



FOREIGN POLICY AND THE INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION OF ROJAVAYÊ KURDISTAN (2011 – Present)

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This policy paper examines the evolution of Rojavayê Kurdistan [Western Kurdistan – commonly referred to as (Democratic Self-Governance of) Rojava] from 2011 to the present, analysing how successive phases of the Syrian conflict shaped its institutional development. It argues that Rojava's survival and consolidation have been driven primarily by external engagement, rather than by religion or ideological doctrine. Drawing on primary sources, including interviews with central figures and significant contributors, such as Mazloum Abdi, Kino Gabriel, and Alan Semo, the paper demonstrates how Rojava's military, political, and administrative institutions emerged in response to regional and international pressures.

Unlike the interim administration, where religion serves as a central source of political legitimacy and external alignment, Rojava's governance model institutionalises a clear separation between religion and politics while employing religion as a unifying social and communal force. The analysis situates Rojava within a broader typology of states-to-be, illustrating how non-state actors can and do exercise foreign policy agency to secure survival, consolidate autonomy, and shape regional dynamics under conditions of conflict and contested sovereignty.

This study advances the literature by highlighting the greater significance of foreign policy in the institutionalisation of Rojava's established administration. By tracing the interaction between foreign policy engagement and institutional evolution, the paper highlights the distinctiveness of Rojava's model and contrasts it with competing governance structures in Syria. It argues for the greater significance of foreign policy in institutional consolidation, advancing an interpretation that departs from the dominant literature on non-state governance.

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Building on this analysis, the paper offers policy recommendations grounded in the prerequisite of political agreement among Syria's main political components. It concludes by outlining implications for Syria's future political order, emphasising inclusive governance, the formation of political parties, free and transparent elections, decentralised yet unified state structures, and the reduction of foreign intervention as necessary conditions for a sustainable and stable political transition toward a post-conflict political order in Syria.

Keywords: *Rojavayê Kurdistan; States-to-Be; State Formation; Foreign Policy; Institutional; Decentralization; Syria.*

Introduction

This analysis examines how the trajectory of the Syrian crisis, beginning in March 2011, shaped the institutional evolution of Rojavayê Kurdistan, officially declared on 11 November 2013. Rojava's development mirrors the sequential phases of the Syrian conflict, reflecting a parallel process of institutional formation under conditions of protracted violence, contested sovereignty, and external intervention. Rojavayê Kurdistan – framed by its leadership as “the local people who constitute the institution” (Mazloun, 2022) – has seen its survival and consolidation determined less by the role of religion as ideational structure, than by foreign policy praxis and the institutional arrangements shaped through external relations. Its evolving structure deconstructs the link between religion and politics: political organisation is not guided by religious doctrine, nor does religion function as a legitimising ideology for authority. Instead, foreign policy has been decisive in establishing Rojava as a regionally and internationally recognised entity with institutional legitimacy. This stands in sharp contrast to Syria's post-Assad transitional administration, where religion has been instrumentalised as an ideological framework to legitimise authority and maintain cohesion. Crucially, Rojava's institutional emergence did not begin with its formal declaration of autonomy. Key institutions – most notably the military structure – had already existed since 2011.

Existing scholarship has primarily focused on Rojava's internal governance and ideological innovations, including democratic confederalism, communalism, and cooperative political economy (Restakis, 2020; Galván-Álvarez, 2020; Kaya and Lowe, 2025). Analyses highlight secularism, ethnic equality, and pluralism as core features of its political model, with religion and ethnicity treated as factors in multicultural coexistence (Schmidinger, 2018) (Oso Sabio, 2015), whereas the foreign policy dimension that drives the evolution of its institutions is largely absent from the literature, and addressing this gap is the focus of the present study. While



these studies emphasise Rojava's pluralist, anti-sectarian approach, what remains underexplored is how foreign policy engagement shaped Rojava's survival and institutional development under conditions of conflict and contested statehood. This paper addresses that gap by examining foreign policy as praxis – defined here as *the responses of state and non-state entities to the action [activities] of external actors across domestic, regional, and international realms* (Charountaki, 2024 :5) – and argues that such engagement constitutes a prerequisite for institutional survival, especially in the case of non-state actorhood. The analysis is distinctive in two ways: first, it situates the argument within the Syrian context, with its complex interplay of internal and external actors; and second, it highlights the strategic use of foreign policy in informing (non) state value-sets and directing foreign policy agenda-setting and implementation.

