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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Security Gap in Syria: Individual and Collective Security in 'Rebel-held' Territories

Ali Abdul Kadir Ali\*

This paper examines security in Syria through the conceptual lens of the security gap, understood as the gap between security practices and objectives which have implications for individual and collective security. Practices of security can be the state apparatus, the military, and militias. The objective – safety – can refer to the safety or security of a range of collectives including the state, political parties, and ethnic groups, while individual security refers to the general safety of inhabitants and the protection of human rights. This paper compares the security situation in so-called 'rebel-held' areas of Syria where alternative governance structures have emerged, examining the security approaches of Local Administrative Councils and Rebel Councils in Deir Azzor, Manbij, Dera, and areas dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). It argues that security and safety are strongly influenced by authority formation and the nature of deals and relationships involved in the formation of these nascent authorities. It also argues that security in these areas is strongly influenced by the Syrian government, which disrupts collectives that threaten its own collective security while giving limited support to those which serve its agenda of retaining power. It also demonstrates the limited utility of the 'regime' vs. 'rebel-held' dichotomy, as rebel groups at times must accommodate the Syrian state in limited ways for instrumental purposes. The article is based on fieldwork conducted in Turkey in 2013–2014, interviews conducted in 2015, and secondary sources based on field research.

The Syrian government's initial violent response to peaceful protests which began in 2011 has led to armed conflict, evolving into a regional proxy war. This conflict has affected Syrian society at all levels, with implications for neighbouring countries. Hundreds of thousands have been killed and

injured, millions others displaced within and beyond the country's borders, and large parts of Syria are no longer under full government control. In some of these areas public services barely function and the Syrian state appears to be absent on the ground but for the bombs it drops from the sky. Nascent governance structures have emerged in these areas to restore public services and security from the bottom-up.

Much has been written about the implications for individual security and human

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\* Department of International Development, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom  
a.a.ali@lse.ac.uk

rights in Syria under the rule of Bashar Al Assad and his late father Hafez. Systematic human rights abuses under both their governments, including today in areas under government control, are well documented (Batatu 1999; George 2003; HRW 2010, 2012; Lefevre 2013). Less well understood is the security situation in areas not under full government control. Grounded in fieldwork conducted in Turkey in 2013–2014, interviews conducted in 2015, and secondary sources based on field research, this article sets out to provide a nuanced and alternative understanding of security conditions in Syria, with a particular interest in inhabitants of so-called ‘rebel-held’ areas where alternative governance structures have emerged. In majority-Kurdish areas, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the most dominant organisation. In other ‘rebel-held’ areas, Local Administrative Councils (LACs) and Revolutionary Councils (RCs) have been formed.

To achieve its objective this article applies the notions of security objectives and security practices, and the ‘security gap’ between them (see Kaldor & Selchow 2015). The security objective refers to what it is that is being secured. Security objectives can be both individual and collective, depending on what is understood to be the objective of security, and on what is defined as the collective – it may be the state, a community, a society (Kaldor & Selchow 2015: 8). The objective of security may also be individualistic, securing individual safety and rights, depending on the form of political authority (ibid.). The practices of security are understood as the interplay of security apparatus – which consists of police, military and intelligence institutions – and the strategies and tactics deployed (Kaldor & Selchow 2015: 6). They are inherently collective since practices represent expressions of political power and authority, which may be a combination of domestic, national and global institutions. (ibid.). The gap is the mismatch between the practices and objectives which creates

varying levels of insecurity depending on the context (Kaldor & Selchow 2015: 7). The security gap can also refer to the inherent gap between collective and individual security, as objectives may be collective or individual, but practices are always collective (ibid.). As a consequence the security apparatus is often more preoccupied with its own security than with the safety of its constituents. There are of course a range of actors involved in Syria’s war, including armed groups, political parties, and nascent governance structures with varying security agendas.

The article puts forward two main arguments. First, the war is highly decentralised and fragmented (as well as fluid) and the security gap is experienced very differently in different localities. Second, individual security, particularly in areas no longer under governmental control, is very much related to the nature of political authority and the process of its formation. Furthermore, even groups emergent from an attempted revolution against the authoritarian rule of a narrow elite have practiced forms of exclusion in their nascent authorities.

The article is divided into three main parts. It starts with a section that briefly outlines some of the literature on authority in ungoverned spaces in the Middle East and how this might relate to notions of collective and individual security. In the main section the article presents its findings regarding LACs and the Kurdish areas. It concludes with reflections on the variation in the nature of the security gap in different ungoverned spaces.

### **Ungoverned Spaces**

The Syrian civil war has resulted in a number of ‘ungoverned spaces’ in areas beyond the control of the central government. Ungoverned spaces do not lack governance – almost all areas inhabited by humans display some sort of governance; rather, they are spaces where territorial state control is ceded to or shared with actors ‘other than legally recognised sovereign authorities’ (Clunan & Trinkunas 2010b: 275). ‘Ungoverned spaces’

emerge in diverse contexts owing to deliberate state policies, or with states' 'witting collaboration,' usually combined with local and global dynamics (Clunan 2010: 4). States 'deliberately create ungoverned spaces or accept softened sovereignty when it suits their purposes' (Clunan & Trinkunas 2010a: 25). In the scholarly literature, various terms are adopted such as *hybridity* or *public authority* to describe informal mechanisms of governance in Somaliland (Renders & Terlinden 2010; Boege *et al* 2008), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Nigeria (Meagher 2012). Mampilly (2011) has examined 'rebel governance' in the DRC, Sri Lanka, and in what is now South Sudan. In what follows I focus on the work of Baylouny (2010), one of the few authors to apply this type of analysis to the Middle East.

Baylouny (2010) surveyed different types of authority which emerge in ungoverned spaces in the Middle East and the actors forming these authorities. Her work examines areas of the Middle East which are relatively unregulated by the state: informal settlements; refugee camps which have become urban settlements; and other neglected urban margins. They differ from 'rebel-held' areas in Syria in that they are not attempts by rebels to govern, but are similar in that these areas lie within formal state territory, but are neglected, under-regulated, and subject to state authorities' predatory actions. These areas lack the public goods that the state furnishes elsewhere, prompting certain actors to engage in service provision, including regarding security and welfare (Baylouny 2010). Actors, such as militias, utilise a combination of violence, identity, and service provision to fill what Hall and Biersteker call 'functional holes' of public services and order which the state has chosen not to furnish in marginalised areas (Baylouny 2010: 137).

