



RCM Thematic Report 9

PROSPECTS FOR NES

IMPACT OF STATUS QUO AND US WITHDRAWAL

RETURNS CONTEXT MONITORING PROGRAM (RCM)

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GLOSSARY

GoS	Government of Syria
IDP	Internally displaced person
ISF	Internal Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KR-I	Kurdistan Region-Iraq
NES	Northeast Syria
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RCM	Returns Context Monitoring program
SANES	Self Administration of North and East Syria
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
YPG	People's Protection Units

1. METHODOLOGY

The Return Context Monitoring (RCM) project was established at iMMAP in June 2020 to fill qualitative information gaps around experiences of and conditions for IDPs and refugee returnees inside Syria. RCM operates through two main deliverable streams, return and reintegration area profiles which cover specific geographic areas, and thematic reports on topics relevant to return dynamics across Syria. RCM works with a variety of stakeholders to identify key information gaps and develop research aims, including durable solutions working groups, sector working groups, and bilateral partner and donor consultations.

This report is the 9th RCM thematic report, which in addition to exploring the current status quo in northeast Syria (NES), and its relation to US policy, also explores how an eventual US withdrawal will play out if not preceded by a shift in the US's current approach to NES and Syria generally. The information and findings in this report are the culmination of more than a year of RCM research and analysis efforts in NES. In addition to semi-structured desk research and primary research carried out specifically for this report, the RCM reviewed data and analysis from previous RCM reports on NES.

2. STATUS QUO

2.1. BACKGROUND

US policy on Syria is currently focused on maintaining stability, which it has pursued through five loosely defined objectives: 1) addressing dire humanitarian conditions; 2) discouraging a resumption of active conflict; 3) countering the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); 4) holding President Bashar Al-Assad and other government of Syria (GoS) figures accountable for atrocities; and 5) looking for opportunities to advance the UN mediated peace process. While the unanimous renewal of UNSC resolution 2585 and the absence of any major escalations, along with the public's exhaustion with interventions in the Middle East, have allowed US officials to characterize the current administration's approach as a success, circumstances on the ground tell a starkly different story.

In NES the US maintains a direct, relatively low-cost military presence, premised on countering ISIS, and remains the largest donor for humanitarian and stabilization activities in the area. Although its presence and support have prevented GoS and Turkish advances and provided lifesaving aid for thousands of people, in the absence of a coherent US vision for NES, any genuine US efforts to resolve the Syria crisis, and significantly increased levels of US and western support, the US is also working to perpetuate, and even exacerbate, a status quo of debilitating uncertainty. When combined with recent, precipitous withdrawals from NES, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the US's ongoing, aimless drift in NES, have encouraged local and external stakeholders, including other western states, to adopt reactive, short term postures and abandon any notion of meaningfully addressing NES's dysfunctional, ineffective governance, deteriorating services and economy, oppressive political environment, and continued security threats and violence.

At present there is no indication the US plans to make any adjustments to its approach in NES and Syria more broadly. So long as ISIS remains active in NES, the US can maintain its presence, and so long as security in NES and the rest of the country does not fully collapse, it can claim success and paper over its near total lack of effort on the political front and role in damaging the Syrian economy through sanctions. Consequently, the crippling status quo, detailed below, is likely to prevail for years to come.

2.2. STATE OF SELF ADMINISTRATION

Between 2015 and 2018, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and People's Protection Units (YPG) gradually established the components of what today are known as the Self Administration, with the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) responsible for political affairs, the Self Administration for North and East Syria (SANES) responsible for governance and services, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) responsible for military affairs, and Internal Security Forces (ISF) responsible for security affairs. Although the Self Administration has been presented as a cohesive, representative NES-wide system capable of administering the area over the long term, this is a false characterization. In its current form the Self Administration is a fragile amalgamation of political, security, and governance bodies controlled by opaque PYD-YPG structures made up of Kurdish kadros and held together by the continued US presence. While there are capable, quasi-independent non-kadro figures serving in the Self Administration, their efforts are undermined not only by their lack of authority, but by the hollow, dysfunctional nature of the wider system at present.