Primary sources include interviews with Mazloun Abdi, General Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Alan Semo, former PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party) foreign affairs representative in London, and Kino Gabriel, former SDF spokesman (2018-2021), illuminating Rojava's operational, administrative, and political structures.

The early 21st century may not have held the same significance for Kurds in Syria as it did for those in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) (Charountaki, 2010:231).¹ Rojava's model demonstrates a loosely structured administration akin to the Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Iraq, with the contexts of the Kurdish case(s) and Kurdistan providing the impetus for policy innovation and a novel understanding of foreign policy. The Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) operates beyond but still within a broader state framework while maintaining distinct institutional structures and external relations, as evidenced by its representation at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos (19-23 January).

1. The Rise of ISIS and the Institutionalisation of Rojava's Military Structure (2012–2014)

1.1. Pre-Existing Institutions and Early Foreign Policy Agency

In the case of Rojava, key institutions – most notably its military wing – predated any formal declaration of autonomy. As Mazloun Abdi notes Kurdish military preparedness did not emerge solely in response to the 2011 uprising but reflected a longer trajectory shaped by earlier confrontations, including the March 2004 Qamishli uprisings. “While Kurdish political organisation in Syria [when I

¹ Initiatives such as the U.S. *Middle East Partnership Initiative*, while formally aimed at promoting democratisation, had indirect implications for Kurdish issues. U.S. funding and engagement with reformist groups in Syria (Prados and Sharp, 2005: 12) after the Iraq War contributed to political openings that later affected Kurdish organisational and strategic trajectories.

was personally involved] – with an established political wing – dates back to the 1980s”, Abdi emphasises that by 2011 “the military institution was already in place anticipating the descent into civil war” (Mazloun, 2022). Today, Rojava is organised through an integrated system of military, political, and administrative institutions, indicating that its formation was built upon pre-existing organisational frameworks rather than emerging *ex nihilo*. The evolution of Rojavayê Kurdistan’s institutional structures is represented in Figure no. 1.

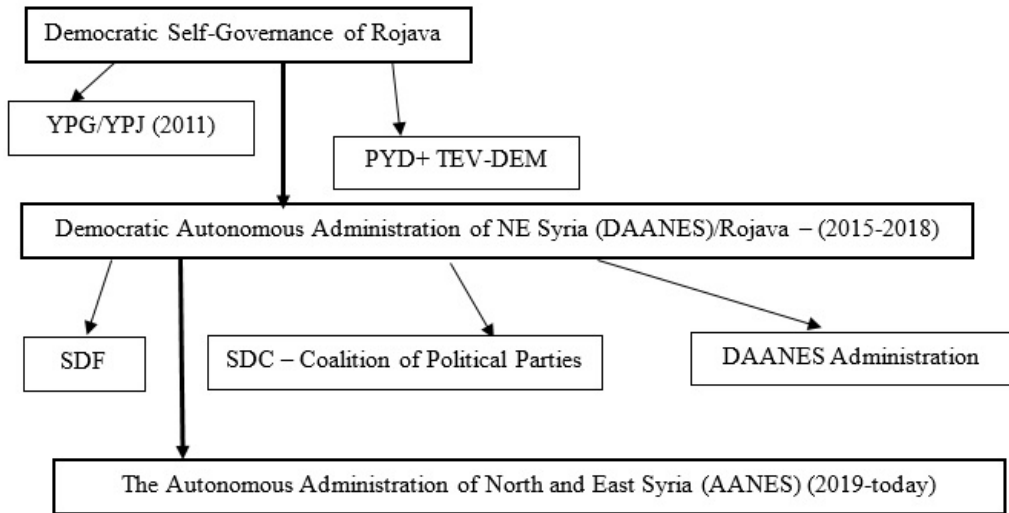


Figure no. 1: Rojavayê Kurdistan – (2012-2014)

