

Rojava – a “protection zone” for religious and ethnic minorities in northern Syria? Report on a research trip



Imprint

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1. Introduction

“The causes for flight must be resolved locally. We expect Germany, Europe and the United States of America to help us. We are going to establish a multiethnic and multi-religious project in Rojava - northern Syria. Here, in northern Syria, we want to support all minorities – regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or language – and we expect help, not only from the public, but also from other governments. The project we started in northern Syria could be implemented in all of Syria, leading to a free, peaceful, and equitable coexistence of the different religions, ethnicities, and religious denominations. Currently, all minority groups living here are represented in the administration – guaranteeing a right to mother tongue, a right to freedom of belief and freedom of expression. These rights are governed by the social contract, and three languages were declared official languages of the region: Arabic, Kurdish, and Aramaic.”

Elizabeth Koriyeh, a Christian woman from Qamischli

Dr. Kamal Sido, Middle East Consultant of the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP), visited Rojava in northern Syria from March 12 to April 3, 2016, to get his own impression of the situation. The important outcome of his research trip are around 24 interviews with members of different ethnic groups, 18 of which are published as an annex to this report.

The Western media are still dominated by the images of the “good revolutionaries” and the “evil regime” in Syria. However, this dichotomous image is obsolete, at least since the emergence of the terrorist group “Islamic State” (IS), formerly known as the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) or the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL). Today, it must be noted that the so-called *Free Syrian Army (FSA)* in Syria is completely infiltrated by Islamists. Throughout the country, the civilian population is suffering from the terrible civil war, which has been going on since 2011. The situation is growing worse every day – especially for the minorities. Many members of minority groups have left the country for fear of discrimination or assaults. They cannot live in safety. Everywhere they go, they are at risk of being abducted, executed, or tortured. Members of ethnic and religious minorities who are on the run within Syria are either trying to reach the area along the Syrian Mediterranean coast in the west, which is held by the regime, Damascus, or Rojava in northern Syria.

There are about 3,000,000 Kurds living in Syria. They represent about 15 percent of the population, and most of them live in two (not connected) enclaves in the north of the country – Jazire/Cazîra¹ and Afrin.

The area, which is referred to as Rojava - Northern Syria in this report, has several other names, some of which are linked to the political views of the persons using the term: The Kurds from the ranks of the *Democratic Union Party (PYD)*, the leading force in northern

¹ Cazîra (Province of Al-Hasakeh), referring to the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris (including Kobani)

Syria, call this area “Rojava”². The term is a derivation or abbreviation of the Kurdish name “Rojavayê Kurdistan”. Followers of Masoud Barzani, the current president of Iraqi Kurdistan, who are competing with the *Kurdish Workers’ Party*³ (which is banned in Germany), call the area “Kurdistana Suriye”⁴. Many Assyrians/Arameans and Arabs simply call the area “northern Syria”. It should be noted that the *PYD* and the *PKK* are more flexible about the name of the area than other groups. Some of the Assyrians/Arameans and Arabic people who live there with the Kurds but don’t approve of the term “Kurdistan” simply use the term “Rojava”⁵. Thus, when representatives of the *PYD*, other Kurdish parties, as well as representatives of some of the Assyrian Aramaic, Arabic, and Turkmen organizations established a federation of northern Syria on March 17, 2016, they agreed on the term “Rojava - Northern Syria”.

First, the Kurds managed to establish a “safe haven” in the turmoil of the Syrian civil war. However, the initial aim was not to establish a separate state, but to lay the basis for a democratic Syria (with a self-government in a federal state), ensuring protection for minority groups and political freedoms for the entire population. A self-government was established in 2013 – with government quotas based on the individual minority groups’ proportion of the population, women’s equality, cultural centers, military and police forces. During the last few years, the police⁶ and the *People’s Protection Units (YPG)*⁷ were able to defend Rojava - Northern Syria against the *Islamic State (IS)* and other radical Islamists. The *Women’s Protection Units (YPJ)*⁸ make up about 30 to 40 percent of the military forces. This also applies to the police forces and the civil administration. Thus, the Kurds and their allies – the *Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)*, the Arab militia of the *Shammar tribe*⁹, and the Christian *Sutoro* militia – managed to gain control over and defend almost the entire province of Al-Hasakeh in the far northeast of Syria, the neighboring districts Tell Abyad¹⁰ and Kobani¹¹ in the north, as well as Afrin in the far northwest of Syria.

However, the Kurds are facing numerous problems that might undermine their autonomy. Firstly, their territory has been under attack by radical Islamists for the last two years; there are serious armed clashes, and the Islamist attackers are increasingly trying to harm the civilian population. Secondly, Rojava is under an embargo by the other powers in the respective part of the world. In the south, there is a blockade by radical Islamists, and Turkey is building a wall in the north of the country and has been keeping all border crossings closed. Also, the border with Iraqi Kurdistan in the east is not completely open. The border

² English: *Western Kurdistan*

³ Mainly, the *PKK* operates in Turkey, but it is also active in the neighboring Kurdish areas

⁴ English: *Syrian Kurdistan*

⁵ English: *The West*

⁶ Kurdish: *Asyayîş*

⁷ Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*

⁸ Kurdish: *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinan*

⁹ Arabic: *Quwat as-Sanadid*

¹⁰ Tell Abyad belongs to the province of ar-Raqqa

¹¹ Afrin and Kobani belong to the province of Aleppo

crossing Fish Khabour (Sêmalka) is controlled by the *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDP Iraq), under the command of the Iraqi-Kurdish President Masoud Barzani. The relations between the *KDP Iraq*, the *PYD* and the *PKK* are currently characterized by fierce competition, and the intra-Kurdish dispute also affects the border crossing Sêmalka. Again and again, there are temporary closures. If at all, individuals can only cross the “Kurdish-Kurdish” border using a motor boat on the Tigris. The total embargo has fatal consequences for the civilian population in Rojava - Northern Syria: There is a lack of medication and food, and the people are becoming poorer and poorer. The shelters are lacking fuel for heating and cooking, and infectious diseases have broken out.

2. The Kurdish political parties and their differences

2.1 The PYD

The *Democratic Union Party (PYD)*¹² was established in 2003, based on an initiative by the *PKK* – which, officially, is ideologically (but not organizationally) close to the party, as both see Abdullah Ocalan as their spiritual leader. Currently, the armed wing of the *PYD*, consisting of the *People’s Protection Units – YPG* and *YPJ* – is one of the most important enemies of *IS* in Syria. The official aim of the *PYD* is to establish a democratic autonomous government in northern Syria, which has, de facto, been existing since 2012. The *PYD* is planning to establish an autonomous region within the existing borders, which is held together primarily by community-based organizations rather than by treaties. Within the autonomous region, the party aims to “guarantee the rights and liberties of all ethnic, religious, and other minority groups/communities in an all-encompassing and just constitution”. The *PYD* has a dual leadership, and one of the two leaders must be a woman. The chairpersons are Salih Muslim (since 2010) and Asya Abdullah (since 2012).

2.2 The Kurdish National Congress in Syria (KNCS)¹³

The *Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNCS)* was established on October 26 and 27, by eleven Syrian-Kurdish parties, the most important of them being the *KDP-S*¹⁴, but also many splinter parties. In July 2012, the *KNCS* agreed to cooperate with the *PYD*. The *High Kurdish Committee (DBK)*¹⁵ was founded, consisting of five representatives each of the *PYD* and the *KNCS* – and an agreement between the *KNCS* and the *PYD* was signed in Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan, in October 2014. The *KNCS* has repeatedly accused the *PYD* of ignoring the agreements met with the *KNCS*. Formally, the *KNCS* wanted to share the power in Rojava - Northern Syria with the *PYD* following the “fifty-fifty”-rule. The organization also planned to

¹² Kurdish: *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*

¹³ Kurdish: *Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyeyê*

¹⁴ *KDP-S*: *Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria*

¹⁵ Kurdish: *Desteya Bilind a Kurd*

build up its own militia, but the *PYD* and other parties are strictly against this. Instead, there are plans to build up common civil and military structures. “Back then, the *KNCS* had to leave the *DBK* due to pressure from the Turkish government. The *KNCS* doesn’t really want to cooperate with the *PYD*,” said a senior politician and former member of the *DBK*¹⁶. The Turkish government is maintaining good relations with the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani. Ankara probably used Barzani to persuade the *KNCS* not to cooperate with the *PYD*. In fact, the Turkish government has labelled the *PYD* as a “terrorist organization”, thus prohibiting all affiliated groups in Syria to cooperate with the *PYD* and the *YPG*. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan doesn’t allow “friendly” governments to enter cooperations with the *PYD* – and he even prompted the US to make a clear decision: “Is it me that is your partner or is it the terrorists?”¹⁷, he stated, referring to the *PYD* and the *YPG*.

Meanwhile, most of the other organizations have turned their backs on the *KNCS*, including two Syrian-Kurdish parties: Firstly, the *Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party*¹⁸, which is led by president Abdulhamid Haji Darwish, a senior Syrian-Kurdish politician and one of the founders of the first Kurdish party in Syria – and, secondly, the *Kurdish Democratic Union Party* in Syria¹⁹, led by Muhiddin Sheikhalî. Both politicians are still living in Syria: Abdulhamid Haji Darwish in Qamishli and Muhiddin Sheikhalî in Afrin.

3. Course of the journey and the first impressions of the visited regions



Places the author visited during his trip to northern Syria

¹⁶ In a meeting with the Author in Qamishli on March 23, 2016

¹⁷ www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/2016-02/turkei-kurden-usa-recep-tayyip-erdogan [May 18, 2016]

¹⁸ Kurdish: *Pêshverû*

¹⁹ Kurdish: *Yekiti/Al Wahda*

The author traveled through the crisis region between the Tigris and the Euphrates for three weeks, from March 12 to April 3, 2016. The journey took him to – among other places – to Kobani, Qamishli, Amudah, Tell Abyad, and Al-Hasakeh.

He was able to meet the representatives of almost all active parties, organizations, and associations in northern Syria, and to arrange interviews with some of them. He met:

- Al-Majd, Abu (*Sutoro Militia*)
- Al-Salum, Mansour (Arab, chairman of the *Executive Federal Council* of Rojava - Northern Syria)
- Azzam, Hussein (Arab, Vice President of the *Executive Council* of the Autonomous Administration in Caḏîra)
- Bave Alan, Ahmad (chief editor of the newspaper *Buyer*)
- Bro, Ibrahim (leader of the *KNCS*)
- Daoud, Daoud (Christian, *Assyrian Democratic Union*)
- Gado, Salih (*Left Democratic Party*)
- Hajnuri, Omar (*Komela Newroz*)
- Hasso, Akram (independent, president of the *Executive Council* of the Autonomous Administration in Caḏîra)
- Haji Berko, Sirwan (founder of the radio station *arta.fm*)
- Hami, Ismail (*Yekiti Party*)
- Ibrahim, Ciwan (Chief of Police, Kurdish: *Asyayîş*)
- Ismail, Ahmad (*DPK Syria*)
- Khalil, Abir (Head of Department of the prisons in Rojava)
- Khalil, Aldar (leading member of *TEV-DEM*)
- Koriyeh, Elizabeth (Christian, *Syriac Unity Party*)
- Muslim, Anwar (President of the Canton of Kobani)
- Mashaikh, Mustafa (*Al Wahda Party*)
- Osman, Amjad (*Equality Party*)
- Saydo, Ilyas (Chairman of the association *Mala Êzdiya / “Yazidi House”*)
- Silo, Talal (Turkmen, spokesman for the *SDF*)
- Sulaiman Ahmad (former speaker of the *Kurdish High Council* and member of the *Pêshverû* party’s politburo)
- Xarzi, Mohammad (President of the Islamic scholars of Rojava)
- Zinar, Fidan (*YPG* in Kobani)
- Representatives of the association *“Together for Amudah”*
- Representatives of the *KNCS*
- Representatives of *Komala Newroz* (Amudah)
- A representative of the *Communist Party of Kurdistan*
- Representatives of the *PYD*
- ...many other representatives of the civil society, the minorities (Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians/Arameans/Chaldeans, the Turkmen, Muslims, Yazidis, Christians), as well as journalists

Most of these parties and organizations have their own offices.

After crossing the border to Rojava at Sêmalka, the journey continued on March 13, 2016, to Amudah via Qamishli. The main bodies of the region’s Autonomous Administration are located in Amudah. During the following days, the author visited Qamishli and the provincial capital of Al-Hasakeh.



Crossing the Tigris at the border crossing Sêmalka

In the mid-1930s, the population of Al-Hasakeh in north-eastern Syria consisted of about 42,000 Arabs (mainly livestock farmers), 82,000 Kurds (mainly farmers) and 32,000 Christians (merchants and artisans), most of them living in the cities. By 1962, the population of the province had increased to 340,000. There was a special census in the same year. Subsequently, the government in Damascus ordered about 120,000 Kurds to be expatriated. Currently, the population of the region – including many civil war refugees – is estimated at 1,300,000.

