

The 'art of the possible' in Deir ez-Zor – a weekly news review

Over the last fortnight, a limited but lethal insurgency has rocked Deir ez-Zor - part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the last region to be liberated from ISIS. Now that the immediate danger has been contained, it is important to look at the combination of factors that allowed this to happen, from political miscalculation and mismanagement to economic pressures, and at the roles played by the Syrian regime and by the different powers that attempt to direct Syria's future to their own advantage. This week's review also looks at deadly political machinations in Kirkuk, the Kurdish parties from Iran, and solidarity from Sweden.

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The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria bases itself on the system of grassroots democracy outlined by Abdullah Öcalan and embraced by the Kurdish Freedom Movement. It is this living example of a different way of structuring society that makes it a source of hope for people everywhere. But, in a world of warring nation states, it, too, has been forced into compromises that sit uncomfortably these ideas, and nowhere more so than in Deir ez-Zor, the last area that the Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated from ISIS. Politics, in Bismarck's famous phrase, is "the art of the possible", and sometimes what is possible is very far from ideal.

The Syrian Governorate of Deir ez-Zor occupies a large area to the east of the country, blessed with fertile soil and cursed – perhaps – with a large part of Syria's oil. It is a predominantly Arab area, with a strongly tribal society. Deir ez-Zor city and the rest of the governorate west of the Euphrates was recaptured from ISIS by the Syrian regime with the aid of Iran, and the Iranian regime has developed an increasing presence there through a network of social institutions as well as through their militias. The part of Deir ez-Zor to the East of the Euphrates was the last holdout of the ISIS caliphate, and was finally liberated by the SDF, with American air support, in March 2019.

When the Kurds of Rojava, or West Kurdistan, used the opportunity presented by the Syrian civil war to establish autonomous control in the Kurdish majority regions of northern Syria, they already had a deep-rooted political organisation waiting to come out into the open and a broad network of politicised families that had learnt their politics during Öcalan's long sojourn in area. The autonomous administration had not been long established when the region came under attack from ISIS. Famously, it was the Kurdish city of Kobanê that reversed the ISIS advance, and the Kurdish fighters went on to liberate the surrounding region. While Kurdish men and women fought, and often died, on the ground, the United States supported them from the air. Amberin Zaman [observed](#) in Al-Monitor that "It was only under intense US pressure that the SDF extended the fight against [ISIS] to Arab-majority areas, including Deir ez-Zor." Though when she asked the SDF commander, Mazlum Abdi, this week if he regretted taking the campaign against ISIS into Arab-majority areas, he [responded](#) "absolutely not. We were under constant attack by Salafist groups from those areas, even before the Islamic State took over. We knew

we had to go all the way up the [Euphrates] in order to keep our people safe and our areas stable.” For the SDF, the prize was the defeat of ISIS, but the Americans were, no doubt, also keen to prevent President Assad from accessing Deir ez-Zor’s oil.

As more places were liberated, areas with very different social structures and histories became incorporated into the fold of the Autonomous Administration – and this was not always easy. Öcalan’s philosophy emphasises the peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions, and the art of the possible demands a sensitivity that doesn’t alienate powerful leaders or the wider populace. Care has been taken to ensure active roles for people of different backgrounds in all regional structures, and patient, grassroots work has begun to enable women to play a greater role outside the home; but, in areas such as Deir ez-Zor, the Administration has chosen to work with existing tribal leaders rather than attempt to impose more democratic structures from outside. Social change, in this conservative and patriarchal society, will need to be built up within the region itself. So far, out of 6,000 Asayish in Deir ez-Zor – the local security forces – [just 54 are women](#).

As predominantly-Kurdish Rojava expanded into the multi-ethnic Autonomous Administration, so the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) were joined by military units from other groups to make the SDF, which is now majority Arab. The different regions that make up the Administration have their own military councils that have incorporated leaders of existing militias.

As if this giant social balancing act were not hard enough, the administration of these regions has to contend with hostile surrounding powers. The Syrian regime, Iran, and Turkey all do not want it to succeed, and they are always ready to encourage unrest, or, in Turkey’s case, to carry out targeted killings and a continuous low-level war of attrition that includes restricting river flows. ISIS cells attempt to disrupt the functioning of society – including by punishing those who work with the Administration – and to terrorise the population into paying protection money. Other disruptive actors are driven by personal ambition, seeking their fortunes as mercenaries, smugglers, or drug dealers.

On the economic front, blockades restrict possibilities for trade and for accessing vital equipment, and US sanctions have destroyed the economy of the whole of Syria. Much war-damaged infrastructure cannot be repaired.