“Early coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq in 2011” (Mazloun, 2022) further illustrates Rojava’s foreign policy agency – particularly at the inter-Kurdish level – from the outset. While the initial focus centred on “military defence against ISIS and later Turkish intervention, Rojava has now increasingly sought to consolidate its self-administration in order to play a more effective role in regional politics” (Mazloun, 2022). This trajectory underscores the central argument advanced in this paper: foreign policy engagement – rather than religion – constitutes a prerequisite for the survival of actorhood. This engagement not only enables institutional consolidation but also facilitates further institutional development, a dynamic that has been largely overlooked in both theoretical and empirical studies within the realm of International Studies (Charountaki, 2022: 98). What makes this argument distinctive is that it situates survival and growth directly within the practice of external engagement, showing how strategic interactions with regional and international actors can shape internal institutional evolution, even in the case of non-statehood.



The analysis advances the discussion on the capacity of non-state actors to function as foreign policy actors, demonstrating how foreign policy co-shapes the establishment of autonomous entities and the consolidation of their status – especially under conditions of conflict and diverse identities. This work understands states-to-be as *entities with state attributes and an ability to adjust the status quo – that is, to drive or shape the process of development in an effort to preserve or consolidate their powerbase and self-governance* (Charountaki, 2022 :98). Even in the absence of full independence, the development of foreign policy capacity marks a significant transformation in the status of the non-state entity, reflecting its aspiration to operate meaningfully within the international arena. In the case of Rojava, this capacity emerged gradually during the post-2012 period as the administration consolidated internally and navigated a complex environment of Syrian state structures, regional actors, and global powers. This process represents a shift from a primarily local non-state actor to a state-to-be, capable of projecting institutional interests externally, managing relationships with other states and non-state actors, and asserting its presence in political/diplomatic and security realms.

Rojava represents a notable case of a non-state actor classified as a state-to-be in the newly developed typology (Charountaki, 2022: 3).² Its evolutionary trajectory toward greater self-determination elevates its role within International Relations, positioning it alongside recognised states as a relevant foreign policy actor. Foreign policy is central to Rojava’s survival because domestic and external pressures are deeply intertwined. Rojava’s Social Contract (Rojava Information Center, 2016) frames the administration as part of Syria while explicitly rejecting religious authority in public affairs. Article 106 mandates that foreign policy reflect democratic principles and the interests of the people, emphasising collective diplomacy rather than state-centric power projection. In Rojava, foreign policy has shaped institutional development, military strategy, and governance structures, functioning both as a mechanism of survival and a vehicle for regional recognition.

Syria can be conceptualised in four spheres of action: domestic-internal, domestic-external, regional-internal, and regional-external.³ The domestic-internal sphere encompasses political forces directly involved in state formation, while the domestic-external (or regional) sphere includes regional actors exerting influence within Syria. Regional-external actors operate beyond Syria’s immediate borders. Examples such as Türkiye and U.S. policy illustrate the distinction between international and regional (foreign) intervention, where external support, alliances, and interventions significantly shaped Syria’s military and political calculus.

² The classification of non-state actors (NSAs) proposed in this work prioritises their nature (implying a set of specific characteristics) – even when their modes of action may overlap – and consists of: (a) institutions; (b) irregular militaries and militia groups – including private companies; (c) fundamentalist groups (religious or ethnic); (d) ethnic groups; and (e) states-to-be.

³ This identification resembles the example of Iraq in Charountaki, 2025, pp. 7–8.