3.1 The individual travel destinations

3.1.1 Amudah

Before 2011, there were about 50,000 people living in Amudah, mainly Kurds. The current number of inhabitants is unknown, since many Kurds have left the city and since many Arab refugees from the combat zones in the south have sought shelter in Amudah. There are still ten Christians living in the city. Their Syrian Orthodox church – which is made of mud – is still intact, but there are no church services any more.

In Amudah, the author interviewed several employees of the radio station *arta.fm*. *Arta.fm* broadcasts in four languages: Kurdish, Arabic, Aramaic and Armenian. The very well-functioning alternative radio station was founded by Sirwan Haji Berko in July 2013.



The team of radio arta.fm

After the author arrived back in Germany following his visit to northern Syria, in the night of April 26/27, the radio station was attacked by armed and masked men who threatened the staff and set the main studio on fire. Some of the opposition parties in northern Syria blamed the Autonomous Administration in Rojava - Northern Syria for this act, but the self-government condemned the cowardly attack against *arta.fm* and promised to bring light to the incident quickly.²⁰ Meanwhile, two alleged perpetrators were arrested. The radio station has resumed its work.



A Syrian-Orthodox church (made of mud) in Amudah

²⁰ <http://www.buyerpress.com/?p=37051> [May 18, 2016]

3.1.2 Kobani

The most western destination of the journey was the city of Kobani²¹, where the Kurdish New Year, *Newroz*, was celebrated on March 21, 2016. Before 2011, the city Kobani had about 54,000 inhabitants, most of the Kurds. The eponymous region of Kobani – which includes 384 villages – does not belong to the administrative district of Al-Hasakeh, but to Aleppo. In 2004, according to the Syrian government, the region had almost 200,000 inhabitants. In the wake of the current civil war, this number has almost doubled. The city of Kobani was established in the course of the construction of the Baghdad railway in 1912. Three years later, Armenian refugees settled in Kobani.



A popular photo motif: the sign “Welcome to Kobani” (Kurdish: “Hûn bi xêr hatin Kobanê”)

The city and the region of Kobani had been embattled from September 15, 2014 to January 26, 2015, when IS-fighters tried to conquer the city. The Kurdish defenders were able to defend only a small residential area. After months of fierce house-to-house fighting, the Kurds received air support and weapons from the United States. The Turkish government refused to provide any help for the region until early November. Finally, under pressure from the international public, Ankara allowed 150 Kurdish *Peshmerga* fighters from Iraqi

²¹ Arabic: *Ain al-Arab*

Kurdistan to travel to Kobani to support the defenders. In January 2015, the Kurds managed to fend off the IS-fighters from Kobani.

According to estimates, 1,000 to 1,500 Kurdish fighters and about 500 civilians lost their lives in the battle for Kobani. Around 5,000 people were wounded and had to be treated in improvised hospitals or in the Kurdish communities of neighboring Turkey. Again and again, the Turkish authorities refused wounded Kurds to be treated in Turkey. Often, wounded fighters had to wait at the border crossings for several days, and some of them were even left to bleed to death. Most of the approximately 400,000 inhabitants of the city and the region of Kobani were forced to flee. Every week, about 1,000 people decide to leave the refugee camps or their private shelters in the mainly Kurdish-inhabited parts of southeast Turkey and return to Kobani – despite the disastrous conditions. As about 80 percent of the city are destroyed, many also tried to find refuge in Europe.



People mourning family members who lost their lives in the battle for Kobani

There are merely two makeshift hospitals: a civilian one and a military one. The border crossing from Turkey to Kobani is only opened about twice a week – and only for returnees. According to the President of the Canton of Kobani, Anwar Muslim²², about 250,000 people have already returned to Kobani and the surrounding villages.

While tens of thousands of Kurds and their friends celebrated *Newroz* in Kobani, the author conducted several interviews with politicians and other citizens. *IS* had planned to carry out attacks on the celebrations that day. As reported later, the terrorist group had tried get smuggle car bombs into Kobani, but they were discovered just outside the city. The *IS*-positions are located approximately 60 kilometers to the south of the city.

²² In an interview with the author in Kobani on June 21, 2016



Women and children on the way to celebrate Newroz

3.1.3 Tell Abyad

On March 22, following a two-day-stay in Kobani, the journey went back to Tell Abyad, which is predominantly inhabited by Sunni Arabs, to Amudah and Qamishli. Again, this involved protection by the Kurdish military, since many Arab Sunnis in Tell Abyad are still supporters of *IS*. Therefore, civilians, especially foreigners, are strongly recommended to move around in Tell Abyad in daylight only – and protected by armed forces. The connection between Kobani in the west and Qamishli in the east was not re-established until June 2015, after the *YPG* and its allies had driven *IS* away from Tell Abyad.

The district of Tell Abyad²³ as well as the eponymous capital city belong to the Syrian administrative district of ar-Raqqa, located close to the border to Turkey, near the Turkish town of Akçakale. Due to its strategic location, the Assad regime followed through with an especially strict Arabization policy in the city of Tell Abyad. The area belongs to the regions from which many Kurds were expelled from in the 1960s and after. In 2004, Tell Abyad had about 15,000 inhabitants – many Arabs, but also Kurds and Syrian Christians. By 2013, *IS*-fighters and other groups of the Syrian pro-Turkish opposition had driven almost all Kurds and Christians out of the city. Many houses that belonged to Kurdish people were destroyed, and their property was confiscated. In February 2015, Kurdish forces launched a major assault on the *IS*-occupied city. There were serious clashes in June 2015, and the Kurds and their Arabic allies were able to drive *IS* out of Tell Abyad. As reported by the Kurds and the Arabs, the Turkish government had supported the radical Islamists.

²³ Kurdish: *Girê Spî*

Since Tell Abyad is now back in hands of the Kurds and their Arab allies, there is no direct connection between Turkey and ar-Raqqa, the capital of *IS*, any more – which is a serious setback for the Turkish policy on Syria, similar to the end of the besiegement of Kobani. The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was quite nervous about the development, because he wants to avoid a Kurdish self-administered region close to the border to Turkey. Thus, Erdogan prompted the United States to either take sides with Turkey or the “terrorists”. In the struggle for Tell Abyad and Kobani, the United States provided air support for the Kurdish *YPG*. In this context, the Turkish government and loyal Syrian oppositionists accused the *YPG* of expelling Arabs and Turkmens from Tell Abyad. The author cannot confirm these allegations.



Travel protection by Kurdish armed forces

3.1.4 Al-Hasakeh

After his stay in Kobani, the author’s next destination was the city of Al-Hasakeh, where, like in Qamishli, the Syrian regime has influence as well. Before 2011, the city had about 175,000 inhabitants. In the region of Al-Hasakeh, the author visited the headquarters of the *Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)* and conducted an interview with the spokesman Talal Silo. The *SDF* consists of Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian-Aramaic, and Turkmen forces in Rojava - Northern Syria, with the *YPG* taking a leading role.

Al-Hasakeh was one of the first places where the Syrian “revolution” broke out, and the first Kurdish community to take sides with the “rebels”. Following several clashes between the *YPG* and Islamist forces in July 2013, the Kurdish activists were very disappointed by the Arab Sunni opposition in Al-Hasakeh, which had taken sides with the radical Islamists. As of 2013, when *IS* started to attack Al-Hasakeh and was beaten back by the *YPG*, the government forces retreated to a few isolated barracks. The *YPG* succeeded in fending off *IS* from the area of Al-Hasakeh, and was thus able to consolidate its important position in the region.



YPG-flags in Al-Hasakeh

3.1.5 The regime in Qamischli and in Al-Hasakeh

The multi-ethnic and multi-religious town Qamishli is militarily controlled mainly by Kurds. About 200,000 people are living there. According to estimates, there were about 40,000 Christians – but about half of the community has already left the city. Qamishli is held by the *YPG*, *Asyayîş*, and other armed organizations that are allied with the *PYD*. In addition, there are also Christian and Arab militias. However, the regime is present in Qamishli and in Al-Hasakeh, the provincial capital, as well – controlling the airport in Qamishli, for example.

The author was able to talk to several residents. The vast majority of the interlocutors – not just politicians, but also simple citizens – are quite glad about the fact that the regime is present in Qamishli as well. Most people agree that the airport is of vital importance, and many of them emphasized the importance of state structures in the region: “If Assad’s rule in Damascus breaks down, the remaining regime-structures in Qamishli and in Al-Hasakeh will automatically cease to exist as well. Considering what has happened so far, we must think and act realistically,” said a 60-year-old Kurdish teacher. Moreover, many Arabs – but also the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans and the Armenians – feel more secure if the regime shows presence. The newly created Autonomous Administration still has to prove itself. The *YPG* and *Asyayîş* are keeping up security and order, but a functioning administration is dependent on an active economy and political life. This is where Rojava is making slow progress. The majority of the population highly appreciate the defense policy and the protective measures in the struggle against the radical Islamists, but there is a lot of criticism concerning the political activities of the Autonomous Administration, especially regarding its economic policy.



Downtown Qamishli

Many of the author’s interlocutors in Qamishli assured that the Autonomous Administration would be better off if the *KNCS* were to be involved in the administrative tasks. Both sides should start to cooperate: The *PYD* should be more open regarding political issues, and the *KNCS* should distance itself from the anti-Kurdish policy of the Turkish state and the *Syrian National Coalition*. It was often emphasized that the state structures in the province of Al-Hasakeh should not be destroyed, that there shouldn’t be an Islamist regime in Syria following Assad’s dictatorship. Many people thought that it would not be a good idea to expel the remaining regime troops from the region. In the long term, they might turn out to be a problem, but there is only one common enemy at the moment: *IS*. In an emergency, it could be necessary to cooperate with the regime to fight the radical Islamists. Also, the regime is largely seen as “harmless”, meaning that the population currently tends to feel safer due to the presence of the regime troops. At that time (April 2016), most of the Kurds argued against their expulsion as well. Another aspect is that the regime pays (small but regular) salaries.



There are still flags of the regime in Al-Hasakeh

One of the biggest problems in northern Syria is electricity – although the state electricity grid is still largely intact. Without the regime, which maintains the necessary infrastructure, there would hardly be any (or affordable) electricity in Qamishli.



Electric power from diesel generators

Usually, the central electricity grid provides power for one hour a day. Since there are no public authorities in Rojava any more, “regime-power” is free of charge. The rest of the time, the households are dependent on diesel generators and have to pay according to consumption. Also, there are private companies that provide power from electric generators for households that don’t have their own generator. These companies sell electricity “by amperes” at high prices. A family or a single person needs at least two amperes to operate two lamps or a TV set – but this would not be enough for a washing machine, a water pump, or a stove.

It is due to these (and other) reasons, that the Syrian regime should – if at all – only be expelled from Qamishli and the province of Al-Hasakeh by peaceful means. There is the danger of a “Kurdish-Arab war”. An ethnic conflict like this would have catastrophic consequences for the entire civilian population, especially for the smaller Christian communities in the region. In a conflict situation, not only the regime in Damascus, but also many other actors such as the Turkish government of Iran, the *IS*, Arab nationalists, and Islamists from the ranks of the *Syrian National Coalition* would try to push through their geopolitical interests.

3.1.6 Afrin: the Kurdish enclave in the west

The author visited the region of Afrin in February 2015. The city Afrin is located approximately 55 kilometers to the north-west of Aleppo, in the valley of the river Afrin. According to estimates, there were 44,000 to 80,000 people living in Afrin before the Syrian civil war.



The City Council of Afrin: Until 2012, there was a monument of Bashar al-Assad

Today, there are almost one million people living in the region of Afrin, about 50% of which are refugees, mainly from Aleppo. Afrin is the only capital of the three enclaves that is not located directly on the border to Turkey, but about 25 kilometers away. In the region, there are seven other smaller towns. Most of the Kurds in Afrin are Sunni Muslims, but there is also a Kurdish-Alavi village, and there are tens of thousands of Yazidis living in the villages. Most of the villages are located along the outer border of the district Afrin, where there are frequent bomb raids by the radical Islamists but also by the Turkish military.

4. Human rights situation

In Amudah, the author visited the headquarters of the Kurdish party “*Yekiti*” and spoke to Mr. Anwar Naso, a member of the party’s politburo. The *Yekiti* party belongs to the Kurdish *National Council in Syria (KNCS)*. Naso had recently been detained by the Autonomous Administration, but was released again. The authorities accused Naso of trying to establish an illegal militia. Instead, he believes to have been arrested because of his political views. Meanwhile, Naso is back in custody (as of June 8, 2016). The Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) sent an appeal the administration to demand his release.