The PYD-YPG's approach is locally unpopular and has perpetuated extremely poor, ineffectual administration. Nevertheless, given the current US posture and current political and security environment, it is understandable. The PYD and YPG are Kurdish organizations principally concerned with their own longevity and the status of Kurdish areas in NES. Although they have come to control Arab-majority areas as a result of their partnership with the US and other western states, the PYD-YPG have no long-term, fundamental interests in these areas. Rather, control of these areas provides the PYD-YPG both a greater chance of maintaining the status quo and a stronger bargaining position with the GoS if and when the US withdraws.

2.3. REFORM PROSPECTS

In lieu of the US providing long term assurances for its presence in NES and actively pushing for a genuinely inclusive, capable Self Administration, the PYD-YPG have no incentive to adjust their current approach. Further, pursuit of genuine political and governance reforms without a shift in the US approach could quickly undermine the PYD-YPG's position.

On the political front, US and western officials have pushed for Kurdish-Kurdish talks over the past two years in an attempt to reach a power sharing agreement between the PYD and Kurdish National Council (KNC). While it appears US and western officials believe a PYD-KNC power sharing agreement would reduce Turkish opposition to the Self Administration and establish a more inclusive Self Administration, in their current form talks will never achieve such objectives and are unlikely to progress at all. Without high-level US engagement with Turkey and a vision for NES that makes the US presence and support for NES at least partially contingent on a power sharing agreement, the PYD will understand it is under no obligation to make any concessions to the KNC. Even worse, as seen over the past year and a half, the push for talks without a wider plan may push the PYD to complicate the prospect for future talks by further consolidating their position in NES under the guise of internal governance reforms.

While basic governance reforms, such as clarifying roles and responsibilities across SANES bodies and expanding SANES's administrative and technical capacity through responsible hiring, seem like relatively harmless steps, they in fact hold significant risks for the PYD-YPG. Over time, a representative, capable SANES could eventually push back against PYD-YPG kadro influence and interference, move for greater transparency and accountability, and pursue policies, programs, and additional reforms that run contrary to PYD-YPG interests. If accompanied by greater political freedom and the ability of opposition parties and non-PYD aligned civil society groups, both Kurdish and Arab, to participate in the SDC and SANES, this could quickly threaten the PYD-YPG's position and lead to outright conflict.

Over the past two years, in parallel to Kurdish-Kurdish talks, the SDC and SANES have discussed a flurry of governance reforms, including revising the Social Contract, holding local elections, developing a SANES human resources policy, and establishing SANES monitoring and oversight mechanisms. While some of these are needed, the nature, timing, and progress of these reform efforts raises serious questions about their true purpose. To date, PYD-YPG kadros have been responsible for managing reform discussions and efforts and have continued to prevent the KNC or any genuine opposition bodies from participating.

Additionally, the reforms as they currently stand avoid addressing the SANES's systemic dysfunction and disorganization, with none seeking to clearly define roles, responsibilities, and practices across the multiple layers of SANES or address the capacity and technical shortcomings in central and regional SANES bodies.

While some SDC and SANES figures engaged in the reform process may have good intentions, overall it appears the reforms are a PYD-YPG move to further consolidate power and further obscure the state of the Self Administration. Consequently, it is unlikely reforms will lead to a more responsive, capable SANES, or lead to a genuinely more inclusive, representative system.

2.4. SELF ADMINISTRATION-GOS RELATIONS

So long as the status quo persists, there is unlikely to be any change in Self Administration-GoS relations. Over the past decade, the PYD-YPG and GoS have exhibited a continued willingness to coordinate on service and economic issues, such as the electricity, water, and fuel sectors, when mutually beneficial. They have also demonstrated a willingness for limited military and security coordination when NES is threatened by increased Turkish pressure. Although political and security tensions have temporarily interrupted coordination, and the balance of power in NES has shifted in favor of the Self Administration for the time being, the PYD-YPG and GoS, as well as Russia, all have an interest in maintaining coordination so long as the status quo persists.

