

SYRIA

Opinions and Attitudes

on Federalism, Decentralization, and
the experience of the Democratic
Self-Administration

May 2016

Survey Study



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The Day After (TDA) is a Syrian organization that works on supporting democratic transition in Syria. The scope of its work revolves around the following areas: the rule of law, transitional justice, security sector reform, designing electoral systems and electing the constituent assembly, constitutional designing, economic reform and social policies.

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Introduction

Since the Democratic Union Party (PYD) announced the establishment of the Democratic Self-Administration, discussions around decentralization in Syria have remarkably come into light. Amplifying the debate further was the call of Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, to test the possibility of establishing federal rule in Syria. What is particularly interesting is that this call came in harmony with US Secretary of State John Kerry's remarks about the possibility of dividing Syria, in comments made during preparations for the Geneva III conference, which is expected to set the parameters for transition in Syria and the country's future governance model. In addition, the Democratic Self-Administration declared a federal system while this report was being drafted.

But what does the Syrian people want? Are they seeking a federal state? What are their perceptions of decentralization and the experience of the Democratic Self-Administration? What are their attitudes towards it? Who endorses it and what do they seek out of it? What are the motives for rejecting it? Away from ideological analyses, it is difficult to find serious attempts to answer these questions as the available field studies on this subject have been almost entirely lacking thus far.

In this new survey, and in keeping with its previous work, The Day After identifies the opinions and attitudes of Syrians towards the issues that major powers put forward without having first taking into account the views of people on the ground. There is a clear need to strengthen the participation of Syrians in deciding their own fate and in determining the form of governance in their future state, as well as in finding a solution for one of the most serious problems that affects them: organizing and administering the country in any future transitional period.

By understanding the perceptions of people on the ground, and identifying what they want and do not want, this study can help to determine points of commonality between different groups in Syria, enhancing the chances of success in the peace-building process.

This is a crucial step forward in the wake of the devastating war that has deepened hostilities between social groups, destroyed the Syrian social fabric, and given birth to a state of polarization in society at the sectarian, ethnic and ideological levels.

This research is divided into three chapters:

- In the first chapter, we present the opinions and attitudes of respondents towards the issue of federalism
- In the second chapter, we present respondents' opinions and attitudes towards decentralization. Prevailing perceptions on decentralization are identified by asking people to comment on its advantages and disadvantages
- The third and final chapter explores people's opinions and attitudes towards the Democratic Self-Administration, and identifies people's motives for either endorsing or rejecting it.

Terminologies and procedural definitions

Federalism

Federalism is a form of governance in which state power is shared between a central government on the one hand, and various constituent provincial units at the regional level on the other. Each region possesses its own system of executive, legislative, and judicial jurisdictions, and operates independently of the federal authority, providing it does not conflict with the federal constitution.

In our present research, we have discussed the possibility of Syria turning into a federal state that would include semi-autonomous regions.

Decentralization

Unlike centralized governance systems, where power and authority are monopolized by a single central government, decentralization implies the transfer and distribution of powers between the central government and local authorities.

In this research, we consider varying degrees of decentralization and their likely impact on Syria. Because of the fluidity of the concept of decentralization, and the various ways in which people understand it, we opted not to define the term in the questionnaire. Instead, we focused on discussing the concept of decentralization according to degrees based on the Syrian situation. We asked respondents about decentralization according to one central concept: the size of the powers allocated to local authorities. Therefore, our research includes multiple and incremental conceptual levels, which include: allocating greater powers to local authorities than what they already possess, broadening their mandate, and to the highest levels of decentralization raised in this questionnaire that manifests in a "Federal state with semi-autonomous regions

Democratic Self-Administration

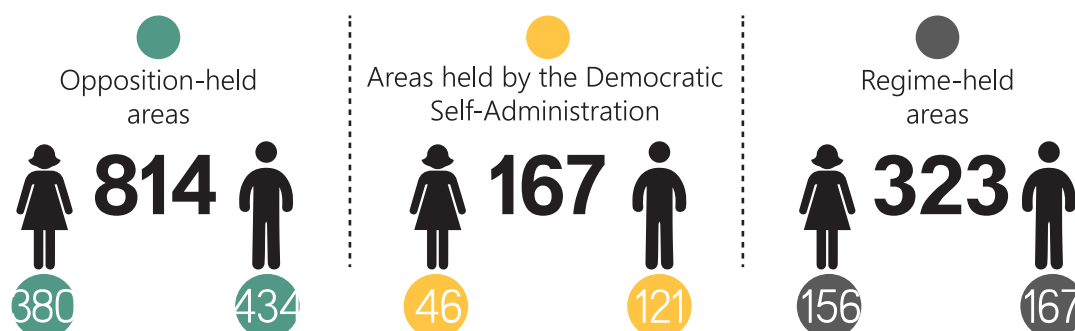
The Democratic Union Party (PYD), co-chaired by Saleh Muslim, paved the way for announcing a "Democratic Self-Administration" in 2014 as a form of self-governance based on the principle of decentralization. Following the support given by the international coalition and the Russian Federation to the People's Protection Units (YPG) and what is known as the Syrian National Democratic Council, this government significantly expanded that it ended up controlling about 15% of Syria. It is composed of three provinces: Al Jazira (Al Hassakah), Efrin, and Kobani.

Regime areas/ Opposition areas/ Democratic Self-administration areas

These titles represent the areas and territory that are currently controlled by the prevailing powers in that area (the regime, the opposition, or the Democratic Self-Administration). The exact areas and the powers holding them are represented clearly in the map and figure 1. Our sample does not include any area under the control of the Islamic State, or "Daash."

Research Methodology and Sample

In the period between November 10th 2015 and January 4th 2016, The Day After (TDA) conducted a field survey across different regions in Syria, with the aim of identifying the most prominent opinions and trends on federalism, decentralization, and the experience of the Democratic Self-Administration. Ten surveyors conducted face-to-face interviews with 1304 respondents, of whom 722 were men and 582 women. Respondents were drawn from different geographical areas in Syria as follows:



Given the current security situation in Syria, it is not possible to obtain a representative sample of the population. As a result, we aimed to collect an indicative sample that would enable us to conduct a comparative analysis between the responses of people from different regional and demographic backgrounds. This allows us to identify the most widely held views and opinions on federalism, decentralization and the experience of the Democratic Self-Administration in Syria.

In addition to our focus on different regions, we have taken into account demographic variables based on ethnicity and religion/sect. While we successfully interviewed respondents from all of our target regional and demographic profiles, the sample size from the Assyrian, Ismaili and Shiite communities was very small (see Table1). The responses from these respondents should therefore be treated with caution. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the sample distribution.