The *KNCS* is part of the *National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Syrian National Coalition)*, which is supported mainly by the Turkish government and Saudi Arabia – politically and diplomatically. Furthermore, the *Syrian National Coalition* is to be seen as a quasi-political representation of “moderate” Islamist armed groups such as the *Al-Tawhid Brigade*, the *Ahrar al Sham*, and the *Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)*, which are fighting against the army of the regime together with the Syrian branch of *Al Qaeda*, the *Al Nusra Front*. These groups also harass Kurds, Christians, Yazidis and other minorities. The *Syrian National Coalition* and the *KNCS* strictly reject the Autonomous Administration in Rojava - Northern Syria. They want to bring it down by any means, which makes the relationship between the *PYD* and the *KNCS* even more difficult. In many of the *PYD*’s publications, the organization accuses the *KNCS* of being directly involved in attacks against Kurdish positions. The *KNCS* contradicts the *PYD*’s accusations and, in turn, accuses the *PYD* of cooperating with the Syrian regime and of having betrayed the Kurdish national interests by propagating a multi-ethnic and multi-religious autonomy project. It is hard to say how close the *PYD* actually is to the regime in Damascus. What is certain is that the *PYD* and the regime have common enemies: the radical Islamist groups and the Turkish government. It should be noted that, in its public statements, the *PYD* has acknowledged the objectives of the Syrian revolution and mentioned the aim of “overthrowing the Syrian regime with all its dictatorial institutions”²⁴. The *Syrian National Coalition*, the Turkish government, and the armed Islamist groups are in fact following an anti-minority policy.

²⁴ www.pydrojava.com [May 18, 2016].

4.1 Visiting a prison

In Qamishli, the Head of *Asyayîş* (the police forces), Ciwan Ibrahim, allowed the author to visit a prison in the district Qanat al Suwêst. Previously, he conducted an interview with the Head of Department of the prisons in Rojava, Mrs. Abir Khalil. When asked whether there were any secret prisons in Rojava, she answered “no”. Further, she emphasized that there aren’t any political prisoners. Thereupon, the author said – a bit provocative – that all rulers would deny the existence of secret prisons.



A prison cell in Qamischli

According to Mrs. Khalil, there are three central prisons in the canton Cazîra (Al-Hasakeh). Furthermore, every major police station has holding cells for prisoners awaiting trial. At that time, there were around 225 people locked up in the prison of Qanat al Suwês.

There, it was possible to talk to the prisoners. The author was allowed to hold a 15-minute presentation for the prison administration and the prison guards, focusing on the importance of humane treatment of prisoners and the ban on torture. It was possible to take pictures of the cells, but not to show the faces of the prisoners. The conditions stated by the prison administration were seen as satisfactory.

4.2 The situation of the minorities

4.2.1 Christians

In Al-Hasakeh, the author visited the headquarters of the Christian *Sutoro* militia – a Christian Aramaic-Assyrian militia that mainly operates in the north-east of Syria, especially

in the province of Al-Hasakeh. The militia is close to the *Syriac Unity Party (SUP)*²⁵, an ally of the *PYD*. *Sutoro* is said to have at least 1,000 fighters.



Fighters of the Christian “Sutoro” militia

In Al-Hasakeh, the author was able to talk to an Armenian woman whose parents had survived the genocide of 1915. Up until 2011, there were about 150,000 Christians living in the province of Al-Hasakeh, of which at least 50% have left the region by now. During his stay in Al-Hasakeh and Qamishli, the author met representatives of several Assyrian-Aramaic organizations. The *Assyrian Democratic Union (ADO)* is an Assyrian organization in Syria and in Europe. It was founded in 1957. According to the organization, the aim is to protect and promote the interests and minority rights of the Assyrian people – and it is involved in the *Syrian National Coalition*, which is infiltrated by Syrian Islamists. The author conducted an interview with Daoud Daoud, a leading member of the *ADO*.

Also – still in Qamishli – an extensive interview took place with Elizabeth Koriyeh of the *SUP*, in the course of which she was questioned about the current situation. She is the Vice President of the executive council of the Autonomous Administration in the Canton Cazîra. The party was founded on October 1, 2005, and has been positioning itself as the opposition to the Assad government since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Unlike the *ADO* party, *SUP* is working closely with the *PYD* and is involved in all political, administrative, and military structures of the Autonomous Administration in Rojava.

For the Christian population, the future form of government in Syria is of vital importance, which is why many Christians in Rojava - northern Syria support the Autonomous Administration. Many of the opposition groups want the entire structure of the future Syrian

²⁵ The *SUP* is a political party in Syria that – according to the organization – represents the interests of the Assyrian/Aramean people.

state to be “more Islamic”. In contrast, Abu al-Majd, a member of the Christian *Sutoro* militia from Al-Hasakeh²⁶, stated: “We are in favor of a democratic, pluralistic, decentralized, secular system in Syria, guaranteeing rights for all members of the minority groups.” The Autonomous Administration in Rojava guarantees linguistic and cultural rights for the Christian Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaicans. The autonomous authorities commonly use three languages: Arabic, Kurdish, and Aramaic. Equality is a very important aspect, especially for the Aramaic people. Their language, which belongs to the world’s endangered languages, is gaining importance in Rojava. Although there are not very many Christians, Aramaic has been introduced as an official language in the region. The official signs of the Autonomous Administration are also in Aramaic, and the street signs in the Christian villages are in three languages as well.

4.2.2 Yazidis

On the way back to Amudah from Al-Hasakeh, on March 25, the author visited a few abandoned Yazidi villages. A majority of the inhabitants of these Yazidi villages emigrated to Germany and other EU countries years ago. In Qizlacho, a village close to Amudah, the author had an appointment with Yazidis. Among the other guests, there were also a few Yazidis from Germany who were on their way to Sinjar in Iraq.



Abandoned houses of Yazidi families who left the region

Once, there were 30 families living in Qizlacho. Today, there are only ten left. The chairman of the Association “Yazidi House”²⁷, Ilyas Saydo, reported that there were approximately 52 villages with Yazidi inhabitants in the province of Al-Hasakeh. Many of these villages are no longer inhabited today. Saydo estimated that there are currently only about 3,000 Yazidis

²⁶ In an interview with the author in Al-Hasakeh on March 25, 2016

²⁷ Kurdish: *Mala Êzdiya*

living in the region. The Yazidis belong to the smallest minority groups – once counting around 30,000 to 60,000 members in Syria. Meanwhile, about two thirds of the Syrian Yazidis have left their villages to find refuge abroad. In Syria, there are settlements in two areas in the Kurdish north; in the district of Al-Hasakeh and in the villages around Afrin, the Kurdish town to the northwest of Aleppo. In Al-Hasakeh, about 60 percent of the Yazidis became stateless after the Syrian government expatriated about 120,000 Kurds in the scope of the Emergency Law no. 93 in 1962. These people were deprived of all their civil rights.

4.2.3 Arabs

In Tall Alo, close to Rumailan, not far from the Iraqi border, the author visited the headquarters of Sheikh Humaidi Daham al-Hadi, who is the leader of the Sunni Arab *Shammar* tribe in Syria and President of the canton of Cazîra.



Visiting Sheikh Humaidi Daham al-Hadi in Tall Alo

The situation of the so-called *Ghamar-Arabs*²⁸ is special: in the early 1970s, prior to the construction of the Euphrates Dam, the regime in Damascus forced the members of this ethnic group to leave the Euphrates valley in central Syria and to settle in the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited region of Al-Hasakeh. After 2011, when there were riots in Syria, some of the Kurds demanded the Autonomous Administration to ensure that these people should

²⁸ English: “flooded” – referring to Arabs whose settlements were flooded in the scope of the dam project

now leave their current settlements. However, the Autonomous Administration rejects this idea. Due to the high number of civil war refugees from the embattled Arab regions in the south, the number of Arabs in Rojava - Northern Syria has almost doubled.

5. Refugee situation

There are at least three refugee camps in the province of Al-Hasakeh. Most refugees, however, manage to find some kind of private accommodation. There are tens of thousands of people living in the refugee camps. In individual meetings, representatives of the Autonomous Administration have repeatedly appealed to the German and other European governments to provide help for the refugees. “We are in desperate need of support in the medical sector, help in the way of drinking water and electricity, and assistance in the field of education. In addition, the roads must be repaired – urgently,” said Hussein Azzam, Vice President of the executive council of the Autonomous Administration in Cazîra, which has its headquarters in Amudah. Since the border crossings from Turkey and Iraq to Rojava are, de facto, closed, there is hardly any support by aid organizations. Thus, the medical situation in the three refugee camps and in Rojava is critical. It is especially the chronically ill, diabetics or dialysis patients, for example, who suffer from the significant shortage of medicine. There is a lack of antibiotics and vaccines. In Rojava, there is also a constant influx of IDPs from the embattled regions, which is why the situation is growing worse all the time.

No one knows how many people have found shelter in Rojava exactly – but there are at least 500,000 refugees in Al-Hasakeh – plus about 300,000 to 500,000 in Afrin. These numbers are constantly changing. Many people move around in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan for a while, before they try to get to Germany or other European countries. In 2012, the number of IDPs who found refuge in Rojava reached more than 1,300,000 million. Many of the refugees stayed with relatives, some found shelter in large buildings such as gymnasiums or schools.

Many people in Rojava - Northern Syria are irritated or even angry about the European Syria-policy. When talking to Christians, the author was often asked: “Why do Germany, the EU, and the United States support the Islamists and the Turkish government?” The vast majority of the Christians in Syria is of the opinion that the Western governments – due to supporting the *Syrian National Coalition*, which is infiltrated by Islamists – are partly to be blamed for the fact that more and more Christians have to leave Syria. “They should have known that if these groups manage to take power, they will exterminate the Christians,” said a Christian from Syria.²⁹ The Christians are calling on the German government and other EU countries not to provide any support for the *Syrian National Coalition*, as the organization is in fact providing support for radical Islamist groups in Syria, which are trying to expel the Christians. Europe should also help the Christian people in Syria directly. “If we could rely on support

²⁹ In an interview with the author in Al-Hasakeh on March 25, 2016

here in Rojava, the people wouldn't have to leave the country". If the causes of flight were to be resolved, much less people would try to reach Europe. "We don't want to live in Europe in the crowded asylum centers. The *SDF*, the *YPG* and *Sutoro* need help in fighting the *Islamic State*, so that we can put an end to the fascist terror of the radical Islamists."³⁰ Many Christians are determined to fight *IS* and other Islamist groups side by side with the Kurds. "This is our territory, the land of our ancestors. We don't want to leave. We won't come to Europe to live in the refugee centers."³¹

6. Turkey as a difficult neighbor

For the author, it was not exactly safe to stay in Qamishli. In 1921, the demarcation line between Syria and Turkey was chosen quite arbitrarily. The railway line (Baghdad Railway) served as the new state border, in the course of which the predominantly Kurdish city of Nusaybin to the north of Qamishli suddenly belonged to the other side, to Turkey. At that time, the city Qamishli in Syria was established. For the Kurds, the Kurdish areas on the other side of the railway line, on the Turkish side, are still referred to as *Serxetê* (English: "above the line"). When the author stayed in Qamishli, it was hard to find sleep. Artillery fire and missile strikes were to be heard nearby – several times a minute – as the Turkish army shelled Nusaybin day and night. Several grenades also hit Qamishli on the Syrian side. According to statements of Kurdish journalists in Qamishli, the Turkish army turned against the civil society in Nusaybin – massively.

6.1 Erdogan and the “Islam-Card”

In February 2015, the author also spoke to the last Armenians in the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited region of Afrin, the region in the north-west of Syria that has been encircled by Turkey and the Syrian Islamists for several years. When asked about his opinion regarding the Kurdish participation in the genocide against the Armenian Christians in 1915, the 58-year-old Aruth Kevork replied, conciliatorily: "There is a big difference between the Kurds back then and the Kurds today." But although the influence of religion among the Kurds has declined with the emergence of the modern Kurdish freedom movement, there are still many who can be manipulated with pretextual religious issues – as can be seen from the many Kurdish voters who supported the conservative Islamic party of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Turkish parliamentary elections on November 1, 2015. He managed to convince 25 percent of the Kurdish voters. Most of the Kurdish people are Sunni Muslims. The Turkish president played the "Islam-Card" during the election campaign and had paid several visits to Kurdish regions – with the Koran in his hands – to mobilize voters. At the same time, the Turkish army remained idle when the *Islamic State* massacred Kurdish people in northern Syria. The Turkish army has been tolerating *IS* and other radical Islamists – who are guilty of

³⁰ In an interview with the author in Al-Hasakeh on March 25, 2016

³¹ In an interview with the author in Al-Hasakeh on March 25, 2016

murdering, raping, and expelling the Kurds and their Christian and Yazidi neighbors – since at least 2012.

