

Explainer: Participatory Governance in the Social Contract of North and East Syria

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Background to the Social Contract

The revolution that started on July 19, 2012 in the predominantly Kurdish regions of North and East Syria hardly registered as a blip on the international radar the day it happened. In the regions dotting the Syrian border with Turkey, the days surrounding July 19th were relatively bloodless and seemingly a small part of the escalating civil war raging across the country. Few would expect the impassioned marches and the occupation of abandoned government posts and lands to reverberate so widely that eventually the revolution would control a third of Syria. Within a decade, the revolution's advance would spell the end of territorial control for the then-unstoppably expanding ISIS caliphate, and would also shape a series of social contracts and actually-existing institutions that continue to give hope and direction to millions of people around the world- from India and South Africa to Myanmar and the United States.

The revolution's organizers and participants- who had been working clandestinely for forty years around the principles of grassroots democracy, women's freedom, ecology, and ethnic and religious pluralism- are the few who would say that they were not surprised that the revolution in North and East Syria has dramatically changed local culture, inspired global social movements, and shifted geo-political alliances. There is a reason that the North and East Syria Region became autonomous so quickly and relatively easily: scores of individuals- Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and others- quietly risked their lives for decades, with intense dedication and no recognition, to create alternative infrastructure that society could use to meet its own needs outside of the eye of the oppressive Syrian state.

While the revolution was initially led by Kurdish organizers who saw themselves as part of the broader Kurdish Freedom Movement in the Middle East, it is now explicitly multi-ethnic and pluralistic. The Kurdish movement had led a decades-long resistance movement, both unarmed and armed, against immense oppression from four nation-states (Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey). In some of these states, Kurds were denied their very existence as a category. In others, they were barred from citizenship in the lands they were born. These states often denied them the ability to speak their language or sing their songs, and the Syrian government even prevented them from growing fruit trees or having any of their own means to sustain themselves. Kurds had lived as a distinct cultural community in these countries before any of the four nation-states or their borders were founded, and initially fought to create their own independent state as a resistance movement. Starting in the 1980s, they began building relationships with other oppressed minorities in these states- Armenian families, Assyrian-led armed and civilian movements, the deeply-persecuted Yezidi ethno-religious group, and even many Arab tribes and citizens.

In the early 2000s, the Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan built on years of internal self-criticisms and slow ideological shifts to announce, in his defense writings from prison, a new paradigm for the Kurdish movement. He called this paradigm "Democratic Confederalism." The movement no longer wanted an independent nation-state but rather, a bottom-up grassroots democracy that governed itself without a state apparatus through confederated assemblies of residents in streets, neighborhoods, villages, towns, cities, and regions.

Ocalan argued that the Middle East was a rich mosaic of communal-oriented cultures, religions, and forms of organization that had co-existed for thousands of years. Despite widespread belief to the contrary, he argued that major cultural clashes only happened when groups were pitted against each other by dominating powers and nation-states. Each culture and religion of the Middle East, as well as decentralized models like tribal confederations, had gifts to contribute to the region as a whole. When Kurds were allowed to organize their own structures of self-governance, cultural celebrations, language, and self-defense, they had gifts to contribute to all other cultures in the Middle East, and likewise, other cultures, allowed to flourish, had gifts to contribute to Kurds. The Middle East did not need another ethnic nation-state to impose one acceptable monocultural identity on the rest. To Ocalan, it needed a confederation that allowed all religions, ethnic groups, tribes, and associations to organize autonomously without usurping the rights of any other. This confederation needed to be governed by

local people participating directly in politics at all levels. Ocalan also argued that the Middle East first lost its historical harmony when women became the “first colony,” paving the way for oppression based on age, religion, race, and tribe. He believed that any revolution had to start where the society was first lost; thus the new paradigm had to be based on women’s liberation. Ecology, direct democracy, and pluralism rounded out the pillars of his ideology.