Map: Distribution of samples in Syria

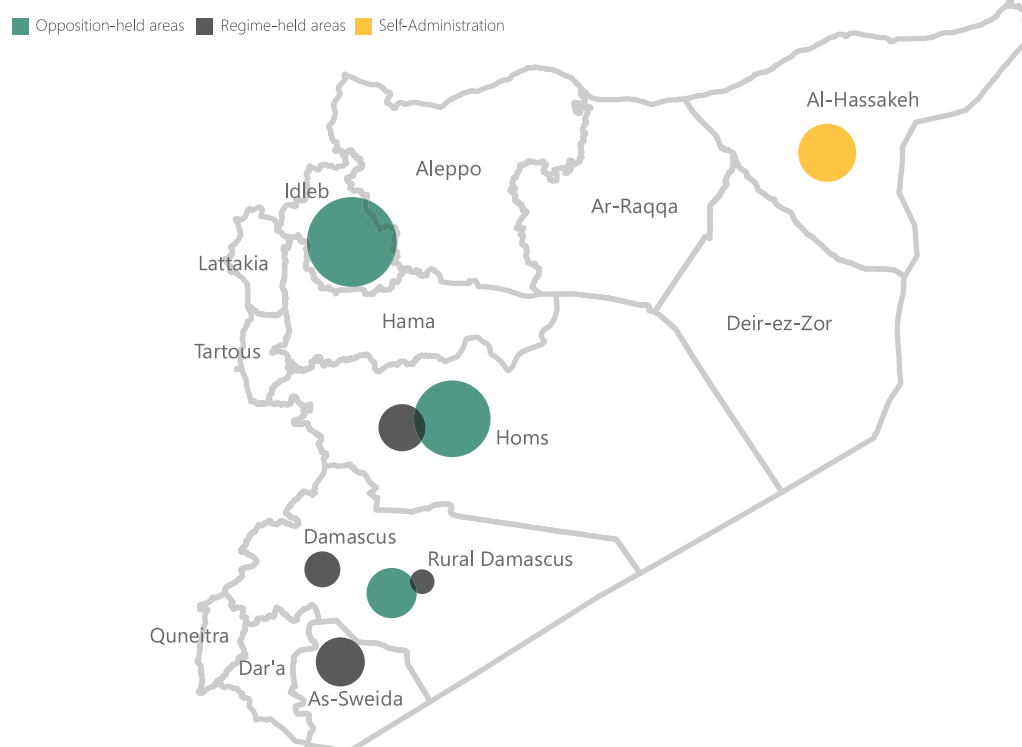


Table 1. Sample Distribution

Province	Religion - Sect							Ethnicity					Number
	Sunni	Alawites	Christian	Ismaili	Shiites	Druze	Prefer not to answer	Arab	Kurd	Assyrian	Prefer not to answer	Other	
Regime held areas													
Homs	10,9%	32,7%	4,5%	0,0%	11,8%	0,0%	40,0%	93,6%	0,9%	0,0%	3,6%	1,9	110
Damascus	59,4%	9,4%	15,6%	15,6%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	90,6%	9,4%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0	64
Damascus Countryside	66,7%	6,7%	3,3%	10,0%	0,0%	13,3%	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0	30
Sweida	0,0%	0,0%	10,1%	0,0%	0,0%	31,1%	58,8%	98,3%	0,0%	0,0%	1,7%	0,0	119
Opposition held areas													
Idlib	97,2%	0,0%	0,8%	0,0%	0,0%	0,3%	1,8%	98,5%	0,0%	0,5%	0,8%	0,2	398
Homs	99,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,0%	99,7%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,3	291
Damascus Countryside	90,4%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	1,6%	0,0%	8,0%	92,0%	0,0%	0,0%	8,0%	0,0	125
Self-administration held areas													
Hasakah	47,3%	0,0%	7,8%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	44,9%	9,0%	75,4%	9,0%	6,6%	0,0	167
Number	937	44	44	13	15	42	209	1120	133	17	30	4	1304

Chapter I

Federalism



To identify respondents' stance on federalism, we asked the following question: What would be your position in the event that it was agreed to transform Syria into a federal state that encompasses several semi-autonomous regions?

It seems that respondents in both regime and opposition-held areas agree on rejecting federalism, with the largest percentage of respondents from both areas saying they strongly oppose it: 44% in opposition-held areas, and 57% in regime-held areas (Figures 2 and 3). It is also noticeable how the (low) percentage of proponents of federalism is slightly higher in opposition-held areas in comparison with regime-held areas (15.4% of respondents as opposed to 5.9%.)

Proponents of federalism form a near consensus in Self-Administration areas (79.6%), compared to 17.4% of respondents who oppose the concept. Meanwhile, only 7.2% of respondents in Self-Administration areas reported that they were strongly opposed to federalism (Figure 1).

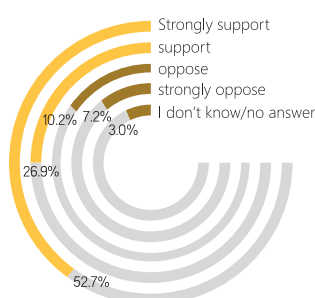


Figure 1: Position on federalism in Self-Administration areas

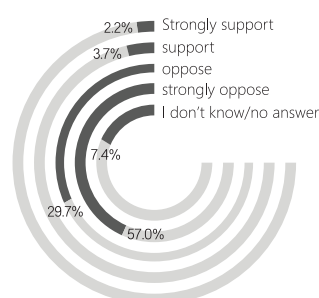


Figure 2: Position on federalism in regime-held areas

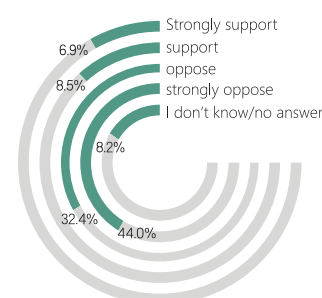
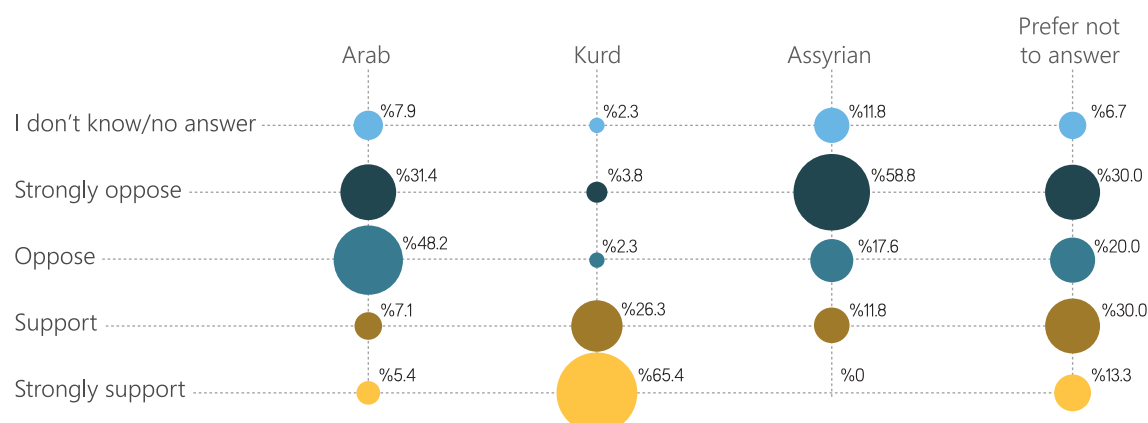


Figure 3: Position on federalism in opposition-held areas

Across all geographical areas sampled, fully half of all Arab respondents said they strongly oppose federalism, while the percentage of Arab respondents who reject the concept rises to 79.6% when we include those who reported they oppose federalism.

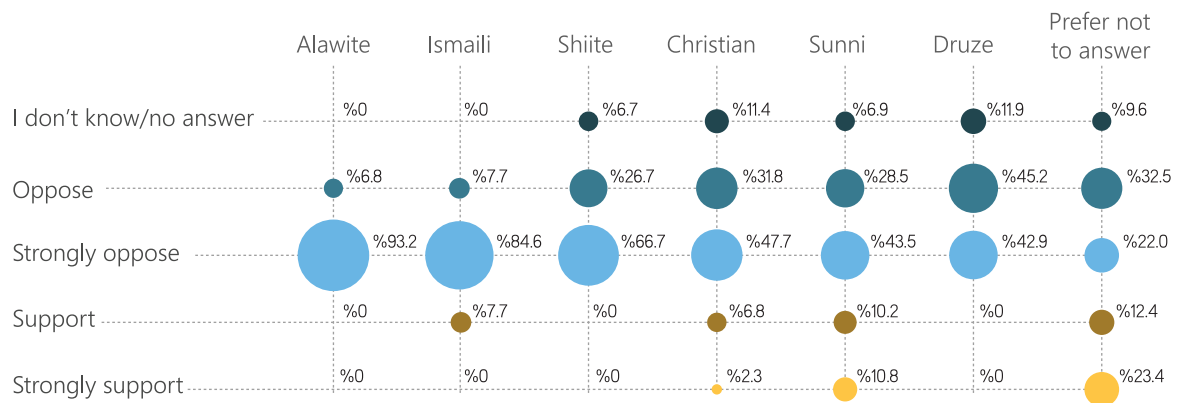
Most Assyrians also provided the same response as their Arab counterparts, with 67.4% opposing federalism, although the percentage of those who strongly oppose it is lower than amongst Arab respondents at 17.6%. The position is reversed amongst Kurdish respondents, where responses indicate a near consensus around endorsing federalism. It is worth noting is that the percentage of those who said they strongly support the concept amounted to 65.4% of all Kurdish respondents (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Position on federalism by ethnicity in the overall sample



Examining the stance on federalism by sect shows that, to a large extent, a majority of respondents across all groups oppose the concept. The very high percentages of those strongly opposed are remarkable: the ratio peaked to a near consensus among Alawites (93.2%), followed by Ismailis and Shiites at 84.60% and 66.70% respectively. Although the percentage of people strongly opposed to federalism was lower among respondents from the remaining sects, it remained relatively high, and at no point fell below 40% (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Position on federalism by sect in the overall sample



Chapter II

Decentralization



To identify respondents' stance on decentralization, we asked the following question: I will show you multiple forms of state organization and administration, and I would like you to please tell which one you think is best suited to administer the future of Syria.

