



A new governance and economic model in practice: Rojava's Social and Solidarity Economy

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Historical context - to 2012

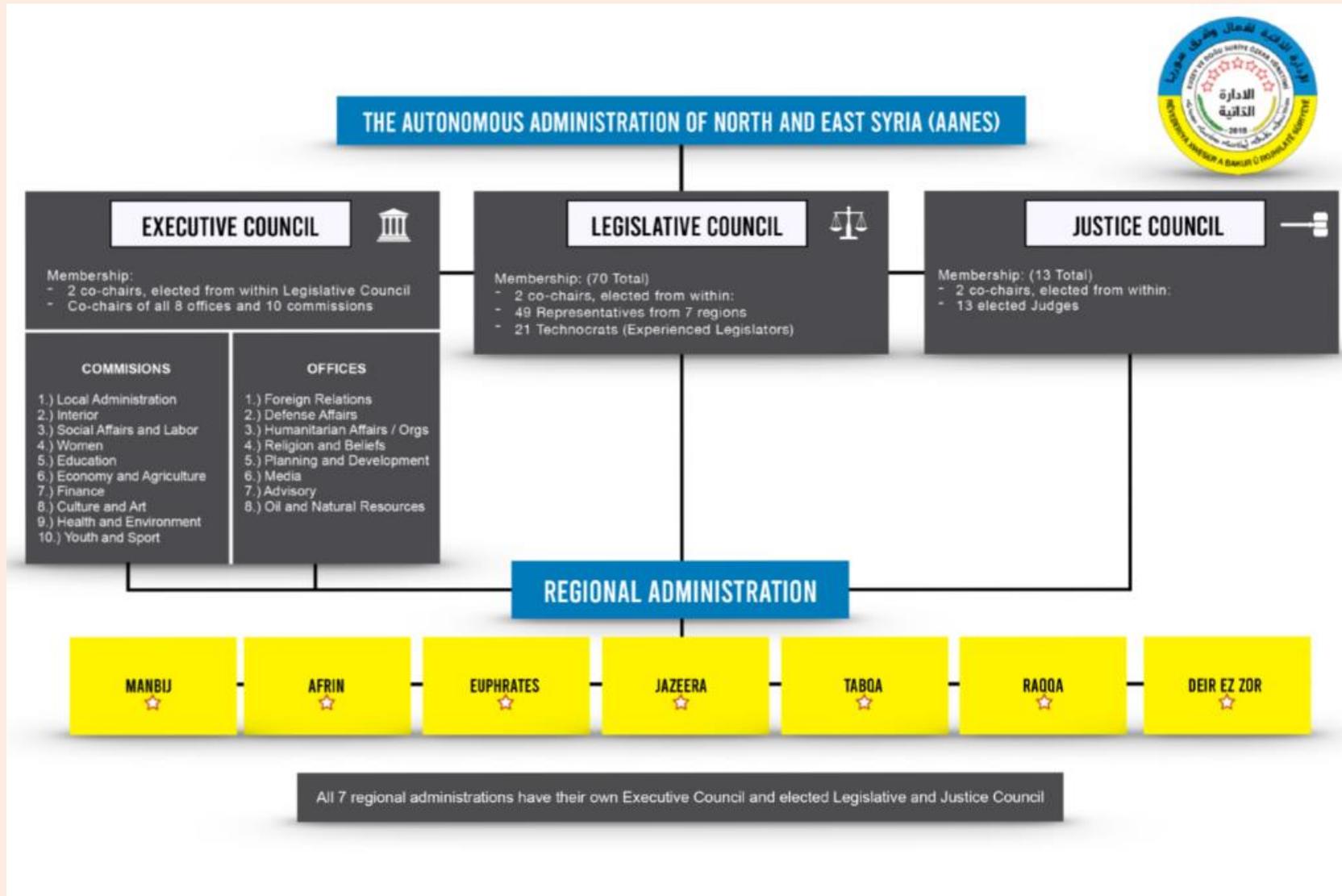
- Prior to and under Assad dynasty (from 1970), Rojava's ~3m Kurds experienced severe repression, particularly after 1999 expulsion / capture of Abdullah Öcalan
- Many Kurds were regarded by regime as officially "stateless", deprived of citizenship and unable to own property
- Region was subject to Ba'athist Arabisation policy, with expropriation of land and significant resettlement of Arabs to change demography on border with Turkey
- Kurds were subject to widespread arrest, detention and torture; provocation was common and any open dissent violently crushed
- Despite repression, clandestine Kurdish activists continued organising strongly, with political parties including Democratic Union Party (PYD) established