For all three parties, the interest in continued coordination appears linked in large part to the potential for informal political and security agreements between the PYD-YPG and GoS if and when the US withdraws. While such agreements are discussed in Subsection 3.2: Renewed GoS Control, amidst the status quo there is no chance for any political and security agreement between the two sides. The PYD and YPG have presented the Self Administration as a formal, decentralized, bottom-up alternative to the GoS, and through the SDC, have continued to present formal demands to the GoS and Russia. While the GoS and Russia have no interest in making formal concessions to the PYD-YPG around the Self Administration, as both undoubtedly understand the Self Administration's institutional hollowness and fragility, the PYD-YPG have no interest in making concessions to the GoS or Russia so long as the US remains in NES.

Over the past two years, the US has quietly framed its support to NES as part of an effort to enable the Self Administration to reach a lasting political and security agreement with the GoS. This not only runs contrary to the loosely defined objectives of Kurdish-Kurdish talks, but so long as the US presents no vision for NES and exhibits no interest in engaging Turkey and Russia around sustainable arrangement for NES, there is little to no chance that any such opportunity will ever arise. Thus, the PYD-YPG will continue to use coordination and informal discussions with the GoS and Russia to hedge its position, while the GoS and Russia will simply wait for the US to withdraw.

2.5. SECURITY

Similar to political and governance dynamics, security in NES is likely to remain extremely poor without a shift in US and western policy. The US's approach towards ISIS over the past several years in NES has amounted to containment. To address the ongoing ISIS insurgency in NES, US forces have carried out dozens of raids against suspected ISIS figures and cells and have continued to support the SDF and ISF in countering the group. Nevertheless, there is no indication the US is willing to devote the resources required to sustainably reduce ISIS's presence in restive areas of Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, and southern Al-Hasakah. All three areas are therefore likely to witness recurrent ISIS attacks, which will not only claim hundreds of lives, but will sustain the group's influence, limit humanitarian and stabilization access, and further undermine the prospects for sustainable recovery.

Meanwhile, it remains to be seen how US and other states approach the issue of detained ISIS fighters in NES in light of the recent ISIS attack on the Ghweiran prison. Although the gradual repatriation of ISIS fighters and family members may continue, and potentially accelerate, at present it appears unlikely that the US will develop any substantial policy to address the status of thousands of Syrian ISIS fighters, as well as foreign ISIS fighters who cannot be repatriated, currently held in SDF prisons without any judicial mechanism to try and hold them.

In addition to various ISIS-related threats, without US efforts to reach an agreement with Turkey on the future of NES, Turkey will undoubtedly continue to pressure NES. A Turkish incursion in Syria will remain a possibility so long as the PYD-YPG and Self Administration are present in NES, however, the most likely scenario is the continuation of intermittent Turkish escalations along frontlines, targeted drone strikes, and moves to disrupt services and the local economy. All three of the moves will continue to complicate the humanitarian and stabilization response in NES and severely undermine recovery efforts.

3. US WITHDRAWAL

3.1. BACKGROUND

As discussed previously, the most likely trajectory for the US's approach in NES is the continuation of the status quo for years to come. While a future administration could explore more ambitious, sustainable objectives that contribute to long-term stability in NES and across Syria, it is just as likely that the US further reduces its interest in Syria and eventually carries out a precipitous withdrawal. The following subsections detail how such a withdrawal is likely to play out in NES so long as the status quo persists.

3.2. RENEWED GOS CONTROL

As discussed in Subsection 2.2: State of the Self Administration, the Self Administration is a fragile amalgamation of political, security, and governance bodies controlled by the PYD-YPG and held together by the continued US presence. Consequently, so long as the status quo persists, a US withdrawal would result in the rapid collapse of the Self Administration system. While Turkey may seek to take advance into parts of NES along the Syrian-Turkish border following a US withdrawal, discussed further in Subsection 4.3: Turkish Intervention, ultimately the GoS and Russia will regain control of the majority of NES.