The available answer choices ranged from utmost centralization to utmost decentralization: 1) granting local administration a smaller role and fewer competencies than it currently has; 2) a single government based in the capital that possesses all powers; 3) granting local administration a greater role and competencies than it currently has; 4) local authorities receiving broad administrative competencies in each region or province; 5) a federal state under which several regions enjoy semi-autonomous governance.

More than half of all respondents (55.3%) in opposition-held areas opted for answers aligned with greater decentralization. 16.2% said that they want local authorities to be given greater competencies than that which they currently hold, while 30% were in favor of local authorities with broad administrative competencies. Finally, 9.1% said they want a federal state under which several regions enjoy semi-autonomous governance. This latter answer choice was selected by a majority of respondents in the Democratic Self-Administration areas (73.7%). In regime-held areas, by contrast, only 2.2% of respondents were in favor of a federal state with semi-autonomous regions. Instead, a majority of respondents in regime-held areas (65.6%) rejected any form of decentralization, instead favoring a single government in the capital that possesses all powers (Figure 6).

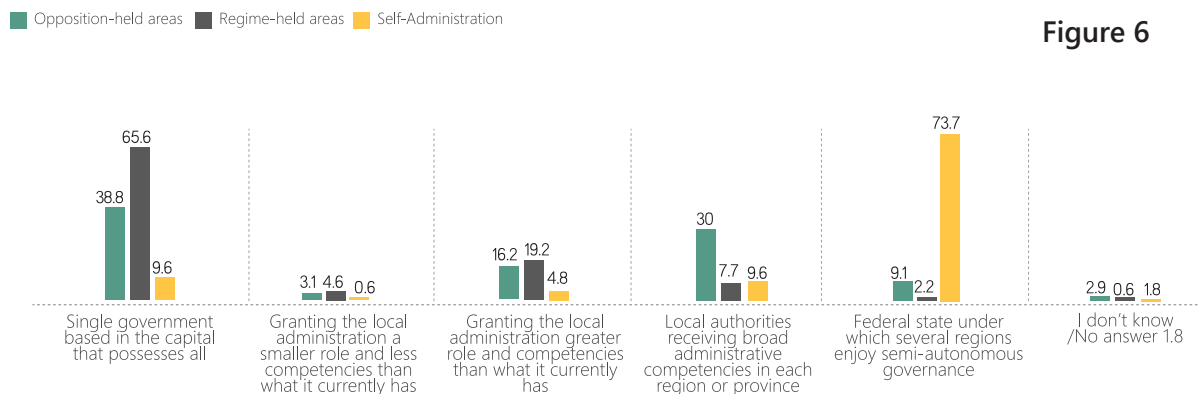


Figure 6

Examining respondents by religion/sect shows how Alawites, Shiites, and Druze agree on rejecting any form of decentralization, and instead have a near consensus for favoring “a single government based in the capital that possesses all powers”. More than half of all Christian respondents also favored this option, although less than a third of Sunni respondents selected it. Popularity for this form of complete centralization was meanwhile lowest among Ismaili respondents. From our sample, Ismailis are the group most enthusiastic about decentralization, with a majority of respondents endorsing the concept. However this does not seem to correspond to support for a federal state, as not a single respondent from the Ismaili community selected this answer.

In short, our results indicate that Sunnis and Ismailis tend to support decentralization while Christians are divided among themselves, and that Alawites, Shiites and Druze completely reject the concept, and instead favor a single government based in the capital that possesses all powers (Table 2).

Analysing the results by ethnicity mirrors significant dissimilarities. Arabs are divided among themselves, although only a small percentage (7.1%) of them were in favor of a federal state that encompasses semi-autonomous regions. However, fully 85.7% of Kurdish respondents opted for the latter option, favoring the most extensive form of decentralization (Table 3).

But what are the different justifications advanced by both proponents and opponents of decentralization and federalism? The following paragraph will explore these issues in more detail.

Table 2. Stance on Decentralization by sect in the overall sample

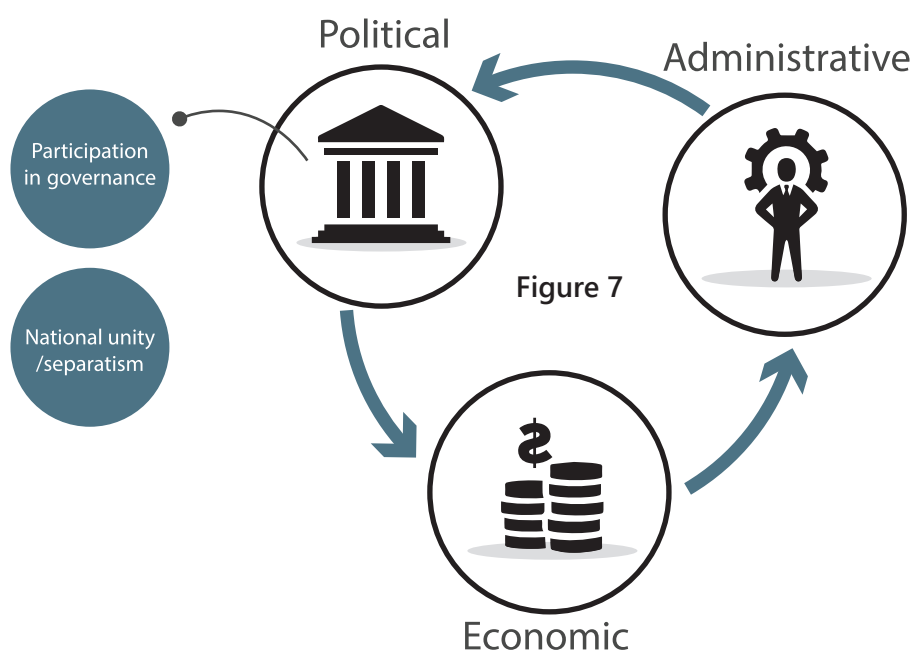
	A single government based in the capital that possesses all powers	Granting the local administration a smaller role and less competencies than what it currently has	Granting the local administration greater role and competencies than what it currently has	Local authorities receiving broad administrative competencies in each region or province	A federal state under which several regions enjoy semi-autonomous governance.	I don't know/ No answer	Number
Sunni	36,5%	3,5%	15,7%	27,4%	14,2%	2,7%	937
Alawites	84,1%	4,5%	9,1%	2,3%	0,0%	0,0%	44
Ismaili	15,4%	7,7%	38,5%	38,5%	0,0%	0,0%	13
Christian	54,5%	0,0%	22,7%	18,2%	4,5%	0,0%	44
Druze	88,1%	0,0%	7,1%	2,4%	0,0%	2,4%	42
Shiites	80,0%	0,0%	20,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	15
Prefer not to answer	43,1%	1,9%	14,4%	6,7%	33,0%	1,0%	209

Table 3. Stance on Decentralization by ethnicity in the overall sample

	A single government based in the capital that possesses all powers	Granting the local administration a smaller role and less competencies than what it currently has	Granting the local administration greater role and competencies than what it currently has	Local authorities receiving broad administrative competencies in each region or province	A federal state under which several regions enjoy semi-autonomous governance.	I don't know/ No answer	Number
Arab	47,0%	3,3%	16,6%	23,8%	7,1%	2,1%	1120
Kurd	3,0%	0,8%	4,5%	4,5%	85,7%	1,5%	133
Assyrian	23,5%	0,0%	17,6%	52,9%	5,9%	0,0%	17
Prefer not answer	26,7%	3,3%	23,3%	10,0%	30,0%	6,7%	30

Prevailing perceptions of decentralization: the advantages and disadvantages

To identify people's perceptions of decentralization, we then asked respondents to say either what they felt were either its advantages or what they felt were its disadvantages, depending on whether or not they had indicated their support for the system in their previous answers. Respondents were asked to select one or more of a series of responses, each of which outlined a potential consequence of federalism. These consequences related to either the political aspect of decentralization (i.e. participation in governance, national unity versus separatism), the administrative aspect, or the economic aspect (Figure 7).