1.2. Early Phase (2012-2014)

Rojava's early institutions emerged during the first phase of the Syrian conflict. Mazloum Abdi identifies 2012–2014 as a “local revolution where the Syrian people claimed rights”, coinciding with the rise of ISIS and “the onset of regional intervention, primarily by Iran and Türkiye while Gulf states intervened indirectly”. While Rojava “did not engage directly with Iranian troops such as the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps), it confronted Iranian-backed militias” (Mazloum, 2022).

Key events during this stage include some of the bloodiest battles in January 2013, when the Democratic Union Party (PYD) faced both the Free Syrian Army (FSA, established July 2011) – initially formed by defectors from the Assad regime and later transformed into a Salafi-oriented force by Türkiye (Phillips, 2020: 98) – and the Islamic State in the city of Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn) (Charountaki, 2015: 1583). The CIA coordinated with donors and opposition commanders from May 2012, channelling weapons from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye to selected Syrian rebels by 2013. The programme, implemented in two stages, included a late-2014 Pentagon-led phase as part of Operation Inherent Resolve to defeat ISIL. Under the Timber Sycamore programme, the CIA also established joint operations centres in Türkiye and Jordan to manage arms and training, coordinating between the U.S., its European and Middle Eastern partners, and rebel groups (Rolandsen and Selvik, 2023: 534-544).

The YPG's (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, People's Defense Units) military organisation proved decisive in defending Kurdish-majority areas, while the Kurdish-led administrative structures established initially through the PYD positioned Rojava strategically within U.S. regional policy. The 2014 attack on Kobani constituted a historical turning point, “when the U.S.-led coalition decided to support us through both air and ground operations” (Mazloum, 2022), in response to “the YPG/YPJ's fierce resistance against ISIS” (Semo, 2025). This engagement marked the beginning of an institutionalised military cooperation, which ultimately contributed to the defeat of ISIS and was closely linked to Rojava's growing institutional coherence and external engagement. According to Mazloum Abdi, ISIS “was angered by our resistance and sent messages warning us not to fight them, threatening to kill us all” (Mazloum, 2022) “including all Kurdish civilians, whom they regarded as infidels” (Semo, 2025), which helps explain why they launched their attack on Kobanî.

This phase also saw the PYD begin to expand its external relations and seek a greater international presence, shaping Rojava's foreign policy interactions. The rise of IS and defections of FSA fighters to the Islamic State (2013-2014) led to a shift in the U.S. strategy. According to Alan Semo, this policy “replaced the failed U.S. plan to cooperate with the FSA and served as an alternative to the attachment of the YPG to the PKK, aiming to leverage progressive Arab forces under Kurdish control” (Semo, 2025).



Rojava's governance contrasts sharply with that of the interim administration. Al-Julani, a member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, founded the Al-Nusra Front in Syria (January 2012) with the aim of establishing an Islamic state in Syria (Phillips, 2020: 13). According to Kino, "HTS is a religious administration that started as a jihadist group whereas the current interim administration, which instrumentalises religion in its foreign relations⁴, is based on Sharia law and Sunni Muslim ideology" (Gabriel, 2025). HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Syrian Liberation Organization, 2017) includes a significant number of foreign fighters, mainly members of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), approximately 3,500 of whom reside with their families in Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib province. Smaller contingents of Chechen fighters – many from the now-inactive Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, formerly pledging allegiance to ISIS - are also present (Hassan 2025). Religious symbolism, such as the gift from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Syrian President Ahmed Al-Sharaa – a piece of the Kiswa of the Holy Kaaba in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus (Saudi Gazette, 2025)⁵ – further illustrates the instrumental use of religion in the interim's administration external relations. However, in the absence of broad internal legitimisation and international recognition, ideational structures alone do not guarantee effectiveness. Similar dynamics are evident in recent clashes between al-Julani's forces and the Druze population in Suweida (The Arab Weekly, 2025), as well as in confrontations between government forces and the SDF in the Raqqa countryside (Sharawi, 2025). In the case of Türkiye, religion has also operated as an ideational tool shaping its Syrian foreign policy in the post-Assad era. These cases demonstrate that foreign policy engagement provides tangible leverage and institutional recognition, but only when internal cohesion is strong; as such, it matters more than religion as another ideational structure in consolidating authority and enabling institutional survival.

