



PRIO
Middle East
Centre

MIDEAST POLICY BRIEF 01 | 2022

Rebel Governance: Ansar Allah in Yemen and the Democratic Union Party in Syria

The civil wars in Yemen and Syria are characterized by the simultaneous presence of third-party intervention and the emergence of rebel governance by the Ansar Allah movement (known as Houthis) and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat – PYD), respectively. In this policy brief, we compare rebel governance structures in Yemen and Syria by focusing on how rebel rule relates to existing state institutions, and how external actors involved in the civil wars impact aspects of rebel governance. Data for this policy brief comes from the review of primary sources issued by the UN, Ansar Allah and the PYD, and secondary source material.

Brief Points

- Rebel governance systems differ in their relations to existing state institutions.
- Education is a key element in disseminating ideology and recruiting followers.
- The impact of external intervention on rebel governance structures is an important, but under-researched area.

Júlia Palik *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

Pinar Tank *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

Modes of Governance

Since the outbreak of the Yemeni and Syrian civil wars, both Ansar Allah and the PYD have gained and kept large swaths of territories. Figures 1 and 2 depict areas under Houthi and the Kurd control, respectively. Except for some small changes, Ansar Allah-controlled areas have been the same since 2015 and span from the northern governorates to the capital Sanaa and beyond. Kurdish control in the north has fluctuated since the PYD took control of the region – popularly called Rojava (Western Kurdistan) – in 2012, renaming it the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in 2018 to reflect its multi-ethnic composition. The PYD are the dominant, if challenged, political force in the AANES. The autonomous region encompasses approximately a third of Syria east of the Euphrates.

The two governance systems differ with regard to the use of violence. Ansar Allah-controlled territories have experienced less infighting than other areas of Yemen, but this “stability” exists because the group co-opts tribal leaders or violently represses any dissent in areas they control. While the areas under PYD governance have been more stable relative to other parts of Syria, the PYD has faced challenges since the areas under its control are multiethnic and have large Sunni Arab populations. Not least, other Kurdish parties (represented by the Kurdish National Council) compete for power and complain of repression in their political opposition to PYD rule (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

The ideological orientation of both groups is important to consider because it influences their domestic policies (governance systems and recruitment strategies) and external relations (opposition to or support of other actors). Ansar Allah adheres to the Zaydi Shia branch of Islam, which is different from the Twelver Shia version practiced in Iran and elsewhere. Zaydis make up approximately 30% of Yemen’s population. From a political perspective, Ansar Allah’s main goal is the propagation of the so-called *Qur’anic March* – the cultural, religious, and political movement that began in 2002 by Husayn al-Houthi’s teachings. Ansar Allah’s ideology rests on internal opposition against the government of Yemen, and Salafism in Yemen, and an external, anti-imperialist campaign directed against the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. The Houthis openly embrace Iran’s Islamic revolution.

The Kurdish PYD has its roots in the ideology promoted by the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan – PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan, who since the mid-1980s has fought an armed struggle against the Turkish state. Links between Turkey-based and Syria-based Kurds were forged during the years that Öcalan, banished from Turkey, operated from bases in Syria. Although their demands have shifted from statehood to greater autonomy within a federal state, the PKK continues to be seen as an existential threat to the Turkish state. Turkey’s intervention into Northern Syria in 2019 can be seen as a reaction to a perceived threat of a contiguous autonomous Kurdish-controlled area at its border.

Education is an important tool for both groups to recruit followers and disseminate their ideologies. Since 2015, Ansar Allah increasingly relies on summer camps and cultural courses to recruit new members and to disseminate its ideology. Motivations for joining these courses range from support to the movement, fear of losing benefits and humanitarian aid, and/or fear of reprisals. These courses are aimed at enhancing Ansar Allah’s control over civilians, limiting freedom of expression and religion, recruiting fighters (including children), and obtaining popular support for the continuation of the conflict (S/2022/50, 2022: 134). Most recently, Ansar Allah has changed public school curricula to promote the group’s own narrative. Likewise, in the areas controlled by the PYD, education is prioritized since these channels effectively transmit the ideology of the PYD to the population under its control. Students study democratic confederalism and women’s science (jineoloji) (Knapp et al, 2016:179) which are the cornerstones of the PYD ideology. The education system contrasts with the Syrian regime’s system, which forbade minority religions or histories. By its own account, the PYD claims it supports diversity and inclusion. However, opposition groups argue that PYD, in practice, prioritizes the views of PKK leader Öcalan. The PYD’s education curriculum has faced pushback resulting in protests and subsequent arrests of groups critical of the PYD for propagating a totalitarian ideology (Nelson and Jamal, 2015).

