation of Rojava eliminating other minority voices such as the Kurdish National Council<sup>8</sup>. The political system has become mainly accountable to the internal PYD structure instead of the diverse population resulting in the growth of distrust and fear between ethnic groups. These governance challenges are eroding the TEV-DEM's legitimacy to govern<sup>9</sup>. In the long-term, the legitimacy of the government to address the concerns of the diverse population and resolve key issues with Turkey, Iraq, and the future government of Syria is critical for Rojava's survival.

Rojava is attempting to provide economically for and estimated 3-4 million people with significant limitations in resources and capacity. External stabilization is required to provide for basic human needs and prevent conflict escalation internally and externally. Rojava is an agrarian economy that has been devastated during the civil war and ISIS occupation. Historically the Rojava region is a significant agricultural producing region for Syria responsible for seventy percent of the wheat production<sup>10</sup>. This agricultural engine has been devastated with up a fifty percent loss of livestock and a ninety percent loss of agricultural machinery under the ISIS occupation resulting in significant food

shortages and economic strain<sup>11</sup>. Significant external assistance is required to address this significant shortfall.

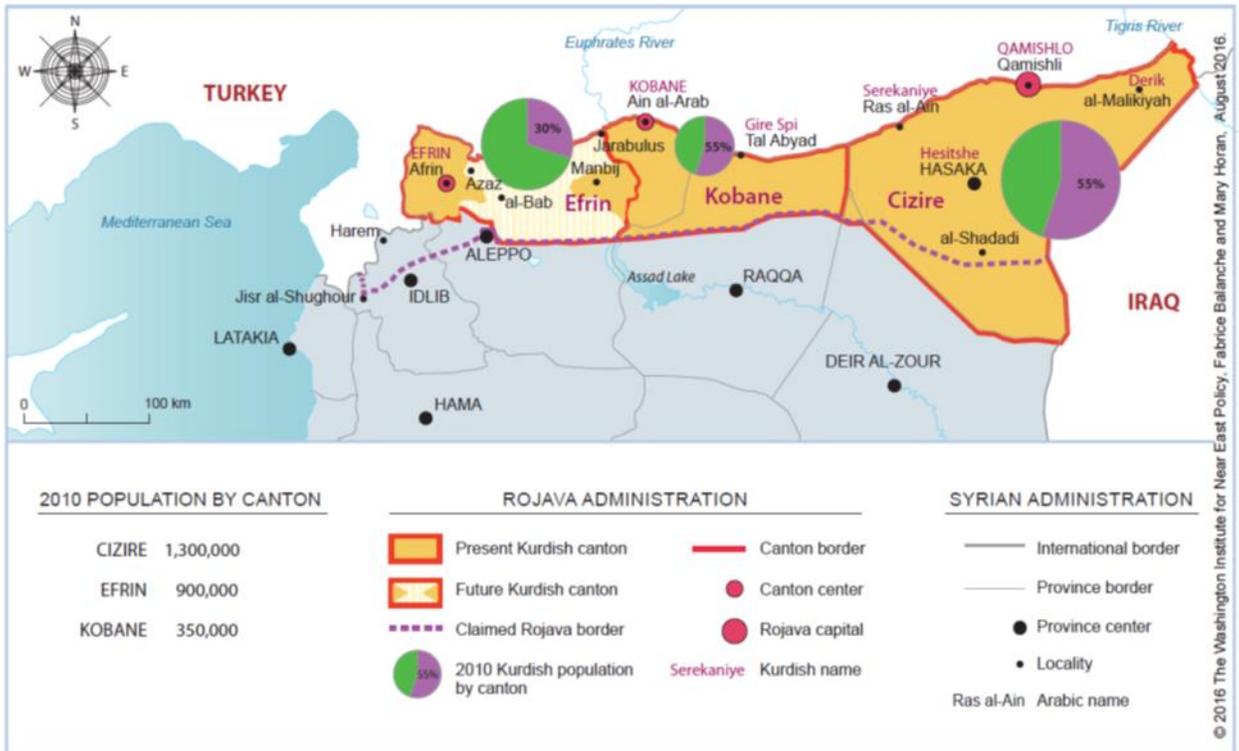
Humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance is expectedly the most noticeable need for stability assistance. This is especially true in the urban areas where as much as ninety percent of the infrastructure has been destroyed far exceeding Rojava's resources<sup>12</sup>. Rojava has demonstrated an impressive ability to provide a form of economic stability and a relative secure environment to provide for the basic human needs under these conditions<sup>13</sup>. However, the financial, trade, and border restrictions emplaced by the Iraq Kurdistan Regional Government and Turkey will ultimately greatly reduce Rojava's ability to sustain their population even with external assistance. Like most of Syria, Rojava is undoubtedly in need of assistance in numerous areas. However, governance, economic, and humanitarian aid are the three areas that could greatly influence Rojava's and Syria's future that support U.S. interest.

