The US military support: a double-edged sword for the Kurds of Syria?

A case study of PYD governance in Northern Syria from 2012 to 2019

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Abstract

As intra-state wars represent an ever-growing share among the conflicts in the world, the involvement of international patrons and the consequences of their support is an expanding matter of interest in the field of conflict studies. In the present work, I question the influence of such external aid on the governance practices displayed by rebels receiving it. Regarding that effect, the literature has been hinting in opposite directions over time; support is either decreasing or enhancing the involvement of insurgents in local governance. In the present work, I intend to bring insights to the debate and contribute to the advancement of the academia on that matter. To do so, I carry a single-case study on the rebel governance displayed by the PYD in Northern Syria (also referred as Rojava). This armed group started to receive military support from the US in late 2014, I therefore compare the practices of local governance visible before and during that period of assistance. The results showed that local governance tend to increase after a rebel group perceives external aid. That confirms the more recent trend in the literature. However, the effect is not clear-cut, the main consequence of the external support appears to be a deep transformation of the rebel group and of the way it manages the territory it controls.

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Abbreviations

DFNS: Democratic Federation of Northern Syria

IS: Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

KDP: Kurdish Democratic Party

KNC: Kurdish National Council

KRG: Kurdish Regional Government

PKK: Kurdish Workers Party

PYD: Democratic Union Party

SDF: Syrian Defence Forces

SDD: Self-Defence Duty

Tev-Dem: Movement for a Democratic Society

YPG: People's Defence Unit

YPJ: Women's Defence Unit

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Introduction

Since 2012, the Kurdish Leftist political party PYD is ruling Northern Syria. Among many other armed groups during the Syrian civil war it was fighting IS and other Islamist groups. However, in late 2014, the US decided to provide the PYD, and its armed branch the YPG, with military support. That radically changed the way the insurgents managed local governance and therefore, how local populations considered them. Their local legitimacy was ultimately altered. That case is echoing with a contemporary debate in the academia regarding rebel governance and how it can be influenced by external support.

The collapse of Soviet Union cut most resource streams from the international patrons towards various insurgent groups in the Global South. That is expected to have forced them to change their behaviour towards a more profit-driven strategy. Rebels and insurgents stopped being presented as freedom fighters following Islam or Marxism-Leninism. They started to be portrayed as war entrepreneurs, looters and nihilist armed groups.

That shift is conceptualized in the academia as the "Old and New civil wars" paradigm, developed by Mary Kaldor. As long as supported, the rebels would be ideologically-driven, but when the income stream would stop, they would turn to looting and exploitation for profit (Kaldor, 1999). That is at this moment that external support and rebel practices on the ground (what would be later labelled as rebel governance) started to be linked together. Here, the academic debate on the influence of the former on the latter started.

That conceptualisation of insurgents as either ideologically- or profit-driven was later overcome. Since the early 2000's, academics focused on rebels in a less normative way and concepts such as rebel governance, rebel legitimacy and rebel-civilian relations emerged. For instance, these non-state armed actors are automatically deprived of the state legitimacy as they seize power through violence. Therefore, they seek alternative sources of legitimacy often in relation with the local population they rule over, or in the part of the population they share ethnicity or religion with.

As rebel governance became a broader concept, one point appears as converging in the literature: governance as a mean of legitimation (Duyvesteyn, 2017). Non-state armed actors engage in governance practices in order to legitimize their power over conquered territories. These activities, from security providing to healthcare or education, have recently been under the looks of scholars and the insights start to widen; we will dive more in depth regarding that range in the following section.

The contemporary literature strives to overtake that instrumental approach of rebel governance, and that concept is now further expanding as a field of inquiry. It is crossed with other notions such as legitimacy, international relations, military interventions and/or support, and rebel-civilian relations. At this point in the academia I will anchor the theoretical framework I will draw on.

As insurgents and their actions are studied in a more diverse way, external support to those struggles were as well. A simplistic narrative of proxy war such as during the Cold War era was not enough anymore, foreign support to rebels became a focus of its own in the literature. I situate the present work and its inferences at the juncture of both these topics, rebel governance and foreign support.

The academic puzzle of this thesis consists of two elements. The first element is a rational-actor based approach in which rebel favour the option of receiving foreign aid rather than to rely on local legitimacy (through local governance) to acquire resources. The second element is a constructivist approach, rebels use the increase in means generated by the external support to engage further into local governance. These two theories are hinting in opposite direction.

That begs to question what happens in the empirics when an international patron starts to provide support to a rebel group regarding governance practices displayed. Each

aforementioned theory would reply in an opposite way. That is why the present work will be a case study in which such external support happens while a rebel group is engaging in local governance. That case is the one of PYD governance in Northern Syria as mentioned earlier.

Internationalized civil conflicts became more important in occurrences and duration than inter-states conflicts in the past decades. The broad public became more in touch with the realities of insurgent struggles as the media penetrated behind the lines of rebel territories and rose awareness on that regard. Rebel leaders such as Ahmad Shah Massoud (head of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in the 1990's) was giving interviews to journalists while fighting the Taliban.

Since the academia evolved in its study of civil war contexts and insurgencies, foreign affairs analysts and interveners are giving more attention to those particularities. For that reason, any actor, involved to any extent in such context, has an interest in studying how actors react to external support and how practices of governance are displayed by various rebel groups.

That is again the reason why the present work will intend to deepen the knowledge on these links or tensions further. Recent cases showed us also that rebels themselves, more than ever, grasped the importance of engaging in local governance. I refer here to the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 2010's. They engaged in underground governance with practices revolving around justice long before the departure of the US military. Once the central power was to be seized, they hitherto enjoyed local legitimacy given by the civilians along these years of hidden governance (Malejacq, 2017).

To narrow down the focus of the present work, I will carry a case study on PYD governance in Rojava (Northern-Eastern Syria) from its *de facto* autonomy in 2012 until 2019. This case appears particularly relevant as the PYD and the YPG enjoyed an extensive support from the US from 2014 to 2019. In the meantime, that insurgent group was renowned for the practices of governance it displayed. Beyond security, they were also providing healthcare, justice, and education to a multi-ethnic population that was politically involved in the decision-making processes. Following both trends in the academia, the insurgents are expected to have acquired local legitimacy from those local governance practices.

In the case of PYD local governance in Northern Syria, governance was witnessed both before the US involvement started and during that period of support. Studying these two timespans, I

will compare them and address the aforementioned academic puzzle. Following the rational-actor based approach, the governance should have decreased after foreign support was achieved. Following a constructivist approach, it should have increased. I here ask then, how did the US military support transformed the local governance pursued by the PYD in Northern Syria from 2014 to 2019?

The present work will unfold as follows. In a first chapter, I will dwell on the academic literature addressing the main themes of the research question, namely rebel governance, rebel-civilian relations, rebel legitimacy, and external support. In a second chapter, I will present the methodology I intend to employ in the third chapter. That latter will be the case study in which I will focus on the actions of the PYD in Northern Syria from 2012 until 2019, but also provide a short historical background to the Kurdish struggle in the Middle-East. Finally, I will address the results drawn from the study in a fourth chapter and answer the research question in the conclusion.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The research question I enunciated in the previous section requires to dive deep in several concepts relating to state-building, rebel-civilian relations, governance, and legitimacy. These broad theoretical tools intertwined and relate to one another according to different settings. In the present chapter, I will start by providing fundamental definitions to avoid confusion along the present work. Then, I will assess each concept I intend to put to use in the case study: rebel governance, rebel legitimacy, rebel-civilian relations, and external support to rebels.

Definitions

In the early 2000s, the concept of failed state emerged. It was describing contexts in which the central state, if remaining, had very weak control over its territory. Most notorious examples would be Somalia or Liberia, but especially Afghanistan where al-Qaida was meant to have been harboured before 9/11 attacks. That very fact justified the beginning of the War on Terror[1].

Considering that extended focus on such "failed" states in the foreign policy-makers realm, academia followed and started to study these settings more and more. In a matter of a few years, it was understood that such states are mostly controlled by non-state actors. Even though the central state might be collapsed, rebels, insurgents, militias, guerrillas, armed group at broad would take over and provide a continuity in the state missions to civilians. Rebel governance as an academic concept may have originated from such focus.

Along the present work, I will use terms of rebels and insurgents in an interchangeable manner. Even though they may differ in several manners, they both refer to a non-state armed group engaging in violence overtime, aiming at seceding from or overthrowing the incumbent state, and enjoy relative control over a territory (Kasfir, 2015). I will also use concepts of guerrilla fighters, freedom fighters, or looters even though these describe activities or strategies such rebel groups would engage in.

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[1] See George Bush's addresses to the Congress and to the Nation in 2001.

Guerrilla warfare is often described as a tactic rather than a whole kind of rebel struggle. A guerrilla war unfolds between groups of fighters scattered in rural areas and a stronger regular army (mostly the one of a state). In the widely acknowledged definition by Ernesto "Che" Guevara, it appears rather close to the case of Rojava we will analyse later on. Indeed, one can find many elements of Marxist-Leninism, it emphasizes the importance of receiving support from the local people, the rural location of the fighting, and the unfavourable balance regarding the material situation of the guerrilleros in comparison to the state (Guevara, 1967).

Civilians and non-combatants are both defined as living in the area under rebel control and not taking part in military fighting actively for neither side (as mentioned in the Geneva Convention IV of 1949). Civilian resistance enjoys a broad definition of expressed disagreements or acts of disobedience (Arjona, 2015). The term rebel constituency refers to the "parts of the country's civilian population from which the [rebel] group originally emerged and for which they claim to fight" (Denny & Walter, 2013). The case of Rojava will be insightful in that regard as the area is not only inhabited by Kurds (PYD's rebel constituency) but also Arabs and other sub-groups. Not only that, but also the fractionalisation of the Kurds inside and outside of Rojava could lead to higher level of violence from the rebel organisation onto the civilians (Ottman, 2017).

I will assess the definitions of more central concepts to this study such as rebel governance and rebel legitimacy in subsequent sections as these require an extensive review of literature.

Rebel Governance

Governance is, in theory, the concept of governing. It can be seen as the effective tasks and decisions taken by a group (Bevir, 2012). That group can be a government but it does not have to be (*Ibid*). In our study, we focus on rebel governance. That can be described as those tasks of governance, this decision-making, however pursued by non-state armed actors. These actors can engage in governance for several reasons, which will be unfolded further, and to various extent. The first condition for such deployment of activities is the effective and stable control of the group over a given territory (Kasfir, 2015). For instance, non-secessionist groups will engage way less in local governance activities than separatist insurgents (Huang & Sullivan, 2021).

From that minimal definition, rebel governance unfolds as a rather more complex concept than expected. Beyond the requirement of control over a territory, it is argued that there are additional scope conditions to the efficiency, and even the occurrence, of rebel governance. On that matter, I will use the work of Adrian Florea, from a quantitative analysis of rebel governance in *de facto* state of Transnistria, he identifies a set of context-dependent conditions that influence the depth but also the nature of such governance. These are the presence of peacekeepers, the level of fragmentation in the separatist movement, the nature of local assets (for instance the industry), and availability of local resources easily exportable (such as gas) (Florea, 2020). A last condition is the external military support and it will be the one I will use the most in the present work.