Rojava administration draws on religion – not as an ideology but as a unifying factor of social cohesion – constructing a multi-religious governance framework that ensures inclusivity and stability without invoking religious authority as a tool of coercion. These developments underline Rojava's distinctive model, which is likely to shape both Syrian and regional dynamics in the coming years. While groups such as HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) employ religion as an ideological tool, Rojava strategically separates religion from politics. Article 95 of Rojava's Charter establishes the Body of Religious Affairs, institutionalising this separation (Rojava Information Center, 2016).

⁴ Syrian President Ahmed Al-Sharaa placed a piece of the Kiswa of the Holy Kaaba in the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, a gift from Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman.

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2. Coalition Formation and Multi-Identity Governance (2015-2018)

The formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015 marked a transition from PYD/YPG independence to a broader coalition, incorporating Syriac Christians, Armenians, Yazidis, Turks, and Chechens, the SDF embodied Rojava's principle of inclusive governance. U.S. support played a pivotal role in operationalising the coalition, legitimising Rojava's administration, and consolidating territories liberated from IS. While this broadened coalition enhanced inclusivity, it also sidelined the PYD to some extent. As Alan Semo notes, the transition from the YPG to the SDF "allowed Arab and Assyrian forces to join, ensuring inclusive governance" (Semo, 2025).

During this period, the Islamic State consolidated, creating a strategic shift in the region. As Mazloum explains, "the U.S. was initially reluctant to support the YPG on the ground, doubting that such a small force could defeat IS. After extensive meetings in Erbil and Zakho, however, the US was convinced to deploy, leading to major joint operations with the coalition. Once the YPG began liberating territory, it was also able to secure and administer it, which in turn required incorporating Arab forces - ultimately prompting the transition from YPG to the multi-ethnic SDF in 2015 so Arabs and Assyrians could join these forces" (Mazloum, 2022). During this period, "the U.S. trained FSA rebels to join the YPG" (Semo, 2025).

The year 2016 was equally significant, cementing the turning point that began in 2015 when internal balances in Syria shifted and set the stage for the next phase of the war. Until Türkiye's direct military intervention in Syria in 2016, the conflict was primarily shaped by internal Syrian actors, such as Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State (ISIS), the Syrian regime, and Syrian components of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who largely determined the internal dynamics of the war. For Rojava, the situation was different: local conflicts required negotiation and coordination primarily among these domestic forces, rather than engagement with regional powers. However, following the Turkish intervention, the perception of the path toward a political solution changed radically, as the war ceased to be purely an internal Syrian affair and acquired regional and international dimensions.

With Ankara's successive military operations – Euphrates Shield (2016-2017), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019) – Rojava's strategic environment shifted dramatically. The deployment of Türkiye-backed Syrian opposition factions (Syrian National Army) against the YPG in Afrin resulted in the capture of Afrin (2018), Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn) (2019), and Tell Abyad (2019), following earlier gains at Al-Bab (2017) and Jarablus (2016), effectively giving Türkiye control "over more than half of the Syria–Türkiye border", "while continuing to seek the expansion of its control zone", and "disrupting Rojava's territorial continuity" (Mazloum, 2022).



These incursions compelled a significant recalibration of Rojava’s military, political, and administrative strategies, transforming the perception of the conflict from primarily local survival to confronting a powerful regional adversary. This shift in external threats transformed Rojava’s perception of the conflict and its approach to political solutions as regional intervention by Türkiye now became the defining factor in Rojava’s strategic calculus. As Mazloum emphasises, this period also coincided with “the largest Russian intervention in Syria in 2015, marking a historical turning point in the conflict” (ibid). These developments not only reshaped the strategic environment but also had direct implications for Rojava’s institutional foundations and foreign policy praxis. The external interventions compelled the administration to adapt its governance structures, consolidate decision-making processes, and engage more actively with regional and international actors, highlighting the interplay between institutional consolidation and the practice of foreign policy under conditions of external pressure.