Map 1. Political Geography of Syria



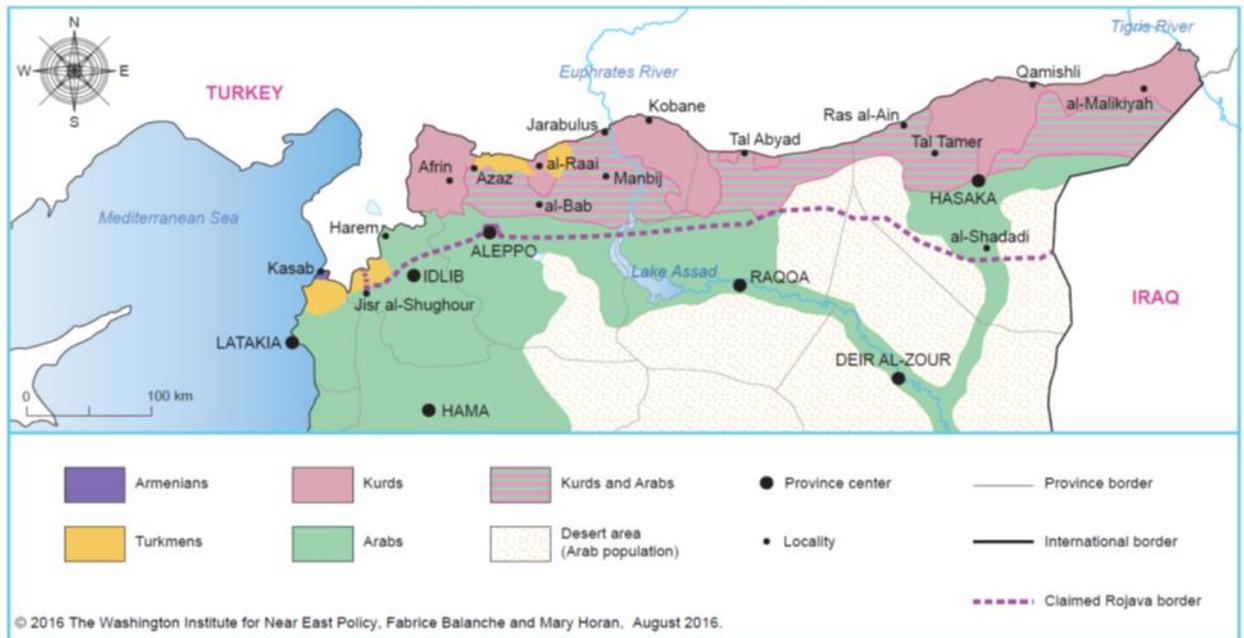
Map 2. Rojava

### Rojava: Population and Future Administrative Organization



Map 3.

### Ethnic Divisions in Northern Syria



### Stakeholder Analysis – Internal Actors

Stakeholders in the Syrian civil war can be generally broken down into two large categories: internal and external. Both categories have a range of actors that have varying levels of influence in the Syrian crisis. Internal actors consist of those groups geographically originating from within Syria and are part of the Syrian demographic. These groups may or may not have relocated from Syria with the onset of the civil war, but are generally considered a Syrian people. I have generally divided the internal actors into two categories: Pro-regime and anti-regime. Not all pro-regime or anti-regime groups have the same goals or outcomes in mind but often align themselves with other pro or anti-regime groups for short-term objectives. This paper describes two main opposition groups within the internal actors' category: the Syrian Opposition, represented by the Syrian National Council, and the Syrian Democratic Forces, under the political leadership of the Rojava self-declared governance of the TEV-DEM. A look at how these two groups relate to the Assad Regime will be included as well.

### **Syrian Democratic Forces**

The SDF are a diverse group of paramilitary forces with a corresponding political party for most of the units. These political bodies representing the paramilitary forces constitute the larger Rojava government under the political coalition the TEV-DEM. While the degree of control the Rojava government exerts of the SDF is not fully understood, it is the Rojava founders' ideal that determines how the paramilitary forces will be used to achieve the immediate and long-term goals. The SDF includes groups of Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and Syriac Christian forces across northern Syria<sup>14</sup>. Each has a unique history with its own tribal or ethnic struggles with the Assad Regime. Prior to the Syrian civil war, each group generally maintained either a neutral or positive

relationship with the Kurdish majority within Rojava. Both Hafez and Bashar Assad marginalized all the current SDF sub-entities in some manner. Both Regime leaders also utilized specific tribal groups to maintain control of disruptive ethnic groups, specifically, the Kurds<sup>15</sup>. With the onslaught of ISIS, a natural grouping of alliances emerged as a means of protection, which eventually formed the SDF. Groups began to coalesce around the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as they enjoyed protection from ISIS within Kurdish enclaves. Both pro-Kurdish groups such as the Shammar tribe joined early in YPG defensive efforts. A few of the Arab outliers in the SDF such as the Raqqah Revolutionary Brigade trace their allegiance much more recently back to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party's (PYD) inclusiveness and willingness to provide sanctuary during the fall of Raqqah to ISIS<sup>16</sup>. The bloody combat both groups experienced during the defense of Kobane later that year strengthened their mutual bond. The Rojava alliance is a combination of complex relationships centered on an ISIS common enemy. What is uncertain is how long the alliance will last once the common enemy is defeated.

Arab-Kurdish tension is a reoccurring issue generating conflict over centuries. The Rojava alliance under the Kurdish political part the PYD leadership is diverse and generally representative of the ethnic makeup of northern Syria. However, as the PYD began liberating majority ethnic regions of northern Syria the tribal groups complained of anti-Arab policies and treatment. When Tal-Aybad was liberated in 2015, the Arab tribal population along with Turkey accused the Kurds and Rojava leadership of ethnic cleansing<sup>17</sup>. The PYD responded claiming that removal was only of ISIS sympathizers and done to maintain security. Since then, Rojava leadership adjusted the method of

governing majority Arab areas. Prior to the liberation of Manbij, the Rojava government established a civilian council comprised of citizens from Manbij ethnically representative of Manbij. These local civilian leaders became the core around reestablishment of governance once ISIS was defeated by the U.S. backed SDF<sup>18</sup>. The result has been less Arab-Kurdish tension in a predominately-Arab city of 300,000. This same ethnic representative leadership model occurs throughout the cantons as well. These are Rojava's efforts to be inclusive and ease ethnic tensions.

Previous anti-Kurdish policies by the Assad regime have shaped modern day Arab-Kurdish relationships. Hafez Assad's policies complicate the understanding of Arab-Kurdish landownership in northern Syria. His "Arab Belt" project in the 1960's relocated Arab families in the Raqqah province onto historically Kurdish land effectively Arabizing some of the most fertile agricultural lands in the north<sup>19</sup>. Later in 2003, Bashar Assad's regime utilized the pro-regime tribal structure in northern Syria to put down the Kurdish uprising<sup>20</sup>. The history of anti-Kurdish policy and the use of Arab tribes against the Kurds is an undercurrent that may trigger further ethnic conflict within Rojava. Bashar Assad's attempt to appease disenfranchised portions of the Kurdish population at the onset of the civil war by granting Syrian citizenship did little to replace the ill effects of anti-Kurdish policy<sup>21</sup>. Local knowledge that spans decades will be crucial to understanding the dynamics caused by a history and effects of anti-Kurdish policies.