The Democratic Confederalist movement built on decades of cross-border connections to secretly organize in Syrian civil society, helping people settle their own disputes, cultivate their own crops, and hold secret meetings on important issues. In 2011, the Arab Spring protests across the Middle East took root in Syria, and nonviolent protests faced heavy military repression from the Assad Regime. Well-organized Islamist militias, backed by regional and non-regional states, flooded the streets with arms and turned the movement into a civil war. The Syrian regime saw the Kurdish regions as less strategic than the larger interior cities, so they hastily pulled out of their military bases, administrative offices, and state-owned agricultural lands. The movement chose not to side with the regime or the Islamists, and proclaimed Democratic Confederalism as a third way. The underground movement, bolstered by grassroots relationships with much of the civilian population in Cizre, Kobanê, and Afrîn, filled the power vacuum on July 19th, 2012, and the days following. Originally called the “Rojava Revolution” (referring to the Kurdish word for “West”), the movement changed its name multiple times as it built more and more relationships with non-Kurdish communities. Revolutionaries immediately started building on their grassroots organizations for self-defense, local justice, women, youth, health, education, and economy, making use of abandoned government lands and infrastructure to fulfill essential functions. They formed local civil councils and later street and neighborhood-based “communes” that would ideally be run by everyday citizens practicing direct democracy and building consensual paths forward through informal and formal conversations over tea in homes and public buildings.

Almost immediately, Jihadist militias vied for control of the newly autonomous regions, attacking cities and villages of “Rojava” and then Arab and Assyrian lands. The Islamic State (ISIS) quickly emerged as the most powerful and murderous of the attackers. Local citizens and their newly-formed mixed-gender and all-women militias fought off these attacks, and eventually formed a strategic alliance with the International Coalition against ISIS who provided them with air support. The society in North and East Syria gave 11,000 lives over 5 long years of war against ISIS, and unfortunately to this day has received almost no international support in rebuilding, in dealing with radicalized, captured foreign ISIS fighters, or in stopping simultaneous invasions and a prolonged drone war by the second largest NATO army, the Turkish military. Turkey sees no distinction between the people of North and East Syria and the Kurdish guerrilla groups that formed to fight state oppression in the 1980s. Because of Turkey’s international stature, the world has turned a blind eye while Turkey daily destroys any civilian infrastructure that powers life in North and East Syria. They have been given a green light to assassinate any civil society organizers, activists, internal security force members, or local politicians through drone strikes as long as they “do not interfere in the fight against ISIS.”

Despite more than a decade of ceaseless war, the people of North and East Syria have organized incredible structures of grassroots democracy, economic cooperation, diverse religious and cultural self-organization, and women’s empowerment. They have their own autonomous but non-separatist government, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) that still sees itself as part of Syria. As their infrastructure lay in ruins, DAANES chose to take their revolution a step further, releasing a new Social Contract co-created in consultation with large swathes of civil society in December of 2023. It lays out in formal writing what has already been in progress for years, outlining the bottom-up system that is partially in practice and yet is also still an ideal to be lived up to. This system starts with “the commune” as its base, and there are communes in just about every village and neighborhood in North and East Syria. All of the 5 million or so inhabitants of the region can theoretically practice direct democracy through local communes where they live. These communes federate into councils at all the various levels of society. However, many communes have not come into their own just yet and are lacking in practice, slowly gaining acceptance with a population used to the

old Syrian regime who made all decisions for them. Other aspects of the revolution are already playing out better than could have possibly been imagined. A full 50% or more of all elected positions are held by women, and at every level there is an equal male and female co-chair who administrates cooperative decisions.

There are hundreds of worker and neighbor-owned economic cooperatives that incorporate many or even all the people of local communes in the work and decisions. People participate in co-creating their lives through various committees and councils on all the important issues: health, peacemaking, economy, education, ecology, culture, and more. The new Social Contract is a big collective “yes” to persevering, learning, innovating, including, and continuing to democratize no matter the challenges wars, embargoes, and pandemics throw at them. It is an idealistic, yet practical combination of direct and representative democracy, horizontal and vertical power.

The contract has globally-unprecedented provisions for women’s self-organizing power and political representation, a strong mix of communal and individual freedoms and responsibilities, and structural support for pluralism, ecology, and local economic cooperation, making it arguably one of the most imaginative and liberatory constitutions ever written. Moreso, many of the provisions and lofty ideals—especially relating to institutionalized gender equality—are already firmly established in practice and have become the reflex of the inhabitants of the region. This achievement is something that the people of North and East Syria are eager to share with the world. The more war and outside pressure knocks on their door, the more our friends in Syria seem to want to be hospitable, open to sharing and learning from others.