3. Democratic Autonomous Administration (2019 – Present)

By 2019, the military defeat of IS marked the beginning of what Mazloum Abdi describes as a “solution phase”, one that continues today “until a political solution is found” and is intended to serve as the framework for an eventual political settlement of the Syrian conflict. This phase has been characterised by intensified international involvement, with external actors operating directly inside Syria in an effort to shape the contours of any future political outcome. During this period, the United States and Russia “divided the region” while effectively “established parallel spheres of influence while maintaining coordination mechanisms to avoid direct confrontation”. U.S. forces consolidated their presence east of the Euphrates, “particularly in the Hasakah governorate and parts of Deir ez-Zor”, while Russia assumed control “over airspace and ground operations west of the river, including areas around Kobani and Qamishli, with a notable concentration along the Turkish border”.(ibid).

As U.S. priorities gradually shifted, Türkiye expanded its regional military agenda. By 2020, Ankara was deploying Syrian fighters beyond Syria’s borders, including to Libya and Azerbaijan, further integrating these armed groups into its wider security strategy. As U.S. backing declined, many opposition fighters were absorbed into Türkiye’s military orbit, operating under Ankara’s sponsorship (Rolandsen and Selvik, 2023: 544). Reflecting on this transition, Mazloum Abdi notes that prior to Türkiye’s intervention, Rojava’s confrontations were primarily internal: “our local conflicts were with local powers – Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Syrian regime, and the Free Syrian Army -Syrian ‘components’” (Mazloum, 2022). Turkish intervention fundamentally altered this landscape by introducing a sustained regional adversary into the conflict.



Also in this period, Rojava undertook a significant institutional transformation. In December 2023, it rebranded as the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (DAANES), adopting a revised constitutional framework rooted in democratic confederalism. This phase marked a shift toward ideational governance principles rather than religious ideology, emphasising inclusion, decentralisation, democratic participation, and multi-religious coexistence. These principles increasingly shaped both internal governance and external engagement, positioning DAANES as a political alternative to prevailing Arab-Islamic governance models emerging in New Syria. These territories, previously under Rojava’s administration, remain strategically critical along the border, as they provide control over key crossing points, supply routes, and influence over regional security dynamics.

Although a 2020 agreement established security zones and imposed certain limitations on military movement, it did not fundamentally alter the territorial realities created by earlier Turkish operations. According to Mazloum Abdi, “Türkiye continues to control a substantial portion of the Syria – Türkiye frontier, including strategically vital areas previously administered by Rojava” (Mazloum, 2022). These territories – stretching along the border – remain central to Ankara’s security calculus and to Rojava’s ongoing political and administrative constraints. Through successive military interventions and enduring political influence – both overt and covert – Türkiye has emerged as a decisive actor shaping territorial control and governance outcomes across Syria, particularly following Russia’s withdrawal from Qamishli Airport and the relocation of all its military equipment to the Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia province.

Efforts to revive a diplomatic track intensified on 8 December 2024, one day before the fall of the Assad regime. Following the 22nd Doha Forum on 7 December, Türkiye, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar issued a joint statement calling for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The statement reaffirmed commitments to Syria’s territorial integrity, the relaunch of the UN-led political process under Resolution 2254, and continued counter-terrorism efforts, underscoring the degree to which Syria remains a focal point of regional and international security concerns. The foreign ministers emphasised the Syrian crisis as a threat to regional and international security, stressing the need to restart the political process in accordance with UN Resolution 2254, uphold Syria’s territorial integrity, and combat terrorist groups (Duvar English, 2024).