The whole of North and East Syria is under huge economic strain, and this can easily translate into criticism of the authorities – criticism that many are very ready to stoke. This is [especially true in Deir ez-Zor](#), where society has had only 4 ½ years to recover from years of ISIS occupation, where successive occupiers have looted basic infrastructure, where factories don't work and lack of water impacts agriculture, where an emphasis on the immediate "pragmatic" demands of military security have allowed scope for corruption, and where it is easy to generate resentment at the local oil wealth being shared across the Administration.

Arrest and unrest

The fissures in Deir ez-Zor's unstable equilibrium, and the actions of those trying to widen them, have become brutally clear in these last two weeks. The catalyst for recent events was the arrest by the SDF, on 27 August, of the leader of Deir ez-Zor Military Council, known as Rashid Abu Khawla. His arrest, along with other commanders, was part of a wider operation against ISIS cells, criminals, and smugglers, which the [SDF insists](#) was based on explicit local demand and carried out with the knowledge of local leaders. The SDF press release on Abu Khawla's arrest [explained](#) that this followed "a period of monitoring" and "numerous reports and complaints from the local populace... due to his involvement in multiple crimes and violations, including communication and coordination with external entities hostile to the revolution, committing criminal offenses and engaging in drug trafficking, mismanaging of the security situation, his negative role in increasing the activities of ISIS cells, and exploiting his position for personal and familial interests". However, the reason for acting against Abu Khawla now, was [made clear by Mazlum Abdi](#) when he spoke with Amberin Zaman on Wednesday: "We confirmed that he was assembling an armed force to attack us in collusion with the regime."

Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute [portrays Abu Khawla](#) as a gangster who owed his position to American insistence: “Prior to Syria’s uprising in 2011, he allegedly ran a gang involved in stealing motorbikes and abandoned properties. Though he went on to join the opposition cause, he was accused of assisting the regime in 2013 and briefly joining ISIS in 2014-15, before fleeing to Turkey. In late 2016, the U.S. military co-opted Abu Khawla and secured him a position as one of the SDF’s lead Arab military commanders. He led units against ISIS in Raqqa in 2017, before moving south into Deir ez-Zor. In late 2018, the SDF attempted to expel Abu Khawla from his role as chief of the DZMC, only to be blocked by the U.S. military, perhaps due to his deep ties within the al-Bakir tribe, from which ISIS had recruited a great many fighters.”

Abu Khawla’s arrest was accompanied by a crackdown on his co-conspirators, and was met by an anti-SDF uprising by members of his tribe and of other tribal groups. This was orchestrated by the Syrian regime, which sent fighters into the area from across the Euphrates. New Lines Magazine [suggests](#) that the SDF had underestimated the extent to which the Syrian regime had been building connections with key figures in the region – from Sheikhs to smugglers, and Abdi has [acknowledged that they were surprised](#) by “the degree of coordination with the regime and the number of fighters who crossed over the river”. He has explained that these “tribal forces” were “organized by the regime. Many were financed and armed by Iran. There were also regime officers among them, the regime’s intelligence officers. We captured four of those people. They are members of Al Difa Watani [a pro-government militia formed with Iran’s help].”

Meanwhile, Turkey’s mercenary militias, based in Turkish-occupied zones, attempted to open a second front with attacks on the areas of Manbij and Tel Tamir. On 1 September, their attack on a Manbij village [killed five children](#). On Wednesday, SDF defenders in Manbij [killed](#) fifteen of the attackers, some of whom were found to be wearing ISIS badges.

These physical attacks were backed up by a propaganda war. The Syrian regime likes to represent North and East Syria as under US occupation, and to

paint the Autonomous Administration as separatists – despite their repeated assurance that they seek a democratic solution within Syria. The state-run Syrian Arab News Agency, [reported](#) that the Syrian Foreign Minister told a conference of Arab communities in Latin America that, “the US occupation of north-eastern Syria, its looting of wealth and its support for separatist terrorist groups will end thanks to the heroic struggle of people of Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah, side by side with the Syrian Arab Army.”

Turkey’s President Erdoğan treats the multi-ethnic SDF as synonymous with the YPG, and the YPG as identical to the PKK, which Turkey insists is a terrorist organisation. He [told journalists](#) on Monday that the events in Deir ez-Zor were “the step of the Arab tribes to claim their lands in unity and solidarity,” asserting that “Arab tribes are the real owners of those places... not these terrorist organisations,” and that “the attitude of the tribes against the PKK and YPG by coming together is a struggle of honour”.

Despite attempts to portray the unrest as an interethnic struggle, Arab tribal leaders from across North and East Syria have [shown public support](#) for the SDF, which now, as noted, has more Arab members than Kurdish ones.

By Wednesday night, the uprising had been suppressed and rebellious fighters had retreated back across the Euphrates, for which the SDF had allowed them an escape corridor. 25 SDF fighters were dead and 97 wounded, and seven civilians had been killed in the clashes. Dozens of tribal fighters had also been killed, though the exact number is not recorded.