The Preamble

This explainer will mostly look at the Social Contract through the lens of participatory democracy. It will focus on how the document shores up actually existing practices of bottom-up power into the primary governing document of North and East Syria, and also how it holds the revolution accountable to its values by publicly declaring its not fully-realized aspirations to be a model for grassroots governance from below. It will, however, make brief mention of other key provisions of the contract on topics like ethnic and religious pluralism, women’s liberation, human rights, economy, and so on.

The preamble makes clear that this Social Contract is built on the legacy of the 15,000 or so “daughters and sons” of North and East Syria who have been killed in attacks by ISIS, the Turkish State, and other militant groups since the revolution began. These people were Kurds, Arabs, Syriac Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Circassians, Chechens, Muslims, Christians and Yazidis, and all of them are the people whom this document is written for, with, and by. The document sets itself apart from the many ethno-statist governing documents of other countries in the region, and expressly envisions a pluralistic, democratic system. It is important to note that the inclusive bodies that formulated the document go out of their way to ensure that no one can declare them separatists who want to threaten the territorial integrity of Syria. The region variously known as “Rojava,” “the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria,” and “the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria” will now be officially called the “Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES).” But DAANES is only one integral part of a larger, not-yet-realized whole; the aim is ultimately to transform Syria from an Arab nationalist dictatorship to a pluralist, united, “Democratic Republic of Syria.” This document is only a model for what the writers hope will come, and its authors welcome continual rewrites to include greater and greater sectors of the Syrian population as they democratize.

Importantly, for the lens of grassroots democracy, the document proves that much of the society is still committed to following a specific ideological path, that of Abdullah Ocalan’s “democratic nation.” Contrary to “state centralization,” “authoritarianism,” and “capitalist modernity,” the democratic nation allows for multiple “democratic autonomous administrations” in which all people of any ethnic group, religion, region, political slant, trade, etc. can form their own autonomous ways of governing themselves,

diverse forms of democratic politics, and ethics. While the authoritarian regimes of the region's past (and much of its present) fear this kind of diversity, the DAANES welcomes it, and believes that the many different democracies make up parts of one whole mosaic. The Social Contract names many existing tools that ensure "democratic confederalism," united cooperation of diverse democracies. These tools include a society that has been widely educated in democratic and ecological values and practices, its functioning co-chair system in which every position of influence at all levels of governance is split between one man and one woman, its limited, but slowly growing communal economy based on cooperatives that are ideally governed through democratic decision-making by local residents and workers, and the many built-in mechanisms for ensuring that justice in DAANES is inclusive and restorative. These tools are the glue that cemented the society together despite all internal and external attempts to tear it apart.

The Social Contract makes the bold claim that despite the conditions of nearly unbearable total warfare in which the document was written, the people of North and East Syria act with "full freedom and choice" in writing it and adopting it as their own. They know what they are doing, they are responsible subjects for their own destiny, and know that their choice draws on a much deeper source than their own experiences: a legacy of freedom and cooperation of the peoples of the Middle East and humanity as a whole. The people of North and East Syria add their name and their project into this democratic, communal, and inclusive stream of history, claiming it as their own, but also sharing it as a gift to unify all Syrian people and inspire humanity everywhere.

Chapter 1: Basic Principles

The document asserts that DAANES will be governed democratically, ecologically, communally, and with women's freedom at its center (Article 2). These are pillars of Ocalan's ideas of the "moral-political society" and "democratic modernity" (as opposed to the state-centric, "capitalist modernity"), which are expressly adopted as the governing framework for the rest of the Social Contract (Article 3). This governance (Art. 4) is done through the will of the people through "free and equal participation" (a more participatory, directly democratic stream) and through "democratic elections" (a more representative stream). From here on out, we will see how the Social Contract merges direct and representative forms of democracy in unique ways.