Historical context - 2012 to today

- First “Arab Spring” protests began in Syria generally in 2011
- 19 July 2012 - a popular uprising got underway in Rojava, with largely peaceful withdrawal of Assad regime forces and liberation of large areas
- Kurdish freedom movement mobilised quickly and proposed programs based on principles of *democratic confederalism* and *democratic autonomy*
- Key principles included participatory democracy, pluralism, women’s emancipation and gender equality, and action on ecology
- Six political parties came together as the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), a key factor in establishment of an autonomous administration
- In 2014 ISIS fanatics invaded and overran Rojava until stopped at Kobane; Kurdish and allied forces (SDF) drove ISIS back and defeated it territorially in 2019

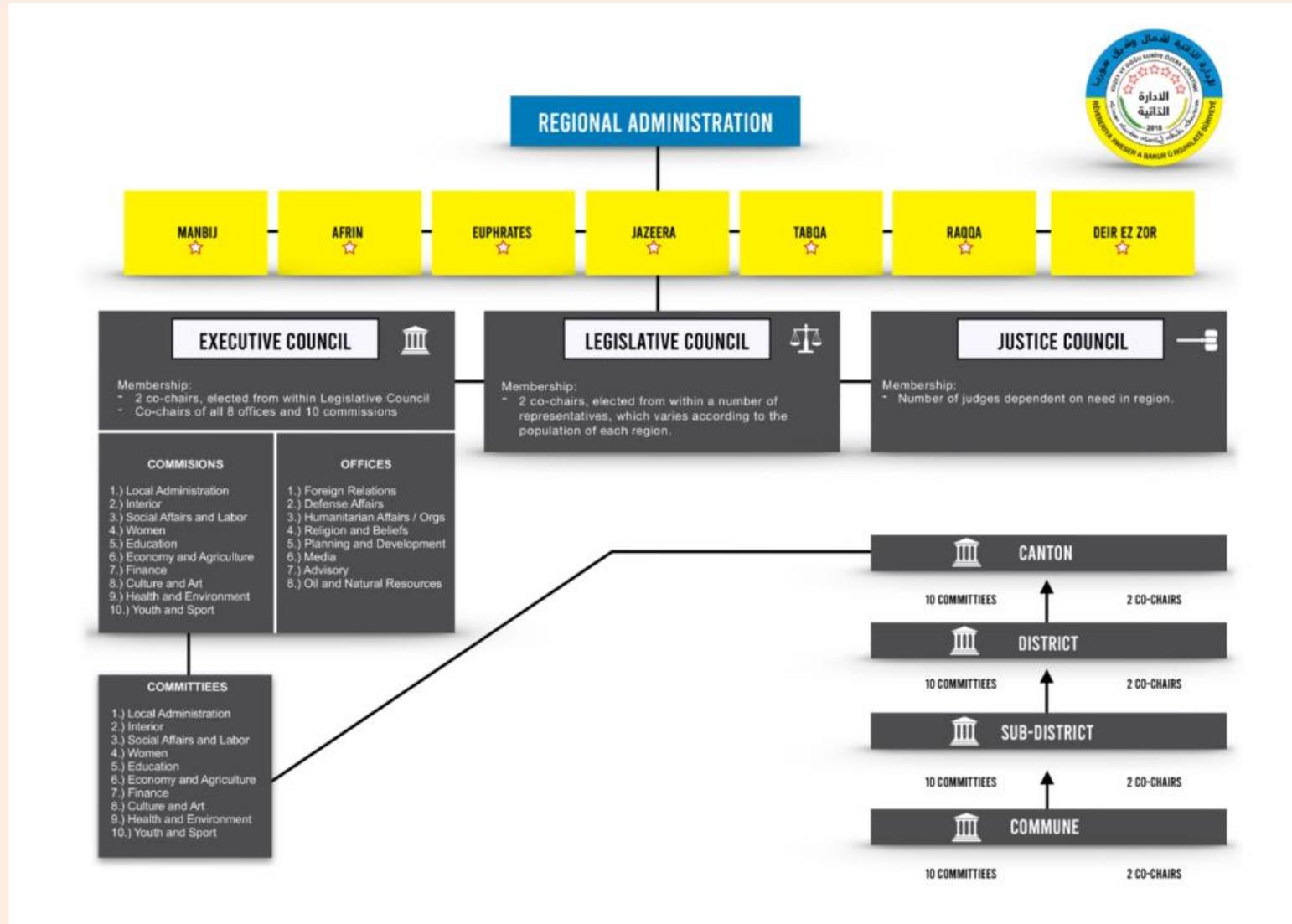
AANES governance structure: 1

(Source: Syrian Democratic Council US Mission)



AANES governance structure: 2

(Source: Syrian Democratic Council US Mission)



Pre-2012 economy

- Syria's food basket, producing most of the country's wheat, cotton, barley
 - Syrian government had transformed peasant small-scale irrigation and dry-land farming in the Euphrates basin into large-scale irrigated agriculture for the production of these "strategic crops"
- Produced only raw materials – no processing
- 80% of oil and gas resources in the area – but no refineries
- No industries – attempts to establish led to confiscation
- High unemployment – people had to migrate to Syria's cities for work, e.g. 500,000 worked in Aleppo
- With the 2012 collapse of Syrian government control, its bureaucratic and micro-managed agriculture was replaced with a network of locally administered communities that assumed responsibilities for the systematic provision of security, justice, fuel, and food

Öcalan's 'freedom paradigm'

Three key components:

- Radical democracy
- Ecology
- Women's liberation

Ecology and women's liberation – are both aims in themselves and methods to 'build' democratic modernity

Charter of the Social Contract (2014, 2016):

- Articles 39-42 deal with economic matters, property and resources
- In summary, private ownership coexists with a cooperative sector