Relations to Existing State Institutions

There is substantial difference between Ansar Allah and Syrian Kurd relations to formal state institutions. Ansar Allah has not indicated that they seek independence, but they are aimed at governing Yemen. On the other hand, the Kurds have argued to establish a federal structure for Syria because it would give them greater autonomy in the regions they control while still within the Syrian state.

Ansar Allah’s governance system was built on existing state institutions, while the Syrian Kurds have radically departed from traditional state structures. These positions reflect the ideology and the geopolitical aims of both groups. While Ansar Allah aims to govern Yemen and control the capital, the PYD seeks local autonomy and control over designated areas. In 2014, Ansar Allah captured Sana’a – and state

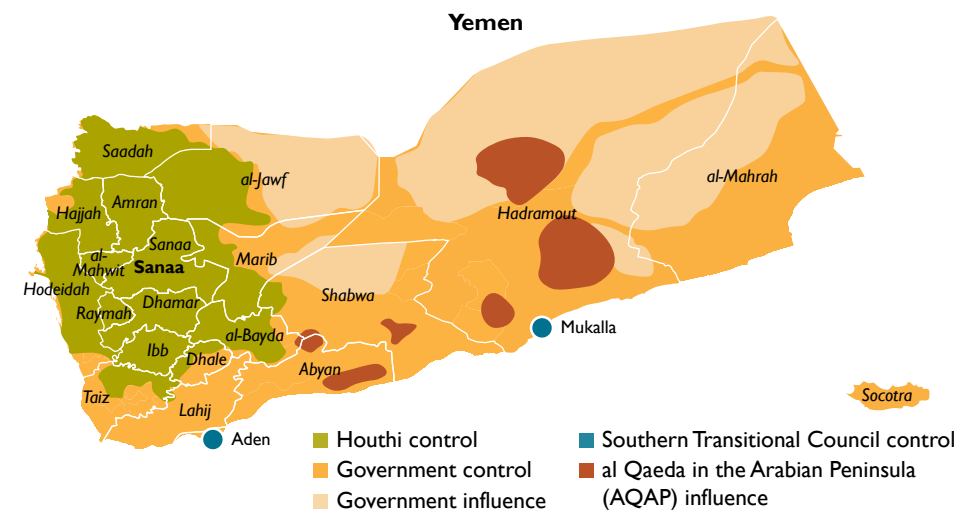


Figure 1: Yemen: Who controls what? Source: Al Jazeera / CC BY-NC-SA

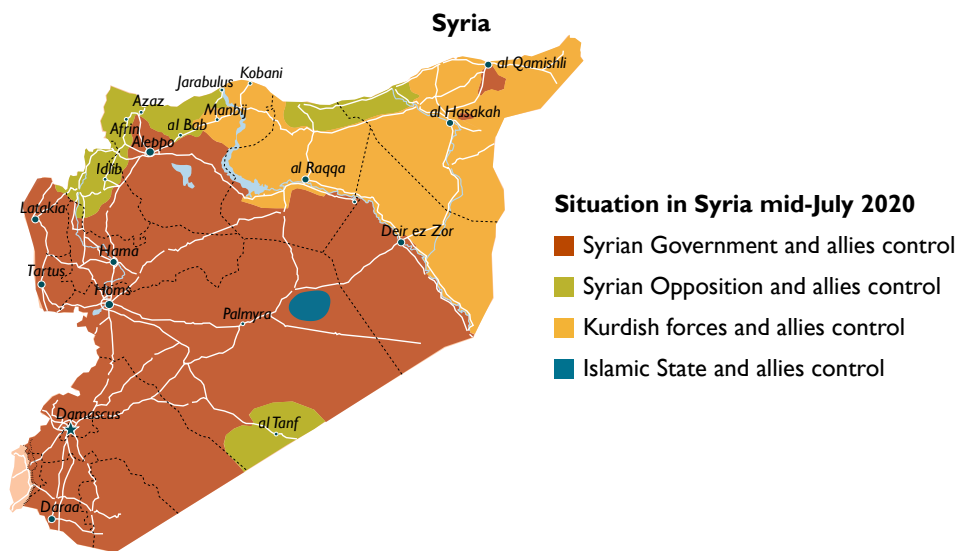


Figure 2: Situation in Syria, 2020. Source: Wikimedia Commons

institutions located there –in cooperation with the previous president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who previously fought against the Ansar Allah during the Sadaa wars (2004–2010). Having access to key ministries and the military has helped Ansar Allah develop its current system of governance which rests on a network of ‘supervisors’ (*mushrifeen*) who have displaced the former ruling party, the General People’s Congress (GPC).