The DAANES system is based on the coming together ("confederalism") of local democratic organizations representing many different social groups and segments, which ensure the right to organize and educate in their own "mother tongues" (Art. 6, 11). This democratic governance happens from the most local level all the way up to large regions called "cantons" that make up the DAANES as a whole (Art. 11). Article 12 officially uses the words "**direct democracy**" to describe the ways both individuals and society participate in politics. Article 13 makes a broad attempt to define this direct democracy- the participation of all the various "components" in decisions that directly affect them through the principle of "**consensus**." In my experience, consensus here should be understood as vague and varying greatly by context. It means less a formal and systematic way of making decisions that all agree on, and is more likely to mean many different ways, differing by context, for inviting as much participation and discussion as possible by the widest swathes of affected populations before making a decision. These decisions could be majority or two-thirds 'majority rules' after many hours of deliberation, actual consensus or consent-based decision-making, or very informal agreements that represent the "sense of the meeting" over many cups of "chai."

The document goes on to name different historically marginalized groups in the society and details their rights, declaring that all people, and especially women and wounded war veterans and their families, have the right to a communal economy, a healthy environment, and free public health services (Art. 16-25). It also details the co-chair system and Ocalan's ideas of the "democratic family" (Art. 26) and individual and communal "self-defense" (Art. 30, expanded on in 111). We then learn of the role of the

individual in the participatory governance system. In Article 31, the individual, as a moral and political actor, is guaranteed the right to participate in more than one commune.

The Communes

The commune is, ideally, the place where power is centered in this direct democracy. According to my conversations with members of The Civil Diplomacy Center (CDC) in North and East Syria, the current size of the communes varies between 200-300 families. When compared to the most hyperlocal units with real decision-making power in places like America or Europe, these are quite small and intimate, but in actual practice, this size is far too large to facilitate real direct, participatory democracy effectively. The members of CDC told me they would prefer a size of closer to 100 families, but they have found practical difficulties maintaining what a similar movement in India lightly calls “smallification” (The Indian “Neighbourocracy” movement, in dialogue with their friends in Syria, suggested aiming towards units of 30 households, a size they have found easy to make inclusive and participatory in their context).

AANES Social Contract *Article 75*:

The commune:

This is the basic grassroots organization form of direct democracy. It is the smallest administrative unit in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. It is the place where the moral-political community develops, which produces social, economic and cultural life. The commune is a self-contained council and is the place of decision-making, administration and has the power to resolve social issues within the administrative and organizational fields.

A commune automatically includes all citizens of North and East Syria who live within its boundaries. Every citizen belongs to a geographical commune (many who live in the city might also have family homes in rural villages, and so might belong to both communes), but they also might belong to one or more “branch communes” which are organized around special interests instead of geography: art, film, music, etc (Source: dialogue with the CDC). While important decisions are to be made through direct democracy, these decisions are carried out by committees and overseen by co-chairs. Co-chairs and committee members are elected by commune residents and can be recalled by those residents as necessary (Article 76). In practice, the degree to which residents fully participate in decisions of the commune or whether they leave many decisions up to the co-chairs and committees depends on many factors such as the degree of civic/political education of the commune’s members, the size and social cohesion of the commune, the economic situation, etc. The CDC members told us that increasing the will of citizens to participate is slow, steady work, and they invited criticisms and even trainings from like-minded movements around the world who have dealt with similar issues.

Rights and Freedoms

There are many articles that guarantee basic freedoms and human rights as can be found in many constitutions (Art. 9, 33-35, 37-73). However, in addition to being very much in line with some of the most respected governance documents as regards to *individual freedoms* (right to due process, freedoms of speech, press, information, political organizing, conscience, the banning of the death penalty, etc. and a relatively expansive right to political asylum that is guaranteed to protect the individual’s consent—no doubt informed by their memory of Abdullah Ocalan’s denial of asylum in many countries before his arrest), the Social Contract goes well above and beyond with its focus on *communal freedoms*.

The document spells out a wide range of political realms where “peoples and components” (ethnic and religious groups, for example) have the right to “organize and express themselves freely,” including “communes, councils [confederated bodies of multiple communes], cooperatives, academies, and the Autonomous Administration (Art. 44).” Likewise, community organizations have similar spheres of participation: communes, councils, associations, unions, federations, and chambers (Art. 45).