Current employment situation

- AANES is the most significant employer in the region, employing between 200,000 and 230,000
- 100,000 in security (Asayish) or armed forces (Syrian Democratic Forces - SDF)
- Civilians mainly employed in education, energy, finance and local administration
- AANES budget mainly financed through oil sales to KRG, Assad regime and local population; income tax and fees; and import duties

AANES Executive Branch Commissions related to the economy

- Finance Commission: responsible for regulating collection of taxes and fees levied by the regional executive councils and local administrations and for their financial relations with the AANES Executive Council
- Commission on Economy and Agriculture: responsible for unifying economic policies in the cantons of the administration
- Commission for Social Affairs and Labour: responsible for regulating and protecting workers and employees' rights in both public and private sectors
- Controls a number of technical offices that answer to it directly, three specialising in economic affairs:
 - Office for Oil and Natural Resources: follows up work in the oil and gas fields, distributes their revenue and manages the electricity grid and water distribution
 - Office for Development and Planning: draws up urban plans for cities and districts
 - Office of Humanitarian Affairs: issues licences for organisations operating in AANES-controlled areas, monitors and evaluates their work

“Assembly on economy” in each canton

The assemblies reflect what Öcalan referred to as “democratic autonomy” - the principle of self-constitution, practices in which people produce and reproduce the necessary and desired conditions for living through direct engagement and collaboration with others.

- Industry
- Trade
- Agriculture
- Cooperatives
 - Compliance with the Cooperative Contract regulated by the House of Cooperatives, elected by a general assembly composed of all AANES cooperatives and which has the right to dissolve any entity if it is in conflict with the Contract
- Women’s Economy

Incorporates, rather than excludes capitalist elements of the economy, and then transforms them into something with greater solidarity.

