

Exiting Westphalia: Democratic Confederalism and the Reproduction of Statehood

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the implementation of democratic confederalism by the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), with a particular focus on its interaction with the structures of modern statehood and global capitalism. Operationalising the ideological tenets of Abdullah Öcalan, the chapter below answer whether the polity could meaningfully depart from the Westphalian state model and capitalist economic structures. The analysis combines secondary sources with qualitative data from video interviews conducted with locally active experts and civil society members, as well as written statements provided directly by DAANES officials. The findings suggest that while the DAANES articulates a strong ideological commitment to decentralisation, social ecology, and cooperative economics, its political and economic institutions reflect significant continuity with statist and capitalist dynamics. Centralised political control, extractive economic practices, and reliance on oil exports persist, shaped in part by the material constraints of war, foreign intervention, and regional instability. The thesis concludes that despite rhetorical efforts to transcend statehood and capitalist modernity, the DAANES remains embedded in many of the structures it seeks to overcome.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Benedek Várszegi, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled “Exiting Westphalia: Democratic Confederalism and the Reproduction of Statehood” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person’s or institution’s copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 23 May 2025

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Introduction

With the escalation of the Syrian Civil War in 2012, the Kurds of North and East Syria took initiative and self-mobilised in a series of events known as the Rojava Revolution. Over the past twelve years, this revolution has evolved into a unique political entity spanning roughly one third of Syria, defying many assumptions and categories within traditional Political Science and International Relations. The polity, known as the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), possesses several distinctive features, the most significant being its status as the only existing implementation of democratic confederalism, a recently emerging ideology attributed to Abdullah Öcalan.

Throughout the last decade, the DAANES has territorially rolled back Islamic State, resisted repeated invasions by Turkey, withstood military and political pressure from the Assad regime, and managed severe food and refugee crises triggered by regional developments. Despite these challenges, it has maintained its ideological commitment to democratic confederalism, promoting values of societal pluralism, tolerance, gender emancipation, minority rights, and environmental sustainability. These principles are part of a broader ideological project that seeks to move beyond the frameworks of the nation-state and global capitalism.

The emergence and functioning of the DAANES therefore present a valuable case for advancing the literature in multiple directions. Firstly, it provides the only practical example of democratic confederalism, a political model that has gained growing interest in leftist circles. Secondly, as a well-documented case of an emerging political entity attempting to break away from modern statehood

and capitalist global structures, it offers a rare opportunity to test theoretical models that have previously relied on historical or indirect data.

This thesis aims to explore these contributions through three chapters, each with overlapping but distinct aims. Chapter I summarises and operationalises the ideological material on democratic confederalism, primarily through the writings of its founder, Abdullah Öcalan. This section constructs a testable framework by connecting Öcalan's holistic vision with academic models such as Tilly's conception of state formation and the core–periphery dynamics developed in Wallerstein's world-systems theory and extended by Samir Amin.

Following this conceptual foundation, Chapter II investigates the extent to which the DAANES has remained ideologically consistent in its efforts to move beyond statehood and global capitalism. The findings point to a limited realisation of its foundational narrative, revealing a high degree of centralised power and a state-building process dominated by the Democratic Union Party and the Syrian Democratic Forces. Economically, the DAANES has been unable to transform the capitalist structures it inherited, due to multiple structural constraints and the opportunity costs of disrupting the status quo, particularly in sectors such as oil production. As a result, private sector dominance, environmentally unsustainable practices, and internal and external core–periphery dynamics have largely persisted.

Chapter III tests a series of hypotheses derived from Tilly's theory of state formation to explain the gap between ideological ambition and institutional reality. This concluding section argues that political entities attempting to distance themselves from the global system of states and capitalism may be structurally predisposed to reproduce those very forms, regardless of their intentions.

Literature Review

On the emergence and nature of states

As the subject of this thesis centres around the notion of the Westphalian state framework and an attempt to exit it, this section reviews literature defining and conceptualising states. Two major approaches dominate the literature: the contractual state and the predatory state (Vahabi 2020, 233). The following paragraphs outline the main arguments of these perspectives and their synthesis, embraced by much of contemporary literature. Charles Tilly's model, a central framework for the theoretical foundation of this paper, also falls under this latter category, recognising the predatory and contractual aspects of states, making an overview of the aforementioned literature essential.

The contractual conception of states in modern political theory dates to the 17th century and is associated with social contract theorists (Riley et al. 2006). While they differ in certain aspects, the most cited social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau share common elements. They posit an initial state of nature, in which no central authority exists, leading to severe negative consequences compared to an organised society (Locke 1689; Hobbes 1651; Rousseau 1762). In this initial condition, individuals hold personal sovereignty, which they voluntarily surrender through a collective contract, leading to the formation of centralised political power (Locke 1689; Hobbes 1651; Rousseau 1762). The perceived issues of the state of nature differ among the three theorists. Hobbes viewed it as a state of constant conflict, leading to his famous description of life as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1651). Locke, adopting a more optimistic stance, suggested that humans are capable of cooperation in the absence of central authority, but the lack of an impartial judicial authority weakens the "law of nature" (Locke 1689).

Rousseau argued that humans are intrinsically good but corrupted by civilisation and inequalities. He rejected feudal structures and Hobbesian absolutism, advocating for a direct democratic state to combat tyranny (Rousseau 1762).

Building on these ideas, neo-institutionalist economists have embraced and extended a contractual understanding of the state (Vahabi 2020; Buchanan 1999). Scholars in this tradition acknowledge the possibility of state predation but frame it as either consensual (Vahabi 2011; Shughart II and Thomas 2014; Munger 2019), universal and not unique to states or even benevolent (Vahabi 2020, 235). For clarity, this paper adopts North's (1981) definition of a predatory state, describing it as one that "specifies a set of property rights that maximise the revenue of the group in power, regardless of its impact on the wealth of society as a whole."

The predatory state approach highlights this extractive function of the state, even interpreting its benevolent features as mechanisms of control (Vahabi 2020). In his review of predatory states, Vahabi identifies three mechanisms through which states use protection as a tool of predation:

- Preventing capital flight – states avoid excessive extraction to stop subjects from seeking alternative protection (Vahabi 2020, 235; Tiebout 1956, 422).
- Encouraging productive activities – ongoing taxation yields higher long-term revenue than one-time extortion (Vahabi 2020, 235; Buchanan 1975; Holcombe 1994, 8–9; Holcombe 2004, 329–330).
- Enhancing political stability – maintaining order prevents costly rebellion and supports functions like property rights enforcement (Benson 1999, 152).

A final body of literature on conceptualising the nature of states emerged from building on both these perspectives, which will be referred to as dynamic models in the present discussion. Frameworks falling under this category recognise the limitations imposed by viewing states as a passive unchanging, all-benevolent or predatory actors, and start the inquiry into the diverse simultaneous manifestations of states in the various aspects of socio-political issues, across conceptual, spatial, and chronological spaces. States are complex entities, which can act as a predator in one sector or segment of society while being based on collective consent and providing for other social groups. They also change in time, with potential differences around their emergence, time of stability, crisis, etc. The paragraphs below will go through the works of Charles Tilly, whose model provides the theoretical foundations of this thesis, and the extensions of Mancur Olson and Douglas North on further problematising internal aspects of states and their emergence.

In his seminal work *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, Charles Tilly explores the analogies between predatory behaviours such as organised crime and the activities undertaken by states, highlighting causal chains linking war-making capacity, state-making, extraction, and protection (1985). Tilly identifies a reinforcing synergy between these organisational capacities, which ultimately gives rise to what we recognise as the modern state. This paper builds on his framework, extending its application beyond the 16th-century European context in which it was originally situated.

Several scholars have transposed Tilly's model into contemporary settings, particularly in analyses of post-colonial state formation (Jung 2017, 221; Kirby and Ward 1990, 116). The external validity of

such applications rests on several key factors. First, the global imposition of Western statecraft during colonialism positioned the European model as a dominant point of reference in both social sciences and institutional development (Kirby and Ward 1990, 116). As Tilly himself noted: “a majority of newly independent states began their careers with formal organizations traced on Western lines and incorporating significant parts of the colonial apparatus. Western-educated state leaders sought to install administrations, parliaments, parties, armies and public services of western inspiration” (1990, 192). This influence is clearly visible in the case of the DAANES and its ideological founder Öcalan, where concepts such as democracy and Trias Politica are explicitly rooted in Western political thought (D’Souza 2017, 12). Authors, including Kirby and Ward (1990) and Jung (2017) rely on this same premise when applying Tilly’s model to African and Middle Eastern contexts.

Second, these transpositions are concerned with phenomena that are largely universal rather than culturally specific, the accumulation of capital and the consolidation of governance capacity, both of which are common features of organised human cooperation. While some of Tilly’s specific conclusions, such as those concerning the role of a trader class in democratic development, may be more context-dependent, this thesis draws primarily on his more general claim about the mutual reinforcement of extractive and protective capacities. This analysis focuses on the most universally applicable elements of Tilly’s framework and applies them to a previously unexamined but ontologically appropriate case. Following the approach of Kirby and Ward (1990, 116), the thesis treats the European experience as “a set of spatial and temporal events” that parallels the trajectory of Syria over the past twelve years.

The analysis section of this thesis utilises Tilly's model to navigate the conception of modern states and their major functions and internal dynamics. However, to engage the trajectories and subcategories of states within the predatory-contractual continuum, additional works, such as the writings of Mancur Olson, were consulted. Much like Tilly, Olson argues that states originate in autocratic conceptions based on military might, and not through genuine social contracts amongst consenting individuals (Tilly 1985; Olson 1993, 568). A major contribution to the literature by the author is the notion of roving and stationary bandits, which are conceptually equivalent to two subcategories of predatory states. Olson refers to warlords, strongmen, and the like as roving bandits who seek one-time extortion from their victims. Stationary bandits, on the other hand, are the actors who recognised their vested interest in settling down and creating a stable protection racket, from which they can extract continuously, and enjoy the synergies also covered by Tilly between increases in productive activities by subjects and protection (Tilly 1985; Olson 1993). An essential element of Olson's framework is the notion of time, which is a main determinant of interests according to the author (Olson 1993). Throughout this 1993 article, Olson highlights how autocratic rulers will enact highly differing decisions based on which timeframe they plan to stay in power (ibid.).

When utilising this theory, it is important to note that the notion of long-term versus short-term planning also constitutes a limitation of Olson's categorisation or ruling regimes, as he makes a distinction of democratic systems based on this variable amongst more (Olson 1993, 571-2). While the identified factors and causal relationship potentially limiting the time horizons of autocrats, such as succession crises in case of a lack of an heir, are sound, Olson leaves out many incentives for short-

term thinking and maximisation of revenues in cases of democracies, indirectly tying predatory state behaviour to autocratic regimes, and contractual behaviour to systems in which there has been a democratic transition. This equation of what is ultimately benevolence in governance to formal democracies is an oversimplification, limiting observations on state behaviour through false dichotomies. Therefore, the present analysis avoids equating predatory tendencies solely with the absence of liberal democratic institutions, to retain the flexibility needed to explore new forms of governance.

Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance by Douglas North bridges this limitation on the nature of democracies, as it detaches predatory and contractual behaviours from strictly democratic and autocratic categories and instead focuses on the institutional frameworks shaping state behaviour (North 1990). According to North, the pivotal elements of institutions which in the long term determine state behaviour and economic performance within a community are the provision of lowered transaction costs and the rule of law through accountability, which limit or allow behaviours such as rent seeking (North 1990, 114). By problematising factors such as the institutional framework in relation to economic performance, the work of North provides an important extension to understanding state behaviour, which gains relevance in the second chapter of this thesis. However, his rational actor approach, which arguably can be instrumental for making concise points on economic questions, paints a limited picture, leaving out important historical, ideological, and political variables. The research conducted for this thesis, therefore, while utilised North's points on economic interests and the problematisation of transaction costs, went further in covering additional aspects of collective behaviour.

By considering Tilly's model a point of departure, but amending it with extensions deemed necessary, the present thesis attempts to contribute to existing literature by undertaking a test of an influential model of Political Science and the study of states, with a contemporary and well-documented case for such observations.

On the politics and political economy of the DAANES

The "stateness", quasi-state status, or fulfilment of state functions by the entity currently known as the Democratic Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), as well as its predecessors, has been established by academic literature (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019; Burç 2020; Várszegi 2022). Works such as the 2022 article by Várszegi discuss in detail the fulfilment of criteria set by the Montevideo Convention of 1933, the most widely recognised piece of international law in determining state status (Várszegi 2022; Grant 1999, 403). However, the article in question, while contributing an overview of the situation in the region, approaches the question of state status from an international law perspective and remains within that framework. The main argument of the paper highlights the conditionality of state recognition by other states and its instrumental nature, which is a particular quality of the Westphalian system, and has implications for entering the system. However, to answer the main puzzle of the present thesis, namely the causes of failure in exiting the institutional frameworks of Westphalian state dynamics and global market structures by the DAANES, the internal mechanisms of collective behaviour and political economy must be reviewed within the institutions of the polity.

The internal analysis of sub-DAANES institutions and their affiliates is, to some extent, covered by authors such as Allsopp, van Wilgenburg, Hatahet, Clevenger, and Thomas Schmidinger, (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019; Hatahet 2019; Schmidinger 2020; Clevenger 2021). The present paper, while facing challenges in terms of limited primary sources, will attempt to gain additional insight by expanding the triangulation of information through consulting the above sources as well as conducting further interviews. With this methodological choice, the author aims to contrast political messaging with the realities of policy implementation within the DAANES.

On democratic confederalism and Abdullah Öcalan

A major literature gap this thesis attempts to address concerns the ideology of democratic confederalism, coined by Abdullah Öcalan. This ideology, explained in more detail in the first chapter, is a relatively new political movement which emerged around the very end of the twentieth century. Blending a rich literature of mostly leftist political thought, democratic confederalism builds on elements such as Marxism, anarchism, the Annales school, postmodern literature such as theories of Foucault, and communalist ideas of Bookchin (D'Souza 2017, 12).

The founder and main figure of democratic confederalism, Öcalan, is a productive writer with dozens of books published under his name, four of which were compiled during his ongoing captivity in the İmralı Island prison. However, this considerable body of material does not follow strict academic formalities, content and format-wise, due to multiple factors. First, Öcalan himself broke with academia explicitly, calling for an epistemic approach inclusive of spiritual discourse, philosophy, arts, and other forms of knowledge dissemination (Öcalan 2017, 298). Furthermore, his captivity in prison, most of the time without access to libraries, citations, or any human contact,

created an environment in which any of Öcalan's published writings are materials recorded and smuggled out by his lawyers during their meetings.

These factors leave us with an eclectic body of writings, also demonstrated by the lack of academic literature on mainstream platforms operationalising the principles of democratic confederalism, despite its prominence in Syria. While articles such as the ones referenced above deal with the political economy and, to some extent, the political status quo of the region, they do so through an exogenous theoretical framework to democratic confederalism, mostly staying within the framework of universal human rights. By answering its main research question, this paper also interacts with the case of the DAANES and the implementation of democratic confederalism in new ways, such as the interaction of this ideology with the boundaries of modern states and the dominant modes of production under global capitalism.

Chapter I: Conceptual Framework and the Ideology of Democratic Confederalism

1.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to summarising the ideological foundation of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which is explicitly based on the works of Abdullah Öcalan, and which is referred to both by him and the Administration as democratic confederalism (Öcalan 2015; DAANES 2023). democratic confederalism is an ideological framework which sees the next step of societal development in a departure from the Westphalian state system and nation-states, as well as the current form of global capitalism and the mode of production which it entails (Öcalan 2017, 123; DAANES 2023). According to the writings of Öcalan, “nation-states” and “monopolistic capitalism” facilitate each other, therefore, it is crucial to discontinue both structures for a polity which aims to establish a true democratic society (Öcalan 2017, 123). The DAANES adopted this principle in its constitution, in passages such as a point of Article 97: “Our societal system depends on the principle of democratic confederalism, and on this basis every Commission organizes itself within councils, starting with the town, city, canton and the region of North and East Syria.” (DAANES 2023, Article 97).

Abdullah Öcalan’s works explicitly blend different epistemic traditions, mixing mythology, social sciences, and philosophy (Öcalan 2017, 298), as an attempt to reach new insights into contemporary and historical complexities such as the global economy and the emergence of modern society. This also stands for his writings on state, capitalism, and political economy in general. Therefore, this thesis on the political and economic structures of the DAANES navigates the reconciliation of

strictly academic knowledge production with Öcalan's work by an operationalisation which aims to approximate his theories with scholarly works often built on by him, to create testable points of reference in analysing the DAANES and its relationship with Öcalan's ideology.

First, the conceptual framework for analysing the relationship between the DAANES as a polity and the status of a modern state is formulated. This section focuses on a functional definition of modern states derived from the work of Charles Tilly, as his framework is both congruent with Öcalan's approach to states and is a highly applicable model to the case under review. The second part of the chapter deals with building a framework of analysis for the political economy of the DAANES, in relation to a departure from "capitalist modernity" (DAANES 2023, Article 3) as put by the latest constitution. This segment will focus on the mode of production, trade, and environmental impact of economic activities in the region.

1.2 States

As discussed in the literature review, there are many existing writings on the stateness of the DAANES in terms of its functions and capacities. From a legal perspective, the Montevideo Convention provides clear criteria based on a polity's capacities, prescribing that a state should have a permanent population, a defined territory, a governing institution, and capacity to enter into relations with other states (Montevideo Convention 1933; Grant 1999, 403). While a review based on institutional structure and capacity is a relevant topic, the aim of the present analysis is to delve into different, uncovered dimensions of the DAANES, focusing on internal dynamics.

More specifically, the research conducted for this paper tries to map out the power structures in the political and economic matters of the polity. The need for this inquiry comes from the unique aspects of the case, which is the formation of a political entity with all functions of a modern state, which explicitly refuses and, in theory, tries to exit the very notion of forming a state. Moreover, due to its recency, the emergence of the DAANES is an extremely well-documented case in history of a power vacuum with no state control over significant territories densely populated, being filled by a new, state-like entity that stabilised long-term (Hatahet 2019; Alhajj 2023). This unique case allows for the application of many theories which could only rely on historical data beforehand, including models on modern state formation.

The present analysis requires a functional definition of a modern state instead of a formal or legal one, as it aims to uncover insight related to internal dynamics rather than categorical attributes. Charles Tilly's functional model of modern state formation is a perfect fit for this goal, not only for its analytical applicability to the case of the DAANES, but also for its theoretical congruence with Öcalan's own conception of modern statehood and capitalism. Both Tilly and Öcalan trace the historical entanglement of capital accumulation and state formation to early modern Europe and argue that these structures continue to reinforce one another (Tilly 1985, 170; Öcalan 2017, 78). These conceptual similarities between the applied framework of assessment and the ideological tenets of the polity analysed minimise the chance of misinterpretation when evaluating the extent to which the DAANES has exited the structures that the two approaches converge on. Additionally, Tilly's framework does not require a conscious pursuit of statehood, as his analysis of 16th-century Europe states that national states often emerged unintentionally from the dynamics of war making,

extraction, and protection (Tilly 1985, 172). This makes his model especially appropriate for analysing the DAANES, which similarly does not explicitly aim to build a state but operates within structural conditions that may nonetheless reproduce state-like forms.

Based on the central model of Tilly, a modern state can be functionally defined as a centralized organisation that emerges and persists through its capacity to wage war, build internal structures, offer protection to its constituents, and extract resources to sustain these activities (Tilly 1985). These dynamics, as identified by Charles Tilly, form the internal mechanisms by which a modern state forms, consolidates, and sustains itself (*ibid.*). Deploying this functional definition allows for a more nuanced understanding of a polity's relationship to the internal dynamics of a modern state, by being able to place it on scales of approximation to ideal types rather than into binary categories.

For the reasons above, this thesis employs the model of Charles Tilly in conceptualising the emergence and internal functions of modern states, hoping to achieve two research objectives: 1) Testing Tilly's state formation model on a contemporary case, with an attempt to account for historical differences between the authors historical examples and the Syrian Civil War 2) Contributing to knowledge on the possibility of exiting specific aspects of the modern state system as we know it, through reporting on a contemporary attempt.

1.3 Capitalist Modernity

A major theme of Öcalan's teachings, also known as democratic confederalism, is to abandon the structures of global market capitalism, also referred to as "capitalist modernity" (Öcalan 2017; DAANES 2023). The works outlining the tenets of democratic confederalism contain the strong

recurrent theme of “city society” and “village society” and their relationship, constituting the status quo of global capitalism, which is to be overcome (Öcalan 2017). Another important aspect of democratic confederalism is equating the current form of capitalism with environmental destruction, or as Öcalan wrote, “This immorality [referring to the “principle of the capitalist economy”] destroys not only the inner social fabric of society, but it subjugates the environment and nature to the extent that not only human life but all animate life is under threat” (Öcalan 2017, 129). This section will first define these core concepts in Öcalan’s and the DAANES’ ideology, then describe the operationalisation undertaken in the next chapter, which focuses on two dimensions: 1) modes of production and flow of commodities, and 2) environmental footprint of local economic activity.