Residents of these areas are more likely to be excluded from the formal economy and reliant on informal means of generating income, leaving them susceptible to bribe extraction from corrupt law enforcement

officers. Intermediaries who negotiate with or bribe (higher-level) state officials to protect residents of unregulated spaces can gain prestige and authority (Baylouny 2010: 139). In effect, they make deals with the more powerful state collective to furnish a level of protection from it for individuals of the 'ungoverned' population. However, although the fulfilment of these functions can lead to 'influence in the community and acquiescence to governance, this dynamic does not necessarily imply either legitimacy or approval': communities which benefit from services may also suffer from the brutality and arbitrariness of these actors' governance (Baylouny 2010: 138). The collective that makes an agreement with the state may provide security in the sense of protection from state predation, but the objective may be to simply carve out space within which to implement its own security objectives, rather than to protect individuals' safety, rights, and freedoms.

Combinations of religion, identity, and violence may be mobilised to facilitate authority generation (Baylouny 2010: 138). In insecure areas, those with violent resources can obtain influence by making public spaces safe, and by creating systems for dispute settlement and reconciliation (Baylouny 2010: 141–3). They may be formal courts, religious or otherwise, or less formal systems. Violence understood as necessary to preserve a community against enemies is a source of legitimacy for authority seekers. The construction of such enemies justifies the violent regulation of public space. (Baylouny 2010: 146)

A common identity, religious or territorial, can legitimise authority seekers, especially if it distinguishes the community from a real or imagined enemy (Baylouny 2010: 147). Those with, or who are seeking, power construct boundaries between groups and social categories in order to include and exclude particular categories, what Yuval-Davis (2011) calls the politics of belonging. Linked to this is ethnic security, based on the claim that only rule by one's own ethnic community

can provide protection and security (Bojic-Dzelilovic 2015). This type of authority leans more towards collective security objectives than to protecting individuals. It may be a form of ethnic-security or securing the interests of a different collective, such as specific militias.

The PYD mobilises ethnic identity and this has had important implications for its collective security objectives. By contrast, LACs have been more likely to favour individual security objectives, although they sometimes create their own boundaries, excluding those who do not have 'revolutionary credentials'. However, the pressures and constraints imposed by the state have been more powerful than those which civilian populations have exerted on nascent authorities. They include shelling and air strikes, and the denial of public services. The effectiveness of these nascent governance structures is closely tied to deliberate state policies. In Kurdish areas of Syria, the PYD has been allowed to form an administration because the Assad government believes the group can be used to secure government objectives. The PYD operates under constraints, including intermittent embargoes imposed by the confluence of conflicts with Turkey and the Iraqi KRG, as well as its fight against ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). But these constraints pale in comparison to those experienced by LACs, the success of which is deemed to threaten the security of the Assad government. It is this contrast between the security gap in PYD-run areas and in areas 'governed' by LACs that I examine in the rest of this paper.

### **The PYD: Collective or Individual Security Objectives?**

The PYD was founded in 2003. Although it denies it is a branch of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) led by Abdullah Ocalan – now imprisoned in Turkey – it belongs to an umbrella organisation supportive of the PKK (Lowe 2014: 227).<sup>1</sup> Syria expelled the PKK in 1998 under Turkish pressure and before the uprising against Assad began, PYD

members were subjected to longer prison sentences than other outlawed Syrian parties (Savelsberg 2014: 97–99). Its current leader, Saleh Muslim, has said he spent several months a year imprisoned by the Assad government since 2003 (Guerin 2012). He fled to Iraq in 2010 but was allowed to return in 2011.

The PYD claims to be building a decentralised and inclusive democratic entity concerned for individual rights, which feature strongly in The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons.<sup>2</sup> 'Rojava' means Western Kurdistan, and includes non-contiguous pockets of Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria including Afrin, Kobane and the Jazeera. Articles of the constitution stipulate that: (1) Rojava institutions shall protect democracy and human rights; (2) nobody shall be subjected to torture or cruel treatment; (3) arbitrary arrest and detention is forbidden; and (4) rights to civic and political association and assembly are protected.<sup>3</sup> According to Article 15, the YPGs (People's Protection Units) are 'the sole military force' of the three cantons and are commanded by 'the Body of Defence – a part of the Executive Council – through its Central Command.' However, the YPG is widely understood to be under PYD command.

The PYD has established councils and governance structures tasked with security, policing, and aid distribution, and formally opposes creating an ethnically-defined territory ruled by a central authority.<sup>4</sup> The PYD has set up People's Tribunals, enforced by the *Asayish* – the PYD's police force – which its foreign relations spokesman Alan Semo says will work to international and universal legal standards implemented by specialised lawyers (ICG 2014: 14).

Relative stability and security ensued after Syrian forces withdrew from Kurdish areas and the PYD took over security provision. Some cultural, political, and civic activities have thrived, including open debates about developing local government (Lowe 2014: 228–229). The regions were secure enough

for a delegation of activists and academics to complete a nine-day tour there in December 2014. Afterwards they unanimously declared that they believed accountable democratic structures had been established there and that programmes for civic tolerance and gender liberation had been advanced (ROAR 2015). Their statement was uncritical of the Rojava experiment. Some were impressed by 'democratic confederalism' (Miley & Riha 2015): a devolved type of governance advocated by PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan that abandons the outmoded system of nation states (Ocalan 2011).