Abdi has promised dialogue with local representatives to address their grievances. He [told Reuters](#) that he had already met tribal leaders who had requested the release of detained local fighters, and that, “We have a decision to issue a general amnesty for those involved. We already released half that were arrested, and we will release the rest.”

While issues of corruption and representation are also important, the scope for economic improvement remains limited. The United States has reiterated the importance of their partnership with the SDF in the fight against ISIS, but they do not envisage this as including support for developing a sustainable

economy, though that is essential for political stability. No-one would advocate continued reliance on aid and NGOisation, but help with the repair of damaged infrastructure need not entail future ties and debt commitments. The US also refuses to give the Autonomous Administration any formal recognition, and turns a blind eye to Turkey's repeated attacks.

According to Abdi, US involvement in these recent events was limited to deploying drones as a deterrent, treating the wounded, and joint meetings with local leaders.

Although Russia backs the Syrian regime, and there were [suggestions](#) that they were encouraging the insurgency, Abdi states that Russia told the SDF that they had nothing to do with events in Deir ez-Zor. Russia also told them that, as previously, they had rejected Turkey's demands to let them attack the Autonomous Administration areas. Russian airstrikes repelled the Turkish backed groups attacking Manbij and Tel Tamir.

For now, the immediate emergency is over, but the future of Syria remains disputed and uncertain.

Kirkuk

The situation in Deir ez-Zor may seem depressingly far from the Rojava ideal, but it cannot begin to compete in terms of self-interested realpolitik with recent events in Kirkuk. Kirkuk, which is also cursed with oil, is one of the places where control is disputed between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Federal Government. There was supposed to be a referendum on its future, but that didn't happen. Instead, it became a de facto part of the autonomous Kurdistan Region when the Iraqi army retreated and Kurdish peshmerga took over control during the campaign against ISIS in 2014. In 2017 it was taken over by Iraq's Iranian-backed militias after the Kurdistan Region held a referendum on total independence, which included the disputed territories. The referendum received massive support, but Iraq (and almost every other country) was determined to block it being put into practice. Since then, the Iraqi Government has continued earlier policies of Arabisation.

Recently, Baghdad agreed that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) could return to their former headquarters in Kirkuk city. Protestors [objected](#) to this by blocking the Kirkuk Erbil Road. Last Saturday, Kurds organised a counter protest, which was attacked by the Iraqi security forces leaving four dead and over twelve injured. And on Sunday, the Federal court suspended the handover of the building.

In the nature of Iraqi politics, what you see are the impacts of schemes hatched behind closed doors. Ethnic divisions are being exploited in the power struggles between different parties as local elections loom; but the extent of double-dealing and subterfuge remains a matter of conjecture. The KDP have been [accused](#) of orchestrating the demonstration against themselves as part of their plan to dominate Kurdish politics in the region.

Iranian Kurds in Iraq

We can expect more troubles in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in ten days' time. This is the deadline agreed between Iran and the pro-Iranian government in Iraq for the resettlement and disarming of the groups from Rojhelat – the Kurdish region of Iran – that are based in IDP camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. On 28 August, Iran [reminded](#) Iraq of this agreement, threatening to repeat its military attacks of last autumn if it is not complied with. Neither Komala nor the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran have intervened militarily in the uprising in Iran – they argue that this would risk even more violent retaliation – but they are resistant to the idea of giving up their weapons and their possibility for self-defence. They can also be expected to resist any attempt to deport individuals to Iran. (The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), which has guerrillas in the mountains beyond the reach of the Kurdistan Regional Government, is not immediately affected by this agreement, but Iran already regards them as military targets.)

Earlier – in exactly a week's time, on 16 September – it will be the anniversary of the death of Jina Amini at the hands of Iran's "morality police", which triggered protests throughout Iran. To commemorate "the most popular and longest protest and uprising to challenge the rule of the Islamic Republic", and

to keep the protest movement alive, six Kurdish Iranian parties, including the three discussed above, have come together to [call for a general strike](#) that day. This is an important call and also a brave one as the Iranian authorities have clearly been preparing for a clampdown on anniversary protests.

Swedish solidarity

I will end with a much less risky act of resistance, but one that shows exemplary organisation and solidarity. The Swedish Solidarity Committee for Rojava is [demonstrating](#) that, despite Turkey's statement to the contrary and the submissive tone of the Swedish Government, support for the YPG and women's YPJ is still allowed in Sweden, and that that support is strong. They are planning another big demonstration for the end of the month, and, with the help of the Left Party, they have openly collected over 100,000 Kroner (around 10,000 €) and delivered it to the Kurdish defence forces. YPJ spokesperson Rûksen Mihemed recorded a thank-you message flanked by two soldiers with T-shirts sporting the Rojava Committees' logo.

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