Kurdish governance structures developed incrementally, capitalizing on the vacuum of centralized control resulting from the Syrian civil war. Taking advantage of this, the PYD sought to establish a political order independent of the state by taking control over the areas populated by Kurds such as Jarabulus, Afrin and Kobani. The PYD’s goal was to establish a new political system based on a distinctive ideology, formed around ethnicity, but where ideology became the mobilizing force. Founding resolutions of the PYD declare their support for peaceful but radical change in the infrastructure of the political system but do not advocate for the fall of the regime (Allsopp 2015:205).¹ The anti-statist stance of the PYD implies that they seek autonomy but not secession from the state (as is often assumed by external actors). The rebels are pragmatic in their relations to the central state and yet, they see the confederal model not simply as a form of autonomy *within* a state structure, but as a form of radical democracy *beyond* the state.

Both groups have developed documents that detail their visions regarding governance. The Social Charter (2014) is the founding document of the AANES which presents the principles by which the PYD governs in areas under its control. Significantly, their basis for political organization is based on democratic confederalism and grassroots democracy. The ideology informs everyday praxis in the political, administrative, judicial and educational systems implemented by the PYD. In the spirit of inclusivity, governance structures prioritize consensus decision making through People’s Houses, which address issues ranging from energy, food distribution, and social problems, including sexual violence and domestic conflict (Flach et al., 2016). Women make up 40% of decision-makers at all levels of governance.

In 2019, Ansar Allah released the ‘National Vision to Build the Modern Yemeni State’, detailing their governance plan for the upcoming years. The strategy envisions a ‘modern, democratic and unified Yemen’. The first general principle calls for a Yemen that ‘shall be based on the principles of Islam and teachings of Islamic law’ (Republic of Yemen, 2019: 20). The document introduces 12 different themes and assigns specific indicators and tasks to each of one to be achieved by 2030. The content of the vision, however, does not correspond to realities on the ground.. Ansar Allah’s governance system has been described as a ‘shadow’ or ‘parallel’ state (Ardemagni et al., 2020) in which decision-making often does not lie with actors

formally representing the state but with the Ansar Allah-appointed supervisors. Most of the supervisors are Hashemites, ideologically committed to Ansar Allah and tied to it by kinship and territory, coming from traditional strongholds of the movement, such as Sadaa.

The development of the Ansar Allah’s supervisory system was the result of a gradual, multi-phased transformation. The first phase began when Ansar Allah joined forces with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (2015–2017). During this period, supervisors were deployed to existing state institutions primarily to observe as local governance was still dominated by the GPC. The following period (2018–2019), after members of Ansar Allah killed Saleh, experienced the consolidation of the supervisor’s position, which often resulted in conflicts with GPC governors. There emerged a parallel state structure characterized by wide-ranging powers of supervisors. In third phase, (mid-2019–present), Ansar Allah have increasingly directly appointed their members as governors (ACAPS, 2020).

Interactions between External Intervention and Rebel Governance

Although research on rebel governance has focused on the domestic institutions and strategies that evolve during conflict, it rarely considers the impact of external support on the emergence and development of rebel governance systems (one exception is Huang & Sullivan, 2020). The Saudi Arabia-led military intervention in Yemen against Ansar Allah has been devastating for the civilian population while also becoming the organization’s *raison d’être* and an important rhetorical tool to legitimize their grip on the population. Ansar Allah maintains relations with both state (e.g., Iran, Oman) and non-state actors (e.g., Hezbollah), but they have relatively few allies compared to other non-state groups.

Iran has been a political ally of the movement since its emergence, and has provided military support at least since 2009. Ansar Allah heavily draws on Iran’s anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist, and Islamist resistance ideology and symbols and Iran is one of the few countries that recognize Ansar Allah as the legitimate government of Yemen. Iran is believed to have influenced the ideological stance of the group: The so-called “Saada core” leadership of Ansar Allah became

more closely aligned to the to the Iranian Twelver Shi'ism practices.(Al-Hamdani, 2019). Ansar Allah commemorates Ashura or the observation of the Shiite religious celebration of Eid al-Ghadir, something that is alien to Yemen (ibid). At the same time, the specifics of its religious relationship are difficult to determine.