More broadly, Syria functioned as a determining factor for competing regional strategies. While Iran has treated Syria as a core component of its regional axis – linking Tehran to Lebanon and Hezbollah – Türkiye has increasingly instrumentalised Syria as part of its containment policy toward Kurdish autonomy. The consequences of this policy would become evident in the subsequent period, shaping the formation of



the new Syria and the emergence of new structures and balances in the region. While Assad represented Iran's axis in Syria – serving as a strategic corridor to Lebanon and as support for Hezbollah – Damascus became the central arena through which this policy was channelled. This marked a sharp departure from Ankara's pre-2011 posture and has had lasting consequences for Syria's territorial configuration, the balance of power among local actors, and the emergence of new political structures in the post-IS landscape. In a televised interview with Al Manar TV (25 August 2015), Bashar al-Assad stated: “the power of Iran is the power of Syria, and a victory for Syria is victory for Iran. We are on the same axis, the axis of resistance” (Al Jazeera, 2015). Meanwhile, Rojava's administration developed adaptive institutional structures and a proactive foreign policy praxis, enabling it to navigate non-statehood, external pressures, and regional dynamics in ways the interim Syrian administration - largely attempting to replicate older centralised models of governance – has struggled to achieve, given the evolving nature of the conflict and the limitations inherent in older centralised governance models (see Table no. 1). This distinction highlights the uniqueness of Rojava's model and reinforces the argument that foreign policy engagement has been a constitutive factor in institutional consolidation.

4. Key Recommendations: Building a Stable and Inclusive New Syria

Syria is not merely an object of foreign policy but a determinant of regional and international power politics. Iran has historically treated Syria as a pillar of its regional axis, while Türkiye – often in coordination with elements of the Damascus regime – has sought to reshape Syria's political and security landscape along its borders. These policies have not only constrained Kurdish political agency – without which stability in Syria appears impossible - but have equally marginalised Druze, Alawite, Christian, and other Arab actors, undermined pluralism and reproducing exclusionary governance. Recent arrangements, including the 18 January 2026 understandings, risk reinforcing imposed political realities if they are not embedded within an inclusive and plural state framework.

Attempts to impose a uniform political reality from above – without acknowledging Syria's transformed political landscape – reproduce the structural failures that led to conflict. Stability may not be attainable through selective recognition or centralised imposition. Syria's social, religious, and political plurality needs to be constitutionally recognised as a foundational element of the state ensuring that diversity is managed through law rather than coercion. At the same time, the rise of Salafi-jihadist ideologies further challenges any project of state reconstruction grounded in civilian authority and the rule of law.



Table no. 1: Evolution of Rojava’s Administration and Foreign Policy Praxis

ROJAVA ADMINISTRATION/ EVOLUTION	KEY DEVELOPMENTS	PHASES/ SYRIAN CRISIS
Rojavayê Kurdistan (via Democratic Union Party (PYD, 2003) – YPG/YPJ (2011))	Local revolutionary phase (2012–2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internal mobilisation through PYD and YPG/YPJ; - Establishment of self-governance structures; - Creation of the 2014 Social Contract (Rojava Constitution); - Limited external intervention; - Conflicts mostly with <i>local actors</i>: al-Qaeda, ISIS (early emergence), FSA, Syrian regime; - The battle of Kobani as a critical turning point.
Syrian Democratic Council/ Forces (SDC/ SDF (DAANES, 2015))	IS-driven internationalisation and regional interference phase/ particularly Turkish military intervention phase (2015–2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rise of IS triggers U.S.-led international coalition intervention; - YPG becomes coalition partner and reorganises into SDF to include Arabs, Assyrians, Yazidis; - Increasing U.S. engagement: training, bases, joint operations; - Kurdish forces fight IS “on behalf of the world”; - Opposition fragmentation: FSA divisions, rise of HTS; - Türkiye begins using Syrian rebels in Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), Peace Spring (2019).
AANES (DAANES → New Constitution, Dec 2023)	<p>Solution phase (2019–today)</p> <p>During the solution phase, it is important to distinguish between Rojava/DAANES — which has focused on decentralised governance, multi-ethnic inclusion, and local administration — and the central government in Damascus, which has prioritised territorial control, reintegration of armed groups, and negotiations with external actors. This distinction frames ongoing political agreements and the evolving post-conflict settlement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct confrontation with Türkiye: Türkiye occupies Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serêkaniyê, Tel Abyad; - Conflict becomes regionalised rather than internal; - DAANES adopts democratic confederalism as ideological foundation; - Inclusion of multi-ethnic/religious groups in SDF; - Increased need for foreign policy strategy and diplomacy; - 2019–today: “phase of political solution” — heavy involvement of U.S. & Russia; joint patrols; division of spheres of control; - Ongoing negotiations around UN Resolution 2254 and future Syrian settlement.
- ¹		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - November 10, 2025, White House summit and cooperation framework - March 10, 2025, Agreement between Damascus and the SDF - January 18, 2026, Ceasefire & Integration Agreement

