

Assad: The unity of Syria is non-negotiable and 'The essence of Syria is its Arabism'

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In a statement potentially responding to developments in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, Assad made a speech on Friday claiming that the territorial claims in Syria were "not up to debate or discussion ever!"

"The Identity of Syria? Yes, the national identity of Syria exists but its essence is Arabism! Arabism in its more progressive definition is that which unites the nation's sons and unites the sects in society." he told the audience.

Since the establishment of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1961, the census has not recorded groups by ethnicity or nationality. But it is estimated that possibly 30-40% of Syrians are not Arab. Among the ethno-religious communities that exist in Syria, there are Kurds, Turkmen, Druze, Circassians, Greeks, Black people of the Yarmouk

Basin, Assyrians (Syriacs), Armenians, Jews, and Yazidis.

The speech to reinforce Syria's Baathist ideology was made in the midst of disputes in Northern Syria. Less than three weeks prior to the speech, Ilham Ahmed, the co-president of the Syrian Democratic Council told Arab tribes that the Syrian government will not return to areas liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

In Northern Syria, the PYD (Democratic Union Party) claims to follow the ideas of Abdullah Ocalan -- a cofounder and ideological figurehead of the PKK -- and renounce the quest for a state in favor of constructing what they call a multi-ethnic, *democratic nation*. In theory, their strategy is to construct two systems, democratic confederalism -- a form of direct and federated democracy-- and democratic republicanism, which ensures that existing states adhere to international standards of human rights and civic rights. In practice, the circumstances of war make this a difficult task.

But some states are skeptical. On August 6th, Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, called the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria a "joke." He argued that promises to devolve power and keep the territorial boundaries of Syria intact were a ruse, and that Syria would not allow any group to threaten its "territorial unity".

The timing of Assad's speech also coincides with a referendum on independence called by the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, which has recieved complaints from Iraq, the United States, and most notably Turkey. Turkey in specific believes the referendum will bring instability to the region. A potential worry it may have is it's fear of emboldening the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, what Kurds call "Rojava", and a potential spillover onto its own Kurdish population in the South-East.

The Northern Democratic Federation of Northern Syria has also been a thorn in the side of the formal opposition, which way back in 2012 refused to compromise on the "Syrian Arab Republic" name and has consistently derided the PYD as separatists.