1.3.1 Modes of Production and Trade

Öcalan writes about capitalism in a holistic manner, conceptualising it not just as a purely economic structure, but a socio-political order as well as an ideology or religion (Öcalan 2017, 34). While doing so, he draws a lot on the works of the Annales school and Braudel, as well as the writings of Wallerstein. Models such as World System Theory encapsulate and complement many of Öcalan’s ideas on the nature and impact of material arrangements in the modern era in conceptualising the worldwide system, from global level analysis to the identification of exploitative extraction between two poles (Wallerstein 1974; Hopkins and Wallerstein 2016; Martínez-Vela 2001).

The economic core regions of Wallerstein refer to highly developed, industrialised and now post-industrial economies, with capital-intensive production profiles (Hopkins and Wallerstein 2016; Martínez-Vela 2001). The countries identified as part of this core are both benefiting from the

division of labour between poles, and reproducing the system which creates the division, by preventing the periphery from breaking out of it (ibid.). This category corresponds to the ‘city-societies’ of Öcalan, which he describes as “the primary web of relations that generate war and exploitation, power, and class” (Öcalan 2017, 47). Öcalan’s accounts of economic centres are not clearly defined, but he makes a clear connection between global capital flows and these centres. In his words, “the gods of the market and the city are entwined” (ibid.).

The other pole of World System Theory is the periphery, constituted by economies with low development levels and industrialisation, which are structurally pushed into focusing on labour-intensive production sectors, due to their access to cheap labour compared to core economies, and their lack of investment capital (Wallerstein 1974; Hopkins and Wallerstein 2016; Martínez-Vela 2001). Öcalan’s ‘village society’ is a comprehensive ideal type category mostly corresponding to the periphery of World System Theories. Village societies, according to his views, are the societies colonised by urban societies in a multi-faceted way, not strictly referring to economic extraction through the channels identified by World System Theory, but also to ideological and political levels directly or indirectly tied to the mode of production in society (Öcalan 2017, 250).

Also signalled by the naming, ‘village society’ and ‘city society’ are concepts which do not operate primarily on the level of national economies, but rather on a cross-cutting scope, starting from the domestic economies. Wallerstein’s world-systems theory on the other hand, while identifying the same dynamics as Öcalan’s model, primarily analyses macro-structural patterns at the international and regional scales, therefore needing extension onto sub-state levels. The framework developed by

Samir Amin extends and in some respects critiques Wallerstein by emphasising the need to account for internal core–periphery structures within peripheral countries themselves. In *Unequal Development*, Amin explicitly challenges the assumption of nationally coherent economies, arguing that in many peripheral contexts, the disparities between urbanised and rural sectors are so pronounced that sub-national analysis becomes essential for understanding economic realities. This approach is particularly useful for analysing the DAANES region, where claimed attempts to restructure the inherited divisions between village-based and urbanised economic forms reflect broader efforts to overcome internalised patterns of dependency (Hatahet 2019; Amin 1976, 238).

Building on Amin’s extension of subnational dependencies to World Systems Theory, the next chapter will look into the effect of DAANES governance in mitigating the divide between ‘village society’ and ‘city society’, as prescribed by Öcalan. For this, different indicators are considered, from modes of production to trade flows and redistributive policies between urbanised and rural areas. The case of North and East Syria excellently fits many of Amin’s ideal types, with the primary regional output being grain and cotton monocultures, and crude oil, which is exported even before refinement (Hatahet 2019). The sector profile of the region is also accompanied by a strategic neglect on behalf of the now-gone Assad regime for decades, leaving the area with an underdeveloped infrastructure even before the more than a decade-long civil war and waves of Turkish invasions (ibid.).

1.3.2 Economy and Environmental Damage

In developing his ideology of democratic confederalism, Öcalan explicitly and extensively draws on the works of Murray Bookchin, an American political theorist associated with anarchism until his

public distancing from the movement and his establishment of ‘communalism’ (Bookchin 2006). His ideas heavily centre around the relationship between economic structures and capitalism in specific, and nature. His genealogy of capitalism and its essential connection to environmental damage had a huge influence on Öcalan’s conclusions on society and nature (Gerber and Brinket 2018). According to Bookchin, there is an innate drive for pursuing hierarchy in humans, which conditions societal development (Bookchin 1982). The emergence of capitalism exacerbates this tendency of domination of “[hu]man by [hu]man” by placing everything into the dimension of commodities and market relations (ibid.). This “economisation” of social life in turn subordinates freedom to economic rationality, which then solidifies domination through rationalising it (ibid.). This environment, with omnipresent domination in social life, creates a mindset in relation to nature, which views it as subordinate to humans and as a simple source of commodities to be exploited (ibid.). This leads to a mode of production with unavoidable environmental damage, as the long-term preservation of nature is not a primary concern according to the logic of the market (ibid.).

Given the centrality of ecological concerns in Öcalan’s writings and in the constitution of the DAANES, the following chapter includes a section analysing the region’s departure from economic practices and environmental damage associated with the previous mode of production. This transition is explicitly proclaimed in several provisions of the DAANES constitution, most clearly summarised in Article 14: “Adopting environmental and societal democratic life as a basis, and working to build an environmentally democratic society, and preventing unjust dealing with, plundering and destruction of nature” (DAANES 2023). To operationalise this dimension of the

political economy, the chapter focuses primarily on two areas: the continuation of crude oil extraction and the measures introduced to promote agricultural sustainability.

Chapter II: Realities within the DAANES

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter summarised and reframed the ideological foundations of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North East Syria, which are explicitly credited to Abdullah Öcalan, the ideological leader of the polity (DAANES 2025). The principles formulated by Öcalan and implemented by the DAANES are manifold but primarily aim at entertaining the concepts of “co-chairing, communal economy, social justice, and the principle of democratic confederalism” (DAANES 2023). According to Öcalan and some of the political communication of the DAANES, in order to fulfil these principles, communities have to distance themselves from existing structures, such as the “modern” or “nation-state”, and “monopolistic capitalism” (Öcalan 2017, 222). While Öcalan expands on these ideas at length, his critiques are often framed in broad, holistic terms. Chapter I addressed this by reframing the ideological foundations of the DAANES through academic models and theoretical lenses either referenced by Öcalan or strongly resonant with his approach.

This reframing now informs the empirical analysis presented in the current chapter, which examines the on-the-ground realities in the territories administered by the DAANES. Following a brief historical and institutional overview, the chapter investigates the region’s political authority and security structures. This section draws on Charles Tilly’s model of state formation, particularly his emphasis on institution building and security provision as core functions of the state and juxtaposes it with Öcalan’s vision of transcending the state through the dismantling of centralised decision-making and hierarchical structures of enforcement. Tilly’s framework is employed here not only for

its analytical clarity, but also because of its conceptual congruence with Öcalan’s own critique of statehood and capitalism.

The subsequent section turns to the political economy of the DAANES, focusing on the mode of production, ownership structures, and the polity’s role within global trade networks. This analysis addresses the persistence or disruption of core-periphery dynamics associated with what Öcalan calls “monopolistic capitalism” and “capitalist monopolism” interchangeably (Öcalan 2017). To operationalise these ideas, the analysis draws on World-Systems Theory, particularly the framework of Immanuel Wallerstein, and incorporates Samir Amin’s extensions, which are used to interpret domestic economic disarticulation and internal peripheralization (Amin 1976, 202).

Remaining within the boundaries of political economy, a final subsection examines a distinct but ideologically central aspect of the DAANES political project: the ecological dimension. Informed explicitly by Murray Bookchin’s theory that domination of nature and domination of people are historically and structurally intertwined, both Öcalan and the DAANES have positioned ecological sustainability as a foundational pillar of democratic confederalism (Bookchin 1982; Öcalan 2015, 163; DAANES 2023, Xelil et al. 2025). This section assesses environmental harm arising from economic activity in the region and evaluates the extent to which the DAANES has addressed these challenges, given their professed importance in exiting what Öcalan identifies as oppressive civilisational structures.

The findings of this chapter suggest that while the DAANES continues to promote the ideological tenets of democratic confederalism, many of its institutional and economic structures reflect the persistence of statist and capitalist dynamics. In the political sphere, the PYD has formalised

commitments to political pluralism, yet retained control over elections, bureaucracy, and coercive institutions, largely through its dominance of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and affiliated bodies. The provision of protection remains highly centralised, concentrated in the hands of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), its military wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) and SDF, which have assumed the core Tillyan functions of coercion and authority. Economically, the DAANES has not overcome the structural legacies of capitalist modernity, with being forced to divert resources to managing immediate crises such as Turkish invasions and food security. Pre-2011 patterns of trade and production persist, with dependency on unprocessed resource exports and private sector dominance. DAANES official respondents and external observers alike describe the economic transformation as partial, with cooperatives lacking scale and centralised resource control merely relocated from Damascus to Al-Hasakah. Despite notable progress in gender equality and ideological commitment to ecological sustainability, the region's material conditions, shaped by ongoing war, forced displacement, and infrastructure destruction by Turkish forces, continue to constrain any substantive exit from the structures that democratic confederalism seeks to transcend.

2.2 Historical and Institutional Context

The withdrawal of the Syrian army from North East Syria in July 2012 initiated the chain of events that led to the formation of what is now known as the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). To understand this entity, which emerged in the power vacuum left by the Assad regime, it is essential to consider the role of the Kurdish population and their political institutions in Syria, which effectively evolved into the DAANES structure during the civil war.

The Kurds, often described as the world's largest stateless nation, are distributed across four primary states: approximately two million in Syria, five to eight million in Iraq, eight million in Iran, and around fifteen million in Turkey (World Population Review 2025a). In Syria, Kurds constitute the country's largest ethnic minority, comprising roughly 10% of the population (World Population Review 2025b). Syrian Kurds primarily inhabit the north-eastern regions of the country, particularly Afrin, Kobanê, and Jazira. This territorial concentration is the result of post-Ottoman colonial partitioning, culminating in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which fragmented Kurdish-inhabited areas across four modern nation-states, namely Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (Schmidinger 2020, 59).

Throughout the 20th century, Kurdish national aspirations were expressed in varying forms across these regions, ranging from peaceful political mobilisation to armed struggle. Examples include the short-lived Mahabad Republic in Iran in 1946, the current autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq, and the earlier Barzani-led uprisings (Gunes and Lowe 2015, 6; Tejel 2020, 29). However, the idea of a unified Kurdistan has been fraught with internal complexity, including differences in dialects, political alignments, and tribal divisions (Tejel 2020, 26-7).

The majority of Syrian Kurds speak Kurmanji, the most widely used Kurdish dialect, and adhere to Sunni Islam, with a notable Yazidi minority present as well (ibid.). Since the end of the French Mandate and the rise of Baathist rule, Kurdish communities in Syria have been subjected to systematic repression, including policies of forced Arabisation aimed at assimilating Kurds into a homogenous Arab nationalist identity (Burç 2020, 87; Tejel 2020, 30). This repression, paired with weaponised underdevelopment in Kurdish-majority areas, led to grassroots forms of local self-organisation (Gunes and Lowe 2015). The emergence of Kurdish political parties such as Yekîti (Unity) occurred in this context (Allsopp 2014, 191).