I reference here these conditions that are specific to *de facto* states for the reason that rebel governance is easier to observe in such settings as it offers more stability over time. An intense civil war might display elements of local rebel governance but the situation is shifting too rapidly due to fighting and alliances and these dynamics are more difficult to observe, therefore the academic work relating to it is less consequent. Also, the case study I will draw on later is focused on Rojava, an area in Northern Syria that is autonomous since 2012. I argue that, to an extent, it offers a similar stability to *de facto* states while engaging in extended governance practices (more on that further).

Many more scholars have contributed to the concept of rebel governance. Nelson Kasfir identifies additional conditions for insurgents to establish rebel governance: again their control over the given territory, the rebels need the ability to act in a violent manner upon it, but also that zone has to be inhabited by civilians (Kasfir, 2015). That means that desertic land such as (some parts of) Western Sahara, even though controlled by such non-state armed groups, cannot display features of rebel governance. More, a rebel group present over a zone but not enjoying the monopoly on violence, due for instance to competing armed groups but also the central state or bandits, could not provide basic social goods such as security and justice. Therefore, one cannot consider it as a governance.

As mentioned before, one big threat to a rebel group trying to engage in local governance can be the original actor in it, namely the central state. Kalyvas sees rebel governance as a dynamic of competitive state-building with the central state remaining (Kalyvas, 2006). That can lead to tensions about resources essential to effective governance such as oil fields or fertile land

between the insurgents and the incumbent state such as in the Iraqi Kurdistan or the FARC-controlled areas in Colombia. But that can also lead to situations of implicit collaboration in which a state cannot control and provide local governance over its whole territory and therefore delegate some of its "state-hood" to rebel groups. Such instance could be seen in the North of Afghanistan under control of warlord Massoud who was providing basic social goods to the population while the US-backed government in Kabul could not reach such remote area and was already struggling with the Taliban threat in the South (Malejacq, 2017).

Rebel governance itself can be separated into two useful categories for the present work and in the analysis of the literature on the matter. On one hand there are situations of *aliocracy* in which rebels only engage in minimal governance activities regarding security and taxation while leaving other matters to external actors being the central state, NGOs, or civil society. On the other hand, the concept of *rebelocracy* describes situations in which the insurgents engage in extensive local governance, mimicking the actions of a common nation state (Arjona, 2015). That involves allowing time and resources to provide social goods to the population beyond the minimum, for instance healthcare and justice provision.

From those scope conditions to the existence and to the efficiency of rebel governance, the question of begs for itself. In the early 2000's, a lot of scholars started to interrogate that matter: the reason why an insurgent group would start providing social goods to a population, while they have to fight for a separatist or regime-toppling goal. Among several reasons identified, one appears as especially relevant to our question and to our case study, rebels involve themselves in local governance in order to (but not only) achieve local legitimacy.

Rebel Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an important, even though slightly peripheral, concept to the present work. Some scholars say it is vital for any group of insurgents to survive on the long run to acquire a basic level of local legitimacy (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). As I mentioned above, rebels need to enjoy a monopoly on violence over a territory to engage in governance, but to justify that use of violence they need to be legitimate (*Ibid*). It appears these two concepts are deeply intertwined where rebels are in charge.

To start from the beginning, I will refer to the father of the modern approach on legitimacy, Max Weber. Among other influential work on the state or the economy, this German law

scholar identifies three types of legitimacy enjoyed by an institution (Weber, 1958). First, the legal one that is supported by a system of widely acknowledged norms. In this case, a constitution or judicial institutions could legitimate a ruler, but for an insurgent group it is highly difficult to enjoy such type of legitimacy. As laws are designed by incumbent states, and sometimes by democratically elected bodies or theological institutions, for an armed group using violence as a mean to seize effective power it appears impossible to reconcile these two.

The second type identified by Weber is traditional legitimacy based on customs historically grounded in a people, a territory, or a system of belief. Rebel groups can establish a lot of their local support with such approach. For instance, the Taliban in Afghanistan offered an alternative to the Western alien control of the country with a narrative of a traditional and strict interpretation of the Quran. But apart from religion, it can be difficult for groups such as Marxist-Leninist ones, or broadly those offering a newer alternative, to based themselves on traditional sources of legitimacy. Leftist groups are often atheist or at least secular and therefore cannot enjoy religion as a local anchor. They might have to resort to change local fables or stories for them to fit their world-view. As an example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka re-wrote or altered traditional narratives of the Tamil people in order to historicize their struggle among the population (Terpstra, 2017).

That latter fact would lead such Leftist groups towards the third type of legitimacy in Weber's conceptualisation, the charismatic leader. One can find for instance cult of personality or the centrality of martyrs in many insurgent groups. The PYD and its close ally the PKK are very close to the image of their imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan whom they nicknamed Apo. But also in de-ideologized groups such as the rebels in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the late 1990's, leaders such as Charles Taylor were famous for the charisma they enjoyed[2] which led thousands of young men to follow him, die for him, and then vote for him.

These three types of legitimacy, even though never enjoyed fully and exclusively by a group, constitute a useful tool to the present work. As I will extend further in the case study, the behaviour of the PYD/YPG and the narratives it created aimed at the inhabitants of Rojava can inscribe themselves in a quest for charismatic legitimacy.

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[2] Charles Taylor was elected in Liberia during the 1997 presidential elections with the slogan "You killed my mama, you killed my papa but I go vote for you". (Blair, 2009)

The Weberian approach on legitimacy is fundamental for any further work on the topic, being about the state or rebel groups. Nonetheless, scholars came later on the matter and pushed it beyond a sheer system of beliefs on the civilian side. Isabelle Duyvesteyn conceptualizes legitimacy as multi-dimensional, reaching civilians but also the international community, under the input of the rebel group but also receiving outputs from external actors such as NGOs or diasporas. She argues, the difference between rebel legitimacy and state legitimacy is that insurgents can remain violent without losing consequent ground in the population, meanwhile a common state would be heavily destabilized following a similar display of coercion. Also, lots of these rebel groups legitimate their actions, both locally and internationally, through a social contract discourse, arguing that they bring a fair share of services, of governance, to the population in exchange to being the legitimate rulers of the area (Duyvesteyn, 2017).

To bring the concepts of legitimacy and governance together, I will use the argument from Weinstein. In *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, he uses a rational-actor approach to the matter. Rebels are meant to engage in governance to enjoy local legitimacy, and from there receive benefits from the population. These benefits can be an easier access to resources (e.g. civilians working for them in mines without coercion needed) but also manpower to join their ranks and provide them more fighters and therefore more chances of victory against the state and against other insurgent groups.

Beyond these advantages enjoyed by the rebels, Weinstein also argues that civilians have rational incentives in collaborating with rebel groups and therefore granting them legitimacy. Indeed, while war is raging out, civilians still need access to basic resources such as food or energy, rebels can be the actor most likely providing them with it or at least organising supply chains. Beyond that, as seen before, rebels can engage in extensive governance, providing further social provisions such as security, justice, healthcare, or even education. In some cases in an even more efficient way than the central state that can be collapsed already or still struggling with international fighting. In such contexts, civilians have a rational incentive to grant these insurgent groups legitimacy and enjoy their governance (Weinstein, 2006).

Rebel-civilian relations

Rebel governance goes beyond control over a territory and providing basic social provisions to the population. The presence of an armed insurgent group, even in the most scarcely populated area of the country such as a thick jungle or mountainous areas, always implies close contact between such factions and non-combatants living on that land. I already expanded on how rebels display local governance, how it relates to the concept of legitimacy, let us now dive into how the interactions between rebel rulers and civilians unfold in the empirics.

First, friendly relations between these two social groups are not as essential to victory as guerrilla groups like to pretend it is. Mao Tse-Tung emphasized that a positive outcome to rebel struggles would depend on "winning the hands and hearts of the people" (Mao, 1967) but that does not always mean engaging in friendly relations with such people. As Kasfir emphasizes, several insurgents won a civil war while engaging in terrible crimes towards the population, such as Charles Taylor in Liberia (Kasfir, 2015). In the present work, I chose to focus on a case such as Rojava, in which rebel rulers over the area chose to engage in extensive local governance. As such, I will not extend on cases of weak rebel governance but I believe it is important to remember the occurrence of such contexts. Rebel governance phenomena are very diverse and context-bounded and that ties studies of such to a limited generalisation extent.

When the rebel-civilians relation can be qualified as friendly, it remains again diverse even though more similar across cases. Civilians can engage alongside their rebel rulers to different extent, in a voluntary manner or a coerced one. Even though rebels can and often do coerce local population into acting the way they want, engaging in governance or remain inactive, some civilians involve themselves alongside the rebels out of interest (Kasfir, 2015; Weinstein, 2006).

A whole dimension of rebel-civilian relations goes through the use of symbolic processes. These are defined as actions triggering an emotional response among a group or a population (Mampilly, 2015). The purpose of such processes is ultimately to reinforce rebel legitimacy among the civilians living on the area they control, for the reasons mentioned earlier. A more direct goal is to ensure a compliance of these inhabitants at a lower-cost in comparison to using coercion. Also because rebels, just as well as states, cannot solely rely on coercion for efficiency and practicality (Arjona, 2015). These symbols can be of two categories: referential ones aimed at reinforcing the image of strength and might of the rebel organisation; and condensation ones

to trigger a feeling of identification from the targeted audience to the rebels' cause (Mampilly, 2015).

This symbolic dimension is expected to be used extensively by the PYD in their governance of Rojava and its inhabitants. For this reason, I will extend on that notion and later apply it fully to the case. One can see the use of symbols by insurgent government as another array of governance practices, alongside social goods provision, the rulers will invest time and energy in the creation of a flag, a hymn, uniforms for their soldiers and officers. These are credential symbols, condensation ones could be seen through the communication between the bureaucracy and the civilians, but also it can be best understood in the extent to which civilians cooperate with the rebels beyond the sole concern of surviving.

Civilians can resist the rebels but it comes at a high cost, they have incentives to comply out of coercion or remuneration. But normative compliance, echoing a system of agreed and shared norms and rules (Mampilly, 2015), is a safer and cheaper way to ensure the minimum level of cooperation required for a rebel government to draw benefits out of the zone it controls. Beyond normative compliance, local legitimacy can be attained and secured through the use of symbolic processes. Being considered as legitimate rulers, the rebels will not only enjoy resources and manpower from the populations, but they will also receive a sense of belonging, a harmony in the armed forces, and less information leaks due to loyalty.

The full set of symbols used by a rebel group, the symbolic repertoire (Mampilly, 2015), in itself gives insights about the nature of the rebel group governing over the area. These can draw on local customs, nationalistic rhetoric, or transnational ideologies. I presume that the PYD administration is following the latter trend as they openly display a leftist ideology and a guerrilla approach to civil war. Therefore, we will focus further on the display of symbols from the communalist ideological background and see how it can affect the legitimacy and local ground of the Kurdish insurgency.