The Arab tribal composition of the SDF is a significant dimension in their makeup. The Regime shaped the composition of the SDF using tribes to exert control over areas of Syria far from the Alawite core in the west. Due to the disproportionate

level of regime influence over time, most tribes do not cleanly fit into the pro-Regime or pro-Opposition categories. Over the past fifty years both Assad regimes leveraged the tribal structure and leadership to maintain control of the eastern rural regions of Syria<sup>22</sup>. Patronage of key tribal leaders served as the primary vehicle within the regime structure to exert influence and “buy” control. For example, in 2011 the Regime coerced tribal sheiks to assemble and pledge support to the regime on state media. Assad also placed influential tribal members into key Syrian military commander positions to maintain tribal influence<sup>23</sup>. While the Regime swayed support of powerful tribes, Assad marginalized other tribes, which are generally sympathetic to the Kurdish plight. The Shammar tribe, minimized by the Regime, refused to suppress the Kurdish rebellion at the request of Assad in 2004 while the Jabbour, Adwan, Tay, and Ougaidat tribes all agreed<sup>24</sup>. It is those same tribal lines drawn prior to the civil war that remain today ingrained in the Arab component of the SDF.

The relationship between the Assad Regime and the Kurdish-led Rojava is tenuous. Despite Assad’s attempts at appeasing the Kurdish population at the onset of the conflict, the long history of anti-Kurdish policies frame the PYD-Syrian conscience and actions. Assad has managed to keep isolated pockets of Regime forces in the Al-Hasaka and Qamishli areas but under an uneasy truce with Rojava. Open armed conflict has erupted over any Regime attempts to expand from their limited conclave invoking a U.S. response<sup>25</sup>. Current U.S. military support to Rojava is a key factor along with the limited Syrian Army strength that has been preventing Assad from retaking areas in the Hasaka region from the SDF. Assad continues to leverage the tribal structure in the Hasaka province, enticing several pro-regime tribes to resist Rojava

self-autonomy. The conflict escalated in 2016 to open armed violence between the Rojava security forces and the Syrian Army supported by pro-Assad tribal groups that resulted in an YPG deployment of forces to quell the violence<sup>26</sup>. The U.S. had taken great care to avoid direct confrontation with the Syrian military until the recent punitive strikes on April 6, 2017. Uncertain if this indicates a shift in U.S. policy, once the common threat of ISIS is gone, the regime's actions to re-exert control of northern Syria will further test U.S. support and policy for Rojava.

**Table 1. Syrian Democratic Forces**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Interest</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Positions</b>	<b>Capacities</b>	<b>Relationships</b>
<b>Democratic Union Party (PYD)<sup>27</sup></b>	Protect Kurdish rights, establish self-governance and secure regional territory in Syria against further Arab oppression	Establish a Federated Syria with autonomous self-governance. Join all three Kurdish Cantons into one contiguous territory	-Be the US primary counter ISIS surrogate partner in Syria -Grow US relationship as leverage over Turkey and the Regime -Maintain Russian relationship for long term interest in Syria when US partnership fails to meet the goals -Improve and deepen Arab-Kurdish relationships in northern Syria	-Large counter ISIS force of approximately 30,000 -Experienced military leadership -governs a large portion of northern Syria free from regime control -PKK historic ties serve as significant political stumbling block with Turkey -PKK relationship can be leveraged for support if needed	-international ties with Russia, maintains a political office in Moscow -strained relationship with the KRG over political Kurdish influence in Syria -supported by the French, US, and UK for counter ISIS operations -hostile relations with Turkey over PKK -strained relationship with the opposition over federalism ideas -excellent relationship with the PUK party within the KRG
<b>Syriac Military Council<sup>28</sup></b>	Reestablishment of the ancient a nation for Syriacs persecuted under the Ottomans and	Build Syriac influence and power gaining international support	-Integrate into leadership hierarchy in the governance of Rojava -Provide military support to the SDF	-External financial and ideological support from diaspora in Europe -Long history providing military	-partners with the PYD and PKK over several decades -limited international

	now Assad Regime. Provide greater rights for Christian minorities.		and build a cadre of militarily capable Syriac units	support to the PKK over the past 30 years	support through diaspora
<b>Raqqah Revolutionary Brigade</b> (Luna Thuwar Al-Raqqah) <sup>29</sup>	Creation of a civil democratic unified Syria.	Defeat of ISIS in Syria. Serve as the civil administration of Raqqah once liberated from ISIS	-Establish alliances with the most effective groups (Groups has changed allegiances 3 times in the war) -Serve as the primary force to liberate Raqqah -Establish a civilian leadership council to reestablish Raqqah governance	-Arab component from the FSA able to communicate with other oppositions groups due to past relationships -Group is from Raqqah with extensive knowledge of the people and area. Invaluable do to Coalition and US efforts to liberate the city.	-initial relationship with Salafi groups -joined with the PYD during the defense of Kobane -familial ties with citizens of Raqqah
<b>Al-Sanadid</b> (Shammar Tribe) <sup>30</sup>	Restore historical Shammari Emirate (taken by the House of Saud) restoring tribal prestige and influence. Maintain Syrian unity.	Liberate Shammari tribal areas from ISIS control, defeat Wahhabism	-Defeat ISIS with aid from the US -Avoid conflict with the Regime -Partnership with the SDF for governance of northern Syria -Fight under SDF leadership	-Direct support from one of the largest tribes in the Middle East -Support base both in Iraq and Syria -Able to broker deals and close the divide between Kurds and Arabs in the region	- Century long positive relationship with the Kurds - did not benefit from the Regime -abstained from the civil war -supports US efforts in Iraq -good relations with the KRG
<b>Syria's Tomorrow</b> <sup>31</sup>	End the Syria civil war through a pluralist democratic unified Syria accounting for minority ethnic self-administration	Combine the opposition and other factions to negotiate peace with the Assad Regime	-Self administration is a vehicle to link the ethnic diversity in Syria -UN facilitated peace talk mediated by Russia and the US	-Egyptian and UAE supported and funded - Large Shammari tribal support -current leader is the last leader of the Syria Opposition	Acknowledged by Russia a powerbroker -Maintains contact and relationships with the Allawites -supportive of the PYD and Rojava
<b>Jaysh Al Thuwar</b> (founded in the FSA comprised of Arab, Kurd, and Turkmen) <sup>32</sup>	Establishment of a democratic Syria	Defeat Assad and Russian influence; expel ISIS and other extremists from Syria	-Partner with the SDF as the most viable force with US support -Partner w/ the SDF in Afrin against Jabhat Fath al-Sham (AQ)	-Multi-ethnic group able to bridge Kurd, Arab, Turkmen issues -Geographic influence across the entire northern Syria -Relatively small numbers	limited relationships with other powerbrokers -primary relationship with the PYD

