

# In Syria, the Kurdish project is redefining the concepts of independence and sovereignty

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The modern understanding of the “State” is that it is the only legitimate and acceptable model of national cohesion at the international level. Essentially, the notion of the nation-state is the most visible yet most controversial framework for an entity in our contemporary world. Whenever the state is mentioned, the notions of sovereignty, independence and legitimacy are highlighted. Theoretically and according to international law, states’ borders are protected from interventions and occupations, as independence, legitimacy and sovereignty are considered sacred in international relations. However, these very notions of independence and sovereignty are often problematic.

In essence, however, there are several entities and states that are dependent on other states. Fundamentally, the legitimacy of a state does not come from the people and the nation(s) residing within the borders of the state. Recognition from powerful

states often can give legitimacy to the smaller and less powerful states. Therefore, the notions of Sovereignty and Independence is no doubt a questionable concept.

Sovereignty is the quality of having supreme independent authority over a territory. In other words, having ultimate power over a geographic space and its people in a way that no state, group, organisation or foreign body is entitled to – with no right to change, interfere or effect that territory's decisions and destiny. Independence, on the other hand, is the right to exercise freely the full range of powers a state possesses under international law. In other words, countries are legally able to make their own decisions about their domestic and foreign policies.

Based on these basic definitions, in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular, we could argue that there is no such thing as sovereignty and independence of the state, society or any social or political group including the Syrian government itself. Meaning that state actors do not enjoy sovereignty and independence. What has been seen in Syria as a matter of fact; is the authority of various groups, states, organisations and some actors.

These groups, in essence, have authority rather than power. Thus, it is obvious that there is an essential difference between power and authority; power is the ability that is coming from within, while authority is some form of ability that is delegated by others. The groups that are in Syria at the current time, were all given authority by other powerful actors. The state is empowered by some regional and international actors. On the other hand, the opposition groups were given some practical authority by other regional and international bodies.

The argument here is not that power is absent in the arena of Syrian politics at the moment. To make the argument more clear; if there was no support from Iran and Russia, the Syrian state would have been toppled long ago. Therefore, basically, Syria is not a state actor. What is evident in Syria could be characterised as some form of authority that has been established by external powers with vested interests- basically the management of conflict in the region. On the other hand, the opposition groups are supported by some regional and international powers that have interests as well - they too are managing the conflict in the region to their own requirements.

Basically, if there was no support extended from several regional countries to various insurgency groups (some of them even identified as terrorist organisations such as Jabhatul-Nasra, Ahrar-Alsham and even ISIS and so on...) by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other states; they would not have been able to prolong their confrontation with the Syrian regime for the last six years or so. The mutual goal of both discourses (state and groups alike) is the pursuit of the will and agendas of the powers that have appointed them as proxies to manage the regional and international dimensions of

the Syrian conflict.

I can simply suggest that both predispositions are similar to each other in seeking power whilst none of them has actually been able to gain power. They both have been given authority to act (as state and non-state actors). This is due to the total failure and dysfunctionality of the state, and primarily to the consequence of the absence of legitimacy and sovereignty (that is if the Syrian state ever enjoyed legitimacy and sovereignty at all). On the other hand, both tendencies have the same ideological objectives. They both seek absolute authority over the whole territories of Syria.

They want to impose absolute authority through the policies of monopoly, unification and oppression of whoever does not submit to their will. The struggle of the state to keep the name of the Syrian Arab Republic is a salient point in question. The notion of ISIS and all other terrorist groups similarly as a united Muslim, Sunni and fundamental entity with the endorsement of Turkey, is an obvious sign of this argument. Moreover, in both cases, the notion of state and centralism is the most prominent argument to lean on. However, once again issues of Legitimacy, Independence and Sovereignty have all been defaced in the current Syrian political arena.

The Kurdish Project for State and Society.

On the other hand, apart from those two discourses mentioned earlier in the political arena of Syria, there is a different project that has had a totally different approach to the state, society and the management of power, authority and the politics of Syria. This I will call for this paper's sake "The Kurdish Project". The Kurdish project in Syria has been inspired by the Kurdish revolution in the northern part of Kurdistan (South East Turkey) and directly influenced by Abdullah Ocalan's perspective on the questions of freedom, and dealings with state and society.

The Kurdish project (at least theoretically) refused both discourses in Syria. They have suggested the third way which has focused on the empowerment of the local groups and the collective will; based on diverse cooperation between different ethnic, religious and cultural entities in the country. They have literally suggested an alternative model of practising power and authority that is different from the traditional state model as it is the case with both discourses in Syria. Moreover, they have heavily criticised the state. They have tried to redefine the concepts of power, authority, legitimacy, independence and sovereignty.

For the Kurds, the notion of Democratic Confederalism has been advanced as an alternative to the centralist statist model that has been experienced for a long time in

the region. In Rojava and northern Syria, the proclaimed federal entity has advanced a multi-dimensional model that is unprecedented in the Middle East. However, the model is currently under tremendous scrutiny. I can argue that for the last five years, (despite the invasion of Afrin city by the Turkish state recently) the Kurdish project has been seeing great progress and has been a uniquely different model. If the experience of Rojava can survive through the current complicated situation, it would be an excellent model for other regions. Nonetheless, there is still the likelihood that this model might regress into one of the main two discourses due to several internal and external factors. As a matter of fact, there is on the one hand; some support for the Kurdish project by some international actors, albeit this seems tactical for strategic reasons. On the other hand, there is a huge objection to this project due to pressure from other regional powers, particularly Islamist and ethnocentric regimes in the area.

If the Kurdish project in Syria fails; in the worst case scenario, it would be similar to what is going on in Northern Kurdistan which continuous struggle, turmoil and protracted instability and challenging the Turkish state. However, if successful, it will be a positive model for democracy, diversity and empowerment for all of the peoples' of the Middle East. It will be a great opportunity to think of implementing a new face of the management and governance that can be different from what has been seen for a long time in the region.

To conclude, it is still soon to predict what will happen to the proxy war and conflict in Syria. Too early to see how regional and international powers taking their shares from a land that has no sovereignty and independence at the current time.