Central to the Kurdish autonomy movement in Syria is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a militant organisation founded in Turkey in 1978. Initially advocating for Kurdish independence in Turkey, the PKK, under Abdullah Öcalan's leadership, later shifted its position towards securing autonomy and cultural rights within existing borders. Due to geopolitical tensions between the regime of Hafez al-Assad, and Turkey by the late 1970s, the PKK was granted access to North East Syria to establish bases of operations and launch attacks into Turkey from the area (Tejel 2020, 32). While this cooperation was temporary, it significantly influenced the political awakening of Syria's Kurdish population (Tejel 2020, 33). The eventual dissolution of this strategic alignment between the Assad regime and the PKK, caused by a rapprochement between Erdogan and Bashar al-Assad, led to the incarceration of many PKK members, as well as the eventual capture of Öcalan in 1999 (ibid.). Partially as a reaction to growing persecution of PKK members, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was established (Tejel 2020, 34). The PYD quickly rose to prominence in Syrian Kurdish politics, particularly after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The party adheres explicitly to Öcalan's ideological framework of democratic confederalism and has become the dominant force shaping DAANES political institutions (Gunes and Lowe 2015, 5; PYD 2025).

The 2011 Syrian Civil War caught the North East Region with a highly mobilised and politically conscious Kurdish population. This mobilisation stemmed not only from decades of state neglect, marginalisation, and harsh economic policies, but also from formative events such as the 2004 Qamishli riots, in which Kurdish civilians were killed during clashes with regime forces (Tejel 2020, 34). These uprisings played a key role in radicalising political consciousness and laying the groundwork for subsequent self-administration. The following sections assess how the

administration that emerged from this context functions in practice, particularly in relation to its foundational ideals summarised in Chapter I.

2.3 Political Authority and Security Structures

2.3.1 State Making

Tilly defines state-making as the process by which a political actor eliminates or neutralises internal rivals and consolidates authority through institutions that extend, coordinate, and stabilise control over a given territory (Tilly 1985, 181). While the DAANES explicitly distances itself from statehood, the political, administrative and fiscal structures within the polity point towards a clear case of state-building according to the Tillyan definitions used in this analysis.

In order to locate the entity acting as a state in North East Syria it is important to clarify the organisational landscape of the region, which gives out a complicated mosaic shifting quickly over time. Although the genesis and transformation of the DAANES will be elaborated in detail in Chapter III, this section will focus on analysing the dominant actors and political structures currently in place, responsible for the state-building activities for the past decade, namely the PYNK, PYD, SDF, YPG/J, and the ISF.

An important aspect of political culture is the different role of parties, which exist in significantly greater numbers than in Western democracies, and which most often operate in umbrella organisations which act as parties themselves and even self-reference as such (Bekdash 2025). The two most relevant of the umbrellas is PYNK, consisting of 25 different parties including the PYD which dominates the coalition, and ENKS or KNC, comprised of 11 separate parties (Rojava

Information Center 2025). This latter is a Kurdish nationalistic entity and the most important political platform for Kurdish opposition to the government of the DAANES, dominated by PYNK/PYD (Allsopp 2014, 194-200; Gunes and Lowe 2015, 5).

At the centre of political and institutional power in the region is the political party PYD, which quickly assumed control over both civil and security affairs following the withdrawal of the Syrian government in 2012. Since then, the PYD has reportedly exercised *de facto* dominance over all DAANES institutions (Gunes and Lowe 2015; Schmidinger 2020, 14). Although it has cooperated to varying degrees with other actors such as the ENKS, the PYD has made or decisively influenced all major structural decisions, including the unilateral declaration of the three original cantons of Rojava in 2014 (Schmidinger 2020, 14). This marked the first institutional and territorial demarcation of what later became the DAANES and was undertaken without consulting other regional political organisations, some of which object to the move to this day (*ibid.*).

Apart from the military successes of its armed wings, the YPG and YPJ, which later formed the core of the DAANES's military under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and continue to dominate its leadership, the PYD and its affiliates consolidated control over North East Syria by sidelining rivals such as the ENKS (*ibid.*) through a strategy of selective inclusion and political manoeuvring. From the very beginning of the events also known as Rojava Revolution in 2012, which led up to the formation of the DAANES, the PYD continued a narrative of openness towards other groups to the point of institutional inclusion, while maintaining the core offices and decision making positions, and allegedly putting pressure on the opposition (Muhammad 2024). A most telling example of this is the short lived Kurdish Supreme Committee, which was a political platform formed in 2012 and ended by 2013. This platform was founded in collaboration between PYD and

ENKS to fill out the governance vacuum left by the withdrawing central government, with initially equal numbers of representatives between the party PYD and the party umbrella ENKS (Schmidinger 2020, 14). This platform however quickly collapsed as the PYD gained popularity amongst the local population, sidelining ENKS, which culminated in the latter leaving the platform and the PYD unilaterally declaring the above-mentioned three autonomous cantons in November 2012 (ibid.).

This pattern of proactive opening to political pluralism on paper while retaining effective control is showcased by the PYD in all aspects of state-building, including only announced but never held elections, bureaucracy, taxation, policing and more. The governing bodies, running under many different names as the polity transformed, announced elections to be held in 2015, 2017 and in 2024, always shortly after the introduction of a new constitution for the region, which were allegedly enacted due to the gradual expansion of the DAANES. When looking into the implementation of these elections, however, we can see the lack of power-sharing potential in them. The 2015 elections of the freshly formed three cantons of Rojava, with a wide Kurdish population and support for the PYD-affiliated political forces were held at the originally announced time. By 2017, the now expanded entity under the name Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria included majority non-Kurdish territories, such as the Khabur valley. The elections that year were partially held on the local and regional levels, however, the election of the Syrian Democratic Council, the highest legislative body of the polity (DAANES 2023), was never held after multiple postponements (Abdulssattar and Edwards 2018). In 2023, the entity adopted its newest constitution, with an alleged claim of further decentralisation of power (Ose 2023). By this point, the DAANES included

7 cantons, with the Kurdish population constituting a minority in at least four regions. The announced elections following the enactment were never held on any level. These dynamics illustrate how the PYD, partially through the SDF and affiliated structures, has carried out the core functions of state-making by both constructing institutional frameworks and consolidating exclusive political authority over them.

2.3.2 Protection

The DAANES and its institutions also completely oversee all forms of protection, such as policing, counter terrorism and border control within the seven cantons of the entity. These internal security tasks are being shared among the formal military organisation of the administration, called the Syrian Democratic Forces, and multiple civilian paramilitary or fully militarised police forces, such as the Sutoro police, Anti-terrorist forces (HAT), Civil Defence Forces (HPC), the Jinên Asayishê, and the Internal Security Forces, which is the central policing apparatus of the DAANES (Abbas 2025). All of the current security organisations were established by and are evolving under the DAANES, however, they highly differ in terms of locality and control by the Administration (ibid.).

The above examples are not exhaustive, but they signify an incomplete decentralisation process in the region's internal security. The Sutoro police forces are a separate entity from the ISF, made up of the Assyrian minority to protect areas with a significant Assyrian population such as Jazira canton (ibid.). The HAT formally belongs to the military, the SDF. The HPC is the locally organised community protection forces, representing Öcalan's vision of participatory self-defence (Interview 2). Jinên Asayishê (Women's Asayish) is a separate internal security force focusing on gendered violence and are most often stationed in Mala Jins (Women's Houses), to mediate domestic conflicts.

Despite the establishment and continued facilitation of parallel and localised entities of internal security for minorities, local communities and women, the main platforms of protection within the DAANES are the ISF, also known as Asayish, and the regular military SDF, both of which respond to the highest executive body of the polity, the Executive Council (Abbas 2025). These security forces maintain a strong presence in all cantons and partake in joint military operations (ibid.), with the SDF being mainly comprised of and established by YPG officers, the military wing of the PYD. This strong presence of centralised provision of protection is also confirmed by the interviews conducted as a part of this thesis research, as a participant active in Syrian civil society talked about having to acquire clearance from the SDF centre in Jazira canton for projects in Deir ez-Zor canton (Interview 1). Further evidence appears in recent assessments of the DAANES's internal security sector. A report by Abbas (2025) describes similar patterns, noting that limited transparency and concentration of decision-making authority continue to undermine effective decentralisation.

These findings suggest that, despite efforts at decentralisation, the DAANES performs the Tillyan function of protection primarily through a centralised apparatus led by the PYD and SDF and their affiliated military structures, with coercive capacity and authority concentrated within the SDF and ISF.

2.4 Political Economy

Embracing democratic confederalism, as articulated by its founder Abdullah Öcalan, entails a radical departure from the pre-DAANES political economy of North and East Syria. This transformation includes the structural reorganisation of the mode of production and ownership, a repositioning of the local economy within global value chains, and the implementation of policy measures aimed at

ending environmentally unsustainable practices. According to the foundational principles of democratic confederalism, these steps are necessary to dismantle the exploitative architecture of “capitalist modernity”, which Öcalan identifies as resting on two mutually reinforcing pillars: “nation-states” and “economic monopolism” (Öcalan 2017).

This section analyses the political economy of the DAANES through two interrelated dimensions. First, it evaluates the extent to which the local economy has been restructured in line with the economic prescriptions of democratic confederalism, particularly in its attempts to displace monopolistic patterns of production and ownership. Second, it examines how DAANES institutions have engaged with the economic functions traditionally associated with Westphalian states, referred to as “nation-states” in the polity’s own political discourse, the Tillyan function of resource extraction in focus. These two dimensions are explored across the following subsections: (1) Mode of Production, Regional Trade, and Ownership Structures; and (2) Social Ecology and Environmental Practice.

2.4.1 Mode of Production, Regional Trade-, and Ownership Structures

Prior to the outbreak of civil war, Syria operated as a centrally planned market economy, heavily reliant on agriculture and resource extraction. The national economy exhibited significant infrastructure underdevelopment, pronounced regional inequality, and vulnerability to both political and environmental shocks (Clevenger 2021; World Bank 2023). Key economic sectors included hydrocarbons, particularly oil and gas, as well as agricultural products like grains and cotton, cultivated through monoculture farming (Clevenger 2021). While Syria maintained a relatively balanced import/export ratio in total value, its exports were largely limited to raw or semi-

processed goods, such as crude oil and agricultural produce, while high-value manufactured goods were predominantly imported (Clevenger 2021; World Bank 2023).