Adherents of the Yezidi religion, subject to repeated genocides in the Middle East, are given their own communal protection article, declaring their “right to preserve their religious, social and cultural privacy” and their ability to use their own autonomous institutions (supported by DAANES) to protect themselves from “all types of assimilation and extermination (Art. 45).” For all people, [forced] assimilation is listed along with oppression, rape, occupation, demographic change, and cultural genocide as crimes against humanity, which are legitimate to resist (Art. 46). People groups are given the right to name and create their own democratic organizations and institutions to protect their culture (Art. 60). Women, youth, the elderly, the disabled, and children are also given special protections (Art. 50-55). Even clans, appreciated for their “historical values”, but challenged for some customs that might conflict with the Social Contract, are explicitly mentioned (Art. 61).

One of the most pertinent provisions for democratic politics in this system can be found in Article 47: **“Each administrative unit, starting from the village, neighbourhood, town, city and canton, has the right to decide on matters and affairs that concern it**, provided that this does not conflict with the content of this contract.” This local democratic autonomy is backed up in the fascinating Article 124. It will be interesting to see how this article plays out when controversial decisions are made, but it reads: **“Local components have the right to object to decisions of public bodies that conflict with their interests and are not in line with their will and decisions**. If the objection is not resolved by consensus, it is presented to the concerned component and the result is approved.” While it may be an issue of translation, the last part of this provision seems somewhat obscure. It seems to be saying that a commune, for example, could object to the decision of a higher body. This then triggers some sort of consensus and consultation process, but ultimately, the local objection can hold sway. Indeed, the next article (125) says that towns, cities, and cantons (what about even more hyperlocal units like communes and councils?) can hold referendums on decisions that they disagree with that affect these units personally. There is finally a provision (Art. 126), that leaves the Social Contract Protection Court (a sort of Supreme Court) to be the final arbiter of this sort of clash between different governance bodies.

Section 3: The Societal System

It is worth noting that communes are the governance unit listed first and foremost in this document. This can be read as ideologically in line with the idea that the power flows from the most local level, the face-to-face assemblies of the communes, upwards. In some places, this might feel practically true, while in others, the communes are less fleshed out. But the Social Contract is not just highlighting what is already existing; it also is aspirational, stating the ideal of how the system is supposed to work according to the principles of “democratic confederalism.” In a non-coercive revolution (Art. 60), only slow, patient conversations happening street-to-street and house-to-house over tea (I’ve mentioned tea several times because it is very important!) have the power to turn aspirations into realities. Enshrining the aspirations into the main governance document in the land, however, can help ensure momentum and credibility.

According to Abdullah Ocalan, the theorist who first laid out the system of democratic confederalism that the Social Contract is based on, “decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For limited space of time they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions (Ocalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, 33).” The Social Contract adheres to this formula very closely. The

most local of communities are the communes. The general assemblies Ocalan talks about that coordinate, implement, and administer the decisions that flow upwards from the communes can be recognized in the system of councils covered in Section 3. It seems that “People’s Councils” are the umbrella term for the councils that meet at various levels of administration- neighborhoods, towns, and cities. Article 77-79 overview the definition, structure, and tasks of people’s councils generally, while articles 80-86 give examples of people’s councils for each unit of administration. People’s councils are representative bodies covering all aspects of social, political, economic, and cultural life, as well as local security, in the areas they administer (Art. 77). The councils are made up of general bodies, committees, and executive committees, and the titles and functions of each committee generally align with those that can be found in any commune. In other words, the councils deal with the exact same facets of life that communes deal with, at ever larger scales.

Articles 97-108 detail specific descriptions of just some of the committees that might be found at all levels in the DAANES system, from the commune to the region-wide government, the People’s Democratic Council of North and East Syria. While each level can form different committees based on their contexts, there will generally be committees for education, culture, families of martyrs (those killed in war, as well as those who are wounded or taken POW), the environment, labor, health, economy, agriculture, law, religions, women, youth, and foreign relations.

Councils

All people’s councils- whether at the neighborhood, town, or city level- are made up of elected representatives from the levels immediately preceding them. These representatives serve terms of 2 years (with a maximum 2 consecutive terms) and their number varies based on population density. The co-chairs of the communes and the preceding councils are automatically members, and of the other representatives, 60% of them will be directly elected by the residents casting their individual votes, while 40% will be elected by organized civil society groups, cooperatives, unions, ethnic, cultural, ideological, and religious organizations. *All* councils have a 50% gender quota for women. Women also have their own councils at each level that ensure that women’s voices can be heard collectively.