Ocalan was inspired by Murray Bookchin, a former Marxist-Leninist turned libertarian anarchist, who promoted ecological and democratic confederalism, according to Biehl, partner and collaborator of the late Bookchin (Biehl 2012) and participant in the delegation to Rojava. Miley and Riha were also impressed by the level of gender emancipation they saw (Miley & Riha 2015). Also among the delegation was David Graeber, an academic and anarchist activist who was convinced that Bookchin's ideas were being implemented in the region,<sup>5</sup> including direct democracy, collectivisation, efforts to dissipate coercive policing powers to society, and gender emancipation (Graeber 2015). Women have notably been visible in the delegates' accounts of Rojava's administrative structures. The PYD is also keen to highlight women's presence in the war against ISIS. The YPJ, or 'Women's Protection Units,' are brigades formed of women, though their commanders may be YPG men.<sup>6</sup> Why women fight in separate brigades and not within the YPG is not clear, nor is the extent of their decision-making influence. But the strong presence of women in Rojava contrasts with other areas in Syria discussed later in this paper. Furthermore, Rojava is described as an anarchist-inspired experiment disinterested in state-building because, according to its founding principles, creating a nation-state does not bring real democracy. A report on human rights abuses in Rojava,

which included criticism of the lack of international standards in court trials (HRW 2014), was dismissed on these grounds. 'Human rights assumes the existence of a top-down state and tries to moderate it, but if you don't have a state at all, apparently that's a human rights violation too' (Graeber 2015). The somewhat bizarre argument is that the PYD's disinterest in respecting human rights is related to its disinterest in being a state.

Other sources provide a different perspective about the PYD's disinterest in human rights. Savelsberg believes the PYD is playing power politics dressed up as Kurdish nationalism (Savelsberg 2014: 102). While the PYD may be partially experimenting with democratic confederalism, the idea remains vague and the PYD's commitment to implementing idealistic principles remains untested. The ideology may be trumped by a desire to retain control (Lowe 2014: 238–239). The creation of Rojava and its administrative structures was a top-down PYD initiative conducted without transparency (Savelsberg 2014: 101). Elections for the 'People's council of Western Kurdistan' (PCWK) were held in November 2011 but only the PYD stood for election and there is little distinction between the PCWK and the PYD (Lowe 2014: 228). Rojava institutions are dominated by PYD-affiliated associations with an assortment of ethnic representatives with 'nothing to lose from joining the project' (ICG 2014: 15). The PYD monopolised aid distribution in Qamishli according to two men from the city now living in Turkey (Interview April 2013). The People's Tribunals have reportedly been arresting civilians who have done nothing wrong, using a hybrid penal code akin to a YPG military law (ICG 2014: 14). Tellingly, when the party's leader, Saleh Muslim, spoke in London in 2013 he was unable to give a concrete example of anything the PYD had been doing to promote democracy in Syria, despite being Deputy General Coordinator of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change in Syria (Muslim 2013).<sup>7</sup> The PYD's primary objective appears to be

securing its own power rather than protecting the rights it mentions in its own constitution.

### ***Violence and collective security practices of the PYD***

Structures of governance created by the PYD are supported by the capacity to deploy violence to maintain power, order, and collective security. Identity and violence are mobilised to implement this collective security agenda, akin to methods Baylouny outlined (2010), using violence to repel a common enemy. When ISIS attacks Kurdish populations in northern Syria (OHCHR 2014: 5),<sup>8</sup> the YPG gains credibility by repelling ISIS and reclaiming seized territories. Saleh Muslim has made implicit plays on identity, conflating the (Arab) opposition to the Assad government with 'Salafis and extremists'; the Kurds, he implies, are moderate democrats (Muslim 2013). His words create boundaries in a politics of belonging and exclusion which presents the PYD as the righteous protectors of Kurds and other ethnic and religious groups. The decision to include representatives from ethnic groups in the Rojava assembly implies a commitment to ethnic quotas and principles of collective ethnic security. The message is that members of those communities will be secure under PYD rule because it allows members of their own community to be involved – nominally at least – in governance.

There seems to be a contradiction between the security of the party (the PYD) and the safety of Syria's Kurdish community. Symbolic assertions of ethnic identity are manifested in PYD areas: in Qamishli new bilingual signs are in place, 'Western Kurdistan' appears on vehicle license plates, and Kurdish flags have appeared (Glioti 2013a). However, a Qamishli Syrian now living in Turkey explained that the flag was specific to the PYD and that other Kurdish parties, as well as Syrian revolutionaries, were banned from flying their own flags (Interview August 2013). Members of the Rojava delegation were concerned that the symbols used were not inclusive enough

as they were limited to Kurdish nationalism and risked alienating non-Kurds who 'might misidentify the struggle as one for a Greater Kurdistan' (Miley & Riha 2015). While this may make Kurdish Syrians feel safer, it may be perceived as threatening by non-Kurdish groups and may not sit comfortably with Syrian Kurds opposed to the PYD. Savelsberg is sceptical even of the PYD's Kurdish nationalism, arguing it is used to mask PYD power politics (2014: 102).

The rivalry between the Iraqi-based pro-Barzani Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the PYD has adversely affected the individual safety of Syrian civilians in Kurdish areas by resulting in border closures between Iraq and Syria that prevented aid from reaching populations in PYD areas. In the spring of 2013, aid from the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq reached Qamishli and was distributed in an orderly way by the PYD, according to two Qamishli men living in southern Turkey. The men opposed PYD politics and condemned the party's use of arbitrary detention but appreciated the relative order and security that Qamishli benefited from (Interview April 2013). However, by the summer of 2013, the borders were closed and what little aid was promised by the Iraqi KRG was not able to enter PYD areas; KRG and PYD personnel were not allowed to cross the border either (ICG 2014: 10–11). One report claimed that the KRG had closed the border after the PYD arrested 75 Syrian KDP members (Star 2013).<sup>9</sup> When the KRG opened the border for a three-day period, 70,000 Syrian Kurds took the opportunity to flee a situation of food, electricity, and water shortages for Iraqi KRG areas (ICG 2014: 10–11). Some were prevented from leaving by the PYD and the *Asayish* police, its officials claiming that this was to counter attempts to change the demographic balance of Syrian regions at the Kurds' expense (Glioti 2013c). In Amuda, residents attempted to flee the reign of the *Asayish* and the poverty which came with PYD rule but were blocked by the *Asayish* at the border (Glioti 2013b).