<p><b>Additional Arab Tribes inside Rojava</b> (Ougaidat, Baggara, Jabbour, Adwan, Tay, Shammar Fadan)<sup>33</sup></p>	<p>Gain individual tribal influence and power post-civil war nationally and internationally</p>	<p>Position each tribe to gain political and economic patronage from respective power broker</p>	<p>Partnership with respective powerbroker seen to be the winner of the civil war <u>Pro-Rojava:</u> Fadan/Shammar</p> <p>-Syrian Arab Tribes Council formed to counter the regime with support from the Syrian National Council: Baggara, Shammar,</p> <p><u>Pro-regime</u> Ougaidat, Tay, Jabbour, Adwan remain loyal to the regime having benefited from Regime policies</p>	<p>Ougaidat, Baggara, and Shammar are the three largest transnational tribes in Syria with external support from larger tribe network <u>Ougaidat:</u> Pro-regime units with support into Homs and Deir al-Zor. <u>Baggara:</u> Significant support from the Assad Regime. Target by Iran for conversion to Shi'ism causing religious conflict.</p>	<p><u>-Ougaidat</u> retains excellent relations with the Regime; no relations or support of Rojava or the PYD -Has limited support inside of Syria <u>Baggara:</u> Significant ties to the Assad Regime. <u>Tay, Jabbour, Adwan</u> close relations with the Regime, hostile to Kurds and other ethnic groups</p>
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### Syrian Opposition

The Syrian Opposition is a myriad of groups ranging from Al Qaeda-sponsored groups to secular Syrian nationalists. They are far from monolithic, and many have diverging interests, goals, and visions of Syria's future. The Syrian Opposition can be broken down into four general categories below and have a strength of approximately 90,000<sup>34</sup>. Each group has slightly differing relationships, thoughts, and views about Rojava, the Syrian Identity, and the future ideal for a Syrian nation. All groups do share the same galvanizing belief that the Assad Regime cannot remain in power in its current form.

A significant issue that generates conflict is the perceived support or cooperation the Syrian Kurds (PYD) provides the Regime. The Opposition directly accuses the Kurds and the Arab components of the Rojava leadership for supporting the Assad Regime and cooperating with the Russians against the Opposition<sup>35</sup>. The Opposition

cite the existence of Regime military units living within the Rojava controlled areas of Hasaka and Qamishli, the facilitation of Russian air strikes against Opposition units around Aleppo, and PYD political offices in Moscow. The Opposition and the PYD fought fiercely over control of the self-claimed ethnic territory around Castello Road and the Sheik Maqsoud neighborhood in northern Aleppo<sup>36</sup>. During this fighting, the Opposition accuses the PYD of cooperating with Russians for targeting coordinates resulting in air strikes.

A second issue between the Rojava leadership and the Opposition is the idea of federalism. When the PYD and Syrian Democratic Council proclaimed a self-autonomous federated Rojava, it galvanized the Syrian opposition against the concept in a way that rarely seen in this conflict. The normally divided and factious Opposition commonly share a strong belief opposing the idea of Rojava's self-autonomous federated region<sup>37</sup>. Rojava's federated Syria is a direct threat to the Opposition's ideal of maintaining Syrian national unity.

The Rojava idea of federalism coupled with the accusations of Regime support and Arab-Kurdish sectarianism with the Opposition is a significant contributor to the isolation of the Rojava government from the negotiation table. The Syrian National Council has not allowed the PYD to participate in negotiations or peace talks with external stakeholders due to their differences<sup>38</sup>. Russian and the U.S. have unsuccessfully attempted to pressure the Opposition to include the PYD in the negotiations. Rojava and particularly the PYD continue to campaign vigorously throughout the international community for recognition. Their exclusion in the negotiation process is a significant issue and goal of the PYD strives to obtain.

**Table 2. Opposition**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Interest</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Positions</b>	<b>Capacities</b>	<b>Relationships</b>
<b>Transnational Salafi-Jihadist</b> (al-Qaeda, Jabhat Al-Nusrah/Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Harakat al-Fajr al-Sham, and others)	Establishment of Islamic Emirate under Sharia Law and expansion globally	Partnership with like-mind groups from National Jihadist for the defeat of Assad and ISIS	-Public breaking with AQ to lessen focus by US and Russia -Global aspirations for expanding jihad -marginalize ISIS as a competitor	-20% of the Opposition strength -AQ supported or associated	-close working relationship with National Salafist -strongly opposed to the PYD
<b>National Salafi Jihadist</b> (Ahrar al-Sham and associates)	Establishment of a national Islamic Emirate without global aspirations	Establish alliances with other Salafi groups for the defeat of Assad and ISIS	-alliance with Transnational Groups to defeat the Assad Regime	-31% of the Opposition strength -supported by Gulf States and Saudi Arabia	-tactical partnership with other Salafi groups -strongly opposed to PYD and Rojava
<b>Political Islamist</b> (Muslim Brotherhood, Portions of the FSA, Susqour al-Sham, Umma Brigade, etc.)	Establishment of a Syrian government with a moderate interpretation of Sharia Law	Defeat of the Assad regime and establish a Syrian Islamic Republic	-Partnership with other secularist and moderate nationalist Islamic groups to defeat the regime	-24% of the Opposition Strength - funded by Western Countries -supported by the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey	-competition with Salafi groups for support from within Syria -tolerant of the PYD and expresses a need to account for ethnic short comings -some FSA groups have joint the SDF from this category
<b>Secularist</b> (Large portion of the FSA of the FSA)	Establishment of a free and democratic Syria not governed in Islamic law or tradition.	Oppose the Salafi jihadist efforts to overthrow Syria while continuing to combat the Regime	-Avoidance of religious affiliation to grow a popular movement -secular vision of a Syrian	-25% of the Opposition strength -US funded	- tolerant of the PYD and rights of other ethnic groups -some opposition from this grouping has joined the SDF