The Assad regime had established a system in which the central Syrian government has tight control on revenue flows and economic policy, to the point that the country was considered a “social market economy” (Mugarbal et al 2024). This domestic economy, highly resembling Wallerstein’s ideal type of a periphery country in the global economy, has to this day an extreme core-periphery dynamic between its urban centres and majority Arab populated areas such as Damascus, and regions such as the North East, fitting Samir Amin’s extension of the World-systems theory. This core-periphery divide was artificially exacerbated and maintained by the Assad regime, since the emergence of Hafez al-Assad, whose vision of a unified Arab republic led to the instrumental marginalisation of the majority non-Arabic areas in governmental investment and infrastructure development (Dolby 2018, 3-5; Clevenger 2021, 28).

The relationship between North East Syria and the central government and areas its favoured economic zones is highly congruent with Amin’s notions of internal peripherisation and economic disarticulation of domestic economies of the global periphery (Amin 1976, 202, 294). The seven cantons of the DAANES constitute on only one-third of Syrian territory, but include two thirds of the country’s grain production, and roughly 75% of its hydrocarbons (Clevenger 2021, 27). Despite producing “many kinds of gold: the white gold of cotton and the black gold of oil in addition to the wheat gold of grains” (Dolby 2018, 3), the region historically experienced the lowest standards of living in Syria. In 2007, half of Syria’s population living under the poverty line resided in the North East (Hatahet 2019, 15). This contrast between the available resources and living standards relative

to other parts of Syria is the outcome of deliberate government economic policies, that structurally relegated the region to extractive functions. Grain produced in the Jazira region was prohibited from local processing; mills and oil refineries were deliberately not built, forcing the region to export unprocessed materials to government-controlled areas or directly abroad (Clevenger 2021, 27). This systemic suppression of value-added industry left the region economically disjointed and highly vulnerable to environmental crises such as the 1999–2010 drought. As the central government structured its economy around this divide between Syria’s economic centre and its marginalised areas kept focusing on extractive productive activities, North East’s economy became disarticulated as put by Amin, making the region economically dependent on a handful of hypertrophied production lines, and structurally disjointed, which further hindered the region by making it extremely susceptible to crises such as the long drought between 1999 and 2010 (Amin 202-3).

This analysis considers Amin’s models in operationalising Öcalan’s city–village civilisation dichotomy, offering a more granular framework for assessing internal core–periphery relations and regional marginalisation, as they both correspond to the realities on the ground and to Öcalan’s holistic claims on the “city civilisation” and its exploitative relationship with the “village civilisation” (Öcalan 2017), which are fundamental to democratic confederalism. With the DAANES explicitly adopting democratic confederalism in its constitution from its very conception (Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane 2014; DAANES 2023), resolving these structural issues related to the mode of production and ownership structures is a prominent element in DAANES political communication and policy documents (ibid.).

The primary and most direct policy tool used by the DAANES to address these structural imbalances is the creation of cooperatives in agriculture and light industry. These cooperatives, characterised by collective ownership and communal labour, aim to replace both private and centralised state ownership, redistributing power and wealth to marginalised populations and undermining core-periphery hierarchies. They are primarily established by canton-level Cooperative Bureaus, Women's Councils, and the women's liberation umbrella organisation Kongra Star (RIC 2020; Schmidinger 2020, 15; Clevenger 2021, 21). Two primary models exist: production cooperatives, engaged in farming or artisanal work, and service cooperatives, where communities pool resources to acquire shared infrastructure such as power generators (RIC 2020).

Despite their ideological significance, the establishment and survival of these cooperatives have faced major constraints. Ongoing military conflicts with ISIS cells and Turkish forces, extensive infrastructure destruction from the civil war, and entrenched tribal and elite land ownership patterns all limit the cooperative model's expansion and sustainability (Interview 1; Clevenger 2021; McClure and Steinhardt 2020, 140; Hatahet 2019, 7-8). In 2019, following the Turkish invasion of Afrin, Clevenger estimated only around 100 active cooperatives remained, marginal in relation to a regional population of 4-6 million (Clevenger 2021, 34). Earlier reports seem to confirm and expand on the same issues, with Hatahet's findings indicating that the cooperatives also lack scale, only employing a "handful of workers" (Hatahet 2019, 6-7), and failing to transform the economy partially due to the influence of existing dependencies towards the Syrian central government and the private sector (Hatahet 2019, 6-8).

Trade and production patterns across the DAANES continue to mirror the pre-2011 political economy. The region remains dependent on agriculture and crude oil, which are exported as

unprocessed goods. The latest available reports on the local economy, such as the one from 2024 by Sulku, still identify agriculture and oil as the “backbone” and “lifeline” of the economy (Sulku 2024). In-depth descriptions from 2019 to 2021, as well as the interview conducted for the present analysis confirm these labels in assessing the role of hydrocarbons and agriculture, along with the continued export of crude oil, and raw agricultural output such as unprocessed grains and vegetables to neighbouring countries, regardless of the overtake of DAANES in the region (Hatahet 2019, 1; Schmidinger 2020, 15; Clevenger 2021, 28-30; Interview 1). Quoting directly from the material received by DAANES officials upon request: “Oil production remains one of the most vital economic resources in our region” (DAANES statement given to me). Due to ongoing armed conflicts and instability in the region (ibid.), a significant portion of trade is conducted on the black market (Interview 1). With the pre-DAANES dependencies and trading patterns mostly intact, the DAANES has not managed to move itself out of the core-periphery tendencies denounced by democratic confederalism.

Furthermore, hierarchical structures of resource control remain intact, though centralised now in Al-Hasakah rather than Damascus. Interviewees describe this shift as a “relocation” rather than a transformation: “Before we had a centralised system in Damascus. Now we have a centralised system in Al-Jazeera, Al-Hasakah city” (Interview 1). Cooperatives, while decentralised in structure, are subject to DAANES administrative oversight and tax regimes. Many operate on land redistributed by the DAANES from former state property (RIC 2020). The central authorities also retain strategic control over key resources. In 2019, the SDF reportedly controlled 80% of Syria’s oil and gas reserves (Hatahet 2019, 2).

These practices align with Tilly's conception of resource extraction as a key state function. The DAANES has developed a coherent apparatus for managing taxation and the regulation of production, echoing the functional foundations of statehood, even while politically distancing itself from the nation-state model (Tilly 1985, 181). Despite progress in areas such as gender equality (Hatahet 2019, 6; Clevenger 2021, 34), the broader picture suggests that the DAANES has not managed to overcome the structural economic legacies of capitalist modernity. Rather than fundamentally altering the regional mode of production or detaching from global and domestic hierarchies, the polity has partially replicated them in a new form. democratic confederalist ideals have been formalised in political discourse, but their full realisation remains limited.

2.4.2 Social Ecology and Environmental Practice

Drawing on the work of Bookchin, Öcalan argued that the oppressive structures inherent in “capitalist modernity” can be traced back to the domination and exploitation of nature (Bookchin 1982; Öcalan 2015, 163). This ecological perspective forms a core principle of democratic confederalism and is one of the three central ideological pillars of the DAANES (Bookchin 1982; Öcalan 2015, 163; DAANES 2023; Xelîl et al. 2025). In line with this orientation, the DAANES has initiated various local projects such as the implementation of drip irrigation in agriculture and the promotion of other sustainable production methods, alongside reforestation campaigns (Sulku 2024; Xelîl et al. 2025). Platforms like the Ecological Conference of North-East Syria have also been established to raise public awareness and disseminate the DAANES's ecological perspective, often referred to as “social ecology” (DAANES 2023; ANF 2024).

Despite these efforts, however, the environmental transformation of the economy faces significant limitations, many of which mirror the structural barriers that constrained the success of cooperatives

(Interview 1; Xelîl et al. 2025). Alongside the escalating effects of climate change, which has produced increasingly severe droughts in the region, the most immediate obstacle to environmental sustainability is the targeted destruction of civilian infrastructure by Turkish military operations. According to a 2024 report, Turkish bombings had destroyed “18 water stations and 17 electricity plants [...] alongside hospitals, schools, industrial sites, and food production and storage facilities” (Sulku 2024). Turkish forces have also adopted a scorched-earth strategy, previously employed by retreating ISIL fighters, involving the deliberate burning of plantations (ibid.).

These attacks are compounded by Turkey’s continued restriction of river flows into North and East Syria, exacerbating already dire food shortages in a region frequently affected by climate-induced crop failure (ibid.). Under these conditions, environmentalism has necessarily become a secondary priority for the DAANES. The administration has been forced to divert resources toward emergency needs such as food provision, not only for its citizens, but also for more than 200,000 internally displaced persons, many of whom were displaced by Turkish invasions, as well as the 26,000 ISIL prisoners of war and their families (UNHCR 2025; ICCT 2025). In the face of inflation and economic disruption, the DAANES has prioritised immediate needs such as the purchase and redistribution of local grain outputs (McClure and Steinhardt 2020, 140) over deeper ecological reform.

As a result, the ecological component of exiting capitalist modernity, as outlined by Bookchin and Öcalan, has not been widely implemented. The DAANES continues to rely heavily on oil revenues and monocultural agriculture, both of which reflect the very economic patterns the ideological project aimed to overcome.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter uncovered the political and economic realities in North and East Syria under the DAANES, analysing the entity through a Tillyan functionalist understanding of the state. In addition, the chapter reviewed the DAANES's engagement with what Öcalan calls “capitalist modernity,” referring to dominant modes of production, global and regional exchange, and other material structures that, according to democratic confederalism, reproduce exploitative hierarchies.

Despite its ideological rejection of statehood, the DAANES, with the PYD and SDF at its core, exhibits Tillyan state-building behaviours. It has established and maintained political institutions and bureaucracy over a defined territory, while marginalising rivals, as seen in the consolidation of their political vision during the implementation of democratic confederalism across the seven cantons. This dominance over governance, protection, and decision-making coexists with a partially decentralised security structure, occasionally delegated to grassroots self-defence forces. While such arrangements reflect efforts toward participatory protection, they also resemble more conventional, hierarchical state functions.

In terms of political economy, the DAANES has pursued collective ownership and cooperative production in line with Öcalan's vision. However, these efforts remain small in scale and largely symbolic when set against a broader economic structure that continues to rely heavily on extractive industries and raw exports. Attempts to dismantle domestic and external core-periphery dependency and transition toward ecological sustainability have been severely constrained by ongoing conflict, underdevelopment, and environmental vulnerability. Moreover, the centralised control over natural resources, taxation, and land, along with the control of economic activity in the

region by the SDF, indicate that the DAANES continues to engage in state-like resource extraction, in line with Tillyan theory.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while the DAANES has rhetorically and ideologically committed to exiting the frameworks of the nation-state and capitalist modernity, in practice it remains entangled in many of the very dynamics it seeks to transcend.