### ***PYD and YPG violations of human rights***

Human rights activists have reported violations by the PYD, the YPG, and *Asayish*. These include incidents of arbitrary detention and violence against civilian opposition members. A human rights activist, whose organisation has been documenting violations in Syria, reports that the PYD frequently detains activists, and that interrogations mimic those of Syrian government forces. Pre-conceived charges of supporting terrorism and treason are presented to detainees who are often tortured (Interview May 2014). Human Rights Watch has reported other abuses: arbitrary arrests, abuse in detention, violations of due process, uninvestigated killings and disappearances, and the recruitment of children into PYD security forces (HRW 2014). Furthermore, the PYD has used expulsion as a way to punish dissent:

...They arrested five individuals and exiled them to Iraqi Kurdistan. Some are not allowed to return to Syria, political party leaders for example... The PYD has prisons and practice torture. Many people who have left the Kurdish areas in Syria have not left because of the brutality of the regime or because of the difficulties of daily life there – although daily life is very difficult there – but because of the pressures from the PYD (Interview May 2014).

Numerous reported examples of human rights abuses exist:

1. A young Kurdish Syrian was beaten by YPG members in Afrin because of her civic activism against the Assad government (Interview April 2013).
2. "The PYD does not want to have any critics in the country," said a Kurdish man the PYD had targeted; the PYD detained and tortured his niece in Afrin before expelling her and her relatives from Syria (Kurdwatch 2015).<sup>10</sup>

3. In Amuda, PYD forces closed down a radio station which opposed the PYD (Interview May 2015). In the same village, *Asayish* and YPG units killed seven protesters in June 2013 as part of a crackdown against rival Kurdish and pro-FSA groups (Glioti 2013b).
4. The YPG and *Asayish* vandalised offices of the rival Yekiti party and attacked their members (Glioti 2013b).
5. Youth committee members from rival Kurdish groups were detained and officially accused of drug trafficking, but the perceived motivation for their arrests was political, prompting a series of public sit-ins. These sit-ins evolved into large demonstrations at which witnesses say YPG and *Asayish* units opened fire (Glioti 2013b; Syria Untold 2013). The YPG ordered a curfew the following day and raided homes for "saboteurs," one of many terms used by the Syrian government since 2011 to discredit its opponents. To prevent further demonstrations, mourning relatives were prevented from gathering (Glioti 2013b), echoing tactics of Syrian government forces.

The PYD 'interferes in everything, and uses force to hinder any activity beyond its authority,' according to Mohammad Wali from the Amuda Coordination Committee (Syria Untold 2013). *Asayish* police forces began implementing a forced conscription law, passed by the PYD, which states that each family must provide one man aged 18–30 in military units (Syria Direct 2014).<sup>11</sup> At times the PYD mirrors the authoritarianism of the Ba'th system, but under a Kurdish nationalist cover (Savelsberg 2014: 86).

### ***Ethnic and Party Security, and the security of the Assad Government***

What is the explanation for this gap between individual rights-based security the PYD professes, their abusive actions in securing the interests of their party, and collective ethnic-security? Part of the explanation may



be found in reports of the PYD's acceptance of material assistance from the Assad government (and its ally Iran), and a growing dependency on the government as a source of service and resource provision (ICG 2014: 4–5, 8–9; Savelsburg 2014: 98). When the PYD took control of towns in Kurdish areas it did so not in coordination with other Kurdish parties but seemingly with the tacit support of the Syrian government (ICG 2014; Lowe 2014; Savelsburg 2014). Early on in the uprising, the Assad government played the communal card, covering cities like Damascus and Latakia with posters that carried slogans like 'Beware those who support sectarianism' (author's observations 2011) and promoting the idea that only the Assad government could be trusted to protect the country's minorities against an opposition it labelled as 'extremist Islamists.' This was at a time when no such threat existed, representing the deliberate construction of 'ontological insecurity' (Bubandt 2005) as a means to secure its power through fear, and became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

PYD leader Saleh Muslim has parroted this narrative since his return to Syria, attempting to portray the PYD as protectors of moderates and minorities and the opposition as 'extremist Salafis.' His claims have been bolstered by the presence of armed groups linked to Al Qaida who have attacked Kurdish communities whilst at the same time oppressing other groups which oppose it and the Assad government. At times the YPG provoked Islamist groups into attacking Kurdish areas by launching offensives against them in coordination with a pro-regime militia, with the aim of creating distractions from their oppressive practices in places like Amouda (Savelsburg 2014: 100–101). This is part of a government strategy to compel Syrians to seek refuge in ethnic and confessional communities, 'to split each community into competing branches, dividing those who support it from those who oppose it; and to empower its supporters by charging them with providing government

services from areas in which it remains present' (ICG 2014: 23). The PYD can be viewed as a useful organisation for the Assad government to split the Kurdish opposition into different groups, weakening its potential to challenge its power.

The relationship between the YPG and FSA is complex, featuring both cooperation and violent confrontation (Lowe 2014: 229).<sup>12</sup> Most of the Kurdish opposition parties adopted a 'wait and see' stance vis-à-vis the Syrian revolution; the support given to the PYD by the Syrian government has succeeded in preventing Kurdish populations from joining the revolution (Savelsburg 2014: 98). The Syrian government is still present in the cities of Qamishli and Hassake and it is only from these locations that state employees can collect salaries. The Syrian government has not allowed the PYD to manage salary payment, preferring instead to further centralise this function. Prior to 2011 they could collect salaries from local government offices in their home districts (ICG 2014: 9).

In schools, the Ba'ath-approved curriculum has not changed, despite PYD requests for the introduction of the Kurdish language. The Damascus education directorate refused these requests, threatened to stop all teachers' salaries, and sent inspectors to enforce the curriculum (ICG 2014: 9, 23). The relationship between the PYD and the government of Syria is 'expedient and there is underlying hostility' (Lowe 2014: 230).

The PYD is not being allowed to implement as much of an ethnic security program as it might like to, and certainly not more than its patrons in Damascus will allow. It is authorised to implement a security agenda to protect the PYD's interests only so far as they do not threaten the collective security of the Assad government. Ethnic identity can only be asserted within parameters acceptable to the Syrian government's own security objectives. In the early days of the uprising, the government made a limited reversal of its politics of exclusion towards the Kurds. It passed Decree 49 in April 2011, introducing

a naturalisation process for many previously stateless Syrian Kurds, though the instrumental nature of the move was not lost on the Syrian Kurds who benefitted (McGee 2014). It was seen as a strategic move to pacify Syria's Kurds and prevent a Kurdish rebellion similar to that which took place in 2004. In addition, government forces are now deliberately treating Kurds detained for taking part in protests less harshly than non-Kurds. A Kurdish human rights defender said:

Before the revolution Kurds were treated worse than others. When I was recently detained with many other activists, the security officer spared me a beating [because I am Kurdish]. He asked each single detainee his name and where he was from to figure out who was and wasn't Kurdish (Interview May 2014).

