

HOW REGIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS UNIQUELY CONSTRAIN GOVERNANCE IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA

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In 2012, when Bashar al-Assad's regime withdrew most of its security forces from the Jazira in northeastern Syria, it ceded local power to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing. The PYD replicated past regime behavior, focusing on maintaining a secure hold of this strategic geographical area at the expense of effective governance. This approach has hindered the prospect of building a self-sustained administration. At the same time, outside actors such as Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, and the United States have inadvertently reinforced the PYD's security-focused rule while pursuing their own security concerns. Exploring potential avenues to peace and stable governance in Syria requires carefully identifying the interrelated nature of these various actors' security concerns in the Jazira.

Control at the Expense of Governance

- Due to its location and its ethnic-based local representation, the Jazira has long been vulnerable to external influence from Syria's neighbors, particularly Iraq and Turkey.
- From the early 1970s until the Syrian war broke out, the two Assad regimes kept the Jazira region under the firm grip of their security agencies and sought to contain and control local politics by keeping the region underdeveloped and dependent on Damascus.
- Faced with similar challenges after 2012, the PYD and its military wing reproduced similar patterns of rule. It did so by centralizing power with its military commanders, promoting a new class of local leaders, and increasing the population's dependence on PYD-provided services and security, while containing unsanctioned political activities.
- The actions by others—the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, the Syrian regime, Turkey, and the United States—has, sometimes inadvertently, reinforced PYD rule over the Jazira.

Diagnosing the Jazira's Many Security Concerns

- The complex ways that the security interests of regional actors are interwoven with local dynamics in the Jazira continue to incentivize a security-focused approach that has undermined prospects for effective governance.
- Any viable Syrian peace process must move beyond proposals of decentralization and Kurdish autonomy, and instead focus more attention on the multifaceted rivalries among local and regional actors in the Jazira. Identifying the ways that multiple interests are in tension is a first step in the direction of an eventual compromise that would encourage more effective, responsive governance in the Jazira.
- A realistic, durable path toward peace in Syria would likely require that relevant parties—Iraqi Kurdish parties, the PKK, the Syrian regime, Turkey, and the United States—seek to advance their security concerns in ways that leave room for potential compromises on the maximalist ambitions of their respective agendas.

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