Many people in Rojava - Northern Syria, Kurds and Christians alike, are convinced that the Turkish government provides financial, political, and diplomatic support for the radical Islamists. Ankara has openly taken sides with armed Islamist forces such as the *Al-Tawhid Brigade*, *Ahrar al Sham*, or the *Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)*. Most of the jihadists who come to fight in Syria do so via the NATO-member Turkey. “The fact that the Islamists are a threat for Europe as well was not perceived early enough. If you feed a rabid dog, you’ll most probably be bitten yourself one day,” said a Syrian Christian.³²

The *PYD* will not be able to resist Erdogan’s policy of Islamization for very much longer – unless there is strong political, diplomatic, economic, and military support from Europe, from the United States of America, and perhaps from Russia. The non-Sunni Muslims and the non-Muslims are in desperate need of protection. There have to be effective measures against the political Islam, from Erdogan and his *AKP* party in Kurdistan to the settlement area of the Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and in Syria.

6.2 Turkey and the obstruction of the “anti-IS-struggle”

Whenever the author told his interlocutors in Qamishli, Amudah, Kobani, or Al-Hasakeh that he is from Afrin and that his mother and some of his siblings are still living there, they asked if he had already been to Afrin or if he was planning to do so. However, it would not have been possible to travel to Afrin from Kobani. For several years, the area to the west of the Euphrates, between Kobani and Afrin (from Dscharabulu via Azaz to Afrin) has been in the hands of *IS* or Islamist groups that are close to the government in Ankara. The distance between the last position of the *YPG* or the *SDF* in the east and the first *YPG* position in west, near Afrin, is only about 75 kilometers. No Kurdish person, except for those who decided to cooperate with the Turkish government, would dare to take this route, as this would mean certain death. The area between Dscharabulu and Afrin has recently become known as *Shahba*.

The *YPG* and the Sunni Arab allies want to drive *IS* away from *Shahba*. “It could be quite easy to drive the *IS* and other radical Islamists away from *Shahba* and, thus, to establish a corridor between Kobani and Afrin. However, the US are against military operations by the *YPG* in this region,” stated a *YPG*-commander in Kobani on March 21. As mentioned before, the Turkish President, Erdogan, is very concerned about a possible break-up of the connection between Turkey and ar-Raqqa, the capital of *IS*, and an end to the besiegement of Kobani. Thus, he is alarmed about the developments in northern Syria – and he is disturbed by the

³² In an interview with the author in Al-Hasakeh on March 25, 2016

fact that the YPG continue to gain control over stretches of land along the border to Turkey.³³



Kurds from the Shahba region

The *Shahba* region includes the plain to the north and the east of Aleppo: Azaz, Al-Bab, a large part of Manbij and parts of As-Safira. *Shahba* is a historical name for the region, which is traditionally inhabited by Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmens. According to estimates, there are still 450 inhabited villages with about 1,800,000 people. 217 villages are inhabited by Kurds. After Syria became independent in 1946, the Kurds in the region had to endure forced assimilation and a policy of Arabization. Since the Kurdish language was prohibited in Syria, and since there were no Kurdish schools, many Kurds have forgotten their language – but it is still alive in the family names and the village names.³⁴

The majority of the population there, especially the Kurds, are demanding initiatives to drive *IS* and other radical Islamic groups away and to put the region under the control of the *Syrian Democratic Forces* or the YPG. It would be possible to open up a corridor between Afrin and Kobani – and a road could make the *Shahba* region directly accessible. Currently, the only possible connection between Kobani and Afrin is, if at all, to travel by plane from Qamishli to Damascus and then take a land route to the north. If *IS* were to be expelled from

³³ www.nzz.ch/meinung/kommentare/ankaras-albtraum-einer-kurdischen-zone-1.18603332 [June 7, 2016].

³⁴ Interview with Haji Riza in Kobani on March 21, 2016

the region completely, Cazîra, Kobani and *Shahba* could be associated to Afrin, forming a federal region in Syria. In this region, all ethnicities and religious communities could be granted equal rights. The majority of the population is against radical Islamists in the area and against initiatives to establish a Sharia state in the region – as envisaged by Islamist groups that are supported by Turkey. If these groups were to take power, the different ethnic groups and religious communities – Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Turkmen, Muslims, Yazidis, Christians and Alawites – would not have equal rights; and neither would the women.



Northern Syria and the Shahba region

6.3 Erdogan’s “protection zone” is dangerous

Ironically, the Turkish government is planning to establish a “protection zone” in the *Shahba* region, supposedly for Syrian refugees. However, many people in northern Syria, especially the Christians, are sure that Ankara’s “protection zone” would rather serve as a stronghold for radical Islamist groups that would terrorize the Kurds, the Christians, and other minority groups. The people in northern Syria sometimes compare Turkey’s plans for a “protection zone” to the Peshawar region in Pakistan. In the 1980s and 1990s, when there were many Afghan refugees living in Peshawar, Pakistan’s secret services supported or tolerated the emergence of the Afghan *Taliban* and *Al Qaeda*. “If the Turkish government really wants a ‘protection zone’ for Syrian refugees, why doesn’t it put an end to the threats towards the existing protection zone, Rojava - northern Syria? Ankara must stop the attacks against this relatively stable and peaceful region,” said a refugee from the village Ihras to the north of Aleppo.³⁵

³⁵ In an interview with the author in Kobani on March 21, 2016

7. Conclusion: Rojava - Northern Syria needs our solidarity

“There may be problems in Rojava, and the Kurds will be the first to acknowledge that. Kurds harbor revanchist claims and they are not as democratic as they often claim. Still, on those two issues, they are no worse than Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey and, indeed, quite a bit better. What the Syrian Kurds are, however, is secular, tolerant toward religious minorities, and generally tolerant toward ethnic minorities within their midst.” This is what Michael Rubin, a Middle East expert from the US and former employee of the Department of Defense, has to say about the complicated situation in Rojava - Northern Syria. This conclusion by Michael Rubin can only be approved.



Refugee children in Kobani

After the radical Islamists managed to “liberate” most of “Sunni Syria” from the Christians, they must be kept from advancing further north to Rojava. Rojava - Northern Syria has always been a diverse region – ethnically, with regard to religion, and culturally. To preserve this rich diversity, all religious and cultural communities must be able to live out their faith and culture freely. Rojava and its leading political forces must not put up with conditions as in today’s Sunni Syria. Regardless of what will become of Rojava in the future, whether the region will become autonomous or whether it will again be controlled by a centralist government in Damascus, radical Islamist should not get hold of Rojava. The Kurds and the few Christians in Rojava - northern Syria will not be able to resist the radical Islamists on their own. They are dependent on help from Germany, Europe, and the United States of America.

It is our job, we are obliged, to help the people in Rojava – to enable them to live a life in dignity and to develop perspectives for themselves and their children. This is possible, and it could even cost less than to provide shelter for them in asylum centers in Germany. In this emergency situation, we – Germany and the rest of Europe – can provide targeted humanitarian assistance to make the situation of the Kurds, Sunni Arabs, the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans, Armenians, Christians, Yazidis, Circassians, Chechens and others more bearable – and to help them survive. Not to mention the almost one million refugees who have found shelter in Rojava - northern Syria. They need our solidarity and support – urgently! In the scope of our humanitarian assistance, we will also be able to take influence on what happens in northern Syria, to stabilize the situation and to strengthen the local self-management structures. We could also promote tolerance, the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic groups and religious communities, as well as human and minority rights. However, what northern Syria needs most urgently, is an immediate and permanent opening of the border crossings to Turkey and Iraq, to allow for humanitarian aid.

8.Recommendations

8.1 To the regional self-government and the PYD

- There must be new and unconditional talks with the *Kurdish National Alliance in Syria*³⁶, the *KNCS*, and the *Peşverû* party – urgently – regarding an expansion of the structures of the Autonomous Administration. The self-government-structures must rely on a broad political basis to ensure the survival of Rojava, to strengthen democratic structures as well as human and minority rights.
- There must also be immediate consultations with the *KNCS*, the *Kurdish National Alliance in Syria*, and the *Peşverû* party concerning the existence (or nonexistence) of political prisoners in the prisons of Rojava. It must be clarified who is imprisoned for political reasons and who is in prison for having formed or for being involved in an armed militia.
- It care must be ensured that the work of the authorities in Rojava is transparent. Without transparency, no administration is able to operate successfully in the long run.
- Although this has already happened in the past, there must be a public statement to emphasize willingness to discuss all relevant issues with Turkey, the *KDP* of Massoud Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the *Syrian National Coalition*.

³⁶ Kurdish: *Hevbendî*

8.2 To the KNCS

- The negative attitude towards the regional self-government must be reconsidered, and the administration must be recognized.
- In the scope of all contacts to and discussions with the government in Turkey, the *KDP* in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the *Syrian National Coalition*, it is mandatory to show willingness to support the Autonomous Administration.
- The demand to establish a private militia must be dropped. Instead, there must be common military structures. New militias in northern Syria would be a threat to social peace and would only lead to new armed conflicts, even among the Kurds.

8.3 To Massoud Barzani of the *KDP* (Iraqi Kurd.) and the *PKK*

- The *KDP* must once again step up its efforts to unite and strengthen the Syrian Kurdish organizations, showing more neutrality concerning intra-Kurdish issues in Syria. The *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)* should be involved in the mediation efforts as well.
- The *KDP* must ensure that the border crossing Sêmalka will be opened for people and for commerce – completely and permanently!
- The *PKK* must use its influence on the *PYD* to speed up the process of uniting the Syrian-Kurdish organizations.

8.4 To the German government

- Rojava - northern Syria is in desperate need of humanitarian support – especially regarding drinking water and electricity. There must be financial support for the civil society organizations that are involved in Rojava.
- The Turkish government, the *KDP* (Iraqi Kurdistan), and the *Syrian National Coalition* must be urged to enter talks about current problems with the Autonomous Administration in Rojava and the *PYD*.
- In consultations with representatives of the Turkish government, the German government must insist that the border crossings to Afrin, Kobani, and Qamishli will be opened permanently – for people, trade, and especially for humanitarian aid.
- There must be measures to resolve the causes of flight in northern Syria! At least one million refugees have sought shelter in Rojava - northern Syria.
- The Turkish government's plans to establish a “protection zone” in northern Syria should not be supported. Instead, it is necessary to find a solution involving the Kurds and the Christians in Rojava.

9. Appendix

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The interviews, which were conducted by Dr. Kamal Sido, the STP’s Middle East consultant, during his trip to northern Syria (from March 12 to April 3, 2016), are based on original sound recordings.

9.2 Individual interviews

Interview with Diyana Mansur Aboudi (Arab, Head of a kindergarten in Qamishli)

The interview was conducted in Qamishli on March 23, 2016.



Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Aboudi: My name Diyana Mansur Aboudi. I am 30 years old. I am the Head our kindergarten.

Sido: What is the name of the kindergarten?

Aboudi: The kindergarten’s name is *Top School*. It is a private institution, not stately.

Sido: What are the monthly kindergarten fees for one child?

Aboudi: There are two groups of children: In the first group, there are the children who are brought to the kindergarten by their parents – and the second group consists of children who are picked up from their homes. The fees are 4,000 Syrian pounds (about 14 Euros) for a child in the first group (*Editor’s note: a normal worker earns about 25,000 Syrian pounds a month*) and 5,500 pounds for a child in the second group. Thus, it costs 1,500 Syrian pounds to have the children picked up.

Sido: Are there meals for the kids while they are in kindergarten?

Aboudi: Generally, the children visit our kindergarten from 8 am to 1 pm. We don’t provide meals; the parents bring along food for their children.

Sido: What about water?

Aboudi: We provide drinking water.

Sido: How many children attend this kindergarten?

Aboudi: There are 85 children. Last year, there were about 120 children. Many parents have moved away or can no longer pay the kindergarten fees.

Sido: What do you know about the ethnic and religious backgrounds of the children’s parents?

Aboudi: Half of them are Arabs, the other half are Kurds – only Muslims, no Christians.

Sido: What are the difficulties for you and your kindergarten? Do you have electricity?

Aboudi: As for electricity, we're lucky. There is a generator about a hundred meters away. It is usually switched on at 8 am. From there, we can get electricity from 10 am to 1 pm.

Sido: How old are the children that attend the kindergarten?

Aboudi: The children are between one and five years old.

Sido: What can you say about the staff of the kindergarten?

Aboudi: We have two teachers for the five-year-olds and for the age-group of four years. We have an English-teacher and a nursery worker who is responsible for the age-group of one year.

Sido: Currently, there are two administrations in Qamishli, the government in Damascus and the Autonomous Administration. Are there any conflicts due to this?

Aboudi: The Autonomous Administration has issued a permission for the kindergarten. The government in Damascus doesn't interfere. The kindergarten staff and the parents decide about the teaching materials. Most parents want their children to learn more Arabic and English. The Autonomous Administration has provided a book for the Kurdish language – but we weren't forced to teach the children Kurdish. This is done voluntarily.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Abu Al-Majd (member of the *Sutoro*)

The interview was conducted in Al-Hasakeh on March 25, 2016.

Sido: The *Sutoro* is a Christian militia. Are members of all Christian denominations – Syrian Orthodox, Catholic-Orthodox, Assyrian, etc. – involved?