Oman, Yemen's neighboring country, also maintains official channels with Ansar Allah and has been the only Arab country to provide a neutral space for the group to engage in communication with other actors such as Saudi Arabia. The UN has documented that components for Ansar Allah's weapon systems are supplied to the group by individuals and entities based in Oman (S/2022/50, 2022: 7). Hezbollah provides battle strategy guidance and Ansar Allah's media has been broadcasted from Lebanon. While external support for the group is important, it operates with a great deal of strategic independence, and they are likely to be able to sustain their rule even if external support dwindles.

External intervention in the Kurdish case by state and non-state actors has defined the possibilities and limitations for PYD's governance over northeast Syria. The United States, Turkey and the Turkey-based PKK have played a critical role in determining the sustainability of rebel governance in the northeast. The alliance between the Syrian PYD/YPG/YPJ and the US that arose in the fight against Daesh presented the PYD with an opportunity to operationalize their governance ideology in the vacuum arising from the weakness of the central state. Their sacrifices on the ground in 2014 gained them international recognition for the Rojava project. However, international support for their growing position in Syria and transborder connections to the PKK in Turkey have raised threat perceptions in Turkey. The decision by then President Trump to withdraw US forces in 2014 green-lighted three Turkish interventions to

prevent the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish entity at its border and resulted in the loss of significant areas under PYD control.

External intervention by non-state actors has also had an impact on rebel governance. The future of the AANES depends on resolving a number of intra-Kurdish rivalries resulting from the historic PKK-PYD relationship. Following the partial withdrawal of the Syrian regime from Northern Syria in 2012, the PKK supported the PYD militarily and politically in its bid for control but the inability to sever this link afterward has made it more difficult for the PYD to gain legitimacy among actors opposed to PYD governance. The most important opposition to PYD rule is from the Kurdish National Council (KNC), an assembly of several Kurdish parties. Formed in 2011 in Iraq and with a greater allegiance towards the Northern Iraqi leadership, they have been accused of working with Turkey and the Syrian opposition forces to undermine the Rojava administration (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019: 97-98). Resolving these intra-Kurdish tensions will be critical to the sustainability of the AANES.

Conclusion

Researching rebel governance and the impact of external support on such structures is challenging due to the clandestine nature of these relations. In this brief, we illustrate the variations in rebel governance across two cases. A key difference lies in the groups' relations to the state. While Ansar Allah has built their rule on existing institutions, the Kurdish PYD developed their own system of governance. We also illustrate that the provision of ideological education is a key component in non-state actors' efforts to legitimize their rule. We highlight that while existing research has focused on the relationship between rebels and civilians, significantly more research is needed to understand how

external intervention – whether in support of or against the non-state group – impacts rebels' governance systems. ■

Notes

1. Although it is important to point out that this resolution was passed at the start of the war when the Syrian Kurds were wary of reprisals from the regime if their demands were too extreme.

Further Reading

- ACAPS (2020) *The Houthi Supervisory System: The interplay of formal state institutions and informal political structures*. ACAPS Yemen Analysis Hub. 17 June.
- Al-Hamdani, Sama'a (2019) Understanding the Houthi Faction in Yemen. *Lawfare Blog*. 7 April.
- Ardemagni, Eleonora; Ahmed Nagi & Mareike Transfeld (2020) *Shuyyukh, Policemen And Supervisors: Yemen's Competing Security Providers*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies: 8.
- Colasanti, Nathalie; Rocco Frondizi, Joyce Liddle & Marco Meneguzzo (2018) Grassroots democracy and local government in Northern Syria: the case of democratic confederalism. *Local Government Studies* 44(6): 807–825.
- Human Rights Watch (2014) Syria: Abuses in Kurdish Run Enclaves. *HRW online*. 18 June.
- Knapp, Michael; Anja Flach, Ercan Ayboga (2016) *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*. London: Pluto Press.
- Nelson, Mateo & Moutasem Jamal (2015) New PYD curricula in northern Syria reveal ideological, linguistic fault lines. *Syria Direct*. 21 October.
- Republic of Yemen (2019) National Vision For The Modern Yemeni State. 26 March.
- S/2022/50 (2022) Letter dated 25 January 2022 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council. UN Security Council.

THE AUTHORS

Júlia Palik is a Senior Researcher at PRIO, researching the conflict in Yemen and non-state actors' disarmament.

Pinar Tank is a Senior Researcher at PRIO, researching Turkish foreign and security policies and rebel governance.

THE PROJECT

This project examines and compares rebel governance in conflict areas in the Middle East. The project is funded by the PRIO Middle East Centre (P-MEC).

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.