1. Negative perceptions

To understand why people might continue to support the idea of a highly centralized government which retains a full set of powers and authority, we asked respondents who had indicated their opposition to decentralization to identify what they saw as the main disadvantages of the system.

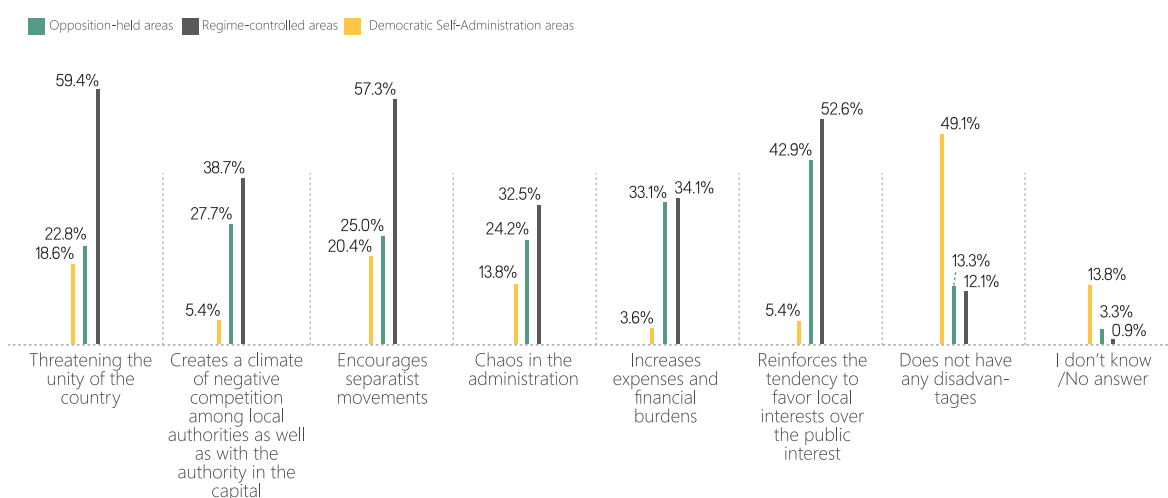
Respondents were asked to choose from six possible options, and, if they chose more than one, to rank their answers based on what they felt was the most serious issue. The six possible options covered issues related to the political, administrative and economic consequences of decentralization:

- Political - three options indicated potential negative consequences of decentralization, ranging in severity from 1) "the tendency to favor local interests over the public interest"; 2) "encouraging separatist movements", and 3) "threatening the unity of the country."
- Administrative – two options were provided: 1) "creating a climate of negative competition among local authorities as well as with the authority in the capital" and 2) "chaos in the administration."
- Economic – one option was provided: "increasing expenses and financial burdens"

By analyzing responses according to geographical area, we note the following:

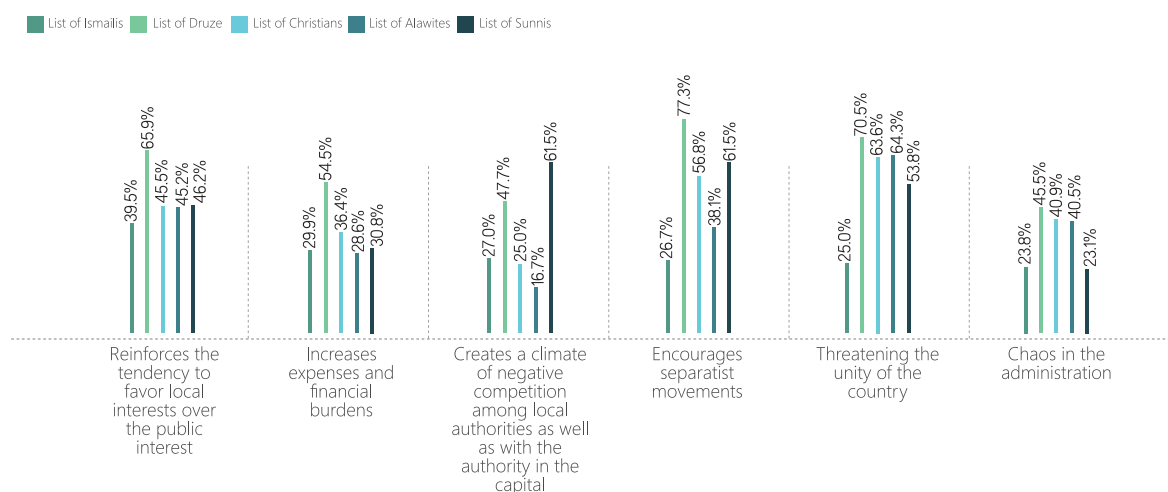
- In opposition-controlled areas, the most prominent aspect cited by respondents as the basis of their concerns over decentralization was the political aspect. Here, the most commonly expressed fear – selected by 42.9% of respondents – was not that of the possibility of separatism, but rather the idea that decentralization would enhance "the tendency to favor local interests over the public interest". The second most commonly cited concern over decentralization was the economic aspect (identified by 33.1% of respondents), followed by the administrative and other political aspects (including the fear of separatism).
- In regime-controlled areas, the political aspects of decentralization were most commonly cited by respondents as the basis for their negative perceptions. Moreover, the two most extreme fears within the political aspect topped the list, with 59% of respondents citing "threatening the unity of the country", and 57% listing "encouraging separatist movements". A further 53% of respondents cited "the tendency to favor local interests over the public interest", while the administrative and economic aspects were less frequently identified.
- In the areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration, political concerns related to the fear of separatism were at the forefront, cited by almost 20% of respondents., Administrative concerns followed, and the economic aspect came at the bottom of the list. However, it is notable that half of the respondents said that there were no disadvantages to decentralization, Compared to only around 13% of respondents who voiced the same opinion in both regime and opposition areas.

Figure 8. Disadvantages of decentralization by area



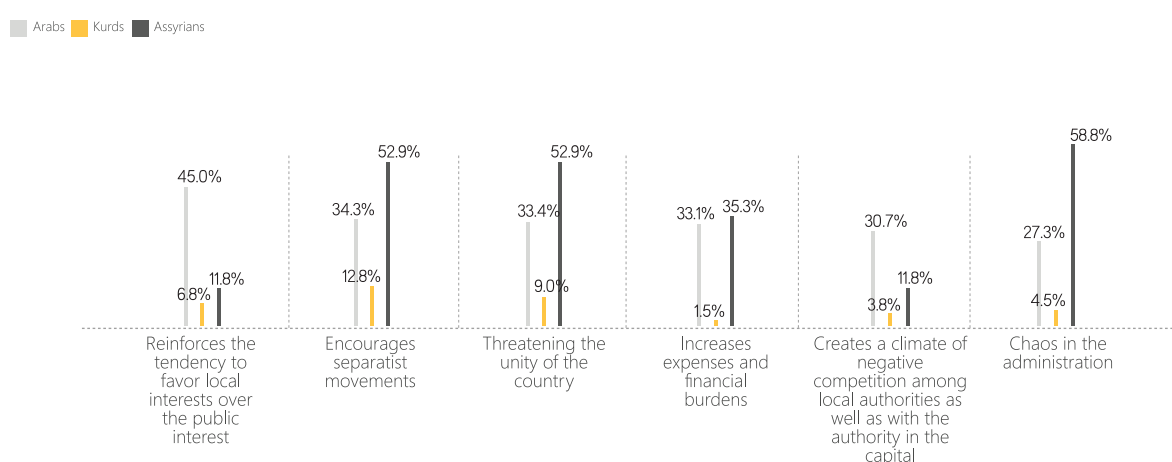
Below we display lists arranged in descending order from the least to most frequently cited choice of each religious sect. Topping the list of the Alawites and Christians are the three political aspects, where those related to fears of separatism top the list at rates exceeding 70%. Political and administrative aspects were the biggest concerns for Druze and Ismaili respondents, cited by more than 60% of people. The economic aspect was the second least cited concern among Druze and Ismaili respondents, while it is the fourth most cited concern for Alawites and the second for Sunnis. (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Disadvantages of decentralization according to religious sect