The same man reported that Syrian government forces actively encouraged Kurds to pursue demands for ethnic autonomy and independence:

I was taking testimony from a [Kurdish] revolutionary activist who was detained by the regime. The security officer interrogating him said, 'Why are you raising that flag [of the revolution]? Why don't you raise your own flag, the Kurdish flag? Why don't you demand your own country?' (Interview May 2014)

Assertions of ethnic identity, which divide the opposition and unsettle supporters of the uprising, are permitted by the Syrian government. The PYD's ascent, influenced as it is by the PKK, does not sit well with the Turkish government which fears the emergence of a PKK influenced entity in Syria, and the possibility this will lead to demands for autonomy or secession in Kurdish-majority areas of Turkey.

Perhaps nowhere else in Syria is there a clearer example of an 'ungoverned space' engineered to secure state interests than in PYD-run areas. The Syrian government ceded partial control of these zones to the PYD, a 'softened sovereignty' that the government tolerates temporarily because it secures government security objectives. PYD security practices – the party and its militia – are securing the objectives of power retention, retaining the recently enhanced power of the PYD, and protecting the interests of its patron of expediency, the Syrian government. It also suggests that the nature of deals involved in the formation of political authority influences security objectives. The PYD appears to have struck a deal with the government of Syria and this may explain why its YPG militia has been abusing individual rights of those who are deemed a threat to the Syrian government. It may also relate to the oppression experienced by the PYD under the Ba'ath regime. Savelsberg says this is 'a telling example of what Vincent Geisser calls the "authoritarianism of the dominated"' (Savelsberg 2014: 102).

In the next section, I will discuss the markedly different experience of nascent governance structures, including local administrative councils (LACs), and show how the fragmented and decentralised nature of the war has influenced LACs to make deals with certain groups, including the Syrian state, in processes of authority formation.

### **Local Administrative Councils: Governance that protects Individual Security?**

In areas no longer under full government control, Syrians formed Local Administrative Councils (LACs), grassroots public administrations seemingly working to maintain and restore essential public services. Their creation appears to have emerged from need as much as from desire for political change. However, many LACs profess desires to create an alternative system: a representative and inclusive democratic government, with

higher levels of legitimacy than an authoritarian system. However, LACs vary considerably from one another due to differing socio-economic contexts; as such, this does not always translate into inclusive, election-based formation processes.

According to a LAC representative from the town of Idlib, 'Each council has its own way, each province has its own circumstances' (Interview August 2013). There appears, though, to be certain patterns: when Syrian government forces withdraw from areas of resistance, the withdrawal of service provision often follows, prompting LAC formation (Menapolis 2013: 4). Networks of citizens organise to provide humanitarian relief, basic services, and even courts of justice. LACs are also said to coordinate with armed groups, characterising LACs as civilian-led organisations with armed representation (Salmon 2013). The first instance of this emerged in Zabadani, a suburb of Rural Damascus, where protracted conflict necessitated coordination between civilian and armed groups. Numerous councils have long come to the realization that coordination with armed groups was necessary for operational and security reasons; as such, FSA representation on councils is common (Salmon 2013). It appears however that LACs' priorities are coping with dangers and needs due to armed conflict and resultant public service withdrawal just as much as, if not more than, they are about establishing democratic forms of political authority.

#### ***LACs and self-selection in Deir Azzor***

Although professing a commitment to democracy and political rights, some councils were formed secretly, without elections, for fear of state reprisals. The first LAC in Deir Azzor was a top-down creation whose objective was perceived to be securing interests of collectives such as the Syrian National Council (SNC) – then the formal opposition based in Turkey with backers in Qatari state – rather than the interests of local Syrian collectives, such as 'revolutionary' clans. The term

'revolutionary' is used frequently by activists and I understand it to mean those who oppose Assad rule and demonstrate this by organising or attending protests, for example. I interviewed 'Nasir,' a member of a committee instrumental in the formation of Deir Azzor City's LAC in eastern Syria. His narrative is the basis for this section. He belonged to the Revolutionary Council (RC) – from which the LAC originated – whose activities focussed on organising protests against Assad. The RC had a humanitarian committee, a media website, and connections to armed groups, and its members began travelling abroad to garner international support and recognition from the SNC. However, the local community believed the SNC prioritised the interests of its foreign backers, like Qatar, over local concerns. The SNC became part of the new National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces – the Coalition – which appointed individuals to represent LACs, sometimes before LACs had actually been formed on the ground.

The prioritisation of the collective security objectives of the Coalition and its foreign state backers was rejected in Deir Azzor city and province, whose citizens and various collectives were not consulted in the process. In rural areas, villages and small towns instead established their own councils, selecting respected individuals to represent clusters of villages and towns in a provincial LAC. Among them were professionals, community figures, and rebel fighters. Tribal leaders were also included but only those known to have been involved in revolutionary activity. When the provincial LAC was formed the city's LAC collapsed because, says Nasir, of its lack of legitimacy. Some members were former government officials, accused of corruption, and others were rejected because they lacked revolutionary credentials. Generally speaking, members were ineffective and failed to communicate with the Provincial Council. A politics of belonging was at play: those belonging to the old order did not necessarily belong to the new one, and were

considered a threat to its integrity. A boundary was drawn by the 'revolutionary' collective, deciding upon individuals' eligibility to participate in new governance structures.