Chapter III - The Tillyan Conception of the DAANES

3.1 Introduction

”Then, roughly formulated, state is the sum of surplus product and value together with ideological tools, instruments of coercion, and the art of administration” writes Öcalan in the second volume of his Manifesto for a Democratic Society, in which he elaborates at length the historical development and nature of the structures from which society must distance itself within the framework of democratic confederalism (Öcalan 2017, 179).

The first chapter of this thesis summarised and situated his holistic ideas on state formation and global capitalism, which significantly overlap, among other perspectives, with Charles Tilly’s historical assessments regarding the interplay of capital accumulation, extraction, and political-military power. Chapter II delved into the realities on the ground within the DAANES, a polity that explicitly claims to operate on the basis of Öcalan’s thought and the principles of democratic confederalism. This analysis focused on political and administrative structures, protection, sovereignty in the context of embeddedness in the state system denounced by Öcalan, and the political economy in light of Tillyan resource extraction and environmental policy in line with the core tenets of democratic confederalism (DAANES 2023).

The findings pointed to a substantial gap between theory and practice: the DAANES largely failed to fulfil the core prescriptions of a democratic confederalist model. Instead, it exhibited a markedly centralised political structure centred around the PYD/YPG, which also dominates the main security apparatus, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF, in addition to providing internal and

external security, controls key resource extraction sites and engages in the taxation of economic activity across DAANES-held territories. These dynamics are in line with the Tillyan mechanisms of Westphalian states also identified by Öcalan.

This chapter will propose an explanation for the limitations of the DAANES in exiting Westphalian state dynamics, along with the aspect of global capitalism, namely domestic and external core-periphery tendencies, the dominance of the private sector and unsustainable modes of production, through the testing of four interlinked hypotheses:

H0: U.S. and Russian involvement significantly increased DAANES's war-making capacity.

H1: Increased war-making led to improved state-making, extraction, and protection capacity.

H2: Increased state-making and extractive capacities improved DAANES's protection function.

H3: The Westphalian genesis of DAANES structured its reproduction of statist and capitalist forms, impeding a break from the state model.

These hypotheses, which informed the whole research conducted for this thesis about the political and economic structures of the DAANES, were tested one by one as they build on each other, ultimately leading the present inquiry to H3, which is the main contribution of the chapter, and, by extension, this thesis.

3.2 Hypothesis 0: U.S. and Russian involvement significantly increased the war-making capacity of DAANES forces

Tilly identified four self-reinforcing capacities of entities in 16th-century Europe which later formed the nation states of our time: war-making, protection, extraction, and state-making capacities (Tilly 1985). His causal chain of state formation starts with “the differential success of some power holders

in 'external' struggles [which] establishes the difference between an 'internal' and an 'external' arena for the deployment of force” (Tilly 1985, 185). This implies a significant increase in the war-making capacity of an actor in an arena of multiple contenders, which enables a degree of success in establishing prolonged territorial control, thereby opening the conceptual and physical space for distinguishing a domestic sphere also referred to as a protection racket (Tilly 1985).

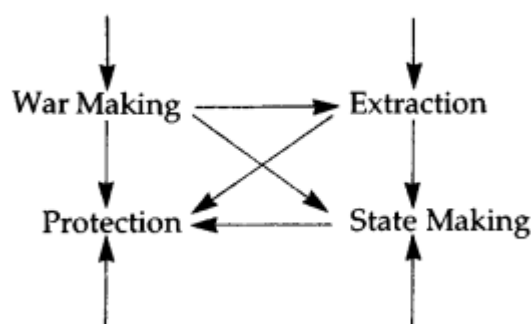


Figure 1 (Tilly 1985, 183)

Before 2011, the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad maintained Syria under highly centralised authoritarian control, with a relative monopoly on organised violence within the official borders of the country, except for the small strip around the Golan Heights annexed by Israel. This situation changed dramatically with the outbreak and escalation of the Syrian Civil War in 2011–2012, which plunged the country and the region into a complex, chaotic, and rapidly shifting power matrix. During the early stages of the conflict, the Assad regime lost significant control over the country's territory, holding only around 16% of the inhabited areas in Syria by 2015 (Noack and Steckelberg 2019).

This phase of conflict, marked by a retreating central authority, entailed multiple crucial developments that would shape the formation and future of new entities such as the DAANES. Most

notably, the Assad regime was forced to withdraw from large parts of the country, in part to consolidate its forces on other frontlines, and in part due to pressure from various armed groups, creating a power vacuum in peripheral regions with historically limited governmental presence (Interview 1). Examples include the north-western region of Idlib, where Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham now governs, and the north-eastern regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane, where the PYD declared autonomy in 2014, establishing three cantons.

Beyond the well-documented collapse of central control, which allowed the DAANES to emerge as a regional actor in north-east Syria (Schmidinger 2020, 12), the Syrian Civil War introduced a multitude of sub-, inter-, and state-level actors into the armed conflicts unfolding in the region. These included non-state armed groups operating across borders, such as ISIL and forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, as well as foreign state powers including the United States, Russia, Iran, Israel, and Turkey, each operating through local proxies ranging from long-established transnational organisations like Hezbollah to newly armed Syrian militias, such as the Turkey-backed FSA.

In the context of north-east Syria, multiple actors sought to fill the vacuum left by the Assad regime, as discussed in Chapter II. These included various local parties and umbrella organisations, such as the ENKS/KNC and the PYD, the latter of which ultimately succeeded in consolidating control. This success clearly stemmed from the military effectiveness of its armed forces, the YPG (Schmidinger 2020, 14), itself an outcome of several factors that enabled the PYD to secure direct and indirect military support from the United States, Russia, and the Assad regime.

The relationship between the PYD/SDF and the Assad regime throughout the war was marked by contradiction and pragmatism. It is best characterised as a toleration of the DAANES by the central state out of necessity, as the regime struggled to recover territory from rebel groups and resist incursions by Turkey (Gunes and Lowe 2015, 5). The greatest existential threat both to the DAANES and, from Damascus's perspective to Syrian sovereignty, was the Turkish invasion. This shared adversary led to a fragile, tactical collaboration between the regime and the PYD/YPG-led DAANES, albeit punctuated by recurring clashes.

The Russian military presence introduced similar dynamics. Russia intervened in 2015 to support the Assad regime after it had lost most of the country. Russian airstrikes, while occasionally targeting YPG positions, were primarily directed at FSA rebels and other groups. This support is documented to have benefitted YPG military campaigns, including the capture of Menagh Air Base (Barfi 2016, 4). Such strategic alignments granted the PYD/YPG a comparative advantage over other armed contenders. Nevertheless, the most extensive improvement to the DAANES's war-making capacity came through U.S. involvement (Schmidinger 2020, 16).

In a 2016 piece by the Washington Institute, Barfi summarises the scale of U.S. support to the YPG between 2014 and 2015:

“In 2014, U.S. airstrikes helped the YPG dislodge IS from the northern Syrian border town of Kobane. Since then, Washington and the Syrian Kurdish fighters have coordinated other airstrikes in the northern provinces of Hasaka and Raqqa. As the YPG increasingly became the most effective fighting force against the jihadists, Washington amplified its assistance. In October 2015, U.S. planes airdropped fifty tons of ammunition in one hundred discrete bundles for a YPG-backed Sunni Arab

group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Later that month, about fifty U.S. Special Forces operatives arrived in PYD-controlled territory to train and equip its fighters. And recently, U.S. forces took over an expanded airstrip south of the PYD-controlled town of Rumeilan to more easily resupply the SDF troops and deliver weapons.” (Barfi 2016, 2)

This, and further sustained support by the United States throughout the conflict, dramatically enhanced the YPG/SDF’s war-making capacity. This translated into military success through access to advanced training, weaponry, ammunition, and continuous air support (Barfi 2016). The resulting increase in war-making capacity in turn:

1. Elevated the legitimacy and popularity of the PYD/SDF as the primary protection provider against existential threats such as ISIL, thereby marginalising internal political competitors such as the ENKS/KNC (Schmidinger 2020, 14);
2. Enabled the expansion of territorial control to include majority non-Kurdish areas rich in extractable resources, particularly oil, which became the core revenue stream of the DAANES, thereby enhancing its extraction capacity (Xelil et al. 2025);
3. In combination with the above factors, created the opportunity for institutional consolidation of the DAANES administration and the facilitation of its state-making structures, entrenching the entity within Westphalian dynamics.

3.3 Hypothesis 1: Increased war-making capacity led to improved protection, extraction, and state-making capacities of the DAANES

With the involvement of the United States after 2014, the YPG-led SDF forces achieved major victories against ISIL and other armed groups, most notably the capture of the de facto ISIL capital, Raqqa (Tejel 2020, 25). These military successes had a dual effect: they solidified the PYD/YPG as the primary provider of protection against external threats to the initially declared three cantons, and they facilitated the marginalisation of internal political contenders. In Tillyan terms, the PYD/YPG

gained the capacity to eliminate or neutralise enemies of their client population, most visibly ISIL, thereby assuming the role and reputation of a legitimate protector in north-east Syria (Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019). At the same time, the increased PYD/YPG popularity and consolidation of military authority enabled a state-making dynamic in which internal rivals such as the ENKS/KNC were sidelined. This marginalisation is evident in several key developments, including the PYD's proclamation of regional autonomy and the successive implementation of constitutions explicitly endorsing democratic confederalism, in direct contrast to the Kurdish nationalist agenda of the ENKS/KNC (Burç 2020, 85). The political structures of the cantons and their electoral processes are openly denounced and boycotted by the DAANES's most significant opposition, which now exerts minimal influence in the region. The clear domination of the PYD/YPG, and the blurred lines between the political party and its military wing, as well as the latter's influence over the SDF, is exemplified by the role of Mazloum Abdi, a former PKK and current YPG officer, currently negotiating on behalf of the whole DAANES with the interim government (van Wilgenburg 2025)

The military success of the SDF led to the conquest of territories beyond the initial three cantons of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane, including strategically significant regions such as Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij, and Deir ez-Zor. These gains placed the SDF in control of areas responsible for approximately 75% of Syria's hydrocarbon production and two-thirds of its grain output (Clevenger 2021, 27). The DAANES derives the majority of its income from taxes collected in these territories and from the sale of oil (Xelil et al. 2025; Clevenger 2021). This highlights the critical increase in extractive

opportunities that followed from the SDF's military advances, which the DAANES has actively utilised, despite facing considerable infrastructural challenges (Xelil et al. 2025).