When a rebel group takes control over an area and starts to engage in governance with the local population, there are always instances of resistance. These manifestations of refusal towards the insurgents can take a lot of different forms and go to different extents. Ana Arjona distinguishes between partial resistance contesting certain policies or practices from the rebels, and full resistance aiming at the rule of the rebels in itself (Arjona, 2015). The occurrence of one or the other of these types of resistance depends mainly on the legitimacy and efficacy of

pre-existing political institutions (if there were) on the area, and the material capacity of the resistant groups. It goes beyond a broad discontent in the population, the rebel rule is compared to the regime before and that is why some insurgents are actually welcomed or resisted in different zones while they could pursue identical policies.

As rebels are armed forces, they can easily use violence against these eruptions of resistance. But they have incentives not to as it could worsen the opposition by granting it legitimacy and spread discontent further. That could also force the incumbent state to intensify the fighting against the rebels as the population under their control is seen as endangered by such coercion. Finally, using violence against civilians comes at a high cost in matter of reputation (Arjona, 2015), being locally, nationally, and even more abroad, where many insurgents raise support and resources.

However, in many contexts of insurgence and civil wars, occurrences of violence used against local populations by the rebels have been witnessed. These can be explained by a weak rebel group not being able to provide a positive alternative to coercion because of a lack of military might, resources, or legitimacy and therefore has to resort to coercion (Wood, 2010). But, on the long run, this violence cannot ensure legitimacy, support, or even compliance from the civilians, rebels need to grow stronger in order to offer social goods and governance instead of coercion. Otherwise, civilians are most likely to turn (back) to the incumbent state (Kalyvas, 2006).

Violence against civilians is used primarily to coerce them into handing out resources or join the ranks of the rebel fighters. Further, it can be used as a mean to suppress state legitimacy by displaying its weakness in response to the violent acts perpetrated. Rebels could target a village just to prove that the central state did nothing to prevent it and nothing to retaliate (Wood, 2010). Nonetheless, that technic will only be effective if the rebels show themselves as the strongest actor in the situation, they have to convince that they can provide security otherwise the locals will turn to the state or to other groups (Kalyvas, 2006).

External support to rebels

As the independent variable in my research question regards the external support from the US to the PYD, I will now draw on the theoretical aspects of such foreign support. I will first assess

what motivates its offer but also its acceptance from the rebel. Then I will focus on the expected consequences on local governance.

Facing a situation of a tier state granting support to an insurgent group in another state, scholars tend to divide a supply and a demand side. Foreign state will supply material help, resources, and arms mainly, and the demand side will receive it or refuse it. Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham (2011) see the supplier as motivated by foreign policy concern such as destabilizing the incumbent state fought by the insurgents. Supporting a rebel group is relatively more affordable in economic, resources, political and international costs than directly declaring war; hence the slow replacement of inter-state wars by internationalized internal wars (Salehyan, Gleditsch, & Cunningham, 2011).

The downside of such a deal is a loss of agency in the attainment of goals as it remains less direct than steering one's own military on the ground. Therefore states will aim at strong rebel groups sharing similar goals and sometimes even common ethnicity, language or religion (*Ibid*).

On the demand side, receiving external support comes to a cost, losing autonomy regarding the decision of the goals, the strategies, and the practices in the struggle. Rebels also have to compromise and, when possible, they will draw on domestic resources in order to limit reliance on foreign patrons for that reason (Byman & Kreps, 2010). In a similar way, stronger rebels are expected to accept less foreign support as they simply need it less than weaker groups. Another risk for insurgents in receiving consequent foreign aid is a loss of legitimacy on the local scale, being seen as puppets or contractors of the international patrons (Salehyan, Gleditsch, & Cunningham, 2011).

Overall, when that external support occurs there are various possible outcomes regarding rebel governance involvement. According to Weinstein, rebels are rational actors. International patrons, being the US or USSR during the Cold War or more recently Iran or Saudi Arabia, strongly support insurgents across the world for various reasons. That support can be financial funds, expertise, supply of ammunition, or sometimes even undercover troops. It is rationally more than any local peasant or worker can offer to a rebel group. For that reason, that latter will try in a first place to receive such international support and, if it cannot be achieved, then turn to the local population for resources and manpower. That is a cost-benefit calculus, international patrons require military victory or sometimes solely instability in an area to fit their interests,

while locals will demand social goods provision and basic governance. Therefore rebels engage in local governance only when they are forced to (Weinstein, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, academia evolved and the study of conflicts drifted away from a rational-actor approach. Local governance as just a way to levy taxes, recruit men and loot resources started to be seen as a narrow take and the concept of local legitimacy began to be more under focus. Local legitimacy, and the strategies of legitimation it goes through, led to what I will mostly analyse here, rebel governance and the rebel-civilian relations. If these relations are friendly, the rebel group will gain legitimacy and therefore the material benefits in the balance. If local populations are hostile towards the insurgents one can suppose the legitimacy is low, hence the access to local resources will decrease. In that second case, and following the approach of Weinstein, it is supposed such insurgent group would enjoy enough international support to not need such resources. That local legitimacy and friendly rebel-civilian relations are achieved through one main instrument, rebel-run local governance (Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). External support, especially financial and material one, is a complement to local legitimacy for rebel groups, with the end-goal being to increase their chances of success in their armed struggle (Huang & Sullivan, 2021).

This last part of our theoretical framework is especially relevant as we expect to draw on the more recent strand in the academia. The work from Huang and Sullivan (2021) is expected to be supported by the case of Rojava. That inscribes the current work in a move from the rational-actor-based approach to rebel behaviour to a more constructivist one. Even though from different epistemological backgrounds, I argue that these two theories seem to complete each other more than competing against one another.

Chapter 2: Methods and Operationalisation

As mentioned before, to answer the research question, a case study will be carried out in this thesis. The coming section will explain the appropriateness of such research design in regard of the inferences I am seeking for. I will also explain the manner I intend to operationalise the variables in the causal relation and the various concepts I established in the previous section.

Causal relation

As this thesis investigates the effects of changes in international support on the PYD/YPG rebel relations with Rojava civilians, I claim that the case study research design is fitting such an inquiry. From the theoretical framework, I will reduce this relationship to two main dynamics. First is the rational actor based one from Weinstein (2006), second is the more recent and more constructivist one from, among others, Huang and Sullivan (2021).

In the case of Rojava, I can witness the required theoretical elements mentioned above. The PYD engaged in extensive local governance by providing social goods to the populations such as security, education, or healthcare; meanwhile they enjoyed extensive support from the US in the form of arms, ammunitions, airstrikes during battles, and the deployment of special forces to train local manpower. However, that Western support was fluctuant, it occurred between late 2014 until 2019.

Therefore, the support from the US can be comparable to an independent variable while the PYD relations with the local population can be seen as a dependent one, as the former varies, we can expect the latter to vary as well. This simple Y:X relation is a causal inference we supposed to be supported by a covariation (Gerring, 2004). By using a case study, the aim is to move beyond a simple theory-testing approach stating that the PYD engagement in local governance should increase during phases of weak support from the US and decrease when that support becomes stronger. The main strength of diving into complex and multi-actor settings such as the one in Rojava, and extensively the Syrian civil war, is to shift to an exploratory approach.

In order to make it clearer, let us use causal designs. *Figure 1* below describes how the relation between the independent variable US support and the dependent variable PYD/YPG engaging

in local governance is expected to look like. The minus sign refers to a negative causal relation, when the US support increase, the local engagement from the PYD is expected to decrease. *Figure 2* shows what I expect to witness in the case study in a more precise manner.

As the first one is a simple causal inference and the second one is a whole causal mechanism, I argue that the case study design is the one fitting the best the inquiry of the present work. Overall, the causal relation is similar in both designs; by adding intermediary steps I expect to gain in precision as to how that causal relation displays in the empirics.

Figure 1: Causal Relation
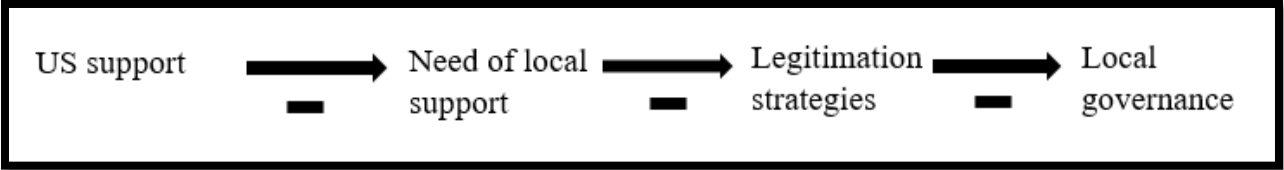
Figure 2: Causal Mechanism

In *Figure 2*, more international support would reduce the need for local support, therefore the rebels would engage in less legitimation strategies, therefore less local governance practices would be visible in our case.

Justification of the Design

A case study is defined as "an in-depth study of a single unit" (Gerring, 2004). Therefore, the present single unit is the Rojava from 2012 to 2019, the dimensions are the international support and the local governance, but also the ideology, the broader situation and balance of alliances in the Syrian Civil War, and the local populations acceptance and/or support of the PYD. The time period under scrutiny starts in 2012 with the beginning of PYD's *de facto* control of

Northern Syria unchallenged by other Kurdish and rebel groups. The study stops in 2019 as there are not enough academic writings and field report regarding PYD / Tev-Dem governance in Northern Syria after this year to dedicate it a whole part of the present work.

I seek to uncover the causal mechanism lying between dynamics of local governance and international support in rebel-held territories. A case study design allows for depth in the analysis, I can afford to take into account elements that a quantitative or a cross-case study would overlook. For instance, the importance of history to explain tensions between Kurds and Arabs, but also between Kurds from Syria and Kurds from Iraq.

An important aspect of the PYD governance policy in Rojava is the ideological realm. Considering the importance of it in the international recognition of the rebel group, I suppose that it goes beyond a "local governance for local legitimacy" dynamic. Only through an extensive case study I can unravel the extent to which the leftist ideology embraced by the insurgents in Northern Syria affected their behaviour internally but also externally. Ideology might intervene in the aforementioned causal mechanism I seek to uncover.

These two elements, the tensions in the local social network and the rebels' leftist ideology are two dimensions (i.e. so-called variables in a quantitative analysis) I will explore, among others, by exploiting the depth and versatility of the case study research design.

Also, as mentioned in the previous part presenting the causal relation, a causal mechanism such as the one I will study here cannot be untangled using quantitative methods. Indeed, the case sample is one, and the observations are too diverse in kind to be automated in a database. I will use reports from international organisations, observations by scholars on and off the field, interviews of locals, of soldiers, and of party leaders. Even though these elements could practically be reduced to statistics, I argue that the research question will be best answered through a qualitative research method. The case of Rojava is too recent and few scholars could access the zone during the peak of violence in the Syrian civil war. As we know, numbers and figures from war-torn state or *de facto* states also tend to be less reliable. A case study design will allow more depth in the analysis and more flexibility in the data I will use. I will cross several sources as mentioned earlier.

Operationalisation

The actions from the Kurdish rebel organisation, the PYD and its various branches, will be one of the measurement levels of this study. What is decided by the party, what is implemented broadly, the actions and their direct consequences will be the evidence I seek. This can be materialized by opening social facilities such as schools or hospitals, but also by simply running them and assuring their continuity in providing services to the population. I will exploit the potential of a case study by focusing on details, for instance who pays the wages of teachers or administrative workers under PYD rule. Further, I tend to consider democratic openings and projects of self-administration closer to the locals as stark actions of local governance as it reveals a broad and long-term perspective for the rebels in Rojava.