Al-Majd: Yes, we have members of all the different denominations, including, of course, members of our people – the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaeans (*Suryoye*).

Sido: And how many members does the *Sutoro* militia have?

Al-Majd: I can't provide any details. Even if I knew exactly, I wouldn't tell you. These are military secrets.



Sido: The *Sutoro* militia is connected to the YPG, both politically as well as regarding military issues. Also, Al-Hasakeh is a predominantly Kurdish city. Do the YPG or other Kurdish organizations expect you to learn Kurdish?

Al-Majd: No, absolutely not. You've been traveling around in Al-Hasakeh today, so you've probably seen that signposts referring to the individual authorities of the Autonomous Administration are usually in

three languages: Arabic, Kurdish, and Aramaic. Equality is very important, especially regarding the Aramaic language. Our language was about to die out, but it is now getting more attention. Although there aren't very many of us, Aramaic has been introduced as an official language in the region. Aramaic is used everywhere in our villages, and more and more street signs show three languages. We fought for this right for our people in Syria for decades.

Sido: In 2005, the *Syriac Union Party (SUP)* fought for the rights for the Assyrian/Aramaic people as well. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria 2011, the organization is on the side of the opposition against the Assad regime. What is the relationship between *Sutoro* and the *SUP* like?

Al-Majd: We have good relations with the party.

Sido: In Syria, there is also the *Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO)*, which represents the interests of the Assyrian people as well. What about the relationship between *Sutoro* and the *ADO*?

Al-Majd: As the *ADO* follows different political goals, we don't work together.

Sido: Your Christian militia is often criticized for cooperating with the regime.

Al-Majd: *Sutoro*, the *YPG*, and other military organizations are associated to the *Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)*. The main tasks of the *SDF* are to fight *IS* and to protect the civilians in the region. As the regime is fighting against *IS* as well, the so-called “opposition abroad” accuses us of cooperating with the regime. For us, it is important to emphasize that we are pursuing our own goals.

Sido: What goals exactly?

Al-Majd: We want to establish a democratic, pluralistic, decentralized, secular system in Syria, guaranteeing rights for all minority groups. It is also important to us to keep state affairs and religious issues apart. We strongly oppose of a Sharia state, the kind the Islamist opposition is promoting.

Sido: Why do the Christians fear a Sharia state?

Al-Majd: We are not afraid of a state that is based on Islam. However, in our opinion, there are no real perspectives for a religious state at this time. Our modern times call for a modern state. This applies both to the Islamic religion as well as to Christianity. As I said, religious issues and state affairs have to be kept apart. The Islamists’ activities have little to do with Islam.

Sido: Outside, when I talked to a man and introduced myself – telling him that I’m from Germany – he insisted that Germany supports the Islamists in Syria. What did he mean by that?

Al-Majd: Most of the Christians in Syria are very angry at the Western governments for supporting radical religious groups in Syria and throughout the Middle East. They should have known that if these groups manage to take power, they will exterminate the Christians. That’s why the man reacted like that. We would like to urge the German government and the other EU countries not to provide any more support for the *Syrian National Coalition*, because the organization in fact promotes radical Islamist groups in Syria. We are calling on Europe to help us here in Syria. With more help, our people would not have to leave the country – and Europe wouldn’t have so many problems with the masses of refugees. We don’t want to live in Europe and in the crowded refugee centers.

If the causes of flight were to be addressed adequately, none of us would have to come to Europe. Here, there are too many rumors that Europe is paradise, the land of milk and honey. This must be stopped. We need help here! The *SDF*, the *YPG* and *Sutoro* need help in fighting the *Islamic State*, so that we can put an end to the fascist terror of the radical Islamists. We are determined to fight these beasts and defeat them. This is our territory, the land of our ancestors. We don’t want to leave. I want to repeat what the man said to you: The German government and other European countries are providing support for the Islamists in Syria.

Sido: What evidence do you have to prove this?

Al-Majd: The proof of this is the financial, political, and diplomatic support for the *Syrian National Coalition*, which openly promotes Islamist militias such as the *Al-Nusra Front*. In fact, they are pursuing the same objectives as the radical Islamists: the establishment of an “Islamic state” in Syria. Turkey is a NATO member, and the whole world knows that most of the jihadists come to Syria via Turkey, just as the money and the weapons. There is enough evidence. The fact that the Islamists are a threat for Europe as well was not perceived early enough. If you feed a rabid dog, you’ll most probably be bitten yourself one day.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Mansour Al-Salum (Sunni-Arab, Chairman of the *executive federal council* of Rojava - northern Syria)

The interview was conducted in Kobani on March 21, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Al-Salum: My name is Mansour Al-Salum. I am chairman of the *executive federal council* of Rojava - northern Syria. (Editor’s note: He is a Sunni Arab from Tell Abyad)

Sido: What is the purpose of establishing a federal council?

Al-Salum: Our goal is to unite Syria. Our idea of a federal state is to be seen as an attempt to keep the country from breaking up.

Sido: What kind of state system do you favor? A Sharia state, for example?

Al-Salum: No, we want to establish a secular state in Syria. We’ve had enough of the radical Islamist ideas. Among other things, our country was ruined by ideas like that.

Sido: Will there be a place for Christians and other minorities in your future vision of Syria – or will they be expelled or exterminated.

Al-Salum: We advocate for a peaceful coexistence of the different ethnic and religious communities in Syria. That’s our main goal – and it was our main goal from the very beginning, when we proclaimed the Autonomous Administration. And now, in a federal Syria, we will achieve this goal.

Sido: In your future vision of Syria, will it be allowed to build churches?

Al-Salum: Yes, we will not just tolerate the Christians, we will support them. Christian churches and mosques will simply be a part of our country – everywhere.

Sido: Will it be possible to establish Kurdish schools?

Al-Salum: Every ethnic group and every religious community will have the same rights to self-determination and enjoy cultural, linguistic, and religious freedom.

Sido: Will Aramaic and Armenian schools be allowed as well?

Al-Salum: Yes, we will also allow schools like this – and support them – because these communities belong to the Syrian population.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!



Interview with Hussein Azzam (Arab, Vice President of the *Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration in Cazîra*)

The interview was conducted in Amudah on March 23, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Azzam: My name is Hussein Azzam. I am Vice President of the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration in Cazîra. I was born in 1954, and I grew up in this region. I belong to the Arab minority.

Sido: You were involved in the founding of the Autonomous Administration about two or three years ago. How would you assess the self-government's achievements so far?



Azzam: There was an urgent need for a provisional administration to avoid chaos. The Syrian government had largely withdrawn from the region, leaving a power vacuum with regard to administrative tasks and security in the region. The region was in acute danger of being conquered by all kinds of extremist groups. At the beginning, there was the *Al-Nusra Front* – later, it was *ISIS* that meant danger. The administration managed to keep the region safe, ensuring a minimum of normal life for the people.

Sido: The *Democratic Union Party (PYD)* propagates a multi-ethnic and multi-religious concept of coexistence between Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians, Christians, Muslims, and Yazidis in northern Syria. Is this just propaganda or is this practiced already in reality?

Azzam: The project, this policy, has become a reality. Right from the beginning, representatives of all ethnic and religious communities were involved in the project – and they were always included in the decision-making. The *PYD* does play a leading role in the implementation of this project – but the other political representatives, I mean the representatives of the ethnic and religious communities in the region – have the same rights. Decisions are made by consensus.

Sido: From the viewpoint of the international community, a peaceful coexistence between different religions and ethnic groups, as well as the leading role of women in Rojava, are very positive aspects. However, there are critical voices regarding a lack of political pluralism. What I mean is that various Kurdish organizations are not involved in the project.

Azzam: From the very beginning, all Kurdish organizations were invited to participate in the self-government. They took part in the development phase, the initial discussions, but some

of the Kurdish parties started to quit. It was said that the project does not meet the national interest of the Kurds, actually referring to quite a “trifle”. These parties demanded federalism. When we demanded a federal status recently, they didn’t want to participate either.

Sido: What can the international community do to help, to ensure that the people will no longer have to leave their homes and emigrate?

Azzam: On the top of our priority-list, there are public safety and the struggle against extremist Islamist groups in the region. We are quite successful, and many people have sacrificed their lives in order to guarantee peace and security. As for the infrastructure and the economy, we urgently need assistance from the international community. Germany, Europe, and other countries could do a lot to help combat the causes of flight here. Another aspect would be to put an end to the unjust blockade of our region – to open the border crossings from Rojava - northern Syria to Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. This would help to create a significant number of jobs. Our self-government created at least 4,000 jobs.

Sido: What demands do you have for the Turkish Government?

Azzam: Our project is democratic, multi-ethnic and multi-religious, and peaceful – it is not aimed against anyone. We want good neighborly relations with the Republic of Turkey, but we demand the Turkish Government to open the border crossings.

Sido: How many refugees / displaced persons have found refuge in Rojava - northern Syria?

Azzam: We have three refugee camps, but many people manage to find some kind of private accommodation. There are tens of thousands of people living in the refugee camps. We don’t know the exact figures, but there are at least 500,000. We would be very grateful if Germany and the other European governments could provide help for us here. We are in desperate need of support in the medical sector, help in the way of drinking water and electricity, and assistance in the field of education. In addition, the roads must be repaired – urgently! Our security forces need help as well, so that they can successfully combat the *Islamic State*.

Sido: We are a human rights organization – and we are against arms shipments. However, we support your demand for economic, financial, political, and diplomatic support for Rojava - northern Syria. Thank you for the interview!

Interview with Ahmad Bave Alan (head editor of the newspaper *Buyer*)

The interview was conducted in Qamishli on March 28, 2016.



On the right: Ahmad Bave Alan

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Bave Alan: My name is Ahmad Bave Alan. I am 41 years old. Currently, we are in the editorial house of *Buyer*.

Sido: When was the newspaper published for the first time?

Bave Alan: On April 15, 2014. The newspaper is bilingual: Kurdish and Arabic. It has twelve pages – one for each language – but the topics are not identical.

Sido: How many daily newspapers are there in Rojava - northern Syria?

Bave Alan: There aren't any daily newspapers here. Most papers are published semi-weekly or monthly. In addition, every political party has its own newspaper. *Buyer* is the only one that doesn't belong to one of the parties – although some people might claim that this is not true (laughs). *Buyer* focuses on political, social, and cultural topics. The circulation is 2,500 to 3,000 copies. We distribute the paper ourselves, as it is not possible to send it by post. Our employees in the villages distribute the paper to the subscribers.

Sido: Is there also an online version of *Buyer*?

Bave Alan: The online journal is updated continuously. We're working on that all the time. You can read the entire contents of the newspaper online, but not until two days after it was published.

Sido: How many employees do you have?

Bave Alan: We have ten employees. We pay them, but the salaries are very low. We simply can't afford to pay more. Thus, you could say that making the newspaper is volunteer work.

Sido: What difficulties are there for the newspaper?

Bave Alan: Firstly, distributing the paper to the readers is a difficulty. It is not possible to distribute it by post, since the postal services have collapsed. There are only few places where you can buy newspapers – two in Qamishli. In other places, you can buy our newspaper in bookstores; at the bookstore *Al Huriye*, for example, which is owned by a Christian.

Sido: Is there any censorship concerning the contents of the newspaper – within the editorial staff or from the outside? Who decides what can be published and what not?

Bave Alan: There is no interference with our work. We wouldn't tolerate that. Occasionally, authors are unhappy if interview partners say that their statements were not summarized correctly. We, the members of the editorial office, discuss and publish what we think is right.

Sido: Is there any financial help for the newspaper?

Bave Alan: At the beginning, we could rely on private funds. Then, we were able to sell more copies of the newspaper. We always manage to sell all the copies – but that's not enough to cover the entire costs for the newspaper. A copy is sold for 50 or 70 Syrian pounds, but the actual costs are much higher. The paper is sold for approximately 30 pounds less than it costs to produce it. It would be too expensive for the readers otherwise. Gradually, we started to include adverts – which has become an important source of income. Every now and then, we get donations from individuals, organizations, or associations. But as I said, the main sources of funding are still the sales revenues and advertising.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Daoud Daoud (Christian, Assyrian Democratic Union)

The interview was conducted in Qamishli on March 23, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Daoud: My name Daoud Daoud, and I am the Vice Chairman of the ADO. I was born in 1963.

Sido: How many Christians are living in the province of Al-Hasakeh?

Daoud: We must distinguish between the number of Christians before and after the revolution (2011). Many Christians, but others as well, had to leave their homes, their country, due to the revolution and the civil war. There should be about 150,000 Christians in the province – about 50% have already left.



Sido: Where do most of the Christians live here in Al-Hasakeh?

