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# Brief



## Conceptual and practical approaches of early stage urban reconstruction in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

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### Abstract

#### FEEM Policy Brief

The civil war that has interested Syria since 2011 has witnessed numerous different actors, state and non-state parties linked by momentary alliances in a fluid and informal political environment. The Kurds of North and East Syria, with the establishment of the Rojava autonomous region in 2014, have been among the most interesting examples of attempts to construct innovative administrative and territorial authorities. Guided by the principals of libertarian municipalism, the self-proclaimed administration has undertaken early reconstruction efforts in areas such as Kobane heavily damaged by the conflict with ISIS. The policy brief will shortly define the conceptual and practical approaches that have been laid out by the Kurd administration and investigate how the innovative organisation methods might influence urban form in the upcoming reconstruction processes.

# 01

## Ethnic diversity and minorities in the Syrian conflict

The history of modern Syria since the rise to power of the Baathist government led by Hafez Al Assad has witnessed the attempt by the state to construct a Syrian nationalist identity capable to unite the majority of population around the rhetoric of dangerous internal and external threats (Galletti, 2012). The holding of political powers by minorities groups was not considered a major problem in the intricate power system of the Syrian state but the groups were accurately selected based on a complex entanglement of economic, social, cultural and religious factors. The most important group would be obviously the Alawites that while being only the 13% of the total population hold practically all the main roles within the government and the productive economic system. Assad's government tended to minimise the cultural differences in favour of a division among a very simple line: on one side the supporters of the regime and on the others the opposers. This division was intended to be cross-cultural and cross-ethnic but in reality often the support to the regime was adopted by entire groups in order to directly benefit from handouts or favourable economic conditions. This construction was never fully fixed but changed and evolved over time, for example the rural populations were favoured in Hafez's early years by major agricultural reforms while Bashar's years so the rising of a middle class employed in tourism and mainly urban (Mezran&Varvelli, 2018).

In this framework most of the minority groups, and in particular the Kurdish one, were repressed in Syria in favour of the construction of an Arab identity capable of uniting different cultures, religious beliefs and lifestyles under the same flag (XXX).

The operation was partially successful as the Kurdish communities in the major cities of Aleppo and Damascus lived in close contact with the Arab population and were practically assimilated to the sunni muslim majority of the population. The situation was a little different for the three detached Kurdish communities (Kurd Dagh, Jarablus and Cezire) of the northern border that were traditionally more linked to Turkish Kurds and maintained a strong and autonomous cultural and linguistic identity (Allsopp&van Wilgenburg, 2019).

During the Arab spring and the subsequent civil war the position assumed by the different minority communities within the Syrian state reflected the process of subdivision of the population in terms of loyalty to the regime conducted in the previous forty years. The dividing lines among in favour and against the government were mainly drawn by economic and social divisions rather than by ethnic or cultural once. It is also worth notice that in many cases the two categorisations tend to overlap as some groups were specifically selected and supported. The Alawites,

being immediately assimilated to the ruling regime, had to face what has been defined as a “dilemma” (Nakkash, 2013) in areas such as Homs where their presence was minimal and historically not important: to immediately take the regime side and at the same time give up all the relationships with other groups in a city that for the vast majority was pro-revolution. In this scenario the Kurdish population had the chance to experience a different condition: thanks to the presence of a strong and organised political body in the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and of

a military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG), they were able to gain the control of a portion of the territory and begin an experiment of self-government that, despite the Turkish opposition and the partial abandonment of the international coalition, is still undergoing. The three cantons of northern Syria were liberated by a Kurdish coalition formed following the Hewler deal in 2012 and have since been ruled by a new administrative system based on the principles of democratic confederalism (Knapp et al, 2016).

## 02 **The Autonomous Kurdish government, an attempt**

After two years of autonomous government the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani drafted the Charter of the Social Contract (Rojava, 2014) a constitution that in the 12th article clearly states the belonging of the autonomous regions to the Syrian states creating a new level of government that aims at being the seed for a federal state to be created at the complete end of the civil war. The preamble of the charter clearly draws the line for the future physical, social and cultural reconstruction of the Syrian state: “*Under the Charter, we, the people of the Autonomous Regions, unite in the spirit of reconciliation, pluralism and democratic participation so that all may express themselves freely in public life. In building a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of*

*religious authority in public affairs, the Charter recognizes Syria’s territorial integrity and aspires to maintain domestic and international peace. In establishing this Charter, we declare a political system and civil administration founded upon a social contract that reconciles the rich mosaic of Syria through a transitional phase from dictatorship, civil war and destruction, to a new democratic society where civic life and social justice are preserved*” (Rojava, 2014).

The issue of physical reconstruction was faced by the Kurdish state through the establishment of platforms, the most important being the Kobane Reconstruction Platform working in the homonym city almost completely destroyed during the battle with Daesh.

The programmatic document *Report for the Ecological and Democratic Reconstruction of Kobané* shows the approached defined by the local administration. The four guiding principles are Participation, Localness, Diversity and Commonality in an attempt to transform the assembly system governing everyday life in a body capable of planning the urban and territorial reconstruction.

The platform aims not only at the reconstruction of the urban fabric but also at the establishment of systems capable of facing the upcoming ecological crisis and current and future effects of climate change: “*With this awareness, rebuilding of postwar Kobani with an ecological perspective would both provide a more livable future for the people of Kobani and set an exemplary experience that will*

*introduce Rojava Autonomous Administration’s democratic con-federalism model with a democratic, ecologic, gender libertarian approach to the world”* (Kobane Platform, 2015). A particular focus is devoted to the level of exemplarity of the proposed solutions in light of an internationalist spirit that imagines that similar approaches and technologies can be tested and adapted in different conditions while the communication and exchange of experience becomes a key element: “*international solidarity which emerged under war conditions would change dimension upon the arrival of architects, city planners, natural farmers, volunteers from international ecology and environment movements to the region to rebuild Kobani”* (Kobane Platform, 2015).

## Conclusion

The Ecological Planning of the city of Kobane presents two main interventions: on one side the city planning scale based on a geometrical pattern defined by houses, green areas and public spaces and on the other a series of low-tech construction methods with natural materials derived from the adaptation of local traditional construction systems (stone, mudbrick, akler, straw-bale, earth, etc.). It is hard to imagine that such interventions could work on a large scale since the level of destruction of most parts of Syria are so high that in order to rapidly give back to local inhabitants a living space ensuring safety and sanitation it will be important to apply more effective high-tech means (Hinnebusch, 2019). The Kurdish experience remains as an example of an administrative system that ensures for the reconstruction to be a seed of future peace and could be reassessed in light of different technologies and architectural and urban design systems. It will be interesting to control and assess the result of reconstruction effort in the Kurdish areas in order to understand how in the medium and long term the application of new administrative models influences the amount of reconstructed buildings and the quality of the urban space.

## References

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