Nasir described how he and others belonging to the 'new order' formed an LAC by invitation and consultation. They created an 'investigation committee' to locate people with the required skills and esteem in the community to join. Members of this committee were not allowed take part in the LAC. Elections were later held in secret due to safety concerns, mostly surrounding the risk of arrest and possible government attacks on large gatherings. The elections were held in secret locations and the electorate therefore was narrow, consisting only of activists and rebel fighters. Fighters were not allowed to become members of the civilian councils, but were nevertheless, said Nasir, supportive of the process, 'We are in a revolutionary situation so the LAC must involve the rebels.... When we get rid of the regime, the LAC will step down and it will be up to the people to decide whether or not to elect other people' (Interview August 2013). The relatively narrow base of the Deir Azzor LAC suggests that the security of the rebels is prioritised over the inclusion of the population in council formation. There is little data regarding how populations of Deir Azzor perceive LACs. However, a report from Bouleil, a town of 25,000 people and an estimated 10,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), described resentment at the failings of an unelected council dominated by a group called the Body for Revolutionary Movement (BRM) (DB 2014). The BRM invited activists to attend a meeting during which an election would be held, but, one activist claimed information regarding this meeting, including its location, was limited. The Bouleil LAC media representative defended its actions, arguing that even the Prophet Muhammad was 'discreet about critical matters', so they too should be discreet, especially as they were 'in the range of the regime's artillery'; however, the organisation

also expressed willingness to embrace everyone and hear criticism (DB 2014). Criticising nascent authorities from a distance is easy, but it does appear that local populations genuinely resent exclusion from processes of council formation and being denied the possibility of participating in decisions regarding how to provide essential services.

### ***Manbij: Individual Security?***

In Manbij, in Aleppo province, a Revolutionary Council (RC) was active after government forces withdrew in mid-July 2012, apparently striking a deal with local revolutionaries. Security forces agreed not to fire on protestors if they limited demonstrations to 15 minutes. When the army withdrew, Manbij became surrounded by rebel forces and unable to receive reinforcements (Reuter & Adhun 2012). The Local Coordination Committees led the organisation of peaceful protests against the Assad government and eventually formed an RC – consisting of 20 members acting as the executive (Munif 2014b) – which governed Manbij from 2012 until ISIS took over in 2014 (Menapolis 2013: 14). A Revolutionary Trustees Council was formed which, says one account, has 50 members (Menapolis 2013); while another account says it has 600 members and acts as a legislative house (Munif 2014b). To test RC members' commitment to the revolution, and counter simple opportunism, an Appeals Council was created to assess the revolutionary credentials of candidates for administrative positions. There are disputes however, and competing councils are regularly formed and dissolved, due to the RC's perceived lack of legitimacy and efficiency (Menapolis 2013: 14).

The revolutionaries' exclusivity, which prevents outsiders from becoming Revolutionary Trustees, may be the cause of these disputes. According to Munif (2014b), who spent several months in Manbij and northern Syria in 2013, 'so many people were left out and the revolutionaries alienated themselves.' Disagreements were reported when

members of Manbij's RC attempted to gain a seat on Aleppo's Governorate Council, elections for which were held in Turkey in March 2013. Rival committees were unsuccessful in claims to represent Manbij (Menapolis 2013: 15). Nevertheless, Munif (2013) points out that the RC originally consisted of 53 popular neighbourhood committees formed clandestinely when government forces were active in Manbij. Committees were preparing to defend their neighbourhoods against attacks by government forces and their *Shabiha* militia (Munif 2013). Although elections are unmentioned in accounts of institution formation in Manbij, and there are accounts of rival councils forming, there clearly exists political plurality in the Trustees Council. It is a space in which nationalists, leftists, traditionalists, and Islamists meet together and exchange their views about governing Manbij; however, because of patriarchal values, women were excluded from the Council (Munif 2014a). Before the religious court became the main arena for dispute settlement, a plurality of courts existed: a secular Revolutionary penal court, an Islamic court, and a court based on Customary Law which protects tribal interests (Munif 2014a). A 60 member-strong police force, which backed the new and better funded religious court, was formed in June 2014, improving security in the area (Munif 2014b). The police, under the oversight of the RC, however did not prevent a proliferation of armed groups in and around Manbij, pushing certain individuals to take the law into their own hands.

The current politics of belonging in the opposition is not inclusive towards women. Because of a historic patriarchy unchallenged by the Syrian state, the RC and Trustees Council had no women members (Munif 2014a). This is common in the formal Syrian opposition; despite the active participation of women in the revolution, aid work, and human rights activism, they remain absent or under-represented in formal structures and organisations (McGee 2012). Women were also under-represented in training

workshops for LACs which I observed in Gaziantep in August 2013. This is in strong contrast to areas under PYD control where the party is eager to display women's involvement in civic and military activities.

Despite many challenges in Manbij, circumstances allowed for service provision and for a level of individual security. Although government forces have attacked Manbij's infrastructure (Reuter & Adhun 2012), the city does not seem to have experienced the levels of infrastructural and institutional destruction common elsewhere in northern Syria (though recent airstrikes by US-led forces may have altered this [Reuters 2015]). Government forces were not defeated militarily but withdrew as a result of a mixture of civil disobedience and negotiations (Menapolis 2013: 13). Furthermore, Manbij has electricity due to its proximity to the Euphrates dam – the government keeps Manbij on the grid for fear of reprisals against the dam which would threaten the provision of electricity to government-controlled areas (Reuter & Adhun 2012).

Generally speaking, the Assad government has long neglected the area, which explains the absence of a strong military or security presence in the flour-producing town (Munif 2014b). Upon regime withdrawal, opposition leaders asked local sheikhs in the mosques to order government employees to continue working and maintain services. One member of the Trustees Council explained, 'We knew who was working for the regime, but to keep services running we decided to deal with them later' (Interview August 2013). Government workers who did not openly oppose the government continued to receive salaries, suggesting that 'loyal' workers may still be passing information to central authorities. The state court, which deals with land registry and personal status issues, continued to work with direct counterparts in Damascus (Menapolis 2013: 13).

The way in which Revolutionaries decided to deal with government employees – aided by the fact that the town was not a priority

of the Assad government – was instrumental to their success. Gardner (2012: 28) observes that the state is not only conceived of apparatuses, laws, and bureaucracies, but also ‘a configuration of powers *inseparable* from the embodiment in individual citizens,’ (emphasis in the original). Rather than purging these individuals, the RC pragmatically allowed them to continue working. Manbij still experienced weekly airstrikes (Munif 2014a) suggesting there was no high-level deal with the Syrian government – rather the Revolutionaries accommodated remnants of the the state in the sense of the individual Syrians who are its embodiment. This accommodation helped to keep the peace, but was also expedient in so much as the Revolutionaries lacked the expertise needed to run essential infrastructure – electricity, water, and the flour mills (Munif 2014a) – without retaining ‘loyal’ government employees.