In Kurdish-majority areas, the GoS and Russia would likely pursue a security arrangement with PYD-YPG and PKK figures that allows for the return of the Syrian military and GoS civilian authorities and integration of local Kurdish YPG and ISF units into GoS military and security services. The GoS and Russia would almost certainly reassert full control over local oil and gas resources and mandate the complete dissolution of the Self Administration system, conditions PYD-YPG and PKK figures would likely accept so long as they are granted informal safe haven and Kurdish-majority areas are provided a degree of autonomy in local security affairs, in an arrangement similar to what is currently in place in Tel Rifaat and the Al-Shahba area in Aleppo.

In Arab-majority areas, the GoS and Russia are likely to pursue a more localized approach similar to what occurred in southern Syria. Thus, the GoS and Russia could work with local SDF commanders and notables to pursue separate security arrangements for western, central, eastern, and northern Deir-ez-Zor, southern and eastern Al-Hasakah, Ar-Raqqa, Tabqah, and Menbij. While the GoS and Russia would seek to integrate local SDF and ISF units into GoS military and security services, they are also likely to dispatch local Arab paramilitary forces to the area. When combined with the fractured nature of Arab-majority areas, the GoS and Russia would thus enjoy a degree of influence and control far greater than in Kurdish-majority areas, at least in the near to mid-term.

In both Kurdish and Arab-majority areas, the return of the GoS will likely trigger immediate waves of displacement, followed by gradual population outflows. In Kurdish-majority areas, local sources estimate that between 15% and 50% of the current population, or 120,000 to 400,000 people would attempt to leave. While those fleeing would likely seek shelter in Iraq, it is unclear how the Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq (KRG-I) and former western states who supported NES would address a likely refugee crisis on the Syrian-Kurdistan Region-Iraq (KR-I) border. In Arab-majority areas, local sources estimate that between 25% to 50% of the current population, or 400,000 to 800,000 people, would attempt to flee. While some may seek refuge in neighboring Iraq, it is likely the majority attempt to cross into Turkish administered areas of northern Aleppo, raising similar questions about how Turkey would address a likely humanitarian crisis in NES.

Notably, the ambiguous political position of NES and questions about the potential return of the GoS have seemingly encouraged western donors to explore channeling support for NES through Damascus. While donors may be calculating that this will lay the groundwork for a more sustainable, robust humanitarian response in NES over the long term, there is no evidence to support this. At present, and so long as the US does maintain its presence, the only certainty is that such moves will further undermine and complicate the existing humanitarian response in NES, due to the siloed nature of programming and the risk of waste and diversion, as the GoS has proven to be far more predatory than the Self Administration and lacks authority and access in much NES.

3.3. TURKISH INTERVENTION

Turkey has demonstrated a willingness to take advantage of the uncertainty surrounding the US's position towards NES, and Syria generally, to intervene directly to address concerns along its southern border. While another Turkish intervention in northern Syria is not a certainty if the US withdraws, if the GoS and Russia fail to address its concerns it could seek to take direct action. As discussed in RCM Thematic Report 6: Operation Peace Spring and Potential Turkish Intervention Scenarios, Turkey's options for intervention in NES can be divided into six zones: 1) Menbij; 2) Ain Al Arab/Kobani; 3) M4 Highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer; 4) Darbasiyah and Amuda; 5) Al Malikeyyeh/ Derik, Al-Qahtaniyah, and Al-Jawadiyah; and 6) Qumishli. Each of the seven zones would constitute an area of distinct strategic and symbolic importance to Turkey and the GoS and Russia.

The two most likely areas for Turkey to intervene would be Menbij and Ain Al Arab/Kobani. Menbij is an Arab-majority area with strong social and economic ties to the neighboring Euphrates Shield Area. Turkey could not only easily capture and integrate Menbij into its existing areas in northern Aleppo without triggering a significant displacement relative to other areas of NES but could also use the area to host additional IDPs that are likely to seek refuge in Turkish administered Aleppo following the return of the GoS. Nevertheless, Turkey's decision to take Menbij would be based on its relations with Russia, as Menbij is strategically important due to its location atop the M4 highway. In contrast to Menbij, Turkish intervention in Kurdish-majority Ain Al Arab/Kobani would trigger significant displacement, major western opposition, and potentially tacit Russian approval. Nevertheless, Turkey could use the area to host a significant number of IDPs following the return of the GoS to NES and eliminate a PYD-YPG stronghold.