Contrastingly, flows of population leaving Northern Syria to Assad-controlled zones or Turkey can attest a disagreement among the locals and therefore a failure in PYD local governance. As mentioned in the previous sections, the operationalisation will be less rigid as in a quantitative analysis. Here again, details will be put under focus such as expressed dissent in interviews or the use of non-violent civilian resistance techniques (e.g. showing the nationalist Kurd flag instead of the Rojava one). Even though not in sufficient number to base a study on, interviews of locals do exist, voicing their opinions about the PYD administration and I will use those as part of the operationalisation process. From all of these, we will assess the PYD relations with civilians.

From the operationalisation of relations with civilians, I will expand on the local legitimacy operationalisation. In the YPG (the broadest armed branch of the PYD), there is an international battalion and a lot of combatants from the PKK in Turkey, but the majority of soldiers are Kurds from Syria. By leaning on the recruitment process, to what extent it is consented by the locals for instance, I will assess the local legitimacy of the PYD/YPG. If the locals are joining the YPG uncoerced, I will suppose the local legitimacy is high and *vice versa*. Also, regarding the police-like branch of the PYD, the Asayîs, through their recruitment, their constituency, and their actions, I intend to understand whether it is a protective or a repressive instrument of power over the local population. This is expected to be supported by reports from the ground in which locals can expand on their opinions regarding such recruitment and display of coercive force.

Another important dimension is the symbolic one. I will focus on the use of different signs both by the fighters and the civilians. For instance various flags can mean radically different opinions

without resorting to coercion. Also, narratives used by the PYD, the glorification of martyrs, and their overall discourse of inclusion (whether it is about female soldiers or the ethnic background of their constituency).

Regarding the independent variable, the support from the US, I will use simpler observations to assess it. The YPG and its allies were clearly identified as allies in the US struggle against Islamists in the Middle East. Even though the fight against Islamist armed groups in Syria was mostly articulated around airstrikes more than direct intervention, funds, arms and training were received by Syrian Kurds on the ground. In the case of the siege of Kobanê, the soldiers fighting ISIS were mainly from the YPG and they received support from the US as airstrikes (among other forms) that allowed them to win the battle. Then, the US military supply directly given to the YPG can also be a part of the operationalisation, or dispatch of trainers and elite corps on the ground to bolster the YPG efficacy as an armed group.

Resources

Through an extensive literature review and the use of ground reports on the matter of PYD rebel-civilian relations, and several other neighbouring matters, I will draw inferences regarding the research question. Beyond the sole local governance practices in which the PYD engaged, I will also question its efficacy among the local population. Reports regarding how the locals, Kurds but also Arabs and Assyrians, consider the actions of the PYD and its branches will be taken into account.

Furthermore, I will dedicate a short but fundamental part of the case study to historicise the Kurdish matter in the Middle East. Far from focusing the present work on historical debates, I consider that such an old and manifold struggle requires a minimum background of knowledge before assessing different contemporary dynamics on the ground. Even though succinct and only supporting other arguments, we shall refer to the Iraqi Kurdistan and compare it in matters of political beliefs, project, and administration; I argue that begs for historical conscience on the matter.

Finally, the Kurdish cause had no common narrative unlike its counterparts in Iran, Turkey, and Iraq, and the struggle of the recent civil war and its fights against Islamist groups, especially the near-lost siege of Kobanê, created one (Frederici, 2015). That matter cannot be ignored; a common narrative can be a powerful tool to bind locals altogether around a political project. In

this case, the leftist ideology embraced by the PYD fully encompassed that event and made it a historical landmark in its broader narrative. I will later expand on the effect of such a discourse on the rebel-civilian relations.

Justification of the Case

My approach in the case selection process was theory-centred. The initial statement was about the effects of international support on the extent rebels engage in local governance in and beyond the territory under their control. The case of PYD governance in Rojava appeared highly relevant on that matter. The shifting international support impersonated by the changes in behaviour from the US allows to assess how the PYD engages both when international support occurs and when it does not. Even though I do not claim the case of Rojava to be a near-experimental setting, it appears as providing both the independent variable and the relative absence of it; as well as numerous other context- and history-bounded dimensions.

Generalisation

The inferences drawn from such a case study on Rojava show leads for generalisation. Rebel groups engaging on different levels to generate legitimacy and/or support while holding a territory are not only visible in Northern Syria. However, one could describe the Rojava governance as an outlying case and that rises questions regarding the generalisation of the findings. Indeed, the modes of governance, the ambivalent international support and the ideology in such settings are rarely found in other rebel-held territories.

Further, the issue of generalisability is a common flaw to the case study research design (Rohlfing, 2012). That is the reason why I will claim a more specific type of generalisation, an analytical approach rather than a frequency-based one. Quantitative studies use data and statistic in order to claim their results can apply to a multiplicity of similar settings. Qualitative study such as the one I carry here uses data which is insufficient in numbers and too diverse in kind and therefore cannot make use of statistical tools. Henceforth, analytical generalisation takes on and provides external validity to single-case study results. Such approach refers to what is brought to the theory rather than the cases. More accurately, the findings give support to the theoretical framework used to build the analysis, which then allows to generalise it to other similar cases (Yin, 2002).

Through the case study I will carry in the present work, I intend to support either one of the aforementioned dynamics, or both. Being the rational actor approach or the constructivist and more recent take, by gaining more strength it will be generalized to more cases. Even though these similar settings will be surely different on numerous points as case studies allow for such depth, a strong analytical generalisation will allow to overcome those issues and build a relevant theoretical framework of rebel-civilian relations in relation to international support.

Chapter 3: The Case of Rojava

In the present section, I will present a case study focusing on the case of Rojava (interchangeably referred as Northern Syria) and its governance by the PYD and its extended branches. Drawing on the theoretical framework established in the first chapter, and following the method explained in the second chapter, I intend to tie back the empirics of such occurrence of rebel governance to the hypothesis I formulated. I expect to see the involvement of the PYD in local governing activities improve from the moment the United States started to support their struggle. That would be motivated by an increase in the means the insurgents could employ, financially or practically. I strive to uncover other complementary factor regarding that effect.

To demonstrate that causal inference, the present chapter will be divided chronologically. In a first part, I will provide a quick historical background of the Kurdish struggle since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, also referencing the experiences of autonomy for Kurds in neighbouring countries. In a second portion, I will extend on the PYD rise to power, its goals in terms of local governance, their extent and their incidence regarding the insurgents' local legitimacy; but also their limits. In a third piece I will focus on how those goals and their empirical reality evolved after the US started to support the PYD/YPG. The US withdrew their involvement from the Syrian quagmire, and therefore their effective support to the Kurds in Rojava, in 2019 and not a lot of academic work nor field reports have been published since then. I will therefore stop the analysis at this time point.

The (recent) Kurdish History and the Iraqi experience (1920-2011)

The Kurds are often referred as the biggest people without a nation (Frerks & al., 2016). Spread across four states, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, they share a common culture, similar languages, and a strive for independence or autonomy.

In the aftermath of the First World War, victorious nations divided the collapsed Ottoman Empire. In the treaty of Sèvres from 1920, a Kurdish state was mentioned, but the enforced treaty of Lausanne from 1923 divided the people over the four nation-states. (Roussel, 2014). The first modern occurrence of a will for independence among the Kurds was witnessed in Iran. An uprising led to the short-lived Mahabad Republic, a *de facto* autonomous Kurdish entity that

was repressed in blood when the Islamic Republic stabilized and strengthened enough (Gunter, 2014, p. 50).

I insist the Kurds are not a homogenous people but more of a patchwork of sub-groups sharing common characteristics under the umbrella term of Kurd (Roussel, 2014). That difference can be seen in languages, Kurds from Syria, Turkey and Armenia speak Kurmanji while the ones from Iraq and Iran speak Sorani. Each of these languages are themselves divided in several regional dialects. That can lead to confusion and downturn a trans-national Kurdish unity. For instance, most cultural products in Kurdish are from Iraqi Kurdistan, where the autonomy was reached earlier than in Syria, therefore these films and books are in Sorani. After the *de facto* autonomy of Rojava, intellectuals and policy-makers had to create their own products in Kurmanji and could not just use the materials from across the border. This had implications on the development of public education under the Self-Administration in Northern Syria, no schoolbooks could be imported and the Kurds from Syria had to develop and print their own (Schmidinger, 2018, pp. 196-205). With that example I intend to demonstrate the heterogeneity of the Kurdish people and how it can affect governance practices, being in Rojava or in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In this case study, I will refer extensively to Iraqi Kurdistan. As a matter of comparison, that bordering autonomous territory is displaying another type of rebel governance, policies, and ideologies. This can be considered as a mirror of the empirics in Rojava. Following decades of guerrilla fighting from the Qandil Mountains in the North, Kurds of Iraq could ally with the US during the first and the second Gulf War (Roussel, 2014). That led them to control an important part of the Iraqi sovereign territory, but also to seize oil and gas resources in Kurdish inhabited areas. The Iraqi Constitution recognized their autonomy in 2005 and since then the zone is led by the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) and its leader, Masud Barzani (*Ibid*). That party follows a traditionalist right-wing ideology, opposite to the one of the PKK and the PYD, and it secured an alliance with Erdogan's Turkey (*Ibid*).

The Kurds in both countries suffered repression from the autocratic leader of the country in the form of aggressive Arabisation policies (Schmidinger, 2018; Roussel, 2014). The US support and the war-induced instability led to a power vacuum in the areas inhabited by a majority of Kurds. An armed political party seized effective control, developed a non-aggression tacit relation with the central state and started to engage in governance practices (Schievels & Colley,

2021). But the nationalistic ideology of the KDP and its "tribal-hierarchical" (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016) organisation of the society is where the paths split. As a result, the so-called Barzanis (followers of the KDP and its leader) are at odds with the PYD and that resulted in tensions at the border between the two autonomous Kurdish zones (Schmidinger, 2018). A direct consequence of that division among Kurds displayed in an embargo on Rojava, initially put in place by Turkey but also enforced by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the political entity governing the Iraqi Kurdistan (*Ibid*). That led to supply difficulties for imported goods in Rojava, which itself influenced rebel governance in the area (*Ibid*).

Kurds from Syria and the Syrian Revolution (2011-2014)

In Syria, Kurds represent a minority of 12% of the population. That is a smaller proportion than in neighbouring countries, they go up to 25% in Iraq (Roussel, 2014). Before the revolution, there was also a lack of a common narrative, unlike the Mahabad Republic in Iran, or the various crushed uprising in Turkey. As elsewhere, Kurds in Syria suffered repressive policies. The Ba'athist regime ruling over Syria since 1963 actively marginalized the North of the country through mono-cultures agricultural policy and a purely extractive use of resources (Schmidinger, 2018). It kept transformative industries in the South, petrol could not be converted into fuel locally and grains were not processed where they grew (*Ibid*). That led to a situation of poverty and dependence to the central state for the Kurds of Syria (*Ibid*).