#### ***Rivalry with rogue FSA units and ISIS***

The Revolutionary Council had rivals in addition to the Syrian state. When the FSA brigades, with which the RC had relations, left the town for the front, criminal brigades emerged and antagonised the population by forcing themselves to the front of bread queues (Munif 2013). The ‘bread FSA’ was cleared out by Islamist brigades – like Ahrar Asham, Jabhat Al Nusra, and ISIS – but the population resisted their efforts to impose unwanted social agendas (Munif 2013). The Islamist brigades were initially successful but eventually defeated by ISIS who seized bread production facilities and violently purged criminal brigades, reducing kidnappings in the town (Munif 2014b). Subsequent bread shortages and ISIS’s efforts to exert too much control over the population resulted in challenges to the group (Munif 2014b). ISIS was expelled from Manbij in January 2014 by local resistance fighters and the local police force (Munif 2014b). However, ISIS returned to the city, harassing civilians and, according to RC president Monzer Al Salal, confiscating

the property and houses of revolutionaries and publicly executing teenager Youssef Mohammed Al Mohamad. Al Salal stated that residents and civil activists organised a successful general strike against ISIS but that ISIS continues to control areas surrounding Manbij, making the town difficult to liberate completely, despite ongoing resistance (Watanili 2014).

Security practices and objectives appear to have differed in Manbij from PYD-run areas and Deir Azzor in important ways. Firstly, the deals struck with the state in Manbij differed from PYD areas in that they did not result in the Manbij RC implementing the Syrian government’s security objectives. Furthermore, a partial accommodation with state employees put Manbij’s RC in a better position than the Deir Azzor LAC. Finally, while the RC excluded women and individuals without revolutionary credentials, it was not secretive in its formation processes in the way that the Deir Azzor LAC was.

#### **Civil Society influences Council Formation in Dera**

Dera’s public service problems resemble those of other localities in Syria. Amir, a farmer from Dera, said that electricity from the national grid has halved since the beginning of the crisis and for three months there had been none at all (Interview February 2015). Water supplies, however, are uninterrupted because rebels control a water line supplying government areas. In Dera and nearby Quneitara, the composition and activities of LACs are influenced by civil society, international actors, and state and non-state armed groups. We lack data about whether LACs there were elected, but one civil society activist says his organisation influenced greater representativeness of councils in Dera and Quneitara.

Abu Ubayd’s civil society organisation (CSO) distributes aid in Dera and Quneitara.<sup>13</sup> Their activities since 2012 include medical relief, vaccinations, and running schools for 1200 children, earning them credibility

which in turn allowed them to influence LAC composition. Both women and IDPs – many who had fled fighting in southern Damascus – had been underrepresented in LACs. The CSO eventually convinced the LACs to include women, arguing that women were necessary to conduct aid assessments and visits to women-headed households, as many women may prefer not to host an unfamiliar man. Their CSO made aid distribution in villages conditional upon its council including a woman. A council of five members was established in each village where the CSO worked, made up of: religious and tribal figures; representatives of original inhabitants of the village as well as IDPs; a CSO representative; and a woman. This contrasts with the narrative of council formation in Deir Azzor city and governorate and in Manbij, where women and IDPs were not included in the councils, at least not at the time of interviews.

### **The implications of ACU policy**

The Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) is part of the formal opposition Coalition, tasked with providing assistance to communities in need inside Syria. The individual security of IDPs was not an ACU policy objective when allocating aid to LACs. Although the voice of IDPs was eventually included in LACs, they were still excluded from receiving material support with implications for their health and material security. Policies of the Istanbul-based Coalition stated that funds sent to LACs could not be spent on IDPs. IDPs, it stipulated, must return to their own LACs for assistance. There were many IDPs in Quneitara from Jdeidat Artooz Al Fadel, south of Damascus, the site of a massacre perpetrated by government forces. The ACU sent US\$300,000 to its LAC, perhaps because of the media attention the massacre received. But most residents had fled to Quneitara where they were told that LACs could not disburse ACU funds to them. They would have to return to the site of a massacre to receive assistance, compelling IDPs

to make a choice akin to one between safety and material deprivation.

While the ACU's resources cannot cover the entire Syrian population's assistance needs, the management of its resources has important implications for individual and community security. The ACU does not monitor funding thoroughly. Abu Ubayd's CSO received a grant with little scrutiny. A grant could be acquired relatively easily with a list of names and fake signatures; no further documentation was required, facilitating waste and corruption. Other agencies funding his CSO asked for identity documentation from individual recipients. There is a lack of adequate transparency in how the ACU works and spends funds. A recent audit could not account for \$1million dollars of their budget (Afanasieva 2014). Furthermore, the sporadic and scattered nature of ACU funding obstructs LACs' long-term planning.

However, there does seem to be evidence that a governance project operating in both northern and southern Syria has improved the provision of services in Dera. Tamkeen<sup>14</sup> is a project funded by international donors that aims to promote transparent governance practices at the local level in opposition-held areas of Syria.<sup>15</sup> The objective is to nurture nascent participatory governance structures through a project cycle where a grant of approximately US\$100,000 is spent with transparent financial controls which can implement infrastructural and public service projects. Syrians take the lead in project design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Where communities choose to devote funds to health projects, spending has implications for individual security (i.e. safety from harms associated with public health hazards) and the right of individuals to consultation and participation in designing and implementing projects that secure these objectives.

For example, Tsil, a town in Dera' governorate with an estimated population of 23,000, experienced heavy fighting between government and opposition forces, including FSA

battalions and Jabhat Al Nusra, resulting in widespread damage to water and electricity infrastructure. In Tsil, the Tamkeen Committee (TC) included the Tsil LAC, Local Coordination Committees, a civil society coalition, and a medical NGO. The TC acts as a nascent governance structure and has adopted good governance practices like community consultation in project designs and transparent documentation of spending and activities. The Tsil TC displays detailed plans on public notices, posts relevant photos, videos, and financial accounts on its Facebook page,<sup>16</sup> and uploads detailed information about each project on their website, including photographs of ongoing and completed works. These include projects to repair electricity and water infrastructure; water sanitation and insect control; and procurement of hospital machinery, all with public health objectives. Donors closely monitor decision-making processes and TC performance and Tamkeen field officers carry out field surveys to assess community satisfaction. Tsil scored highly having completed nine projects in the first implementation cycle in 2014 and survey respondents rated the TC as *satisfactory* or *very satisfactory*.