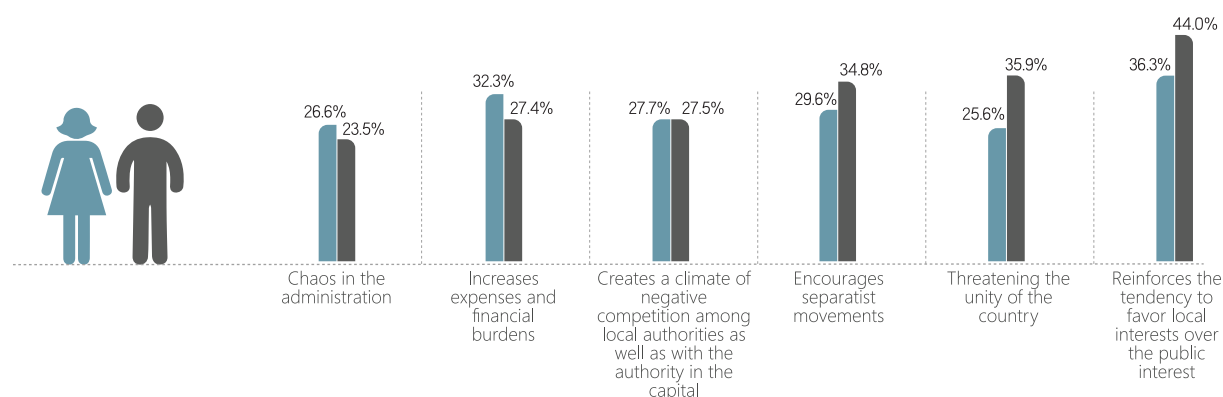
It also seems that respondents tended to prioritize concerns about decentralization differently according to their ethnicity. While political issues came to the fore for both Kurdish and Arab respondents, economic concerns surpassed administrative concerns for Arabs, while they were the least cited issue among Kurds. For Assyrians, meanwhile, a fear of chaos in the country's administration topped their list of concerns, followed by political fears related to separatism (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Disadvantages of decentralization according to ethnicity



Although political aspects topped the list of both men and women respondents, what remains remarkable is the emergence of economic concerns in the list of women. Concerns of an economic dimension ranked second in women respondents' list, but dropped to fifth for men. Fears over the unity of the country meanwhile ranked second for men, but last for women. (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Disadvantages of decentralization according to gender



2. Positive perceptions

To identify positive perceptions, we asked respondents who had indicated their support for decentralization to choose what they felt where the biggest advantages of the system from a range of possible answers. As with negative perceptions, the available responses covered the political aspect of decentralization, the economic aspect, and the administrative aspect. The six possible responses were:

To identify the positive perceptions about decentralization, we asked the respondents about what they think are the positive issues associated with it, and presented seven possible answer choices that incorporate the same three aspects that we presented in the list of cons, and they were as follows:

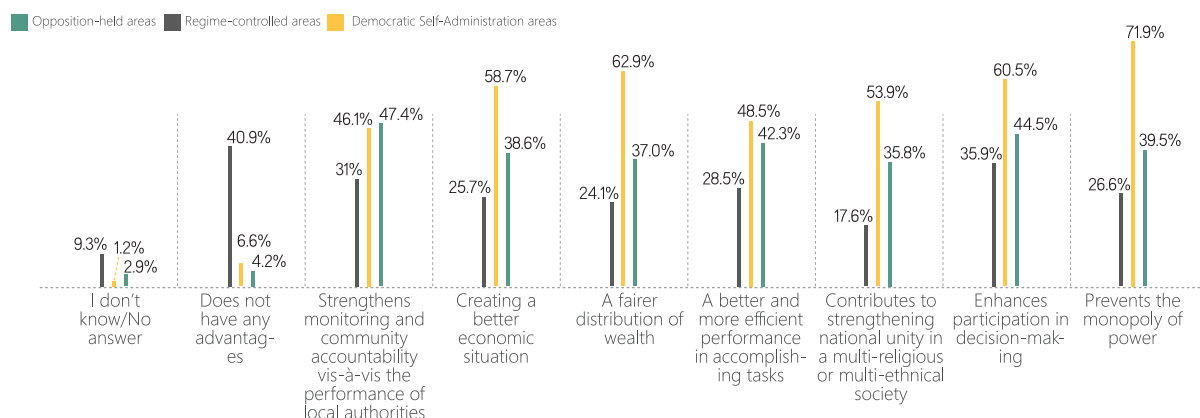
- The political aspect of decentralization: there were two available options. The first related to the issue of participation in governance ("enhancing participation in decision-making", and "preventing the monopoly of power". The second concerns national unity and was in the following form "contributing to strengthening national unity in a multi-religious or multi-ethnic society".
- The economic aspect of decentralization included two available options: "a fairer distribution of wealth" and "creating a better economic situation".
- The administrative aspect also included two options: "strengthening monitoring and community accountability vis-à-vis the performance of local authorities" and "a better and more efficient performance in accomplishing tasks".

By comparing responses according to geographical area, we observed the following:

- The administrative aspect, as well as the political aspect related to participation in governance, ranked top in the advantages mentioned by respondents in opposition-controlled areas. This was followed by the economic aspect, while the issue of national unity came last.
- In areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration, the political aspect – particularly the issue of participation in governance – ranked first in the list. The economic aspect was the second most cited issue, while the administrative aspect and the issue of national unity came last.
- 40% of respondents in regime-controlled areas said decentralization has no advantages. "Enhancing participation in decision-making" (participation in governance) topped the list at 35.9%, followed by "strengthening monitoring and community accountability vis-à-vis the performance of local authorities" (administrative aspect), while national unity came at the bottom of the list. The remaining percentages were proximate to one another to some extent.

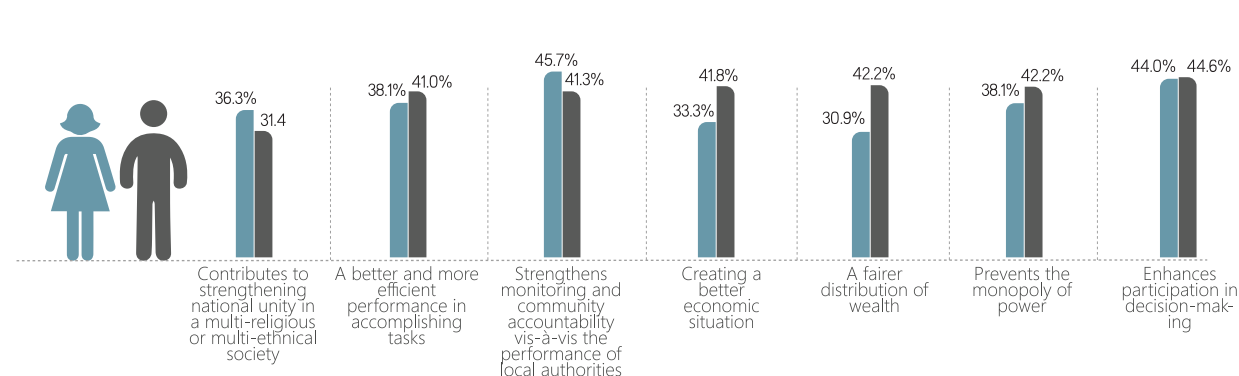
Unlike in regime-controlled areas, a very low percentage of respondents in opposition-held areas said that decentralization has no advantages¹. At the same time, however, and in contrast to areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration, a very low percentage said decentralization has no disadvantages. Therefore, it seems that respondents in opposition-held areas are aware of both the positive and the negative aspects of decentralization. However, despite mentioning at least one advantage of decentralization, a high proportion of respondents in opposition-held areas still said they opposed the system. 38.8% said they want a single government based in the capital that possesses all powers, compared to 55.3% who approved the granting of broader competencies to local authorities (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Advantages of decentralization according to geographical area