Daoud: They live in Qamishli, in the city Al-Hasakeh, in Al-Malikiyah (*Editor’s note: “Delik” in Kurdish*), In Al-Kahtania (*Editor’s note: “Tirbespî” in Kurdish*), in Ras al-ain (*Editor’s note: “Serê Kaniyê” in Kurdish*), and in Tel Tamer. There were 34 Christian villages in Tel Tamer.

Sido: How many of these Christians still speak Aramaic?

Daoud: There are about 35,000 who still speak Aramaic. In many churches, the liturgies are still in Suriani (*Editor’s note: Aramaic*).

Sido: What is the greatest threat to the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaicans? For all the Christians, I mean – including the Armenians?

Daoud: The Christians are threatened in their existence. This is not the first time that Christians were forced to flee from Al-Hasakeh, but there was an increase during the civil war. In addition, there were targeted attacks by IS, especially against the 34 villages along the river Khabour. Once, there were 20,000 Christians living in the area – now, there are only about 2,000 to 3,000 left. Many Christians had to leave Al-Hasakeh due to attacks by IS. Many Christians were kidnapped by IS, and there are individual abductions by unknown perpetrators. All this means that more and more Christians are leaving the region. Many of the Christians even left before 2011. The regime in Damascus is responsible for that. Our chairman, Gabriel Moshe Kourieh, is currently imprisoned in Damascus, for more than two years now. In total, 52 members of the ADO were arrested in the last few years, but only one of us is in jail at the moment – Kourieh.

Sido: What is the relationship between the ADO and the region’s Autonomous Administration like?

Daoud: We have good relations with the political parties that are involved in the Autonomous Administration. Our organization is not involved in the Autonomous Administration. We have a different political agenda.

Sido: Currently, there are several Kurdish parties. Some are pro-autonomy, others reject the idea or are even prepared to fight against such plans. Some are neutral. Thus, there are Kurds who say that the administration is not a Kurdish administration, as it is trying to work against the region's Kurdish character. At the same time, there are Christians who believe that the administration wants the region to be “kurdized” by expelling the Christians. What is the ADO's position in this regard?

Daoud: At the beginning, we were involved in talks regarding the establishment of a self-government. However, the different actors were unable to find an agreement. We always stressed that this region is a part of the country and that the Syrian uprising was initially about making Syria a democratic country. We want democracy in Syria – as well as religious and ethnic pluralism. In addition, we are secularists.

Sido: There are people who claim that there is a politically moderate Islam. What do you think? If you prefer not to answer this question because you are among Muslims and in Qamishli, you can leave this question unanswered.

Daoud: I can only speak for myself (meaning not on behalf of the ADO). We can't deny that there is a political Islam. In my opinion, the term 'moderate' doesn't apply if politics and religious issues are mixed up.

Sido: I'll help you: Is a political Islam an existential threat for the Christian people?

Daoud: Yes.

Sido: Let's talk about the future of the regime: Can the problems in Syria be solved by overthrowing the regime – or would you advocate for a consensus between the civil war parties? What would be better from the viewpoint of the Christians – if one of the sides were to prevail, or a consensus?

Daoud: We are in favor of a democratic and peaceful change – a consensus between all the interest groups!

Sido: That's a very diplomatic answer. Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Bahiya Gergis Daoud (an Armenian woman from Al-Hasakeh)

The interview was conducted in Al-Hasakeh on March 25, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Daoud: My name Bahiya Gergis Daoud. I don't know how old I am exactly – somewhere around 75 or 80. I am Armenian and was born in Syria. My parents fled from Turkey, from Til Tere, on the other side of Syrian-Kurdish town Dirbêsiyê (*Al Darbasiyah* in Arabic).

Sido: Were your parents deported to Deir ez-Zor? (*Editor's note: The Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor belonged to the Ottoman Empire. In the years 1915 to 1916, in the course of the genocide against the Armenians, hundreds of thousands of Armenians were deported to Deir ez-Zor.*)

Daoud: No, they managed to escape before the Turkish army could get hold of them. First, we stayed in a small village that is now on the Syrian side of the border, close to Dirbêsiyê. There, we built a church with the help of our bishop from Qamishli. Then, about 30 years ago, we came to Al-Hasakeh. I am almost alone here, because all my relatives have emigrated. The Armenian musician Ibrahim Keivo is my nephew, he lives in Germany. (*Editor's note: Keivo, who lives in Lemgo, Ostwestfalen, plays in the WDR Big Band.*)



...and I want to tell you something else: In the summer of 2015, a nephew of mine – his name is Ibrahim – disappeared. He was on his way to Europe, to meet Ibrahim Keivo in Germany. He was still young, 33 years old. He is supposed to have traveled from Turkey to Greece by boat. We haven't had news from him ever since. We tried to find him with the help of the churches as well as with lawyers.

Sido: Do you speak Armenian?

Daoud: No, unfortunately not. We didn't learn Armenian at school. We lived in a small village, and I had to take care of the goats and the sheep. Then, it was said that it is “eyb” (*English: “shameful”*) for girls to go to school. I can speak a bit of Turkish.

Sido: How would you describe your relationship with the Kurdish people here?

Daoud: We always had a very good relationship – and now they control the country. I haven't heard anything bad about them.

Sido: Today, the Kurds are in control of the police, the *YPG*, and other authorities. Did the Kurds treat you well?

Daoud: Yes, they provided us with diesel, sugar, and other food. We don't have any problems with the Kurds here.

Sido: Are you afraid of the Islamists, *IS* for example?

Daoud: We are afraid of *IS*, but not of the others. Here, there are many Muslim Kurds ... there, there, and there ... *(Editor's note: She points to the surrounding houses.)*

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview. I wish you a healthy and peaceful life!

Interview with Toni Hanna Ego (a Syrian-Catholic Christian)

The interview was conducted in Amudah on March 15, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Ego: My name is Toni Hanna Ego. I am 55 years old. I was born in Amudah. My parents are from Serxetê. (*Editor’s note: Today, the Kurds call the region behind the railway line, on the Turkish side, “Serxetê”, which means “above the line”.*) My father, who grew up in Mardin, survived the 1915 genocide and found refuge here in Amudah.

Sido: Which denomination do you belong to?

Ego: I am a Syrian-Catholic Christian.

Sido: How many Christians are there in Amudah?

Ego: All in all, there are three or four families – plus one family that is Armenian.

Sido: Do you still speak Aramaic?

Ego: Unfortunately not.

Sido: Where are your church services held, now that the church in Amudah is no longer intact?

Ego: We visit the church in Qamishli on Sundays.

Sido: Being a Christian, what is it like for you to live here in Amudah?

Ego: To be honest, we are doing quite well under the Autonomous Administration. It’s a peaceful coexistence.

Sido: Were you, the Christians, ever told to leave the city?

Ego: No, not at all. We are not discriminated against. From time to time, however, there are bomb attacks, such as in Qamishli, Dirbasiye, or in Amudah. But we don’t know who is behind that, *IS* or other organizations.

Sido: What do you think about the situation in Syria? How could a solution look like?

Ego: Look, from my point of view, the situation is to be seen as follows: Syria must remain as one state – but there must be strong regional self-governments, possibly in the form of cantons.

Sido: If the Islamists were to gain power in Syria, would it still be possible for Christians to live here?

Ego: I am absolutely convinced that the Islamists will not come to power. I don't even want to think about this... The Islamists must not come to power! Syria must be a secular state. The Islamists' plan has failed already.

Sido: Who is supporting the Islamists – *IS*, the *Al Nusra Front*, and others?

Ego: The Islamists can rely on help from the neighboring countries – especially from Turkey, and sometimes from Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are of two minds about this.

Sido: What are your hopes for Syria?

Ego: I want Syria to be a democratic and secular state in which everyone can rely on self-administration and fully unfold.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Omar Hajnuri (Association *Komela Newroz*)

The interview was conducted in Amudah on March 17, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Hajnuri: We are in the house of the association *Komela Newroz* (*Editor’s note: The Newroz Association supports the civil society.*). My name is Omar Hajnuri, and I am a member of the association. This is Abdulrahim Tkhobi (*Editor’s note: Hajnuri points to his colleagues.*), and this is Mustafa Ramadan. We are all members of the association.



Sido: When was the association founded?

Hajnuri: The association was founded on May 1, 2013. The association existed before already, but not officially – and we didn’t have our own facilities yet.

Sido: What do you do exactly?

Hajnuri: Mainly, we are busy supporting the civilian population; we organize workshops and train civil society activists in various spheres of social life... (*Editor’s note: At that moment, the lights go on. There had been a power outage earlier that day.*)

Sido: I see, you have considerable problems with electricity, as all the other people.

Hajnuri: It’s just the way we live here. Our rooms can be used for different events. We could, for example, give you the opportunity to hold a presentation about the STP. We could provide you with a small room, make a public announcement and send out invitations.

Sido: How are you funded?

Hajnuri: We have many friends and former members who live abroad today, and we also get donations through the in-house events.

Sido: Just assumed we, the STP, were to open up an office, could you provide us with a room, for example? What would the costs be?

Hajnuri: We can’t offer rooms for rent, we only offer them for events.

Sido: How many registered associations or initiatives are there in Amudah?

Hajnuri: There is our association, then “*United for Amudah*” and *Kolishina*... (*Editor’s note: An association for the support of women.*) Apart from that, there are also representatives of associations and initiatives with headquarters abroad; *Badael* and *Dawwlati*, for example.

Sido: I know that there has been violence in Amudah, and many people have lost their lives. There was a major confrontation between the general public and the Autonomous Administration. Many people were arrested, and seven people got killed by the police. My question: Are there any activists in prison?

Hajnuri (*Editor’s note: He points to Abdulrahim Tkhobi*): He was in prison – but at the moment, none of us are imprisoned.

Sido: Were the occurrences resolved? Did the administration compensate the victims?

Hajnuri: Unfortunately, the occurrences of that time have not yet been resolved completely. Only one of the people who were injured back then is currently living in Amudah. He is supported by the administration – but that’s not enough. Other people who were injured were brought to Turkey or to Germany.

Sido: Generally, what do the people of Amudah think about the current situation, against the backdrop of these events?

Hajnuri: Sadly, what happened back then caused many people to leave the city – as we notice in the scope of our workshops. Most of the participants are females, as many male teenagers decide to emigrate.

Sido: Is forced recruitment an important reason for the fact that so many young men leave the country? What possibilities are there to solve this problem? Ultimately, the state, or the government, has to be able to defend itself...

Hajnuri: Our problem with the self-government is that it represents only one political agenda. There is another organization, the *Kurdish National Council (KNCS)*. Of course, everybody wants to defend his home. But it is not just about defending one’s home... The young people are sent to other areas to fight IS – areas where there are no Kurds. The Kurdish people have to find a common basis and decide where and when to fight.

Sido: Could a cooperation between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the *KNCS* help to solve the conflict?

Hajnuri: Yes, that could help a lot in trying to solve the conflict. The problem with the forced recruitment could also be solved by paying the recruits adequately. Many young people have to work to feed their families – which is why so many decide to join the *YPG*: The pay is better. (*Editor’s note: All recruits are paid 35,000 Syrian pounds. If necessary, their families are supported as well.*)

Sido: Is it possible to avoid military service based on ideological reasons? (*Editor’s note: Here, Sido tells the interviewee about the German system.*)

Hajnuri: As I said, a consensus between the Kurdish parties in this regard could really help to settle the conflict. The conflict between the Barzanists and the Apocists is very harmful for

our society... (Editor's note: The Barzanists are the followers of the KNCS, and the Apocists belong to the PYD or the PKK.) Apart from that, the PYD's policy concerning the population is very strict: Anyone who doesn't participate in certain activities is seen as a traitor. This also applies to the other side (the Barzanists). Most of those who have left have lost all confidence in the Kurdish parties, because they are unable to find an agreement in this difficult situation.

Sido: What can be done in Europe? Could more influence on the administration help?

Hajnuri: There are arbitrary arrests – again and again. People are detained for weeks or months without specific reasons. It would be necessary to demand the Autonomous Administration to put an end to the arbitrary arrests. The administration must become more transparent regarding business and politics.

Sido: We, the STP, have always demanded that the border crossings from Turkey to northern Syria must be opened. Some Kurdish organizations have opposed to our requests, arguing that the blockade should be tightened to try and bring down the current system, the PYD. What do you think about that?

Hajnuri: No, it's wrong of these Kurdish organizations to demand this. For party members, especially for the leading members, it is usually not a problem to cross the border. They are doing well for themselves, while the civilian population is suffering from the closed border crossings. As I said, we support the efforts of the STP: the border crossings to northern Syria must be opened. The civilian population must not suffer due to party-political interests. Those who are calling for an even stricter blockade of northern Syria are pursuing selfish plans – ignoring the interests of the civilian population. Most of them don't live in Syria anyway. Apart from that, I don't believe that the civilian population would try to overthrow the PYD if they were left to starve by closing the border crossings.

Sido: What do you suggest to improve the economic situation of the civilian population?