Nov 2019



- Kurdish-led forces
- Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and Turkish military
- Turkey's proposed "safe zone"
- Jihadist forces
- Syrian rebels
- Syrian government
- Oil fields
- Gas fields

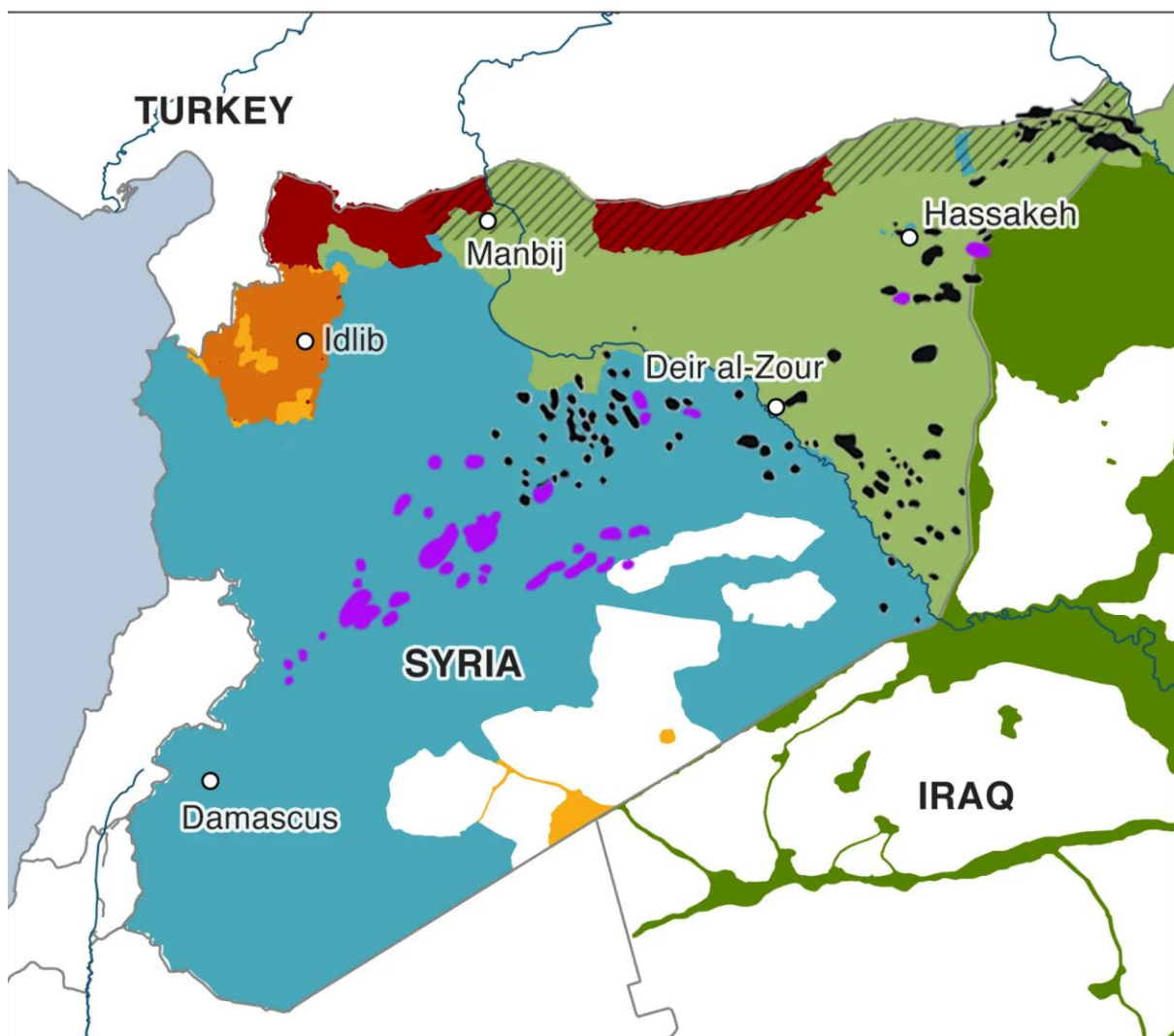


Figure 2 (Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit, as reproduced in BBC News 2019)

3.4 Hypothesis 2: Increased state-making and extractive capacities improved the protection functions of the DAANES

Over the past eleven years, the DAANES has undergone continuous transformation in its territorial reach, institutional development, and administrative capacity. This rapid pace of institutional change is reflected in the adoption of three different constitutions in 2014, 2016, and 2023, each revising the entity's administrative framework and formal identity (Rojava Information Center 2023). While maintaining its ideological commitment to democratic confederalism, the polity has experienced significant bureaucratic consolidation (Xelîl et al. 2025). As one DAANES official explained:

“Since its establishment, the DAANES has transitioned from revolutionary, grassroots structures to more institutionalised and codified administrative systems. In the early years, governance relied heavily on informal, community-driven assemblies. Over time, we have established formal governance bodies, legal codes, civil registries, and ministries that operate according to clear administrative procedures.” (Xelîl et al. 2025)

The 2023 constitution contains 134 articles, formalising a complex multi-level political system that prescribes representation and decision-making from the community level to a federal structure encompassing seven cantons, with executive, legislative, and judicial functions institutionalised at each level (DAANES 2023). This formalisation of the political and administrative system has strengthened the entity's capacity for control and oversight over political activity and civil society within its territory, with PYD/SDF affiliates occupying leading positions across all three branches of the governing structure (Schmidinger 2020, 14-16).

Additionally, to the greater control of political organisation within North East Syria, the DAANES's governing framework also formalise and explicitly legitimise the use of violence by governing institutions, and the SDF in specific. Article 111 of the current constitution both states that "The Syrian Democratic Forces are the legitimate defence forces in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria" and renders the grassroot elements of security provision (Community Protection Forces) in North East Syria under the SDF and the legislative arm of the DAANES (Peoples' Democratic Council) through passages such as "The organizations of the Community Protection Forces are organized under a joint general command, and this general command is accountable to the Peoples' Democratic Council and to the Syrian Democratic Forces [...]" (DAANES 2023, Article 111). This centralisation and legitimisation of the use of force reinforces the capacity of the DAANES to oversee protection functions in North East Syria.

Over time, the extractive capacities of the DAANES also increased from the point of its initial formation, which in turn significantly contributed to its capacity to continue its protection function in North East Syria. One significant factor, covered above and in Chapter II, is the capture and holding of territories with crucial natural resources such as oil and gas by the DAANES, which constitute one of its main income sources to this day (Xelil et al. 2025). The other major factor in the increase of extractive capacities is the solidification of oversight of financial and economic activities by the polity, from border security collecting tariffs, to a multilevel internal tax system supervised by the General Organization for Financial Supervision and Accountability (DAANES 2023, Article 113). This body, along with the other institutions overseeing the economic life in North East Syria, are all formed and report to the Peoples' Democratic Council, the legislative body of the DAANES.

This centralisation of capital flows, combined with the mostly intact private sector in north East Syria discussed in Chapter II, points toward the Tillyan dynamic of establishing regular taxation with the collaboration of capitalists to secure the steady flow of capital, as a means to continue state functions (Tilly 1985, 172).

3.5 Hypothesis 3: The Westphalian genesis of DAANES structured its reproduction of statist and capitalist forms, impeding a break from the state model.

As the previous sections have shown, the statist and capitalist structures present in North East Syria, discussed in Chapter II, not only persist, but follow a causal pattern that aligns with Tilly's model of state formation. These dynamics place the polity on a trajectory that structurally inhibits any full exit from the very frameworks it seeks to transcend.

The Rojava Revolution, which eventually evolved into the DAANES, was initiated in the power vacuum created by the Assad regime's military withdrawal and was escalated and sustained by the war-making capacity of the YPG/SDF, significantly amplified by extensive U.S. military support. The project of autonomous self-governance was led primarily by these armed forces, which consolidated territorial control and gained legitimacy through the effective protection of the local population. However, this reliance on military capacity in the face of ongoing threats, from defeating ISIL and dealing with its remnants, Turkish invasions, and persistent armed conflict, produced a structural need for centralised decision-making and resource extraction. In turn, this necessitated the state-making processes described above, as entities that conform to Westphalian state functions remain the most successful protection rackets in the current global order.

The continued pressures arising from a constant state of war, which necessitated the centralisation of power and resources, also made the securement of steady flow of resources crucial, in order to be able to continue functioning, which makes the centralised taxation of Tillyan “clients” unavoidable. Furthermore, in this context, the disruption of the private sector, or the production of crucial resources such as oil and gas to fulfil the ideological prescriptions of democratic confederalism in existing statist and exploitative capitalist structures bear incomparable opportunity costs, due to these sources provide the majority of DAANES funds.

Despite persisting problems with corruption, favouritism, and lack of transparency, the output of resource extraction through statist models compromising the ideological narratives of the polity were documented to be used in combating Turkish invading forces, as well as to provide public services and food security to the population of North East Syria (Clevenger 2021, 35), signalling the urgency of resource extraction and allocation.

The continued pressures of war required the DAANES not only to centralise authority but also to ensure a steady flow of resources to maintain its operations. This made centralised taxation and economic oversight, both being characteristics of the Tillyan dynamic between coercion and capital, effectively unavoidable. In this context, attempts to disrupt or collectivise the private sector, or to reorient production of key resources such as oil and gas in line with the ideological tenets of democratic confederalism, presented unaffordable opportunity costs, as these sectors, which remain largely statist and capitalist in organisation, continue to provide the bulk of DAANES's revenue.

Despite ongoing issues of corruption, clientelism, and limited transparency, the revenues generated through these statist and extractive models have been used not only to fund military defence against

Turkish aggression, but also to deliver public services and maintain food security for the population of North East Syria (Xelil et al. 2025). This signals how resource extraction and allocation remain essential for the polity's survival, even at the cost of ideological coherence.

The structural trajectory of the DAANES, forged through war-making, solidified through centralised extraction, and institutionalised through state-making, is therefore illustrative of the broader limitations facing anti-statist and anti-capitalist revolutionary movements operating within the global system. The case of the DAANES exemplifies the pattern described by Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein, and echoed by Öcalan himself, in which anti-systemic movements “have come to power in specific state structures operating within the interstate system” and have subsequently “been caught in the constraints of this system” (Arrighi et al. 1989, 77; Öcalan 2017, 52).

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a structural explanation for the observed discrepancies between the ideological narratives of the DAANES and the political-economic realities outlined in Chapter II, through the application of Charles Tilly's model of state formation and the testing of four interrelated hypotheses. As the research confirmed all four hypotheses, from the impact of foreign intervention on war-making capacity, to the reinforcement of extraction and protection, and finally the entrenchment of statist forms, the findings point towards the relevance of Tilly's model, in identifying state functions and the dynamics of state formation in contemporary cases.