Projects elsewhere have not all run as smoothly. In the first cycle, seven other TCs performed well in certain respects but poorly in others. The Tamkeen case is an ongoing and evolving project with generally positive early results. Currently there is little data sourced externally from Tamkeen Committees and implementers but Amir, the farmer from Dera, spoke well of Tamkeen projects which repaired a school and organised refuse collection (Interview March 2015).

Armed conflict continues in Dera and Quneitara but dynamics differ from those in northern Syria and the role of civil society and international actors in making authority formation more inclusive and transparent is significant. The insecurity associated with being excluded from material assistance and processes of governance has been tempered by civil society intervention.

## Conclusion

The gap between individual safety and collective security objectives, as well as between practices and objectives, remains wide in the different ungoverned spaces of 'rebel-held' territories in Syria. I have argued that the nature of the security gap cannot be disentangled from political authority formation in different parts of Syria. In particular, the collective security of the Assad government remains the most dominant in Syria, even in the so-called 'ungoverned spaces' of rebel-held areas in northern and eastern Syria. Some organisations have been able to attain a level of success thanks to deals – explicit and implicit – brokered with the Syrian state, challenging the notion that the rebel-government dichotomy is a useful tool of analysis.

Nascent political authorities able to govern with some functionality in these areas are those which serve, or do not threaten, the collective security of the Assad government, or which have been able to accommodate or compromise on their collective security agendas in order to gain support of the Syrian state or at least deflect its destructive blows. In Kurdish areas, the PYD is allowed to operate. Here, the collective security of the party's interests take second place to the security of Assad's government, followed by the collective security of the ethnic Kurdish community. Within LAC areas, collective security of the Syrian state imposes itself from the skies with bombs, and within the homes of Syrians whose public services it cuts off. Furthermore, within LACs, the collective security of selective groups – clans, tribes, revolutionaries – can supersede that of the individual. Only in Manbij, (before it was overrun by ISIS), did accommodation with residents who belonged to the old order (and were not part of the revolution) help to improve security at local levels. State employees not openly involved in revolution continued to receive salaries and electricity infrastructure was relatively intact, but the state seems aware of who and who is not a threat to its collective



security – possibly a result of information flowing from informants – and here has spared ISIS from the level of bombardment which state forces conduct elsewhere in Syria.

In southern Syria it does appear that, in a small number of cases, more participatory structures have emerged. This could be because of the involvement of civil society in authority formation and the influence of international actors, although it could also be partly due to the different dynamic of the conflict there.

Individual security typically comes at the bottom of the list of objectives. It is unfair in the extremely dangerous and constrained circumstances within which many LACs operate to make normative judgements about their practices. They are working in ungoverned spaces engineered by the Syrian state (and deemed to challenge its security) and lack the resources afforded to the PYD by the Syrian state. The secretive elections of LACs can be seen as a symptom of this engineering.

This paper has attempted to look at what *is* taking place without insisting on what *ought* to be, and in light of what is possible in the circumstances. In the politics of belonging which have emerged from Syria's war, the government is content to send the message that individuals and collectives which challenge its own security objectives do not belong in Syria; these actors are considered terrorists, saboteurs, or traitors. Historically, states and aspiring state actors have actively forced populations to leave territories they control, or seek to control (Ali 2011), and the Syrian government is no different. It allows Syrians from sites of resistance to take refuge in government territories like Latakia (Sahlawi 2013) as long as they do not attempt to challenge its security (or are not already known to have done so) and accept further compromises to their individual security as a consequence of displacement. Those who do not accept these parameters can exit Syria and remain abroad. Across Syria, the gap between collective and individual security remains wide, and is getting wider.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The PYD's development and complex relations with other Kurdish parties in Syria and Iraq is dealt with in more detail by Lowe (2014).
- <sup>2</sup> The full text is available here: <http://www.pydrojava.net/en/index.php/kurds-in-west-of-kurdistan/209-the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons>
- <sup>3</sup> See articles 25–26, 32a, 73–74, and 91b.
- <sup>4</sup> For detailed analysis of these structures, see ICG 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> Further observations are recorded here: <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/video-the-rojava-revolution-david-graeber-s-observations/685-video-the-rojava-revolution-david-graeber-s-observations.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> The story of the YPJ brigades fighting ISIS received attention in media outlets including the BBC, CNN, Al Arabiya News, The Daily Mail, and Marie Claire.
- <sup>7</sup> The author asked the question after Saleh Muslim's talk at the London School of

Economics. He struggled to answer until prompted by the author about constitution writing to which he immediately said 'yes' and moved to answer the next question.

- <sup>8</sup> ISIS demolished Kurdish houses on the pretext they were 'PKK houses.' See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efpCZdyMkSE&feature=youtu.be>.
- <sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/security/2013/05/tensions-iraqi-kurdistan-syria-barzani.html#>
- <sup>10</sup> Kurdwatch.com documents many more violations.
- <sup>11</sup> See also <http://www.kurdwatch.org/index.php?cid=185&z=en>
- <sup>12</sup> A recent example is the *Burkan Al Furat* – Euphrates Volcano – alliance between YPG and FSA units, as well as other paramilitaries, in the fight against ISIS.
- <sup>13</sup> His Skype interview forms the basis of this section. I am grateful to Rim Turkmani for conducting this interview and that with 'Amir,' as part of collaborative research into Syria's political economy of war.
- <sup>14</sup> See <http://www.project-tamkeen.org/>
- <sup>15</sup> This section is based on an interview with Tristan Salmon who is a Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor on the Tamkeen project in Syria. Any errors in representation of the programme are my own.
- <sup>16</sup> The Tsil Tamkeen Committee Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/tseel.tamkeen?fref=ts>

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