Hajnuri: A lot depends on whether the border crossings are open. Economic projects can only be carried out if the borders are open and if there is trade between northern Syria and Turkey or Iraq.

Sido: Thanks you very much for the interview!

Interview with Abir Khalil (Head of Department of the prisons in Rojava)

The interview was conducted in Qamishli on March 24, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Khalil: My name is Abir Khalil, and I am Head of Department of the prisons in Rojava - northern Syria.

Sido: How many prisons are there in Rojava - northern Syria, in the three cantons Cazîra, Kobani, and Afrin?

Khalil: In Cazîra (*Editor’s note: in the province Al-Hasakeh*), there are three central prisons. Furthermore, every major *Asyayîş* station (police) has holding cells for prisoners awaiting trial. There are 17 in Cazîra. There, prisoners can only be held for up to 24 or 48 hours. The central prisons are in Qanat al Sues (Qamishli), Derik (“*Al-Malikiyah*” in Arabic) and Sare Kaniyê (“*Ras al Ain*” in Arabic). Then, there is a prison in Kobani and one in Tell Abyad. I have no information about Afrin (*Editor’s note: Afrin is located in the outer northwest of Syria and still has no land connection to Cazîra and Kobani*)



Sido: What can you say about the number of prisoners in the canton Cazîra?

Khalil: Currently, there are about 400 prisoners.

Sido: How many of them are political prisoners – people who were arrested for political reasons?

Khalil: There are no political prisoners.

Sido: None at all?

Khalil: None at all. Occasionally, someone is arrested for a crime, and one of the political organization claims that the prisoner is one of its members. Then, they say “The detainee is our member. He was imprisoned for his political views.” Then, the prisoner is said to be a political activist or journalist... As I said, we have no political prisoners – nobody is arrested for being a member of a certain political party.

Sido: Are human rights organizations allowed to visit the prisons in order to verify your information?

Khalil: Human rights organizations can visit the prisons at any time. There will be – and have already been – visits by aid organizations.

Sido: Did these human rights organizations also publish written reports after their visits? Are you satisfied with these reports?

Khalil: It doesn't matter whether we are satisfied with the content of the reports or not. We know what we are doing here. It is important for us that the prisons function as academies to ensure that the prisoners will be able to find their way back into society again, to ensure re-integration into societal structures.

Sido: Do you need support by human rights organizations or other competent international bodies that could provide help on-site?

Khalil: Yes, definitely. We have already been in contact with a few international organizations – and there has been exchange regarding the situation in the prisons and the training of our staff. We visited Geneva once, where we were able to obtain information from an organization that focuses especially on prisons and on how to treat the prisoners. We are glad about every visit and welcome any support from abroad.

Sido: If you, being the manager, were to notice cases of prisoners being abused by prison guards, would you try to elucidate the occurrences? Would the perpetrators be punished?

Khalil: Yes, we follow up incidents like this. When we started, there were a few cases like that (*Editor's note: the Autonomous Administration was established in 2012*). I know of 10 to 15 cases in which staff members had to be sanctioned for wrongdoings.

Interview with Elizabeth Koriyeh (Christian / Assyro-Aramaean, leading member of the Syriac Unity Party)

The interview was conducted in Qamishli on March 30, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Koriyeh: My name is Elizabeth Koriyeh, and I run the Aramaic (Syriac) Cultural Association. I was born in the village Gir Shiran in 1967. I am also a leading member of the *Syriac Unity Party (SUP)*.

Sido: Is your organization involved in the Autonomous Administration?

Koriyeh: We are initiators of the Autonomous Administration and are involved in all of its structures.

Sido: Do you have military units?

Koriyeh: Yes, we do. There's the *Suryoye military council*. Also, there is *Sutoro*, similar to the Kurdish police (*Asyayîş*), and there's the woman units of *Beth Nahrin*.

Sido: Are all Christian Churches – or denominations – represented in the SUP; I mean the Syrian Catholic, the Syrian Orthodox, the Assyrian Church of the East, etc.?

Koriyeh: As a political organization, we see ourselves as a people (*Suryoye*), with all its different labels – such as the Chaldeans/Aramaean/Assyrians – referring to the indigenous people of Mesopotamia. In our political organization, there are members of all our people's churches. Our organization doesn't have a problem with different names. As I said, we see ourselves a nation, and our aim is to integrate the different labels. Also, we see ourselves as the peoples' representatives – regardless of the different terms and denominations.

Sido: How many Christians are there, approximately, in the province of Al-Hasakeh – including the Armenians?

Koriyeh: There has been total chaos in Syria for the last five years. I don't have any exact figures, but I assume that at least 50% of the Christian population have left the region since the beginning of the revolution. Whenever there are clashes, we Christians are the first victims. What I mean is that the conflicts cause our people to leave the region forever. After the beginning of the revolution, there were targeted attacks against Christians, and quite a lot of Christians were kidnapped. We are sure that the attacks are to be seen as systematical attempts to frighten our people and to send them running.



Sido: Can you tell me something about how many people belong to the different Christian denominations?

Koriyeh: Most Christians here are Syrian Orthodox, but there are several Syrian Catholic as well. The Armenians belong to three different churches: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. The Greek Orthodox Church (Rome) is hardly represented.

Sido: Do the Christian political parties cooperate with the so-called *Al-Majlis Al-Milli*? (*Editor’s note: The churches are represented in this council.*)

Koriyeh: The Church is responsible for religious affairs, and we focus on political matters. The Church tends to reduce the Christian population to a single religious group. We don’t just see ourselves as Christians, but also as an ethnic group. In our opinion, religious issues and state affairs should be kept apart – everywhere in Syria. We see ourselves as political representatives of the Assyrian/Chaldean/Aramaean people.

Sido: How could Germany or Europe support the Syrian Christians here in Rojava - northern Syria?

Koriyeh: Unfortunately, we noticed that we – the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Aramaean, the Christians in this region – are disadvantaged by Europe. Often, there is no reaction if our people are persecuted or oppressed. Today, we are citizens of second or third class in the countries we live in. We are going to establish a multiethnic and multi-religious project in Rojava - northern Syria. We want to promote all minorities in Syria – regardless of religion, ethnicity, or language – and we need support; not only by the public but also from the governments. The causes for flight must be resolved locally. We expect Germany, Europe and the United States of America to help us. The project we started in northern Syria could be implemented in all of Syria, leading to a free, peaceful, and equitable coexistence of the different religions, ethnicities, and religious denominations. Currently, all minority groups living here are represented in the administration – guaranteeing a right to mother tongue, a right to freedom of belief and freedom of expression. These rights are governed by the social contract, and three languages were declared official languages of the region: Arabic, Kurdish, and Aramaic.

Sido: Who is against this project? What are the current threats?

Koriyeh: The terrorist organizations *IS*, *Al-Nusra* and other Islamist groups are a mortal danger for our people, for the autonomous region. If these organizations manage to take control of the region, the minorities will no longer be able to live here. Specifically, the economic blockade is a serious threat, as all the border crossings are closed. We are almost entirely cut off from the outside world. Thus, we call on the Turkish government to open the borders immediately to allow for humanitarian aid.

Sido: In the opposition, there are a few Christians who believe that the political Islam in Syria is not a real threat for the Christians and other minorities. What do you say to that?

Koriyeh: The persecutions and mass expulsions of our people are often based on religious fanaticism. Therefore, Islamism remains a major threat to the existence of our people. For that matter, any kind of religious fanaticism is dangerous for a society – as the Christians have experienced often before. Our countries will only be able to develop if religious issues and state affairs are kept apart. Syria is a diverse, multiethnic and multi-religious country. Thus, the political system must guarantee to protect diversity. We, together with our allies of the *Democratic Union Party (PYD)*, demand a democratic, pluralistic, federal system for Syria – including rights for all ethnic groups, freedom of expression, and religious freedom for all religious groups.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Anwar Muslim (President of the canton Kobani)

The interview was conducted in Kobani on March 21, 2016.

Sido: Merry Christmas, Mr. Muslim! (*Editor’s note: The interview took place during the celebration of the Kurdish New Year, Newroz.*)

Muslim: Thank you very much! All the best to you!

Sido: I am glad that people in Kobani can now celebrate *Newroz* in peace. How many people have returned to Kobani by now?

Muslim: About 250,000 people have returned to the city and the surrounding villages. When the border crossings open, twice a week at the moment, more and more people leave Turkey and come back home.



Anwar Muslim (second from the right)

infrastructure, support in healthcare, the production of drinking water, electricity, as well as regarding the reconstruction of schools. Also, we need help to rebuild the agricultural sector.

Sido: What can you expect from the Turkish government regarding the border crossing?

Muslim: Unfortunately, the Turkish government didn’t manage to get rid of its phobia of the Kurds yet. We, the Kurds here in Kobani, have no enmity with Turkey. We want to start a new, democratic, secular, federal state here in Syria – but that’s just what Turkey is trying to prevent.

Sido: Did the Kurdish armed forces in Kobani ever fire bullets at Turkey? Were there any attacks against the Turkish border from the Kurdish side?

Sido: What percentage of the former population has returned already?

Muslim: I don’t know exactly, but I would say more than 50 percent.

Sido: When were you born?

Muslim: I was born in 1976.

Sido: What do the people of Kobani expect from the international community?

Muslim: Our wish, our demand to the international community, is that we can rely on help regarding the reconstruction

work, just as in the struggle against IS.

We need help in rebuilding the

Muslim: No, never! But there are grenade attacks from the Turkish side. Our people in Kobani are constantly provoked by the Turkish military.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Ibrahim Muzel (a *Schammar*-Arab)

The interview was conducted in Qamishli on March 23, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Muzel: My name is Ibrahim Muzel. I am an Arab, from the tribe of the *Schammar*.

Sido: Were you born here? Did you grow up in Qamishli?

Muzel: Yes, that's right.

Sido: The Kurds have established an Autonomous Administration here. Do you, or the Arabs in general, feel discriminated against by the new power?

Muzel: No!

Sido: On the wall there, it says “Long live Kurdistan” – aren't the Kurds trying to get the Arabs to leave the city?

Muzel: No, I've never heard of anything like that.

Sido: Does the new administration discriminate against other minorities or ethnic groups in this region?

Muzel: No, our city Qamishli has always been multiethnic and multi-religious, and we want it to stay like that!

Sido: What do you think about the situation in Syria as a whole?

Muzel: “Inshallah!” (*Editor's note: English: “if God wills”*) I hope the best for Syria. Only Allah knows what is coming. I hope we can live together peacefully in the future. Here in Qamishli, there is no religious or ethnic discrimination.

Sido: In your opinion, should the Kurds be able to learn their own language and have their own schools?

Muzel: It is Kurdish people's right to learn their language and have their own schools.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Haji Riza (a refugee from *Shahba*)

The interview was conducted in Kobani on March 21, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Riza: My name is Haji Riza. I'm from the region *Shahba*.

Sido: What do you mean by the region *Shahba*?

Riza: When we say *Shahba*, we mean the plain to the north and to the east of Aleppo. It's a historical name for the region. There is also an old dam in the district of Azaz. The region is traditionally inhabited by Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmens.



On the left: Haji Riza

Sido: Could you tell me precisely which towns belong to the *Shahba* region?

Riza: Azaz, Al-Bab, a large part of Manbij and parts of As-Safira.

Sido: How many villages are there in the districts you mentioned?

Riza: I can't say exactly, but I think there are about 450 villages in this region. There are about 1.8 million people living there. 217 villages are inhabited by Kurds. Since Syria became independent in 1946, the Kurds in the region had to endure forced assimilation and a policy of Arabization. Since the Kurdish language was prohibited in Syria, and since there were no Kurdish schools, many Kurds have forgotten their language – but the language is still alive in the family names and the names of the villages.

Sido: What are the demands of the people, especially the Kurds, in this region?

Riza: The majority of the population, especially the Kurds, want *IS* to be defeated. Also, the region should be controlled by the *Syrian Democratic Forces* or the *YPG*, so that we can travel from here to Afrin directly. (*Editor's note: Shahaba is not far from Kobani. At present, the only possibility to travel from one region to the other is travel from Qamishli to Damascus by plane and then take the land route to the north. To establish a direct land-route to Shahba, IS would have to be driven out of the region.*) Then, Cazîra, Kobani and Shahba could be associated to Afrin – as a basis for a federal region in Syria where all ethnicities and religious communities could enjoy equal rights. We are strictly against the establishment of a Sharia state in our region, as pursued by the Islamist groups that are supported by Turkey. If these groups were to take power, the different ethnic groups and religious communities would not have equal rights; and neither would the women. We want the Kurds, Arabs,

Armenians, Turkmen, Muslims, Yazidis, Christians and Alawites to be able to live together peacefully.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Ilyas Saydo (Chairman of the Association *Mala Êzdiya*)

The interview was conducted in a Yazidi village called Qizlacho, close to Amudah, on March 25, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Saydo: I am 48 years old.

Sido: The center we are currently in, what is it exactly?