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### **External Actors**

In this paper, external actors are non-Syrian groups that play varying levels of influence on the internal dynamics of Syria. These actors range from powerful nation states to other ethnic, religious, or ideologically similar groups. I have focused the list

on major powers that exhibit direct influence in northern Syria and Rojava. I have also grouped many international actors broadly together such as the U.S. and Western Coalition and Gulf States while acknowledging that each country's views with the groups vary.

The most significant external stakeholder with influence in Rojava is **Turkey**. The forty plus year Turkish struggle with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is the crux of the issue and the source of increasing conflict. This issue affects all other external actors' interaction with Rojava. Each external actor views the PKK and PYD relationship differently reflecting different policies and interaction with both Turkey and Rojava. Turkey's Government on one hand, makes no distinction between the PYD and the PKK and lists them as an existential threat to national security. The U.S. and Western Coalition view them as closely connected but distinct organizations with differing goals<sup>40</sup>. This difference in viewpoints effects every portion of the U.S. and Turkish relationship from support to the Syrian Opposition, to the use of Incirlik Air Base, to the flow of humanitarian aid. Turkey wields significant geographic leverage over the U.S. and coalition as the only country providing basing for the full range of diplomatic, economic, and military activities supporting the Syrian Opposition in the north.

The search for an effective surrogate force against ISIS is the catalyst for the U.S.-PYD relationship. The YPG emerged as the most effective group against ISIS providing the U.S. with the only legitimate surrogate paramilitary capability to attack the capital of Raqqa. In response, the U.S. and the Western coalition rallied behind the SDF as the military solution to seize Raqqa and began providing military support in

2015. To alleviate Turkish concerns, the U.S. coalition has only been supplying the Arab contingents called the Syrian Arab Coalition (SAC) with military equipment<sup>41</sup>. Turkey continues to protest U.S. support, insisting that military aid is finding its way into Kurdish hands<sup>42</sup>. Turkey is also concerned over the legitimacy that direct U.S. and coalition support gives the PYD. Turkey actively blocks material support to Rojava, including humanitarian aid, which drastically limits the cross-border flow of goods. The struggle between the U.S.'s desire to back its most effective counter-ISIS partner and an existential threat to Turkey will most likely intensify. The conflict between Turkish-backed Opposition and the SDF reached an alarming level during February and March of 2017 resulting in the introduction of U.S. Army Rangers into Syria to keep the peace between the SDF and Turkish backed Opposition in Manbij<sup>43</sup>. Further conflict like that is seen in Manbij will most likely continue as the U.S. coalition closes on Raqqa.

After being pushed by the U.S. on the use of the SDF, Turkey established a clear “redline” and will not tolerate the joining of the three Kurdish cantons of Afrin, Kobane, and Jazeera along their border. The intervention of Turkish troops in Jarabulus in 2016 was a clear response to the PYD goals to unite the Afrin and Jazeera Canton’s west of the Euphrates resulting in a united Rojava<sup>44</sup>. Any further attempts by the PYD will invite further armed conflict with Turkey. Conflict continues to escalate between Turkey and the SDF since the introduction of Turkish troops into Syria. The proximity of Turkish military and Turkish-backed opposition to the SDF has escalated the conflict. Both groups are now fighting over the same contested areas west of the Euphrates River. Intentional targeting of SDF units by the Turkish military has been observed as the Turkish enforce their “redline” of no SDF forces west of the river<sup>45</sup> as well as the Turkish

airstrike on an YPG headquarters on April 25, 2017. Turkey will continue to counter Rojava expansion with military force.

**Russia's** relationship with the PYD and Rojava leadership is complex and colored with a long history of supporting Kurdish movements especially against Turkey. Russia politically supports the PYD with the establishment of political offices in Moscow and the insistence of Moscow that the PYD should be included in the Syrian peace talks<sup>46</sup>. In the Afrin Canton, we see direct Russian support of the YPG by providing air strikes to target the Syrian Opposition with confirmation from Russian officials<sup>47</sup>. Russia has several strategic goals in Syria such as maintaining regional military basing, countering U.S. influence in the region, and domestic terrorism concern all best accomplished by keeping Assad in power. In contrast Russia has also stated that a federated type government in Syria is a possibility in the future as a sign of Kurdish support<sup>48</sup>. This is at odds with both the Syrian Opposition and Assad's idea of a united Syria. The U.S., on the other hand, finds itself at odds with both the PYD and Russia by not supporting the possibility of a federated Syria. The PYD will most likely continue leveraging both the U.S. for direct military support and legitimacy while leaning on Russia for political support internationally and with Assad.