Theory and practice of democratic confederalism economic structure in AANES

- Inspired by Bookchin's ideas on non-hierarchical social reproduction, there is theoretical and practical emphasis on an ecologically sensitive cooperative economy based on decentralised, ecological forms of agriculture, artisan manufacture and intra-municipal trade networks, including water infrastructure
- Oil infrastructure formally under the control of AANES, but oil is extracted by a US company
- This reliance on oil and its revenues contradicts the central tenets of Bookchin's 'social ecology' and the cooperative, organic agriculture
- Bookchin singled out hydrocarbons as a source of both environmental and social decay

Cooperative Contract

- Networks of consumers and producers
- Producers mainly in agriculture and food processing

Cooperative contract

- 25% of a cooperative's income must be reinvested in its activities
- 20% paid as tax to the AANES Finance Commission
- 5% paid as an annual contribution to the House of Cooperatives
- All cooperatives should respect ecological principles and the environment

Cooperatives

- Hevgirtin was largest: 1,250 members, cultivating barley on over 6,000 hectares; Turkey's Oct 2019 invasion and ongoing occupation in the Serêkaniyê (Ras al-Ain) and Girê Spî (Tel Abyad) regions destroyed this developing alternative economy
- Examples of smaller and women-led and managed cooperatives:
 - Warshin: sewing workshop in Qamishlo to sew banners and logos for institutions. Number of members and amount of production vary according to demand.
 - Shilêr: dairy coop in Qamishlo, making yogurt, cheese, cream and labneh
 - Adar Bakery: first bakery to be founded and run by women in Rojava; bread is sold at more affordable prices than the market and is free to those without financial means
 - Dastar: conglomerate of small women's co-operatives creating conserves in Qamishlo

Land and agriculture

- AANES has not repossessed private property
- At the end of 2016, the AANES Economy and Agriculture Commission decided to give land owned by the Syrian state to cooperatives
- Political economy had been used for demographic engineering and cultural homogenisation (Arabisation). Abdullah Öcalan's thoughts provided the main ideological direction for agricultural policies in AANES:
 - disrupt policy of depeasantisation and monocultures – stimulate family farms and cooperatives
 - food provisioning through developing regional markets as both a product and medium of socio-political struggles over the provision of food
 - connect productive resources and consumption needs based on the principle of fair price (i.e. for all - peasants, workers, and consumers)
 - develop processing and manufacturing capacities
 - cultural diversity replacing policy of Arabisation

After Turkish occupation of Afrin



Cutting down olive trees in Jindires district of Afrin
(Source: North Press Agency - 24 Oct 2021)

Turkish-backed factions impose royalties on Syria's Afrin farmers

- Turkish-affiliated groups have seized all the lands whose owners are not present in the area - more than 300,000 people have fled
- Turkish-backed Amshat faction imposed USD\$4 on each tree, whether it had fruit or not, in addition to 25% of the oil production
- Turkish-backed Suqur al-Shamal Brigade harvested the crops of many villages in Bulbul district and stole more than 50,000 trees
- Also in Bulbul district, the leaders of the Turkish-backed Jaysh al-Nukhbah imposed royalties of 50% of the oil production in return for allowing them to operate their olive presses
- In 2020 between 90,000 and 100,000 tons of olive oil was transferred to Turkey and sold as Turkish olive oil

Water infrastructure

Water infrastructure dependent on upstream control of Euphrates River by Turkey, making water supplies geopolitically vulnerable



Shepherds move their flock
over the dry bed of the
Khabour river

*(Source: Bel Trew, Independent -
30 Oct 21)*

Mobiles and Internet

- Internet connection relies mainly on ISPs from neighbouring Iraq and Turkey; devices are smuggled and operated through private companies – AANES tried to stop due to malware, spyware etc
- Wide use of satellite internet services, such as Tooway
- Rojava Cell (R-Cell), private company, authorised by AANES in 2018 to supply 4G mobile and internet services through fiber-optic cables and towers from Sulaymaniyah to Al-Malikiyah/Derik to be distributed to various cities; AANES Telecommunications Authority supplies services to agents
- Announcement in Sept 2021 that AANES was negotiating with several international companies to provide services