Saydo: We are in the Mala Êzdiya (English: “Yazidi House”) in the village Qizlacho, close to Amudah.

Sido: Are all the inhabitants of the village Yazidis?

Saydo: Yes.

Sido: How many families live here?

Saydo: Once, there were 30 families. Now, there are only ten left.

Sido: How many Yazidi villages are there – or were there – in the province of Al-Hasakeh?

Saydo: Once, there were 52 villages with Yazidi inhabitants. Some of them were mixed Yazidi-Muslim villages.

Sido: How many Yazidi villages have been abandoned?

Saydo: Avgira, Hesheria, Port Said, Moskau, Mihke, Khirbet Dilan ... those villages have been abandoned completely.

Sido: How many Yazidis were there in the province of Upper Mesopotamia in 1980 – and how many are living there now?

Saydo: There were about 60,000 Yazidis, but there are only about 3,000 left

Sido: Where do most of them live – along the Turkish border or more to the south, to Al-Hasakeh?

Saydo: Most of them live in the north, along the Turkish border. For the Yazidis, the south is very dangerous because of *IS* and other radical Islamist groups. Due to the organized emigration, the Yazidi population is on the decline. If more Yazidis decide to emigrate, there won't be any Yazidis left here in the longer run.

Sido: Do you think there might not be any Yazidis living in the region any more in a few decades?



Saydo: No, there will always be Yazidis here. There will always be Yazidis who feel connected to their homeland. They would never leave the country. My hope is that some of the Yazidis will return when the situation has calmed down.

Sido: If the political Islam were to prevail here, how could the Yazidis live here?

Saydo: Yes, that is the greatest danger. We must make sure that this doesn't happen!

Sido: Could you please tell us more about the association *Mala Êzdiya*?

Saydo: The association was founded in 2012. We, the Yazidis, wanted to organize ourselves. In troubled times, you can only survive if you're well organized. We wanted to establish a political representation for the Yazidis in Rojava. The association addresses political, civil, and religious issues. We want to participate in political life and be able to solve internal conflicts.

Sido: Do you have organizational connections to the Yazidis in Afrin?

Saydo: No, we don't. We are trying to establish contacts so that we can work together. Unfortunately, there is no way for us to visit each other, because there is no land connection between Al-Hasakeh and Afrin. We can only communicate by phone.

Sido: As I can see, you are not politically independent? (*Editor's note: Sido points to a portrait of Abdullah Ocalan.*)

Saydo: Yes, we are politically independent. However, I admit that we are closer to a certain organization – the *YPG* – than we are to others. Other parties would have little to do with us. We are also involved in the Autonomous Administration, and a few Yazidis also hold positions there.

Sido: Doesn't the administration discriminate against the Yazidis?

Saydo: No, that's not the case. On the contrary, the Yazidis are supported.

Sido: Do the Yazidis have their own militia?

Saydo: No, but we are well represented in the ranks of the *YPG*. Many of us have lost their lives in the struggle against *IS*.

Sido: Can Yazidis become judges here?

Saydo: As I said, the Yazidis are supported. We are represented everywhere, and there is no discrimination.

Sido: What would you like to tell the Yazidis in Germany and the rest of Europe?

Saydo: We wish all Yazidis all the best – but we would also like to remind everyone not to forget the Yazidis here, and we ask for financial support. This region is where the Yazidis from Syria have their roots. If a tree’s roots die, the whole tree will die.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with Talal Silo (Turkmen, spokesman for the *Syrian Democratic Forces*)

The interview was conducted in Al-Hasakeh on March 24, 2016.

Sido: Could you please introduce yourself?

Silo: I'm General Major Talal Silo, spokesman for the *Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)* and a member of the high command of the *SDF*. I was born in the village of Ar-Ra'ii, north of Aleppo, in 1965.

Sido: What is the military situation like at the moment? Do your troops stick to the agreed ceasefire?



Silo: Yes, of course. We respect the ceasefire at all our positions. This was emphasized by an official communiqué. However, we reserve the right to respond to attacks. Incidentally, the ceasefire does not apply to the areas in which we are fighting the radical Islamist *IS*.

Sido: Are there any violations of the ceasefire by the so-called moderate rebels?

Silo: Yes, these groups don't necessarily respect the ceasefire. Especially in Aleppo, there are attacks against the civilian population, in particular in the district Sheikh Maksud. There are attacks against the civilian population every day; people get killed, and many people are injured. If I may name the groups that don't respect the ceasefire: the *Al-Nusra Front*, *Ahrar al-Sham*, the *Sultan Murad Brigade* and the *Mutassim Billah Brigade*. In Aleppo, there were even attacks involving the use of toxic gases such as Sarin.

Sido: What about the situation in the province of Al-Hasakeh?

Silo: The ceasefire does not apply to Al-Hasakeh, because that's where we have to deal with *IS*.

Sido: How strong are the *SDF*, numerically?

Silo: That's a military secret. I won't answer this question.

Sido: How many military organizations belong to the *SDF*?

Silo: All in all, there are ten organizations.

Sido: Are all ethnic and religious communities represented in these associations?

Silo: Yes, all ethnic groups are represented – there are Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs, and Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans.

Sido: Are there any Christians in your force?

Silo: Yes, the Assyrians/Chaldeans/Arameans are Christians. The Aramaic military council is a member of the SDF.

Sido: Are there any Yazidis in your ranks?

Silo: None of the armed groups is specifically Yazidi, but there are many Yazidis in our ranks. There's no specifically Armenian group either – but there are some Armenians, especially in the YPG.

Sido: What political side are you, the SDF, close to? Is the SDF, as a military organization, associated to a political party?

Silo: When the SDF was founded in 2015, we had no political representation. Then, the *Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)* was established. Thus, we now consider ourselves as the military wing of the SDC.

Sido: What are the goals of the SDF for Syria as a whole?

Silo: At the beginning, our goal was to defeat IS and to liberate our territories from the Islamists. Apart from that, we are fighting for a democratic, pluralistic, decentralized, secular system in Syria, guaranteeing rights for the members of all population groups in Syria. Furthermore, we consider ourselves as the core of the future armed forces of a democratic Syria.

Sido: Almost all armed groups that are not associated to the SDF are planning to establish a Sharia state in Syria. Does the SDF want a Sharia state as well?

Silo: No, not at all! We don't have anything to do with that. Our goal is to ensure that religious issues and state affairs will be kept apart.

Sido: Will the minority groups have a future in Syria? Will Christians have the right to build churches and to practice their faith freely?

Silo: We are fighting for equality – for all the people in Syria. The Christians will be able to build churches, just like any other religious community.

Sido: Are there any conflicts between the SDF and the neighboring countries at the moment?

Silo: We belong to the anti-terror alliance, led by the United States. In the scope of this alliance, as it is led by the US, we are provided with air support to help us fight IS. There are major problems with our neighbors in Turkey, who interfere and try to impede our actions

against *IS*. Turkey is a threat to our existence, and there are attempts to obstruct our long-term objectives for a democratic Syria.

Sido: Does the alliance also provide weapons?

Silo: We can rely on air support. As for weapons: not so much, unfortunately. So far, there were only three ammo-deliveries. Thus, we are calling on the alliance to provide more weapons.

Sido: As cruel as wars may be, there are still rules – such as the international humanitarian law of war. Does the *SDF* stick to these rules?

Silo: Yes, we do! This is governed by our statutes – which apply to the treatment of prisoners as well as to the civilian population.

Sido: Were there any violations of these laws on your side? Were the responsible people punished?

Silo: No, at least not to speak of.

Sido: Are there child soldiers in your ranks?

Silo: No, there aren't any child soldiers. We are strictly against that. I can give you an example: Recently, we were joined by members of an Arab minority. There were two minors among them. We thanked them, but we sent them home. Both of them were 16 years old.

Sido: There are allegations that the *SDF* persecutes civilians who allegedly cooperated with the *IS*. What about these allegations? There were even reports about ethnic cleansing in this context.

Silo: We have a clear line in this regard: We strongly oppose of discrimination based on religion or ethnicity. Admittedly, there have been a few individual cases of human rights violations on our part.

Sido: Are the *SDF*-fighters told what is expected of them before they join the battle?

Silo: Yes! Before we take military actions – as far as possible – we make sure that the civilian population is not endangered. We only start large-scale attacks if there are no more civilians in the respective area. Usually, the fighting takes place in villages that have been abandoned a long time ago – and there are air raids before the ground fighting takes place. The civilian population is warned in advance, and we only let the civilians return to their homes when the mines are cleared and the car bombs are defused. The civilians aren't allowed to return before that. However, there are problems in terms of skilled workers who are able to clear mines or defuse car bombs. Thus, we've a hard time trying to keep up.

Sido: Are you willing to cooperate with international organizations in this regard? Would you be prepared to allow investigations in the respective areas, to have the alleged human rights violations investigated?

Silo: We have repeatedly stated that we are prepared to cooperate with all human rights organizations, at any time, to investigate these allegations.

Sido: Thank you very much for the interview!

Interview with an elderly woman (name unknown)

The interview was conducted on March 13, 2016, at the border crossing from Iraqi Kurdistan to Rojava - northern Syria after crossing over from the Iraqi-Kurdish side the Syrian-Kurdish side.

Sido: Why are you always sent back again?

Woman: I don't know. They send me back again and again – and I just don't know why!

Sido: Where are you from?

Woman: I'm from Derik.

Sido: Are you suffering from a heart disease?

Woman: Yes! *(Editor's note: She shows her medicine as well as medical reports.)*

Sido: How many times did you come here just to be sent back?

Woman: This is the fourth time. They don't tell me why they send me back.

Sido: Who sent you back? Which side – the Syrian-Kurdish or the Iraqi-Kurdish?

Woman: The Iraqi-Kurdish side will not allow me to enter.

Sido: Do you have evidence about your medical condition?

Woman: Yes! *(Editor's note: She shows her medical reports again.)*

Sido: Did you do anything wrong? Did you commit any crimes on the Iraqi-Kurdish side?

Woman: No, I swear by Allah.

Interview with an elderly Arab woman (Wagda, surname unknown, member of the so-called *Ghamar*-Arabs)

The interview was conducted in Amudah on March 23, 2016.

Explanation: in the early 1970s, prior to the construction of the Euphrates Dam, the regime in Damascus forced the members of this ethnic group to leave the Euphrates valley in central Syria and to settle in the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited region of Al-Hasakeh. After 2011, when there were riots in Syria, some of the Kurds demanded the Autonomous Administration to ensure that these people would leave their current settlements. However, the Autonomous Administration rejects this idea.

Sido: Where are you from?

Wagda: I'm from the village Jaberiya.

Sido: How far away from Amudah?

Wagda: Not far.

Sido: How many kilometers?

Wagda: I don't know. About five kilometers.

Sido: Where are you from originally?

Wagda: Originally, I am from ar-Raqqa, from the villages just outside ar-Raqqa, to be precise.

Sido: So you belong to the so-called *Ghamar*-Arabs?

Wagda: Yes, we had to resettle about 35 or 40 years ago.

Sido: What do the *Ghamar*-Arabs living here do for a living?

Wagda: Mostly agriculture and livestock.

Sido: Were your pastures in ar-Raqqa flooded

Wagda: Yes.

Sido: What is your relationship with the Kurds in this region like?

Wagda: Very good.

Sido: What was the relationship like when the regime was still in control of the region?

Wagda: Good as well.

Sido: And how are you treated by the Kurds now? Are there any disadvantages, are you discriminated against or beaten?

Wagda: “Mo eyb!” That would be shameful for them. They just wouldn’t do that – we are like brothers and sisters.

Sido: What do you think about the fact that the Kurds will have their own schools, that their language will be recognized and that they can set up their own administration?

Wagda: Oh, sure – we’re all fine with the Kurds. We approve of that!

Sido: So it’s OK for you if you continue to learn Arabic and the Kurds learn Kurdish?

Wagda: Yes, sure!

Sido: How old are you?

Wagda: I’m about 70 years old.

Sido: Do you speak Kurdish? (*Editor’s note: The question was asked in Kurdish.*)

Wagda (laughs): No, I don’t! (*She answers in Kurdish.*)

Sido: Thanks for the interview, aunt! (*Editor’s note: A polite way to address an elderly woman*)

10. Glossary

Abbreviation	Name
ADO	Assyrian Democratic Organization
AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / Justice and Development Party
DBK	Desteya Bilind a Kurd / Kurdish Supreme Committee
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KDP-S	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria
KNCS	Kurdish National Council of Syria
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê / Kurdistan Workers’ Party

PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat / Democratic Union Party
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces / Syrian Democratic Forces
SIF	Syrian Islamic Front
SUP	Syriac Unity Party
Syrian National Coalition	National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces
TEV-DEM	Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk / Movement for a Democratic Society in Rojava
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel / People’s Protection Units
YPJ	Yekîneyên Parastina Jinan / Women’s Protection Units