In terms of the advantages of allocating broader competencies for local authorities, economic issues come last in women respondents' list while they hold a leading position in the list of men, ranking second and third. One of the administrative aspects comes at the forefront (and supersedes political aspects) in the women's list. In short, women give priority to administrative issues and those associated with participation in governance, while men give priority to participation in the governance and the economic aspect, followed by the administrative over a narrow margin (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Advantages of decentralization according to gender



1- It was less than the percentage in areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration and amounted to 4.2% only.

The economic aspect holds a high rank in the list of Kurdish respondents in comparison to Arab respondents, as it ranked second and third for the formers while it went down to fifth and sixth for the latter, and came last in the list of Assyrians. The issue of national unity has risen to second place for Assyrians, dropped to sixth among Kurds, while it ranked last in the list of Arabs (Figure 14).

The answers of Sunnis, Ismailis, and Christians, were relatively similar in terms of placing national unity at the bottom of the list and tackling issues associated with participation in governance. What is remarkable is that Ismailis place the economic aspect in an advanced rank, as it topped the list along with participation in governance (Figure 15).

Figure 14. Advantages of decentralization according to ethnicity

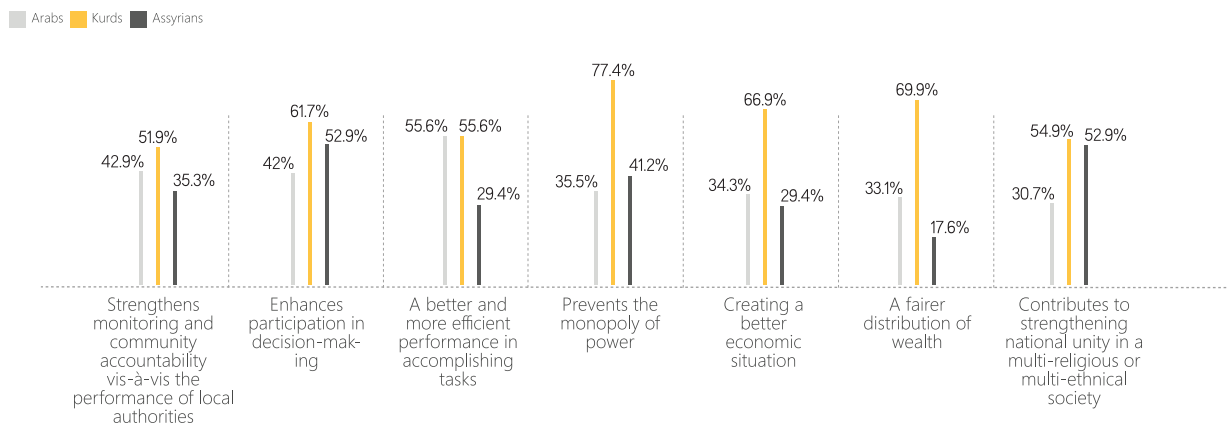
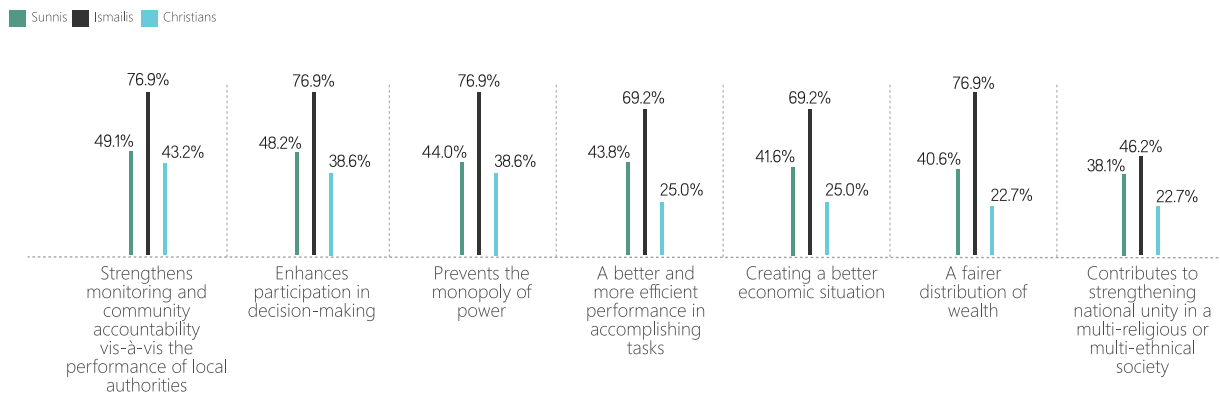


Figure 15. Advantages of decentralization according to religious sect



Chapter III

Democratic Self-Administration



To identify respondents' views on the experience of the Democratic Self-Administration, we asked the following question: what do you think about the "Democratic Self-Administration" proclaimed by the Democratic Union Party (PYD)?

In regime and opposition-held areas, there seems to be near consensus opposing the Democratic Self-Administration. A large proportion (over 40%) of respondents in these areas strongly opposes the system (Figures 17 and 18). By contrast, in areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration, more than half of the respondents said they support the system (55.6%), compared to 38.3% who oppose it. However, it must be noted that as many as 13.2% of residents in the Democratic Self-Administration region say they strongly oppose it (Figure 16).

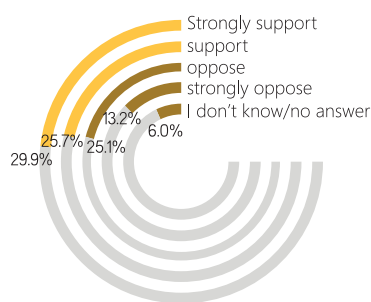


Figure 16. Self-Administration

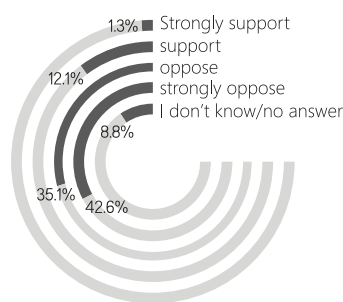


Figure 17. Regime Areas

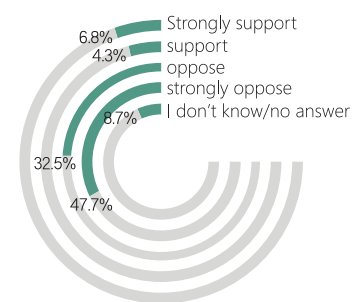
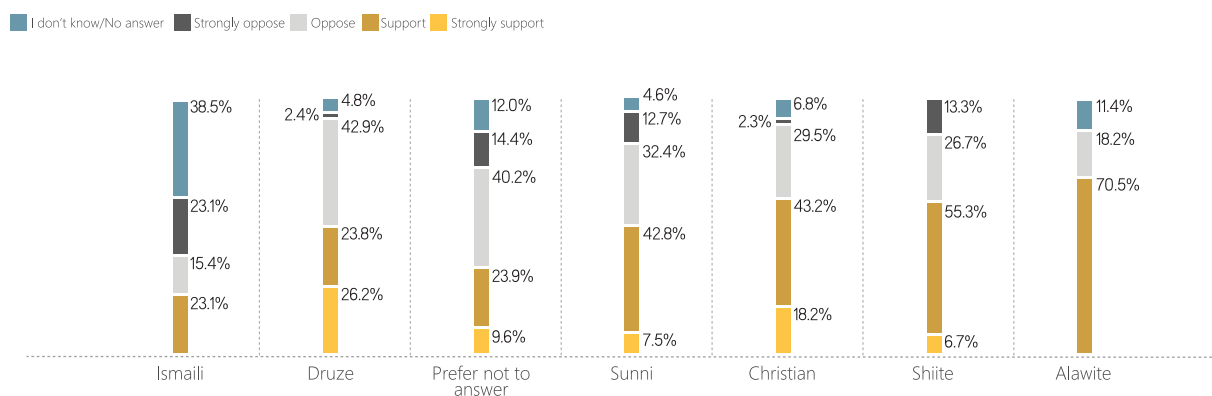