More than economical marginalisation, the Assad regime also enforced Arabisation policies (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). Kurdish families were removed from their houses and deprived of their possessions to the benefit of displaced Arab families (*Ibid*). Agriculture and housing land belonged to Arabs or to the regime, in no occurrence to the Kurds (*Ibid*). They did try to resist that state-organised oppression, the most notable instances was the episode of revolts in Qamishlo in 2004 which were followed by bloody repression from the regime (Schmidinger, 2018).

In this overall situation of subordination, the so-called Arab-spring took place in the early 2010's. Syria was hit by the wave as well, a decade-long civil war started in 2011 that would involve most powers in the world and several insurgent groups from various ideological background. Among them, the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, or Democratic Union Party), formed in 2003 as a sister-organisation of the Turkish PKK (Kurdish Workers Party). Since its creation, the autonomy from the former to the latter has always been a blind-spot for the analysts

and the scholars (International Crisis Group, 2013). Following the announced withdrawal of regime forces from the North of Syria, several PKK cadres with peshmerga fighters (experienced guerrilla soldiers) hiding in the Qandil mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan came to the area (Frederici, 2015).

From 2012 onward, the PYD and its armed branches, the YPG (People Defence Units) and the YPJ (Women Defence Units), were effectively in control of the area (*Ibid*). They only faced opposition from other Kurdish parties grouped under the umbrella organisation of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) (Frerks & al., 2016). The PYD remained out of that alliance, arguing it was following a more nationalistic agenda steered by the Barzanis (*Ibid*). The PYD proclaimed the autonomy of Rojava (literally meaning "West" in Kurdish, referring to Western Kurdistan) in November 2013 (Schmidinger, 2018).

Local Governance

The PYD local governance during that timeframe is mostly visible through its institution-building achievements. A police force was created, the Asayîs, and was meant to report directly to democratically elected bodies such as neighbourhood committee (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). These committees are the basis of the democratic system planned by Öcalan and the PKK and effectively crafted by the PYD. Working committees would go from the neighbourhood or village level to cities or rural areas level, until the canton level (*Ibid*). Each position is a co-chair with one man and one woman, both elected. The communalist ideology embraced by the Rojava administration emphasize the importance of gender dynamics in their social and political model, each committee had a parallel one solely composed of women (*Ibid*). All of these committees are dealing with low-level justice and they manage the economy of the region. Land and resources from the regime were put under their management and they are responsible for the supply of food and energy to the population and to fighters (*Ibid*).

Three cantons were proclaimed in January 2014 by the Rojava Administration (Schmidinger, 2018), Afrin in the West, Kobanê on the centre, and Cizîrê in the East (*Cf. Fig. 3*). Each of them displaying these democratically elected committees supposed to be the bearer of political power in Rojava (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). As they steer the economy, and are supposed to hold accountable armed forces, being linked to the YPG or not, in the region, the power of the PYD was supposed to decline in favour of those elected bodies (Frederici, 2015). After postponing elections from 2014 until 2017 (except for municipalities in 2015), a seemingly democratic

process finally took place (Schmidinger, 2018). All along, such attempts were boycotted by the KNC, expressing their dissent with the PYD alleged authoritarianism (*Ibid*).
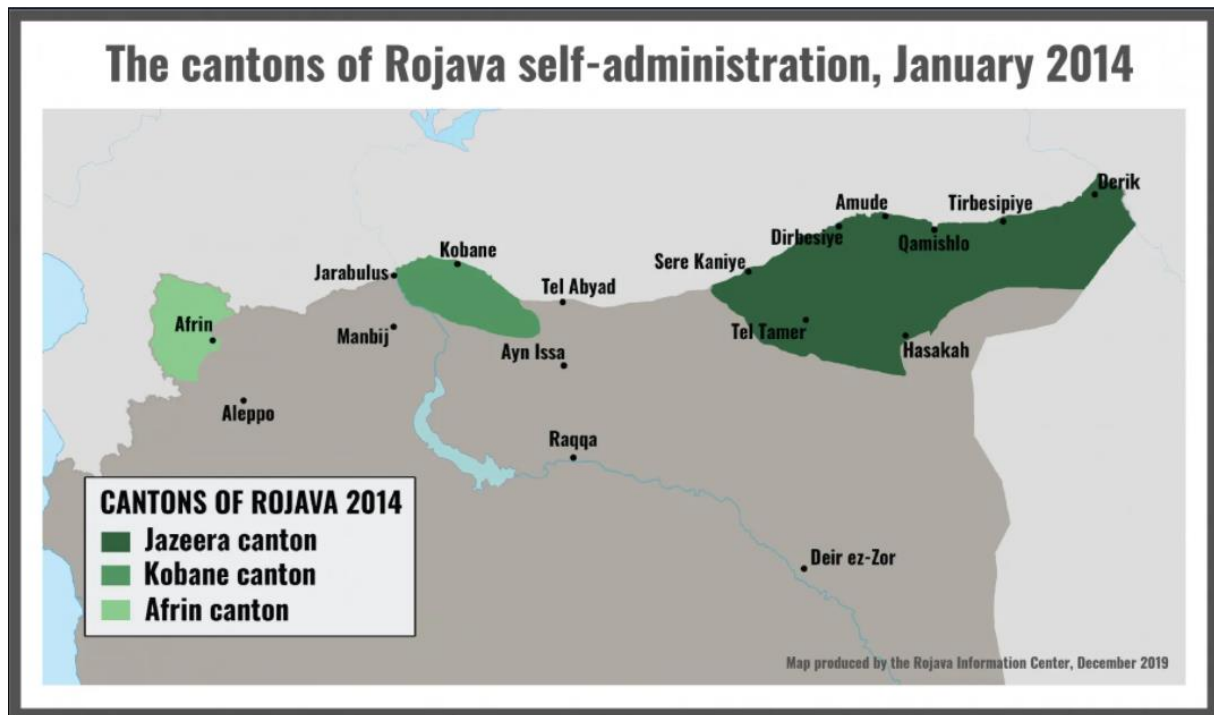

Figure 3: The three cantons of Rojava in January 2014 (note: city and region labels vary between Kurdish and Arabic)

That puts in the question, from the very beginning of the *de facto* autonomy of Rojava, of who is really in charge of governance. Even though the PYD claimed to transfer the political power over the region from their organisation to those numerous committees, there were already several elements hinting the opposite. Especially regarding the accountability of the YPG and the Asayîs (Frerks & al., 2016). What is certain, for the timeframe of the present section, is that those institutions were put in place by the PYD and therefore can be considered as an extensive involvement of the rebels in governance practices. That is, before the US started to provide them support.

Rebel-civilian relations

Several cases of political repressions were witnessed in Rojava, perpetrated by the PYD, the YPG and the Asayîs against militants and members of opposition parties (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In Amûdê, the YPG reportedly shot in the crowd to disperse an anti-PYD protest (Schmidinger, 2018). Also, the YPG and the PYD outlawed several anti-Assad demonstrations, which already hints the ambivalent relation they kept with the regime (Schievels & Colley,

2021). There have also been instances of child soldiers in the YPG ranks or at border checkpoints operated by the Asayîs (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Although I must precise it did not appear as forced enrolment, minors were teenagers around 14 or 16 years old and the parents talked more about "brainwashing" the youth in the overall excitement of the revolution than coercion or kidnapping[3] (Schmidinger, 2018). Conscription started to appear for Kurds to enrol in the Asayîs or the YPG but it was easy for citizens to refuse to take part in it, sometimes by bribing them or simply declining the soldiers knocking on the door (al-Jabassini, 2017).

Despite their repression, their ties to the formerly oppressing regime, and several Human Rights violations, the PYD enjoyed high levels of popular support from the beginning (Schmidinger, 2018). The few elections carried provided high rates for the party, which remains a significant element despite the boycott from some other parties (*Ibid*). Civilians enrolled in the Asayîs, the YPG and the YPJ (Frerks & al., 2016). Several inhabitants of the region, being Kurdish, Arabs, or Assyrians, expressed gratefulness to the PYD for keeping the Syrian civil war out of the area (Schmidinger, 2018). Due to various quotas, the PYD designed the new-born Rojava institutions as inclusive on ethnic matter (Frerks & al., 2016), and the population appeared as highly supportive of that take (Schmidinger, 2018). Unlike the KNC which was advocating for deportation of Arabs settled during the Arabisation policy from Assad (*Ibid*).

As I foresaw in the previous chapters, the local population of Northern Syria had extensive contacts with the insurgents. Rebel-civilian relations constitute a fruitful concept to address the research question of the present work. I argue here that the locals were supporting the PYD before the US support started.

Limits

Assad pulled most of his military out of the North in 2011 (Frederici, 2015). I insist here on the fact that his regime, his bureaucracy, and even some of his armed forces never fully disappeared from the zone (Schmidinger, 2018). For instance, in Qamishlo, the Arab neighbourhoods were still under regime control in 2013 and 2014 (*Ibid*). In governance practices, that remaining grasp of the regime over the region can be seen in the continuity of its administration. Teachers were still paid long after the official departure of the regime and even under the PYD effective control

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[3] I directly refer here to a set of interviews carried in Rojava by Thomas Schmidinger in 2013 and 2014. Several parents of minors engaged alongside Kurdish fighters give a similar opinion on the recruitment methods. Cf. (Schmidinger, 2018)

(*Ibid*). The insurgents explicitly stated they could not pay them, Kurdish lessons even had to be given unpaid (*Ibid*).

That is the first limit to the local governance of the PYD, they could never seize a total power over administrations in North-East Syria. And that was not due to a lack of military might but to a lack of tangible resources. That form of limitation will have direct consequences on the PYD local governance and legitimacy, notably regarding conscription (al-Jabassini, 2017). That latter point will be discussed further.

Local legitimacy

When in power, the PYD received full control of economic assets such as oil and agriculture without much resistance, leaving private owners to handle their land and only asking for a tax (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). Kurdish citizens, but also Assyrians and Arabs joined the ranks of the Asayîs and the YPG or merged their own organisations into them (Schmidinger, 2018). That is a proof of trust and legitimacy as rulers of the area. Despite the violence in Amûdê, the PYD allowed several mobilisations against them which exemplifies confidence in their popular support (*Ibid*). The unspoken alliance of Assad and the PYD, later proved by regime documents (Schievels & Colley, 2021), were known among the population but tolerated (al-Jabassini, 2017). It appeared civilians did not consider that fact as overbalancing the positive outcomes of PYD governance over Rojava (*Ibid*).

In 2014, Islamist groups became mightier and started to push their offensive up North, reaching Kobanê in late 2014. Al-Nusra, one of al-Qaida heir, and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, abbreviated IS or ISIS, became an imminent threat for the existence of Rojava (Frederici, 2015). During the siege of Kobanê, the YPG and other allied armed forces lost ground and were deemed to lose the city militarily. At this moment, the US started to provide them with extensive military materiel and supported their fight through airstrikes (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016).