**Iran's** importance for Rojava is growing due to its commitment of significant resources to keep Assad in power and countering Turkish support for the Syrian Opposition. Iran shares part of the domestic Kurdish separatist movement threat with Turkey and Iraq. In recent years that activity has lulled domestically as Iran stepped up support to the PKK to contain Turkey<sup>49</sup>. It is in this murky Kurdish region that Iran deals with the PYD and Rojava, making the ability to ascertain the nature of the relationship

between the two difficult<sup>50</sup>. What is evident is that Iran is openly supporting Syrian armed forces directly with IRGC Qods Force as well as Hezbollah as seen with the IRGC Commanders visit to Aleppo in 2016<sup>51</sup>. The IRGC Qods Force provides direct support to the Syrian Army with military advisors, weapons, and equipment as well as the employment of Iranian Special Forces units in direct combat alongside the Syrian Army<sup>52</sup>. The reporting of the presence of IRGC Qods Force and an increase in clashes between pro-Regime forces and the Rojava security forces in the Hasaka region indicate increased Iranian support to the Syrian Army against Rojava. This would indicate that Iran is supportive of Assad's desire to maintain national integrity over supporting the PKK or associates against Turkey. We know very little about the PYD/Iranian relationship, but the incidents mentioned above indicate that it is not peaceful or supportive in nature<sup>53</sup>. Strategically Iran pursues several key goals that affect Rojava. Iran seeks to maintain Assad as a key ally to support Hezbollah and oppose any fragmentation of Syria from Syrian Kurdish groups that incentivize Iraqi Kurdish separation inside Iraq<sup>54</sup>. Increased Iranian activity in support of the Regime will increase conflict within Rojava as ISIS is defeated and Assad grows in power.

The **Iraqi Kurds** are important stakeholders as the most internationally supported and politically progressive Kurdish group seeking autonomy. The Iraqi Kurds have significant influence across the Kurdish population spanning Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. The Iraqi Kurds have starkly different relationship and policies supporting the PYD and Rojava government. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Goran (Change) parties have different interest and relations with Rojava. The KDP as the political party in power within the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG) has drawn closely aligned with Turkey for economic and security matters over the past decade<sup>55</sup>. The visit of the Turkish Prime Minister to Irbil in 2011 signaled the growing relationship that has become increasingly interdependent. The KDP partnership with Turkey greatly influences their relationship with the PYD and Rojava government. The KDP accuses the PYD of pushing out other Kurdish political groups in Syria, mainly the Kurdish National Congress (KNC) supported by the KDP. The KDP in response hosted three negotiations with the various Syrian Kurdish political factions over the past several years only to have the PYD go back on the agreement to provide a more inclusive political system in Rojava<sup>56</sup>. The KRG responded by closing its borders to Rojava, something Turkey had already done<sup>57</sup>. Both Turkey and the KRG are the primary actors with geographic access to Rojava. Both of Rojava's neighbors have either poor or openly hostile relations with the PYD and put in place sanction-like policies to isolate Rojava and deter further progress in the establishment of their federated ideal of Syria. U.S. pressure on the KRG to relax the borders has been somewhat successful, however, there is little movement from Turkey to open its borders<sup>58</sup>

The PUK and Goran party within the KRG are supportive of the PYD and the Rojava government. They both support the PYD for Kurdish solidarity, but mainly as a counter balance to the current KDP hegemony in the KRG<sup>59</sup>. The PUK fully supports Rojava by facilitating travel of PYD and Rojava leadership, providing financial and military aid, and facilitation of third country access to PYD leadership. The PUK remain supportive and pressures the KDP for better relations with the Rojava governance. While the KDP look for economic partnership with Turkey, the PUK see growing

economic ties with Iran as their closest neighbor and maintains ties with Baghdad. The current flashpoint is in the Sinjar region that has developed into a significant conflict over the control of the region between the KDP and the PKK/PYD with the support of the PUK. While the Sinjar region is politically a KDP powerbase with a strong KDP supportive population, the Sinjar region also contains a large ethnic Yezidi population that felt abandoned by the KDP Peshmerga during the onslaught of ISIS in 2014. The KDP Peshmerga were unable to stop the ISIS advance withdrawing all but a handful of forces from the region. The YPG and PKK filled the security void and provided the defense and evacuation of tens of thousands of Yezidi civilians. The YPG and PUK took the opportunity to establish presence in the historically KDP-dominated region. The PUK supported the YPG and their efforts to develop Yezidi defense forces to counter KDP dominance in the region<sup>60</sup>. This is a significant issue for the KDP and it is one of the major grievances used to justify closing the Rojava/KRG border. The Sinjar issue will continue to affect Rojava's relationship with the KRG and the openness of the border.

**Table 3. External Actors**

Name	Interest	Goals	Positions	Capacities	Relationships
US and Western Coalition <sup>61</sup>	Defeat ISIS; end the war in Syria to limit the out flow of refugees. Long-term removal of Assad	Defeat ISIS without the use of larger conventional military forces, continue pressure on Assad with diplomacy and funding of the moderate opposition	-Maintain funding and support to opposition -seek further cooperation with other power brokers to combat ISIS -stop the flow of refugees fleeing Syria	-significant military, political, economic, and informational leverage of other stakeholders -NATO alliance -UN and EU support in the refugee issues	-Western coalition differing views on PYD and Rojava -US, UK, and France support SDF military operations -Coalition friction over Turkey's opposition to the PYD and Rojava ideas for counter ISIS
Russia <sup>62</sup>	Reestablish Russian	- Counter US influence in the	-Keep Assad in power	-significant regional power to	-Partnership with Iran and