Against this backdrop of external intervention and imposed political arrangements, Rojava’s trajectory is relevant not as a transferable governance model, but as an illustration of how sustained external engagement – while prioritising security cooperation – also contributed to the institutionalisation of an autonomous political-administrative entity with the capacity to manage its external affairs. Although external support focused primarily on military coordination, it simultaneously enabled Rojava to consolidate self-governance and exercise limited foreign policy agency through regular engagements with the U.S. and other official

⁶ The process is still ongoing.



representatives, despite its non-state status. This dual process produced a structural contradiction: a political actor that achieved international engagement and institutional consolidation is now increasingly framed through a narrow security lens. Despite this structural contradiction, Rojava's experience demonstrates how decentralisation, secular governance, and inclusion can coexist without undermining territorial unity, while also highlighting the risks of marginalising political representation in favour of security imperatives. The experience underscores the importance of managing diversity through political participation rather than coercion and of preventing the domination of one component over others, as failure to do so risks renewed instability.

A successful transition requires political agreement among all Syrian components and the development of representative political parties. While Rojava's institutions enabled effective governance across approximately 50,000 km² of territory (2025), the earlier emphasis on administration over political representation (as seen with the PYD) limited leverage in negotiations with the central state. The next stage therefore requires political parties that genuinely represent Syria's diverse communities. Only through party-based representation – constitutionally linked to decentralised governance and state institutions – could elections ensure meaningful participation without re-centralising authority. Bridging administrative legitimacy with party-based representation is essential to preserve decentralised governance within Syria's future political order. This transition requires connecting local/regional governance structures to state political and legal frameworks, while managing foreign influence, preventing the re-emergence of authoritarianism, and ending external occupation.

Key priorities include: (1) legal recognition of political parties representing all Syrian components; (2) free and transparent elections; (3) an inclusive constitutional framework; (4) territorial unity combined with constitutionally guaranteed decentralised governance; (5) legitimate state leadership; (6) security-sector reform limiting foreign control and rejecting militia authority; and (7) clear domestic political oversight of the military to ensure accountable governance.

Failure to implement these priorities risks intermittent instability or renewed civil conflict in Syria. Ensuring political representation, decentralised governance, and inclusive constitutional recognition – alongside ending foreign occupation and halting external intervention – is crucial. Integrating administrative legitimacy with broad-based political participation will be essential for achieving a stable, representative, and enduring post-conflict Syria.

In this context, Rojava's governance model could play a constructive role in restoring stability across Syria – not as a separatist project, but as a demonstrative framework for inclusive, multi-identity and decentralised administration. While full equality among all Syrian political components as *prius inter pares* may not be immediately achievable in the post-Assad era, Rojava's institutions offer a practical approach to addressing the Kurdish issue fairly while ensuring that Druze, Alawite, Christian, Arab, and other communities are meaningfully included in governance.



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