Figure 18. Opposition areas

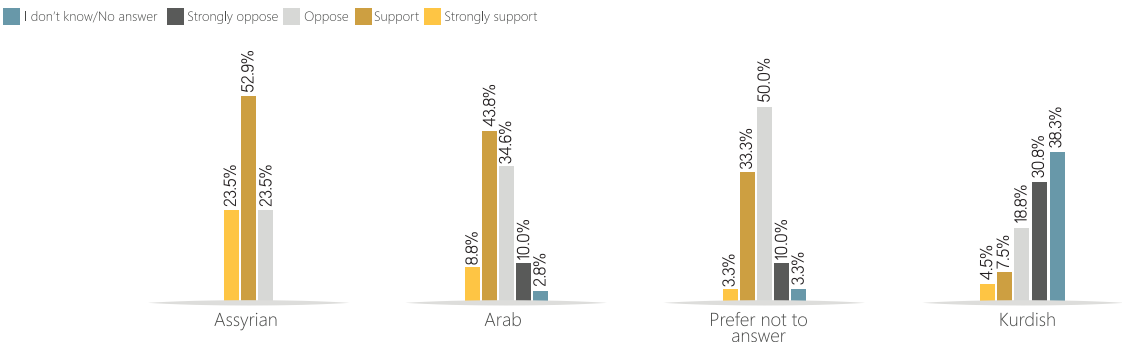
All religious sects seem to oppose the Democratic Self-Administration, except for the Ismailis. Alawites constituted the group of respondents that opposed it the most (70.5%), and more than half of Shiites reported the same stance (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Position on Democratic Self-Administration by religious sect in the overall sample



Assyrians and Arabs likewise oppose it, and a high percentage of them said they strongly oppose it, 52.9% among Assyrian respondents and 43.8% among Arab respondents. A majority of Kurdish respondents (69.1%) support the system, and more than a third of Kurdish respondents strongly support it (Figure 20).

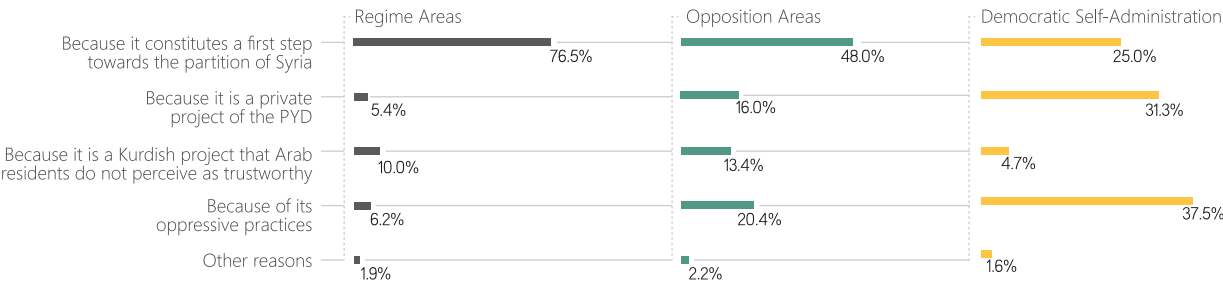
Figure 20. Position on Democratic Self-Administration by ethnicity in the overall sample



1. Motives for opposing the Democratic Self-Administration

It seems that the main reason behind people’s opposition to the Self-Administration in regime and opposition-controlled areas is the fear of partition. It is also notable that the proportion of people who cite the Self-Administration’s oppressive practices as their main reason for opposing it is higher among respondents in opposition areas (20.4%) than in regime-held areas (6.2%). In areas controlled by the Self-Administration, the largest proportion of respondents hostile to the system (37.5%) cited oppressive practices as the main reason behind their opposition, while 31.3% said it was because the system is a private project of the PYD, and one that is not viewed by Kurds themselves as trustworthy. The fear of partition, mentioned by 25% of respondents in Self-Administration areas, was lower than in either opposition and regime-controlled areas. Finally, it is interesting to note that only a very small percentage of respondents in Self-Administration areas (4.7%) said they opposed the system because it constituted a Kurdish project (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Democratic Self-Administration



The majority of Arab respondents hostile to the Self-Administration (56.9%) said their primary motive for opposing it lies in the belief that it constitutes a first step towards the partition of Syria. Kurdish respondents opposed to the system can be divided into two main groups, the first primarily motivated by its believe that the Self-Administration is a private project of the PYD (45.7%), while the second says the main reason behind its opposition is the Self-Administration’s repressive practices. More than a third of Assyrians who oppose the system say they do so because it constitutes a first step towards the partition of Syria, while 30.8% cite the system’s repressive practices as their primary reason (Table 4).

Table 4. Motives behind opposing the Democratic Self-Administration by ethnicity in the overall

	Because it constitutes a first step towards the partition of Syria	Because it constitutes a private project of the PYD and Kurds do not perceive as trustworthy	Because it is a Kurdish project that Arab residents do not perceive as trustworthy	Because of its repressive practices	Other motives	Total no. of respondents
Arabs	56,9%	12,7%	12,7%	15,6%	2,0%	879
Kurds	11,4%	45,7%	0,0%	40,0%	2,9%	35
Assyrians	38,5%	7,7%	15,4%	30,8%	7,7%	13
Prefer not to answer	20,0%	24,0%	0,0%	56,0%	0,0%	25

With the exception of Sunnis, a majority of respondents from all sects cite as their primary motive for opposing the Democratic Self-Administration the belief that it constitutes a first step towards the partition of Syria.

Nevertheless, even among Sunni respondents, the largest proportion of opponents to the Self-Administration (47.5%) cited their belief that the system constituted the first step towards the break-up of Syria as their primary concern. Other primary motivations for opposition to the Self-Administration cited by Sunni respondents was the system's repressive practices (20% of respondents), the belief that it constitutes a private project of the PYD (15.7%) and the perception that it is a Kurdish project which is not trustworthy among the Arab population (14.9%). (Table 5).

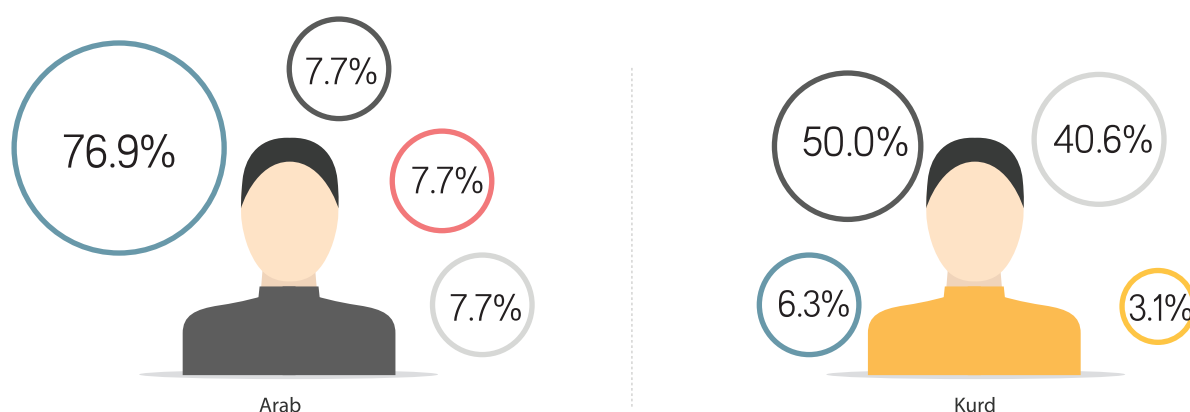
It seems that for Arabs residing in the area of the Democratic Self-Administration, the main motive for opposing the system is the fear that it will lead to the territorial division of the country, and constitutes the first step towards this partition. As for the Kurds who oppose it, they are divided into two main streams: a private project of the PYD and Kurds do not find it particularly trustworthy (50%) and repressive practices (40.6%) (Figure 22).