The city was recaptured and became a symbol in the Kurdish struggle, seized by the PYD/YPG as a founding moment for the autonomous claim in the region (Frederici, 2015). The siege of Kobanê and its martyrs became a central part of the PYD narrative, and a propagandistic communication revolved around it increasingly (*Ibid*). I argue that use of such event relies heavily on the symbolic dimension of PYD local governance. Among displaying a Rojava flag

and spreading chants glorifying fallen rebel fighters, the siege of Kobanê became a common history for all Syrian Kurds to rely to. I also assert that such a strong and powerful shared narrative, by tightening the members of a community, further strengthened the local legitimacy of the PYD. Many locals before the siege defended any actions of the PYD/YPG by claiming it kept the Islamists out of Northern Syria (Schmidinger, 2018), they now had a tangible proof of it.

To an extent, I argue that the PYD acquired a form of traditional legitimacy as I referred to in the chapter 2. Drawing on Weber's approach to legitimacy, one form would result in positioning oneself as a legitimate ruler from the history, the culture, the traditions of the community and/or the area. In this case, the PYD by portraying itself as guardians and saviours of North Syria, Rojava, the Kurds, might have reached such type of local legitimacy in 2014 and 2015. The local legitimacy of the PYD was strong and that is also proven by the rapid decline of the support towards the KNC (Schmidinger, 2018). Even though the Kurdish-nationalist movement suffered a certain level of political repression, I argue the population was genuinely supporting the PYD at this timepoint.

The US support and the expansion of Rojava (2015-2019)

External support

Following the siege of Kobanê, the YPG became an official ally in the US-led war against Islamism in the Middle East (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). Washington provided them with numerous weapons which they were lacking before (*Ibid*). In an interview from 2014, Salih Muslim, a high cadre in the PYD and former prime minister of the canton of Cizîrê, declared the arms were provided by the black market and paid by the organisation out of local resources (Schmidinger, 2018).

In their advance against IS and al-Nusra, the Kurds and their allies from the North could also rely on heavy airstrikes from the US Airforce (Schmidinger, 2018). Alongside those various forms of military support, the US sent 300 special forces soldiers on the ground to better train new fighters (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016; Frerks & al., 2016). The policy of the US proved itself effective in regard of its goals, IS lost its territorial ground in the following years and al-Nusra became less of a threat. The Syrian regime did not take back control of the North as it initially wanted; the US and its coalition were still aiming to oust Assad in these times (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016).

Except from the special forces, the US did not deploy troops on the field. These elite soldiers were meant to train the YPG and its allied armed groups and not to primarily engage in overt fighting. Therefore, the involvement of Washington alongside the Kurds was a heavy military support but at no point an intervention.

An important element of the US support to the PYD is that it remained purely military. The US department of state refused several times to support projects of federalism or of autonomy in Northern Syria (U.S. Department of State, 2016). It appears Washington only saw the fighters in the rebels, strictly referring to the YPG and rarely to the PYD (*Ibid*). However, the PYD was the political leadership of the YPG from the beginning. Hence, I consider the US support as going to the whole apparatus, led by the PYD, rather than just being received by the YPG. Although conceding that the armed group should engage in local governance to an extent to manage the population during the war against Islamist groups, Washington never supported officially any project in this realm (*Ibid*). For that reason, the PYD could only enjoy material benefits from its international patron, namely weapons, training, and funds.

That ambivalent position taken by the US can be explained by the complicated balance they are trying to keep in their diplomacy in the Middle-East. As the War on Terror was expanding to Syria, the US were mainly aiming at defeating the Islamist groups on this territory. The Kurds, especially the YPG and later the SDF, proved to be reliable and effective allies. That is self-proven by their victory over al-Nusra and ISIS. However, by militarily supporting these groups, a political dimension could not be ignored. Especially regarding their position towards Turkey, which was strongly opposing the alliance (BBC, 2017). Washington had to find a balance between efficacy on the ground and friendly relations with regional powers. I here argue it may be for that reason why the US never supported projects of confederation or autonomy in Northern Syria.

Regarding the academic puzzle the present work addresses, the independent variable of external support fits the empirics of the case study. The US were less involved as in an intervention, but still their assistance did shift the balance in terms of territorial gains for the PYD. Further in that direction, I will hereafter assess the evolution of PYD governance during the period it enjoyed such assistance.

Local governance

The territory of Rojava expanded considerably south and reached its territorial peak in that period (Schmidinger, 2018). The administration was divided in 3 regions, for a total of 7 cantons (*Cf. Fig. 4*), by far outreaching Kurds-populated areas, encompassing Arab-majority regions (*Cf. Fig. 5*) (*Ibid*). But that rapid growth came with several challenges to the Self-Administration in terms of governance, and it soon called for a restructuring of the bureaucracy.

In March 2016, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) was proclaimed by the PYD and delegations from other communities including Arabs, Assyrians and other minorities (al-Jabassini, 2017). The PYD accepted to withdraw the term Rojava from the final name of the confederation to promote its inclusiveness of non-Kurdish populations in the administration (Schmidinger, 2018). Elections, promised since 2014, occurred in 2017 and provided a majority of political power to the PYD and its allies (*Ibid*). Again, the KNC boycotted the democratic process (*Ibid*).
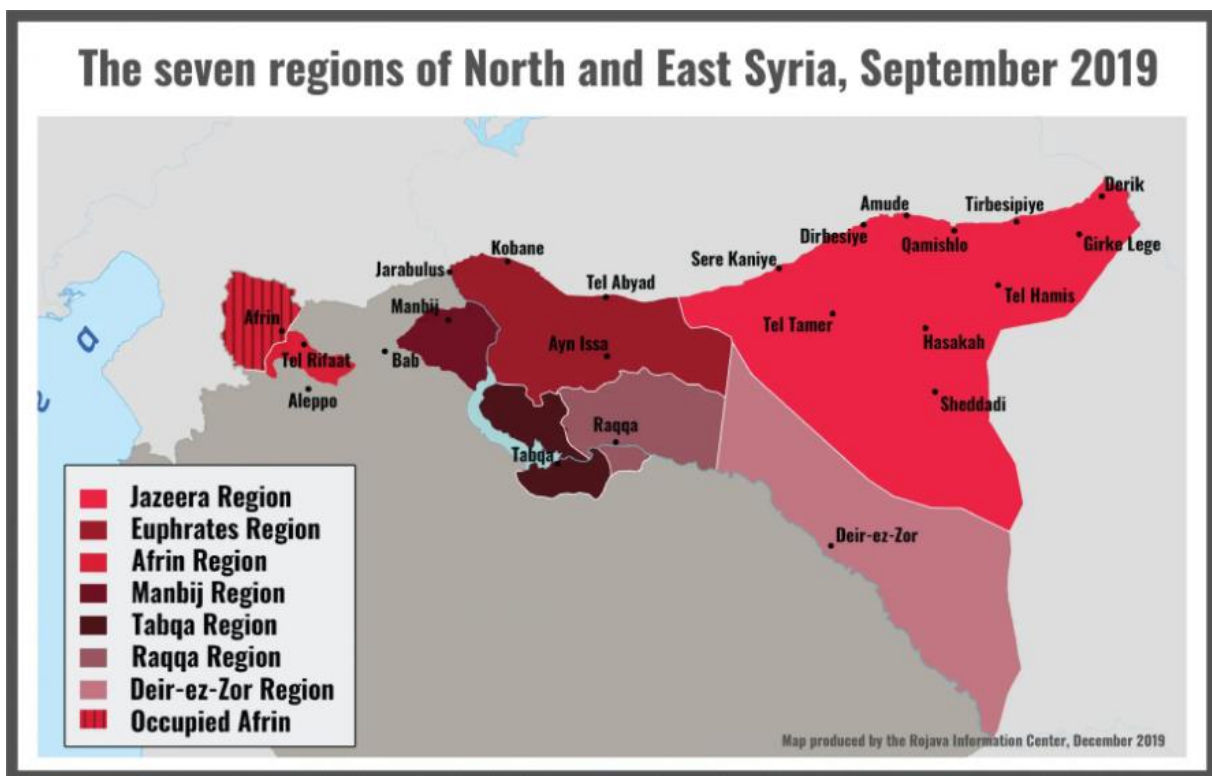

Figure 4: Layout of the DFNS territory in 2019

The PYD-led coalition obtained effective power over the area and I will therefore continue to treat it as rebel governance. That coalition took the name of Movement for a Democratic Society, abbreviated Tev-Dem, and became the official political ruler of the DFNS (Cemgil &

Hoffmann, 2016). However, several occurrences of Human Rights violations perpetrated by the Asayîs and the YPG, obviously overriding the political accountability of the Tev-Dem, hint a remaining PYD control over the armed forces in the area (Frerks & al., 2016; al-Jabassini, 2017; Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016).

Under the impulse of the US, the web of armed groups more or less allied in Northern Syria came together under a YPG-led umbrella organisation labelled Syria Democratic Forces (SDF) to include more Arab and Assyrian groups into the struggle against radical religious groups (Schmidinger, 2018). Overall, during the period the DFNS enjoyed support from the US, I argue that the power of the PYD and its armed branches strengthened over the political landscape but also over the population. From that time on, the DFNS started to be considered by scholars as a *de facto* state and the governance displayed by the PYD is not anymore of a war-time type but the one of a para-state (Cemgil, 2019), or *de facto* state. Nonetheless, that can be challenged by a remaining influence of Assad regime over the region through income paying (as mentioned in the previous section) and loyalist military forces fighting side by side with the SDF (Schievels & Colley, 2021). That challenged the Tev-Dem and the SDF monopoly over the use of violence in their alleged controlled territory.
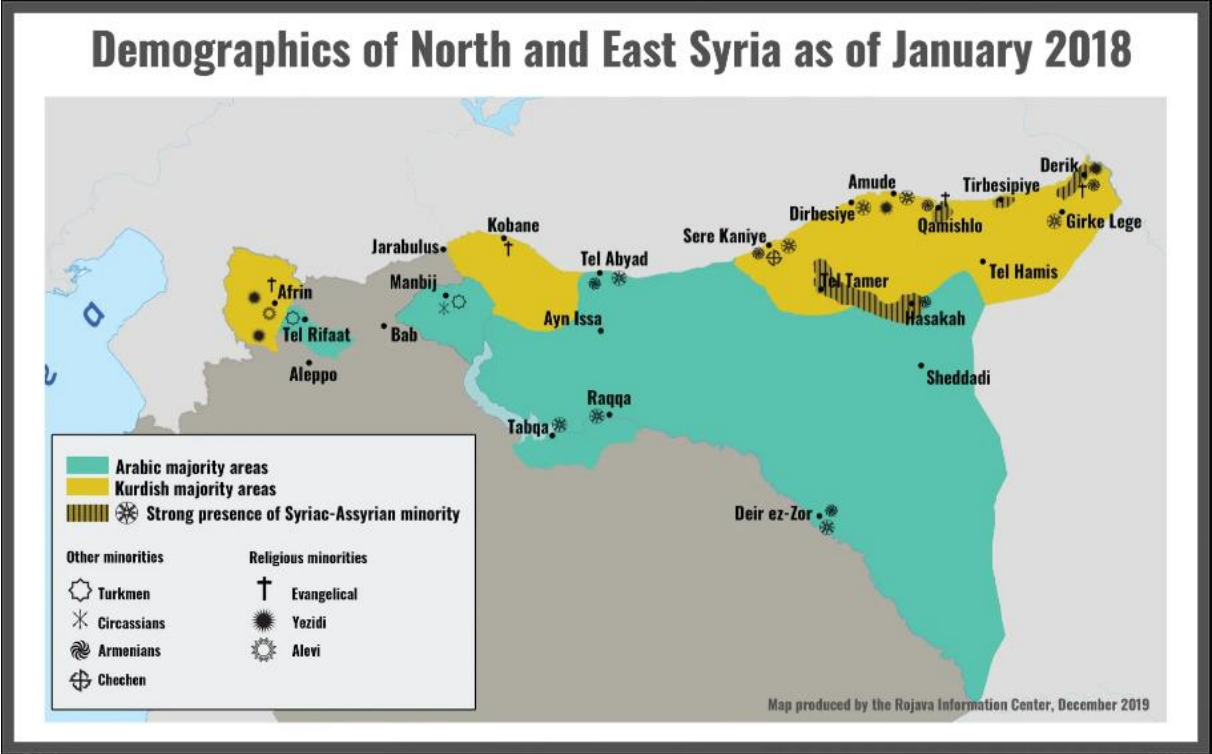