	influence in the Middle East	region and Syria. Maintain Pro-Russian government in Syria -protect Russia from terrorist threat from Syria due to larger Russian foreign fighter presence	-Maintain strategic Mediterranean naval port -Leverage relationship with Iran to counter US and western sponsored opposition -maintain relationship with PYD to counter US influence and as a lever against Turkey	leverage full range of government power -support from the current legitimate government of Syria	the Regime to maintain Assad and defeat ISIS -Growing relationship with Turkey with counter ISIS and Syrian Peace talks -historic Kurdish relationship of support
Turkey <sup>63</sup>	Increase Turkish regional power; establishment of a pro-Turkish or at least neutral government in Syria	-Stop the flow of refugees from Syria -Stop and reduce Kurdish militancy in the PKK/PYD both in Syria and Turkey - removal of the Assad regime	-Continue funding opposition elements both moderate and extreme -Partnership with Russia to counter the PYD attempts to unite in northern Syria -continue commitment of Turkish military in Syria to establish a buffer zone and counter Kurdish advancement	- provides direct geographic access for all counter regime and counter ISIS operation for the coalition and GCC countries -Growing economic dependence on Russia -economic partners with the KRG for goods and resources -NATO ally with significant strategic value	-strained relationship with US over PYD and PKK issues -strained relationship with EU over refugee flow -positive economic and security relationship with the KRG -contentious relationship with Iraq over Turkmen minorities in northern Iraq.
Saudi Arabia <sup>64</sup>	Limit Iranian influence in Syria and the region – counter Iranian regional hegemony	-Removal of Assad as a supporter of Iranian efforts in the region -Loss of Iranian support base in Syria	-Continue funding extreme opposition groups to overthrow Assad -willingness to provide direct military troops for operations in Syria	-significant monetary contributor to the opposition and potential reconstruction post-conflict -religious center for Sunni Islam – significant influence over Sunni Muslims in the region -significant GCC US ally in the region	-strategic relationship with US countering Iran -positive relationship with Turkey over both support for the opposition and anti-Syrian Kurdish expansion -good relations with the KRG
Gulf States <sup>65</sup>	Limit Iranian influence in Syria and the region	-Removal of Assad to counter Iranian growth in the region	-Continue funding opposition groups considered even extreme to the US. -Advance Muslim Brotherhood agenda regionally	- key counter Iranian partner with the US -significant monetary contributor to the opposition and potential	-increasingly greater support for KRG -generally poor support and relationship with Syrian Kurds -supportive of Turkish efforts

			-willingness to provide military troops for operations in Syria	reconstruction post-conflict.	with the opposition
Iran <sup>66</sup>	Establish itself as a regional superpower by maintaining Syria as a key Arab ally	Keep Assad in power Maintain Syrian support to Iranian efforts in Lebanon and the region	-continue the use of Iranian military and funding for direct support of Assad. -Partner with Russia to counter US and western influence in the Middle East -Continue military, financial, and political support to Iraq	- experienced and well-funded paramilitary organization -Hezbollah as a state sponsored terrorist group with global access -history of support from Assad regime and Russia	-significant relationship with Syrian regime and Russia -unsupportive of Syrian Kurds as opposition to Assad and control of Iranian Kurdish population
Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) <sup>67</sup>	Advancement of Kurdish Rights in Turkey	Establishment of a Syrian self-autonomous region as a safe haven for PKK leadership and support	-support PYD efforts in Syria with direct military, political, and financial support -leverage historic ties with PYD leadership to support PKK goals	-international support of PYD provides inspirational boost to PKK causes -deeply rooted ties with the PYD leadership to influence Rojava	-significant PKK/PYD relationship -hostile relationship with KRG -historic support from Syria that has waned with improved Syria/Turkey relations
Iraqi Kurds (KRG): KDP, PUK, Goran <sup>68</sup>	Independent Kurdistan in Iraq	-Positive economic and military relationship with Turkey -Positive PUK relationship with the Iraqi government in Baghdad -counter PKK influence and activity in the region -maintain key strategic relationship with the US	-gain political influence and support of Syrian Kurdish population -partnership with US for counter ISIS efforts -partnership with Turkey for counter PKK efforts -garner international support for Iraqi Kurdish issues -maintain natural resources in the KRG for independence	-larger international support -able to maintain relations with Turkey over greater Kurdish issues -owns large geographic stabilized region for international operations against ISIS -key broker in Iraqi political issues	-robust KRG international relationships across the west and GCC countries -inner conflict between the KDP and PUK over support for the PYD (KDP opposed/PUK supports) -Turkey leverages KRG economic relationship over PYD/PKK issues

## Results

The stakeholder analysis above identified several key challenges to consider in the development of cohesive stability assistance and crisis intervention. The first challenge is defining the common Syrian identity. With such a varied group of actors

and powerbrokers involved in the Syrian civil war, it is critical to determine what goal assistance is to achieve. This challenge is fundamental for the entirety of Syria, but specifically in Rojava as well. All three of the major categories of internal actors – Opposition, Rojava, and Regime – have very different ideas on what it means to be “Syrian” and the kind of identity the nation should have. This difference is a significant underlying factor of the conflict.

The Syrian National Council, as communicated by its leadership, has a surprisingly nationalistic view of Syria not defined by ethnicity or religion. The Assad Regime maintains this view as well. This concept of “nation” is from an Arabic term that defines a nation by its territory rather than ethnicity or religion<sup>69</sup>. The Opposition and Regime identify with this notion of “Syrian”. The French established Syria under the Sykes-Picot agreement as a multi-cultural state bringing together the diverse Arab, Kurdish, Druze, Allawite, Turkoman, Christian, Islamic, and other various groups into a cohesive state. Many representative of these diverse groups served in the early government under a French style parliament. This experience over the last 100 years coupled with a growth of an urban middle class over the past 50 years has led to a “Syrian” identity that surpassed historic ethnic and religious lines especially in the eastern urban areas<sup>70</sup>.

Rojava has a much different idea of what it means to be Syrian. Rojava is a semi-autonomous government, but it identifies ethnically versus nationally. Most Rojava is ethnically Kurd thus slanting the Rojava identity. This identity is shaped by the PKK socialist and communal ideals adopted by Ocalan in the 1970’s and 80’s now furthered in the Rojava construct developed by the PYD<sup>71</sup>. The Assad regime came to

power increasing ethnic divisive policies such as Arabization under the Baath Party<sup>72</sup>. These repressive policies contribute to the current ethnic communal identity. The idea of what I will call 'Rojava ethnic communalism' is fundamentally different from the nationalistic ideal formed under Sykes-Picot as aspired by the Opposition and Regime. Some of the non-Kurdish ethnic groups among the Rojava construct identify with the Kurdish ideals as they were also not benefactors of Syrian government policies and specifically excluded in the development of a Syrian national identity over the past century.