This chapter aims to contribute to the literature by demonstrating how political entities founded on explicitly anti-statist and anti-capitalist principles, such as the DAANES, may reproduce the very

structures they seek to overcome due to structural pressures embedded in the international state system and global capitalist economy. To be precise, the findings of this thesis do not aim to confirm or discredit commitment within the DAANES towards democratic confederalism. Rather, they suggest that the significant ideological compromises observable in the polity's structure is not solely the result of internal failings or strategic pragmatism but are also highly predetermined by its Tillyan genesis and material embeddedness in a world-system that favours state-like formations.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate democratic confederalism and its implementation by the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), with particular focus on its interaction with modern statehood and global capitalism. Drawing on the works of Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Samir Amin, it developed a testable theoretical framework to examine whether a polity formed in the aftermath of state collapse and war could meaningfully depart from the structures of the Westphalian state system and global capitalism, as envisioned by Öcalan and the principles of democratic confederalism. Additionally, it deployed Tilly's model of state formation in offering an explanation on the contrast found between ideology and practice within the polity.

The first chapter outlined the conceptual and ideological foundations of democratic confederalism, building a bridge between the non-academic writings of Abdullah Öcalan and existing political science literature. These theoretical tools were then used in the next chapter to examine the DAANES's ideological consistency, as well as its material practices, institutional structures, and patterns of governance.

Chapter II demonstrated that while the DAANES has maintained a rhetorical and symbolic commitment to democratic confederalism, the realities on the ground tell a more complex story. Political authority remains highly centralised around the PYD and SDF, and the structures of coercion, extraction, and administration align closely with the classical functions of the modern state. Similarly, efforts to transform the political economy have been constrained by structural pressures, wartime destruction, and external threats, leaving core elements of capitalist modernity

intact, including reliance on oil, monoculture agriculture, and trade dependencies. Despite formal support for cooperatives and ecological sustainability, implementation has been partial and limited in scale.

Chapter III offered an explanation for this divergence between ideology and practice. By testing hypotheses derived from Tilly's state formation model, it found that the DAANES's wartime origins, foreign military backing, and need for survival in a competitive geopolitical environment contributed to the reproduction of state-like structures and practices. These findings suggest that even radical political projects may be shaped and constrained by the material conditions of their emergence, leading to outcomes that echo the very systems they set out to reject.

In sum, the emergence and consolidation of the DAANES offers a rich and revealing case for contemporary political theory. Beyond presenting a relatively recent instance of *de facto* state formation, it illustrates both the potential and the limitations of ideological experimentation in contexts shaped by conflict, occupation, and economic dependency. Although it has not succeeded in exiting the frameworks of the state and global capitalism, its continued existence and partial reforms suggest that alternative models of governance can persist under exceptional conditions. Future research would benefit from access to more extensive primary sources, including economic data, to provide deeper insight into the dynamics explored in this thesis.

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Appendices

Figure 1: Tilly, Charles. 1985. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." In *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, 183. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

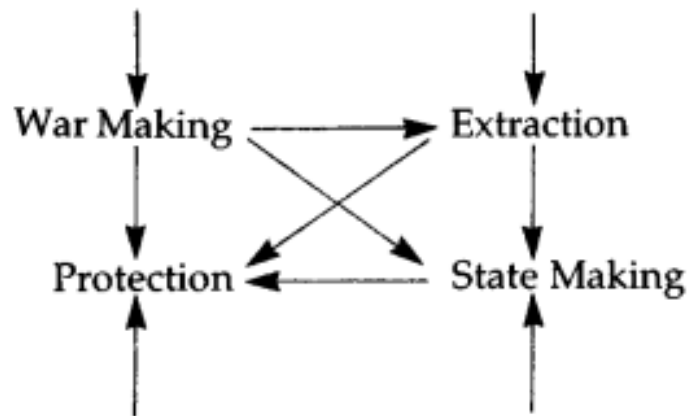
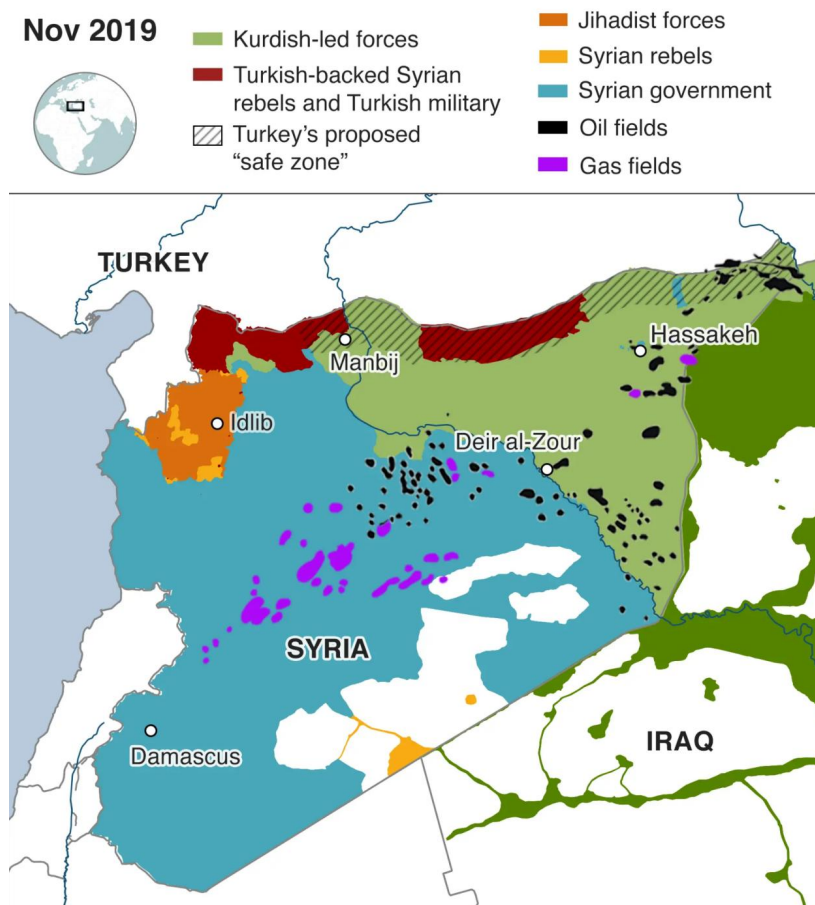


Figure 2: Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit, as reproduced in BBC News 2019 in BBC News. 2019. "Syria War: Who Controls What?" *BBC News*, November 7, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/50464561>.



Interview Protocol

Purpose Introduction (to be read aloud at the beginning):

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I'm conducting interviews as part of my master's thesis, which explores how the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria functions in practice, especially in comparison to traditional state structures and global capitalist systems.

I'm particularly interested in understanding the lived realities of governance, economic organization, and social life, beyond official narratives, from the perspective of people actively involved in the region, like yourself. This is not an evaluation or audit, it's a space to share your experiences, thoughts, and observations, which will be anonymised if not requested otherwise by you.

Consent Script (to be read aloud):

Before we begin, I'd like to go over a few important points about your rights and the use of this interview:

- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can skip any question or stop the interview at any time, for any reason.
- This interview will be recorded (audio/video) for transcription purposes. Only I, as the researcher, will have access to the raw recording and transcript. Note that I will use transcription software in the processing of the material.
- Your identity will be kept confidential unless you give explicit permission to be named. In the thesis and any related work, your comments will be anonymised unless otherwise agreed.
- I may quote or paraphrase parts of your answers in the thesis, always respecting the context and your anonymity.
- You can review any statements attributed to you before publication, if you'd like.

Do you consent to participate in this interview under these conditions?

(Wait for verbal confirmation or written consent if needed.)

Do you also consent to the interview being recorded for transcription purposes?

(Confirm this separately.)

Question Matrix

Question ID	Target Group(s)	Theme	Exact Question	Sub-Questions / Prompts
Q1	All	Governance	Can you describe your role or work within the DAANES or the broader region?	
Q2	All	Governance	Who makes important decisions in the region, and how are they made?	Are these decisions made collectively or hierarchically?
Q3	All	Governance	How different is the DAANES from the Syrian state in how it operates day-to-day?	
Q4	Researchers	Governance	Apart from the recognition as such, can you highlight major differences between the DAANES and a classic Westphalian state?	I am mainly interested in internal dynamics identified by Charles Tilly, focusing on state building, protection, economic extraction, and war making.
Q5	All	Governance	How do you see the DAANES as an entity conduct international relations?	Has it been representing and negotiating primarily by itself, or has it been conducting its business separately from the central government?
Q21	Researchers	Economy	To what extent do you see the DAANES successfully break with the main elements of 'capitalist modernity' (as defined by Öcalan and the DAANES constitution), such as exploitative modes of production and value chains previously present in the region?	The political communication of the DAANES often references the distancing the economic life of the community from exploitative modes of production, establishing agricultural and industrial collectives, and environmental policies.
Q22	All	Economy	What is the role of the private sector in the DAANES economy?	Is it different than under the Assad regime in the past

				or other parts of Syria?
Q2 3	All	Econ omy	The territories controlled by the DAANES include the main oil fields of Syria. What is the role of oil in the DAANES economy?	
Q2 4	All	Econ omy	The current DAANES cantons are also often regarded as the 'bread basket of Syria', referring to the crucial role the region plays in Syrian agriculture. Did the emergence of DAANES change anything on agricultural production in the region?	
Q2 5	All	Econ omy	There have been contradicting reports of illegal trade and tight political control within the DAANES, how do you see these issues evolve in the past 10 years?	Who are the main actors shaping and determining the day-to-day economy of the region?
Q2 6	All	Econ omy	What do you see as the main sources of funding for the DAANES?	Can you give examples (e.g., taxes, donations, trade)?
Q2 7	All	Econ omy	How do you see the public perception on the economic system under the DAANES?	To what extent is this system determined on a local level?
Q2 8	All	Econ omy	Öcalan wrote about oppressive structures which are imposed by the economic centres to rural areas, did the DAANES influence dynamics between villages and cities in any way?	Did the DAANES decentralise any economic or political decision making which left rural communities with more autonomy?
Q3 1	All	Secu rity	Which groups ensure safety and order in your area?	Is it consistent or does it vary across places?
Q3 2	All	Secu rity	Some would argue that the DAANES could only emerge and can only sustain itself because of the Syrian Civil War. How do you see the role of war in the formation and the everyday existence of the DAANES?	Do you see the DAANES continuing without an imminent security threat such as ISIS or Turkish invasions?
Q4 1	All	Ideol ogy	Which ideas of democratic self-rule do you think are being practiced well within the DAANES?	[if explanation is needed] The idea of democratic confederalism as put by Öcalan and the DAANES

				is local communities deciding on the most important things for themselves, within small local councils. Other principles include the equality before any institution regardless of gender, race, ethnic, religious or sectarian identity, and the protection of the environment.
Q4 2	All	Ideology	Do you see any contradictions between what the DAANES is communicating and the realities on the ground?	Authoritarian decision-making, continued environmental damage, or discrimination of any groups in society?