Figure 5: Demographics in the DFNS territory (in Yellow and Blue) in 2018

From this present section, I argue the governance displayed by the PYD evolved following the US support. As foresaw, the increase in means due to the external assistance allowed the insurgents to involve themselves more in local governance. That statement is supported by the extended deed of institution-building, administrative layout and democratic processes. Even though Rojava, and the subsequent DFNS, remained a *de facto* state (or para-state), the governance displayed by the Self-Administration undoubtedly increased after the US support commenced.

Rebel-civilian relations

Following the US support, I argue the relations between the PYD, its many branches, and allied groups, with the local population strongly degraded. First, political repression continued, mostly exemplified with the deportation of the KNC leader to Iraqi Kurdistan by the Asayîs on the order of the PYD in August 2016 (Frerks & al., 2016). Second, a conscription law was passed in July 2014, labelled the Self-Defence Duty (SDD), drafting one male member per family aged 18-30 years old (al-Jabassini, 2017). The Asayîs was tracking the deserters, using their control over border checkpoints, and was coercively bringing them to training camps (*Ibid*). In December 2016, the DFNS proclaimed a Social Contract of the Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria, a sort of constitution that amended the SDD and went further with coercive conscription (*Ibid*).

In the meantime, the Asayîs, the YPG and YPJ were again exposed for using underage fighters (KurdsWatch, 2015). They signed a Geneva call to stop doing so but in practice it did not evolve much (al-Jabassini, 2017). The PYD and its armed branches became increasingly criticized among the population for this reliance on minors and coerced conscription (*Ibid*). That led to the first instances of meaningful civilian resistance in the DFNS. Non-violent signs of dissent with the political directions of the Administration appeared. The most notable instance was the rise of the Kurdish National flag (*Fig. 6* in the Appendix), used in Iraqi Kurdistan, different from the one in Rojava (*Fig. 7* in the Appendix), and forbidden by the Tev-Dem (*Ibid*). Also massive protests took place both in Kurdish and non-Kurdish areas (*Ibid*).

That handling of the population at broad appears very different than during the pre-US support period of time. The PYD/YPG always appeared as fierce armed groups with a clear ideological line and an explicit use of violence, but their relations with the population was one of their

pillars, the local legitimacy allowed them to master the area with very few oppositions and to strengthen its ranks with more local soldiers.

In November 2016, the SDF declared the operation Wrath of Euphrates to expand south the frontline against IS, aiming at the Islamists' capital of Raqqa (Schmidinger, 2018). While capturing several towns they were supported by heavy airstrikes from the US, but that resulted in several occurrences of civilian casualties (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

More inside the DFNS territory, the Tev-Dem administration came under heavy critics for its management of war prisoners and justice (Schmidinger, 2018). Human Rights Watch witnessed several violations regarding detention rights of local and foreign inmates for alleged links to IS or other similar groups (Human Rights Watch , 2020). Images of overcrowded rooms with dozens of men lying side by side on the ground were displayed on the media worldwide in the late 2010's. The NGO also heavily criticized the justice system of in the DFNS for its slow pace and overall inefficacy (*Ibid*).

These elements of population abuses constitute a clear rupture with rebel-civilian PYD relations before the US support. I recognize that these elements clearly hint to the older trend in the academia, rationally the Kurds could have turned their backs to the local population as their new ally, the US, provides more resources for less involvement. However, I do not claim here that external help to the insurgents directly reduced their care of civilians. There could be intermediary variables such as the loss of agency from the PYD, the over-stretching of its administration in non-Kurdish land, and the focus on military victory rather than local governance pressured by the international patron. I will further expand on these concerns in the next chapter.

Local legitimacy

Where the PYD was welcomed as stabilizers in the region, civilians started to oppose their policy. Drifting away from a discourse of scarcity of resources and democratic management of them, the empirics started to display occurrences of blackmailing (al-Jabassini, 2017). Families refusing to provide one of their male members to the SDF were deprived of social goods provision, knowing how precarious the situation of inhabitants was, to force them to comply (*Ibid*). Civilians, including numerous Kurds, started to flee the area to Turkey, also as a manner

to protest against the Tev-Dem (*Ibid*). That hints a clearcut drop in local legitimacy enjoyed by the rebels.

The PYD governance, mainly going through the Tev-Dem, changed after the beginning of the US support in an important manner. To an extent it increased, the administration reached more layers of the social fabric and enjoyed more means to do so (Frerks & al., 2016; Schmidinger, 2018). Following their democratic victory, the rebels were supposed to reach a form of legitimacy closer to one of a state. They also enjoyed a tacit recognition (and very limited) from the West through their support.

Contrastingly, it appears that they lost a lot of local legitimacy. The population expressed their dissent with the organisation through several means that even reached international spheres (al-Jabassini, 2017). As aforementioned, occurrences of civilian resistance to rebel rule were made visible across North Syria during that time period (Schmidinger, 2018).

Chapter 4: Case Study Results

This chapter will be dedicated to bringing the theoretical framework and the case study together. I intend to link the findings of the case study to the research question, using the methodology presented earlier.

Main Themes

External support

The support granted by the US to the PYD/YPG does fit the theoretical framework I assessed earlier. I argue this very insurgent group was chosen by Washington among many others in the area because it was the strongest, the most homogenous (around the Kurdish ethnicity), and the most structured. That links back to the arguments of Salehyan, Gleditsch and Cunningham (2011). The supplier of support (the US) must have feared a loss of agency in the way the Islamists were fought and therefore chose what appeared as the most reliable actor to support.

As the empirics did show in the case study, receiving external support comes at a cost for the insurgents. The PYD/YPG, and later the Tev-Dem / SDF, lost a lot of agency in their fight against the Islamist groups. The US did steer a lot of their military campaign. These are the risks of accepting foreign support for insurgents (Salehyan, Gleditsch, & Cunningham, 2011), alongside a loss in local legitimacy (Byman & Kreps, 2010).

Governance

I here tie back the theoretical background on governance (Kasfir, 2015; Huang & Sullivan, 2021; Florea, 2020) and argue that governance occurred before and during the US support period to the PYD. Following the scope conditions established by Nelson Kasfir, the PYD do have the monopoly on violence over the Rojava and later the DFNS (Kasfir, 2015). Even though through the YPG and the Asayîs, and later through the leadership of the Tev-Dem, the rebels kept the control over the population in Northern Syria from the beginning of their expansion. Even though some regime forces remained in the Arab neighbourhoods, I assess the insurgents had effective and coercive control of the zone. That is a fundamental condition of governance that is met.

The PYD engaged deeply in institution-building, but even further in state-building with border controls, an anthem, and a pursuit of international recognition. That meets the concept of rebel

governance as competitive state-building from Kalyvas (2006). I also argue the tacit alliance between the PYD and the Assad regime fits the concept of delegated state-hood to rebel groups when the central state cannot reach and govern a region (Kalyvas, 2006).

From the moment the PYD seized power in Northern Syria, it engaged in governance activities. Provisions of social goods such as education and security were evidently visible, but also the whole deed of institution-building that could be witnessed especially in the early days of Rojava. I suppose no rebel group intending to solely exploit a local population would allocate time and means to shape a police force and a democratic system autonomous (to an extent) from them. Drawing on the literature review I established earlier, I argue the PYD control over Northern Syria has always been a *rebelocracy* (Arjona, 2015).

Rebel-civilian relations

I will then move onto the concept of rebel-civilian relations. A rebel group ruling over a territory, even in a purely extracting approach to the population, will always have relations with the locals (Arjona, 2015; Mampilly, 2015). In our case, the rebels did engage in extensive governance with this population, so the relations with the population were present and visible at any time.

I argue a change occurred before and during the US-support to the PYD. Until the siege of Kobanê, the population considered the PYD and its armed branches as the only alternative to the rule of Islamist groups such as al-Nusra or IS. Neighbouring areas were under control of such factions and were providing a close proof that the Kurdish insurgents were a safer bet for the North-East Syrian population. That seems to confirm a rational thought of "choosing the lesser evil" as referred in Weinstein (2006).These locals seemed to allow the PYD a wide leeway in its actions, shutting their eyes on the tacit alliance with the Assad regime, on the political repression suffered by the KNC supporter, and on a nascent Human Rights violation habit.

More than looking the other way, numerous local Kurds joined the ranks of the Asayîs, the YPG and the YPJ; Assyrian and Arab allied armed group started to blend in these branches. The population agreed with the rules imposed by the PYD and engaged in their struggle personally or through symbols such as chants and flag, I found here what is referred in the literature as normative compliance and symbolic compliance (Mampilly, 2015).

It appeared a consequent turn in rebel-civilian relations occurred after the PYD received the support of the US and gained control over territories beyond former Rojava. As mentioned in the case study, the PYD already suffered a symbolic issue with the remain of Assad troops in Northern Syria and the continuity of the regime governance practices (such as paying teachers' salaries). It also endured a practical issue of supply provision to the population. Even though the US backing of the PYD provided them weapons and skills to push back Islamist groups, these governance-linked issues did not disappear.

To an extent, the support of the US can be identified as one reason for such a change. The PYD lost a lot of agency in its fight against the Islamist and I question the will of the rebels to extend their territory beyond the Kurdish populated areas of Northern Syria. Their territory expanded consequently in a rapid manner, encompassing Arab majority areas further down South (such as Raqqa), and this undoubtedly created important challenges for governance in such context. As an instance I will refer to the strong influx of war prisoners from Islamist groups, mainly foreigners, that arrived in Kurdish-administered prisons. Images of overcrowded rooms were displayed worldwide, but the DFNS administration did not have the tangible means to address such pressing issue.