Oil

- Energy agreement signed by Russia and Syria in January 2018 gave Russia exclusive rights to rebuild the Syrian oil and gas sector. Oil exploration contracts in the northeast started being sold to Russian companies signalling an intent to take control of the assets.
- In March 2019, after receiving a sanctions waiver by the US, Delta Crescent signed a deal with the AANES for exclusive rights to develop and market oil produced in Hasakah province for 25 years - but this waiver was recently withdrawn by the Biden Administration and the licence transferred to Gulfsands Petroleum
- Russia and the Assad regime pressured AANES to provide more fuel by withholding essential supplies like food, medicine, and building materials. Deal in April 2021 for AANES to send 200 oil trucks to the Syrian refinery in Homs. The Qatirji Company, owning the oil trucks, is under US sanctions and its CEO is sanctioned by the UK.
- The current and future management of oil resources in North and East Syria is unclear due to sanctions and other factors

Health

- Mainly provided by AANES
- Also private medical facilities, e.g. the Jiyan Hospital, a surgical hospital, in the town of Tel Tamer was opened in Oct 2021 with departments for general surgery, radiology, pediatrics, gynecology, cardiac, orthopedics and a laboratory
- WHO, together with funding from Japan, renovating and expanding main hospital in Qamishli
- MSF supports COVID-19 hospitals in Hassakeh and Raqqa

Education

Schools:

- Multilingual (Arabic, Circassian, Kurdish, Syriac, Turkmen)
- Explicitly refer to notions like women's liberation, democratic nation, ecology and other themes prevalent in the movement's philosophy
- Curriculum includes values such as inter-communal solidarity, protection of minorities

Academies:

- A communal education system developed through hundreds of academies across the region for people from all walks of life
- Encourage self-thinking for active political involvement and solving issues in society

Mixed economy

- AANES has asked the US to allow US companies to invest and work there; it requires investment in critical infrastructure due to discriminatory policies of the Assad regime against Kurdish areas
- AANES realises the importance of job creation to prevent the population joining extremist groups

Challenges

- Continuous attacks by Turkey and its mercenaries
 - Turkish-backed al-Hamzat faction cut down dozens of forest and olive trees in countryside of Afrin to sell in the region's markets. Report by the Human Rights Organisation-Afrin issued at the beginning of the year, stated Turkish forces and Turkey-backed factions have cut down more than [314,400 olive and other forest trees](#) since their takeover of Afrin.
- Lack of international recognition
- Excluded from negotiations about Syria's future
- Land-locked: reliant on border crossing(s) mainly with the Kurdish Regional Government (Iraq), but the major crossing with KRG, at Tel Kocher/Al Yaroubiya closed. Russia vetoed re-opening at the Security Council, in favour the Syrian regime and Turkey
- Many IDPs, incl from the 2018 Turkish invasion of Afrin, about 300,000 in the camps of al-Awda, Afrin, Barkhodan, Sardam and Shahba, others distributed among 42 villages and towns in the northern countryside of Aleppo
 - Syrian government prevented the entry of adequate quantities of fuel, gas, food, medicine and flour
 - Aid provided by organisations to the IDPs only covers 20% of their needs
- Al-Hol and other camps with ISIS fighters and family members

Further study

- Impact of cooperatives on the regional economy?
- To what extent has this model been applied to strategically important areas such as power, water, telecoms, gas & oil? Who controls these?
- To what extent are AANES and the democratic structures in control of the economy?
- Who controls the financial system and how is it managed?
- Can this structure remain transparent and avoid favouritism and nepotism?
- What about the previous elites?
- Role and extent of private property, portrayed as being complementary to the public sector?
- Level of participation in the part of the solidarity economy that is founded on collective self-organisation from below?



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