The second challenge seen throughout the stakeholder's analysis is the competing Syrian "vision" for a nation. This is rooted in the divergent Syrian "identities" previously discussed. Both the array of internal and external stakeholders all have competing and starkly different vision of what Syria should become. The Opposition envisions Syria moving forward as one unified country that maintains the territorial integrity of present-day Syria<sup>73</sup>. Anything that risks the unity or speaks of dividing or partitioning Syria along religious or sectarian lines is a "red-line" for the Opposition. Assad and the Opposition both share this viewpoint. Differing is the construct of the Syrian national government. A wide range of future Syrian government ideals exist from a democratic secular government of an Islamic dominated state. The largest discrepancy is the difference between maintaining national integrity and the concept of federalism proposed by Rojava. The Opposition envision a unified democratic country maintaining territorial integrity, while the Rojava supporters see a federated country with self-autonomy for ethnic groups. Assad wants a continuation of his regime. Still, international powerbrokers have their own competing visions and desires.

The primary difference between Rojava's federalist vision and the Opposition and Regime's unified central government ideal is stark. Support by external stakeholders of these divisive views greatly compounds the issue. Analysis above shows that Russia supports the concept of federalization while insisting that Assad must stay. The U.S. is supportive of maintaining national integrity, but supports Rojava's military efforts against ISIS. Turkey and Iran both oppose the concept of a federated Syria with a Kurdish self-autonomous region. This is a significant challenge in providing stability assistance as the powerbrokers have different and competing visions for the future of Syria. Stability assistance in Syria must be an inclusive plan that takes covers the entire country and furthers the larger policy goals for the region. Providing support to competing views, unless coordinated to bring the two parties together, will most likely be unsuccessful.

Another challenge identified in the stakeholder analysis is the degree of desired foreign support to Syrian groups for stabilization. The Syrian National Council (SNC) has strongly voiced its desire for only military and aid support from foreign donors. The SNC leadership is vocal in stating their desire for minimal foreign intervention in the future of Syria wanting primarily economic and diplomatic support to end the war with Assad. The SNC dialog centers on a very nationalist view that the Syrian civil war is an internal Syrian problem and that foreign intervention has worsened the situation. SNC leadership has been very vocal about the Iranian and Russian support to Assad and critical of the lack of U.S. leadership. This dynamic will complicate U.S. efforts to provide direct stability assistance to any area of Syria. U.S.-provided stabilization to Rojava might be seen as an effort by the U.S. and the West to partition Syria, which crosses a serious red line for the Opposition. Clearly, Assad would prefer to limit direct

international intervention in the form of stabilization or governance. The Regime already receives significant humanitarian aid that further enables the regime to redirect Syrian government funds to support continued funding of the military<sup>74</sup>.

The Rojava government and the PYD leadership have starkly different view of desirability of foreign intervention or other assistance. The PYD specifically courts the U.S., Russia, and other Western countries for assistance. The assistance requested is in a wide array of support from military arms, to humanitarian aid, to assistance in establishing governance. Any assistance from legitimate Western countries builds the credibility of Rojava as a legitimate entity and alternate vision of Syria proposed by the Opposition or Assad. Rojava will most likely continue significant efforts to curry international support for their cause much in the same way their brothers in Iraq have done over the past few decades. The stark difference between Opposition and Rojava desires for foreign intervention will be another challenging factor in providing stabilization.

### **Recommendation**

Looking at the U.S. influence and relationship with the Iraqi Kurds over the past several decades might inform policymakers as to a future framework with Rojava. The most significant issue the U.S.-Rojava relationship faces is arguably Turkey and the PKK. The relationship enjoyed between the Turkish government and the Iraqi Kurds evolved significantly over the past 50 years with assistance and influence from the United States.

Iraqi Kurdish desire for autonomy beginning in the 1960's under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani was viewed as an existential threat by Turkey<sup>75</sup>. Turkey and Iraq

reached an agreement to target Kurds by allowing cross-border operations into either country against both the PKK and Iraqi Kurds. Turkey aggressively conducted operations to suppress all Kurdish nationalistic movements, especially the Iraqi Kurds as Mustafa Barzani encouraged the Kurds from Turkey and Iran to join a larger Kurdish movement<sup>76</sup>. U.S. intervention to establish security in Northern Iraq changed this.

The first Gulf War in the 1990's and the establishment of the U.S. led Northern No-Fly Zone provided the Iraqi Kurds security from the onslaught of the Iraqi Regime. Under the umbrella of security enforced by the U.S., Iraqi Kurds developed a stable economy and created a market for Turkish goods and began to export energy resources to Turkey<sup>77</sup>. By the early 2000's the relationship changed dramatically with Turkey as economic interest of both parties along with a joint effort to counter the PKK-whose terrorist actions were renounced by both the Turkish government and by the autonomous Kurdish government structure in northern Iraq. The economic interest and combined security concerns are the catalyst for a dramatic change in the Turkish and KRG partnership<sup>78</sup>. The visit of the Turkish Prime Minister to the KRG in 2017<sup>79</sup> as well as the warm welcoming of the KRG President Masoud Barzani to Turkey<sup>80</sup> indicate the budding relationship.

Using Iraqi Kurdistan as a roadmap, we can see similarities and challenges. The U.S. has already helped create a secure environment within Rojava providing the early conditions for a stable society and economic growth. Additional U.S. engagement with Turkey and the government of Rojava backed with a foreign policy that provides stability assistance addressing the most difficult issue of the PKK is a logical step. The U.S. has the ability to shape the government of Rojava to address some of the international

concerns from its neighbors. This can be accomplished through providing stability assistance specifically for peaceful governance. Over time, the U.S. could foster the development of a regional ally greatly shaping the future of Syria.

### **Conclusion**

Rojava is a region with an extremely complex array of actors and significant international challenges. Stability assistance to Rojava will be politically complex with the myriad of international powerbrokers and competing interests. However, this challenge equals opportunity. Competing external powerbrokers have significantly influenced the conduct of the civil war. In the same manner, those powerbrokers will influence Syria during stabilization and reconstruction, and will ultimately support their own interests. The U.S., Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and many Gulf countries are positioning to shape Syria in a post-conflict environment. In the 1990s, another group of Kurdish minorities found protection under the U.S. and western coalition despite protests from Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Today that group is the Kurdistan Regional Government and is a significant partner in the region not just for the U.S., western and regional allies, but for Turkey as well. A similar opportunity exists with other Kurdish minorities in Syria if we are willing to take the risk.

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