Each council has important tasks. The councils elect their own committee members, co-chairs, and executives. Their purpose is to discuss and decide on issues that affect their level *as long as their decisions do not interfere with the decisions made by the communes or councils at more local levels*. This mechanism ensures that power, as structured by the most important governing document in the land, really does flow from the bottom-up. For instance, a neighborhood council, which of course includes the co-chairs of all the communes as well as many representatives from broad swathes of civil society organizations representing all cultures, religions, hobbies, and trades, can take collective decisions that affect the neighborhood level but only if those decisions do not contradict existing decisions of the neighborhood’s component communes. Likewise, the city council can take city-wide decisions as long as they do not contradict existing decisions from town councils, neighborhood councils, or communes. **Very interestingly, councils approve the members and leaders of the Internal Security Forces (essentially the police) and the more-volunteer Community Protection Forces (HPC), as well as the restorative justice-minded Reconciliation Committees at their respective levels.** The city council also approves co-chairs of the justice courts, which take cases and disputes which cannot be handled by more local reconciliation committees in the communes or other councils. Each council also has their own executive committees which implement their decisions, follow up on the work of the committees, and help coordinate between other bodies. For instance, the neighborhood and town councils’ executives coordinate between communes and their executive committees, while the city council executives coordinate between town councils, neighborhood councils, and communes to ensure they are all working cooperatively. The system is also monitored by monthly reports from each executive committee to the general membership of their council for transparency.

Article 109 details a “democratic municipal system in North and East Syria.” It is unclear if, or how, the municipalities differ from the cities of the region, but the provision states that “**municipalities adopt a system of direct democracy in their work.**” Municipal councils and their co-chairs are elected at the same intervals as those of cities. Municipalities from across North and East Syria coordinate through the “Union of Democratic Municipalities.”

Cantons

Outside of the system-wide administration level, the largest subunits of governance in North and East Syria’s democratic confederalist system are the cantons (Art. 87-91). There are seven cantons: Jazira, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Euphrates, Manbij, Afrin/Shehba, and Tabqa (Art. 91). Each canton consists of all the cities, towns, villages, farms, and communes in its geographical scope, and covers all the same aspects of life as the previous levels. Each canton works to be as self-sufficient economically as possible, though there are provisions that both underground and surface wealth can be fairly distributed between cantons through the Democratic Autonomous Administration according to the density of each canton’s population and its need. It is unclear how this works in practice, but it seems there is a concerted effort to prevent some cantons from becoming impoverished while others grow wealthier (Art. 87). The cantons organize their own internal security forces, but are responsible for sending their forces to aid the whole DAANES and the future Democratic Republic of Syria in times of need. Cantons are free to act as diplomatic actors as long as they do not contradict the Social Contract, and the unique ethnic and religious groups of each canton are assured the right to manage their own affairs and protect their own languages and cultures.

The people’s council at the canton level works very similarly to the other levels, but there are some differences worth noting. After elections, the first cantonal meeting is to be chaired by a man and a woman “*from the oldest and youngest members*” before the session’s participants go on to elect their co-chairs (Art. 88). All forms of diversity are taken into account in this system, even age diversity. Much of Article 88 details similar provisions as can be seen in any large-scale parliament around the world: quorum, immunity, and session length. Once again, canton levels take decisions affecting the cantons, but cannot interfere with city affairs (Art. 89). There are also some mechanisms, likely differing by canton, to ensure that the various ethnic and religious groups present in that area are equitably represented on the canton’s executive council, which implements the decisions of the people’s council of the canton. There is special mention that the cantons can issue general amnesty laws to free people held in prisons (These amnesties have often been done to release low-level ISIS members or collaborators in exchange for guarantees from their local tribes that they will be kept from causing harm again).