Drowning in its own expansion, the PYD seems to have overlooked its relationship with the local population. Political repression continued, conscription became coercive and multiple occurrences of civilian resistance to rebel rule could be witnessed. As explained in the theoretical chapter, it need not be confrontational to be a resistance phenomenon (Arjona, 2015). In this case study, I could identify several non-violent resistance practices, for instance hoisting the national Kurdish flag, and departing the area to Turkey or Assad-controlled parts of Syria. But even after the relations with the population degraded, civil resistance remained mostly partial as civilians contested policies more than the very rule of the PYD. That can be explained by the lack of pre-existing performing institutions to compare with (*Ibid*).

Legitimacy

Finally, I will address matters of local legitimacy. From the case study, I can tie back the local legitimacy enjoyed by the PYD to the theoretical framework of the present work. As explained through the Weberian approach on legitimacy, a violent group such as the PYD/YPG could not enjoy legal legitimacy as they seized power through coercion. However, I argue that they did

not fully lack legal legitimacy as their work of institution-building offered them a *de facto* state image.

To achieve a form of traditional legitimacy, the insurgents had to craft their myths around event such as the siege of Kobanê and the worship of martyrs. That take on traditional legitimacy remains less solid than when it is based on older customs or on religion. As of the charismatic legitimacy, it did not appear through the case study I carried in the present work that the PYD/YPG was relying on such approach. Apart from a personality cult around the leader Abdullah Öcalan solely endorsed by the soldiers, it did not appear that such propaganda was directed towards the population.

The PYD started to lose legitimacy due to the use of coercion only after it reached a *de facto* state. Displays of violence are tolerated for rebel groups in power but they are not for modern states (Duyvesteyn, 2017). By expanding too much and becoming a *de facto* state, the PYD might have lost a kind of tolerance in regard to their use of coercion among the local population. The population was granting legitimacy to the PYD in times of war when the threat of ISIS was dangerously closed as it was the best rationale choice. That can be explained by the insurgents providing security and governance, the local population would rationally choose to ignore these issues (Weinstein, 2006).

Logically, the level of local legitimacy enjoyed by the PYD mirrored its relations with civilians. It appeared it consequently dropped after the US support began and the DFNS expanded. Regarding the matter of conscription, the topic can also be addressed as the PYD had to start coercing men into joining their ranks, which they might not have to before. Locals joined the Asayîs and the YPG/YPJ in important numbers during the first years of Rojava. As the direct threat of Islamist groups became weaker, they might have stopped from joining the military branches. The Tev-Dem in charge would have been forced by this phenomenon to enforce conscription.

As mentioned earlier, the PYD local governance increased in reach but not in performance. Indeed, as rebel governance was expected to be a mean of local legitimisation, that very fact defeats a part of the theoretical framework built earlier. In this case, an increase in governance did not result in an increase in legitimacy, rather the opposite. That might hint to a flaw in the manner rebel legitimation is conceptualized in the contemporary scientific literature.

Conclusion and reflections

Research Question

The inquiry leading the present work was the evolution of PYD local governance in Northern Syria from before onto during the US support. The relations with the local population and the levels of local legitimacy did change following the beginning of support. The governance itself changed in kind and in reach. I argue by extending the former three cantons of Rojava to what became the DFNS, by including armed groups and parties from other ethnicities, and by developing the administrative layout of the territory, rebel governance became more present over the area.

By going from a situation of civil war in which the PYD and the YPG were fighting among other rebel groups to a context of para-state, or *de facto* state (Cemgil, 2019), the governance practices displayed had to change as well. The monopoly over the use of violence seemed to be achieved as Assad troops could never take back control of Northern Syria. The PYD-led Tev-Dem in power in the DFNS could claim a state-like type of legitimacy, a normative one in a Weberian approach. As aforementioned, they could coerce locals more easily and they could outlaw competing party (for instance by deporting the KNC leader). That hints how deep the PYD-led government could penetrate the North-East Syria society.

From that take I could argue that the constructivist approach on rebel governance (Huang & Sullivan, 2021) is confirmed by the case. Enjoying the support from the US, the rebels could extend their reach in the society and carry more profound activities of governance. That is confirmed by the administrative reforms engaged in the DFNS transforming weak rebel institutions into a quasi-state bureaucracy. The democratic apparatus witnessed during the elections in the US-support period are hinting a transition in the display of governance. I could argue that the PYD became confident enough in its hold over the territory to give the choice of their ruler to the locals. From these facts, it seems the occurrence of external military support to a rebel group do increase the rebel governance involvement in the area.

Nonetheless, I ought to introduce a nuance to that result. As I presented in the previous section, the local legitimacy reduced after the support and the rebel-civilian relations degraded. That statement hints to a more traditional approach in the academia. Following the work of Weinstein, one explanation would be that the PYD did not need the support of the locals as

much as before. The rebels would enjoy sufficient resources from the US support to relegate their management of the population to a lower-interest matter, in a rational-actor approach. I argue the answer does not lie in such simple reading of the situation. As the coerced conscription hinted, the SDF still needed local manpower to strengthen their ranks. More, the US support appeared as solely military and targeted at defeating the Islamist threat in the Middle-East, which was proven by their withdrawal after the goal was soon-to-be achieved in 2019. As the Kurds were playing a dangerous game of alliances with the Assad regime and the US, they had no incentive to abandon the local population as it was their only reliable ally in this context.

However, the relations did weaken after the US support. Byman & Kreps (2010) argue that external support comes at a higher cost than expected for rebels regarding their local legitimacy. On one hand they can be considered as puppets of bigger interests and not on the people's side anymore. On the other hand, insurgent groups lose a lot of agency in their decision-making as they owe their successes (or part of them) to the international patrons (Byman & Kreps, 2010). In our case, these two dynamics are visible. The PYD went from a Kurdish autonomous claim to handling a far larger land than they supposedly aimed at. And it is possible that the locals of Northern Syria stopped to see the YPG as a shield against Islamist groups, but only an agent of foreign power and an ally to the oppressing Ba'athist regime. That was of undeniable harm to the PYD local legitimacy.

Overall, to answer the initial research question, I argue that the US support transformed the PYD governance. It did enhance it quantitatively, more occurrences of practices, more reach in the lives of the locals (similar to a state biopower[4]), more width in the range of practices with broad elections. And it did impoverish it in its initial goal of local legitimacy through degraded rebel-civilian relations. It appears that the external support changed the rebel rule structure and that structure then changed the local legitimacy and the relations with the population. That is a missing link in previous academic works. The US support transformed a guerrilla struggle into a *de facto* state, that inevitably had consequences on the way the population was handled and the legitimacy of the leadership.

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[4] I here refer to the Foucauldian concept of biopower, the state control over the population is reaching the very body of civilians (Foucault, 1977). In our case, effective conscription is an instance of biopower.

Implications and reflections

Even though the results of the present work do not fully hint in the direction of the newer trend in academia, I argue it pushes the literature further in that direction. It certainly departs from a radically rational-actor based take on rebel governance. Following Weinstein (2006), the PYD would have ceased involving itself in local governance and we could witness the exact opposite. However, the present work does not give full credit to the reasoning of Huang and Sullivan (2021) neither. The rebel-civilian relations between the PYD and the inhabitants of Northern Syria clearly degraded, just as the local legitimacy enjoyed by the insurgents; even though the rebels had the practical means to invest much more in these matters. That implies that the literature will have to extend its inquiries beyond the issue of the means the rebels involve in governance when experiencing external support and when not. I argue that academia will have to investigate first how that support transforms the rebels internally, as a structured group, and then their governance practices.

Regarding the method I used in the present work, I argue that the choice of a single-case study design proved itself genuine. Indeed, I could witness minor elements a quantitative analysis would have overseen, as I foresaw in the methodology chapter. For instance, operationalising the concept of civil resistance to rebel governance through the display of enemy flag (or at least forbidden by the authorities ruling). Indeed, I could not count the number of occurrences of such practice, but the very fact it was mentioned in the literature constitutes a fundamental piece in answering the research question. More, I argue that the answer to the research question I reached could not be achieved with a more systematic analysis. The ambivalent nature of such result was perfectly fitting an in-depth case study.

However, I encountered several limitations along the research process. An important flaw relating to the design was the lack of data addressing precisely what I was seeking. Using second-hand data from academic writings or ground reports from NGOs or International Organisations, the case study could not be as accurate as if it were carried directly on the ground. Also, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, the generalisation potential offered by a single case study differs from the one of a more quantitative design. That implies that the findings of my research cannot directly be applied to similar settings of rebel governance and external support. Rather, it brought a mitigated support to the more recent theories in the literature.

Prospects and future research

Regarding the case study, the recent events in Northern Syria beg for an update on the situation. Unfortunately, not enough scientific literature and ground reports were available for me to include the post-US withdrawal period in the present work. From what could be witnessed since 2019, the PYD appeared in decline regarding its grasp over the region. Ankara continues to pressure the Northern border after Turkish forces and backed armed groups took control of the Afrin canton in 2018. Regarding governance, few data could be exploited after 2019 but the Covid-19 crisis is expected to have hit the DFNS with full strength. International aid kept being seized by the Assad regime (openDemocracy, 2020) and I hypothesize that undermined further the already complicated Tev-Dem relations with civilians.

Beyond a sole issue of power and military might, the withdrawal of the US support to the SDF opened an era of uncertainty for the DFNS. As the Kurdish struggle is lacking tangible ally in the Middle-East, the Tev-Dem will have to find another international patron. On the ground, the Tev-Dem will need to create a new relation with the civilians, repairing the damage done during the US support period regarding its local legitimacy. All that in order to secure the territorial claims it reached. The very survival of the DFNS is on the balance, Turkey is fearing an autonomous zone allied to the PKK at its South border, and Assad is still aiming at recovering its lost territory. The Tev-Dem today can only rely on its first-days ally, the local population of Northern Syria.

The external US support transformed the landscape of the Kurdish struggle in Northern Syria. It changed the actors, therefore their actions and the consequences of these actions. I mentioned earlier how the governance itself was transformed by the external support, not only in its practices but also in its aims. For that reason, this case study begs for further work regarding the evolution of rebel-civilian relations and local legitimacy in such transformations of context. I assert that the legitimation strategies of a nation-state, and its relations with civilians, are clearly different than the ones of a rebel group. In the case of the DFNS, the rebels seem to have moved closer to a state-like legitimacy and therefore their strategies of legitimation might have moved closer to the ones of a state.

Regarding future research, I assess that a cross-case studies between several contexts of external support to rebel groups would be insightful. The result of such work could also be compared to the ones of the present single-case study. By analysing side by side two or more instances of

such conditions, researchers could witness if the structure of rebel governance is in fact transformed by external support or if the PYD occurrence was an outlier. Then, by comparing across cases, a pattern could be found in the contexts such transformation occurs. The presence of more than one case would also provide a better generalisation potential for the forthcoming results.

I also argue that the literature on the consequences of external support should focus more on the transformation underwent by the receiving rebel groups. Governance practices, and the way they change, are only one of the effects of such transformations. Other case studies, being single or of comparative design, could establish whether that intermediary variable is visible in other settings or solely in the case Northern Syria. If it does appear in other context, academic literature might move further in that direction, focusing on the influence of international support on rebel structure.

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Figure 3-4-5: Rojava Information Center

Appendix

Figure 6: National Kurdish Flag (used by the KRG)

Figure 7: Flag of Rojava / DFNS (used by the PYD/Tev-Dem)