The People’s Democratic Council of North and East Syria

The People’s Democratic Council of North and East Syria, often referred to as the Democratic Autonomous Administration, is the largest-scale body in the autonomous territories covered by the Social Contract. It unites all seven cantons (Art. 91). Once again, every possible ethnic and religious group is listed out in the contract by name as having representatives at this level, and the 50% women’s quota is also underlined. It is defined as a body that takes into account all possible contexts- historical, demographic, religious, cultural, ideological, etc.- in making decisions, and it explicitly allows all of these contextual people groups to form their own democratic autonomous administrations. This is remarkable, because the highest level of this system does not claim a monopoly for itself; it invites diversity of local and special interest administrations that align with the Social Contract. The election processes and percentages are the same, though it is clearer here than elsewhere in the document that groups and cantons are represented based on population density. In addition to the specially elected members,

co-chairs of the canton councils and their executive councils, as well as the co-chairs of the Union of Democratic Municipalities are also members. States of peace and war across the whole DAANES are defined at this level, in cooperation with the cantons and the Women's Council of North and East Syria. The highest levels of internal security forces and military forces are monitored here, and DAANES-wide diplomatic efforts (both externally with other regions, peoples, states, and institutions, and internally between cantons), budgets, and general amnesties are handled at this level, in cooperation with the cantons. Per usual, the People's Democratic Council makes decisions affecting the whole NES region, but cannot interfere with the canton level.

The Women's Council of North and East Syria

Women have their own bottom-up, democratic, confederal, autonomous administration system, flowing from the communes to the whole scope of the DAANES. Decisions about women are made by women through this system; mixed-gender communes and councils cannot make decisions affecting women specifically. There are huge efforts for women's education and self-organization at all levels, and the women's system is also entrusted with safeguarding democratic confederalism for the whole of DAANES (Art. 110, sec. 8). Most notably, **women have their own Social Contract (sec. 9)**, and organize themselves autonomously in the Internal Security Forces and military (Art. 111).

How directly democratic is this democratic confederalist system?

- The words “direct democracy” are named as the overarching principle of DAANES in Article 12. The commune system is explicitly named as a direct democracy (Art. 76), and the municipalities also “adopt direct democracy in their work (Art. 109).” Other relevant terms include “consensual democracy” and “consensus” that are peppered throughout the Social Contract.
- The commune level is directly democratic. All residents are welcome to attend commune meetings and to discuss key issues that affect their lives. Decisions, according to my conversations with the Civil Diplomacy Center, are typically taken by majority rule, though only after extensive conversations that can often build a sort of consensus without producing the need to take a majority vote at all. The commune system can only be organized at the speed of trust of the people themselves. New communes are continually being formed, citizens are continually going to academies or attending training to learn more about how to participate as directly democratic actors, and population groups that were once distrustful are buying into the revolution. Yet, as outside embargoes and drone wars continue to harm the economy and infrastructure, many citizens feel they have less time to participate. While waves of citizens have fled to Europe due to the war and economic situation, North and East Syria has also accepted internally displaced Syrians from elsewhere. These population changes mean that people's willingness and capacity to participate as direct political actors varies over space and time.
- The communes and councils have the right to referendum on decisions that affect them that they disagree with.
- Decisions made at lower levels cannot be contradicted by higher levels, or at least the level immediately above it. It is not clear if neighborhood councils can be contradicted by cantons, or city councils by the People's Democratic Council, but Articles 123-126 make clear that local bodies have the right to object to the decisions of higher bodies, hold referendums, and maintain their

decisions over and against higher ones. There are various bodies to mediate disputes that may arise, including a court for the protection of the social contract.

- The people's councils are mostly representative bodies, but they include the delegates from the communes. This ensures a directly democratic pipeline from bottom to top and top to bottom. Delegates from the communes can be recalled and are not allowed to contradict commune-level decisions. It would be very common to know someone directly that sits in councils at least up to the city level, and probably even the canton. It would not be unusual for an average citizen to know someone personally who is on the People's Democratic Council of North and East Syria, and through their commune, that citizen could have direct say over decisions that the highest-level officials have to respect.
- The representative component comes from general elections where 60% of the non-co-chair seats are elected by popular vote, and 40% are elected by civil society organizations and religious and cultural groups. This ensures that it is not just individual voices that are represented, but collective voices too. Women's councils at every single level prevent women's voices from being individualized and divided and ensure that women have their own social contract and democratic confederalist system that the mixed-gender bodies are bound to respect.
- No official is allowed to act solely as an individual. Because of the mixed-gender co-chair system, there are always two people serving in every position. The woman co-chair will always have a whole assembly of women behind her.

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Ian Cambell

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