Table 5. Motives behind opposing the Democratic Self-Administration by religious sect in the overall sample

	Because it constitutes a first step towards the partition of Syria	Because it constitutes a private project of the PYD and Kurds do not perceive as trustworthy	Because it is a Kurdish project that Arab residents do not perceive as trustworthy	Because of its repressive practices	Other motives	Total no. of respondents
Sunni	47,5%	15,7%	14,9%	20,1%	1,7%	705
Alawite	94,9%	5,1%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	39
Christian	65,6%	6,3%	15,6%	9,4%	3,1%	32
Druze	85,7%	3,6%	3,6%	3,6%	3,6%	28
Shiite	91,7%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	8,3%	12
Prefer not to	64,2%	14,2%	2,2%	15,7%	3,7%	134

Figure 22. Motives behind opposing the Democratic Self-Administration by ethnicity

■ Because it constitutes a first step towards the partition of Syria ■ Because it is a private project of the PYD that Kurdish residents do not perceive as trustworthy
■ Because it is a Kurdish project that Arab residents do not perceive as trustworthy ■ Because of its oppressive practices ■ Other reasons



2. Motives for supporting the Democratic Self-Administration

It is observable that the motives for supporting the Democratic Self-Administration vary significantly by geographical area. The main motive cited by respondents in opposition-controlled areas, is the need to organize and manage towns that fall under the control of the Democratic Self-Administration. In fact, more than half of the respondents in opposition-held areas have selected this answer (Figure 29). A similar number of respondents in regime-controlled areas (52.8%) said their primary motive is the need to protect these towns from terrorists (Figure 28). As for the regions of the Democratic Self-Administration, primary motivations cited by respondents included the need to protect these towns from terrorists, and the belief that the Democratic Self-Administration is the only democratic project that currently exists in Syria (Figure 27). The latter response was the second most frequently cited motivation in opposition and regime-controlled areas, at 29.1% and 19.4% respectively.

According to our findings, the main motivating factor behind Arab support for the Democratic Self-Administration is the idea that there is a need to organize and manage the towns under its control. This was cited by 42% of Arab respondents as being the primary reason for their support, compared to 25% who said they backed the system primarily because it is currently the only democratic project that exists in Syria. Among Kurdish respondents, the most commonly cited reason for supporting the Democratic Self-Administration (26.1%) was that “this area is a Kurdish area, and therefore must fall under a Kurdish self-administration”. Meanwhile, the least common justification, given by just 12% of Kurdish respondents, was the idea that the Democratic Self-Administration “achieves the aspirations of the Kurdish people to establish their independent state” (Figure 26).

Figure 23. Opposition areas

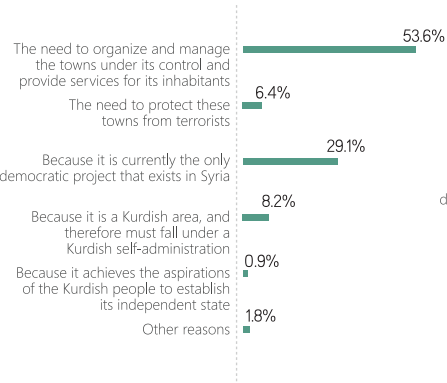


Figure 24. Regime Areas

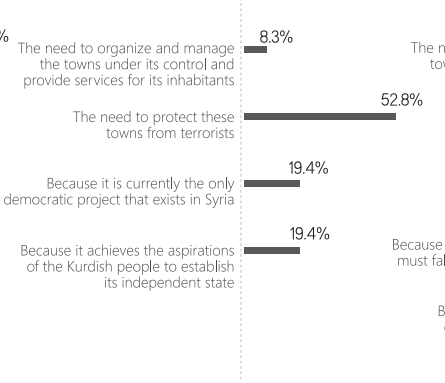


Figure 25. Democratic Self-Administration

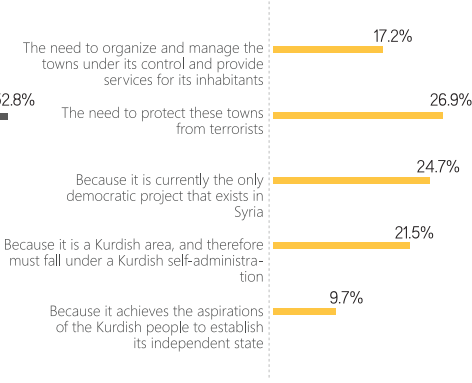
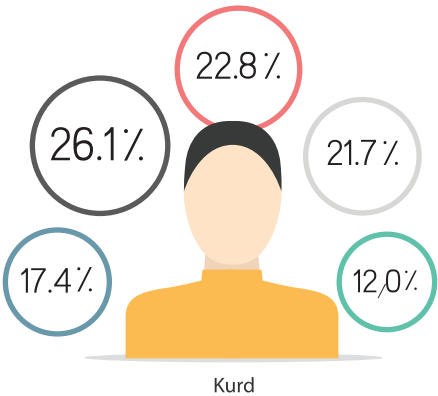
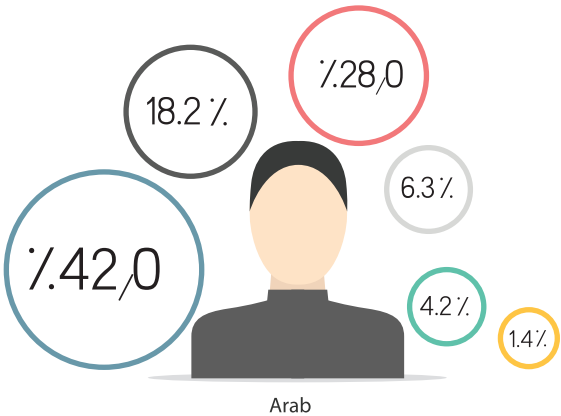


Figure 26. Motives for supporting the Democratic Self-Administration by ethnicity in the overall sample

- The need to organize and manage the towns under its control and provide services for its inhabitants
- The need to protect these towns from terrorists
- Because it is currently the only democratic project that exists in Syria
- Because it is a Kurdish area, and therefore must fall under a Kurdish self-administration
- Because it achieves the aspirations of the Kurdish people to establish its independent state
- Other reasons



3. Between Kurds and other social components in the Self-Administration areas

Our results suggest that non-Kurdish residents in the Self-Administration areas tend to oppose federalism²: 58.5% of respondents from this group said they either oppose or strongly oppose transforming Syria into a federal state with semi-autonomous regions, compared to 93.7% of Kurdish respondents who advocate this step. However, the percentage of non-Kurds who oppose federalism increases significantly when asked about the stance vis-à-vis the Democratic Self-Administration, as this opposition turns into a near consensus. This suggests a large polarization between the Kurds who predominantly support it (69.8%) and the other social components that largely oppose it (78.1%). Meanwhile a large majority of non-Kurdish respondents in areas controlled by the PYD (78.1%) oppose the Democratic Self-Administration, as opposed to 69.8% of Kurdish respondents who support it. These results suggest a large polarization between Kurd and non-Kurd respondents in the Self-Administration areas regarding their stance on the Administration.

But what can explain the higher percentage of opposition among non-Kurds towards the Democratic Self-Administration than to the question of federalism? Likewise, what explains the dip in support among Kurdish respondents for the Democratic Self-Administration compared to support for federalism?

Figure 27. The stance on federalism between Kurdish and other social components in the Democratic Self-Administration

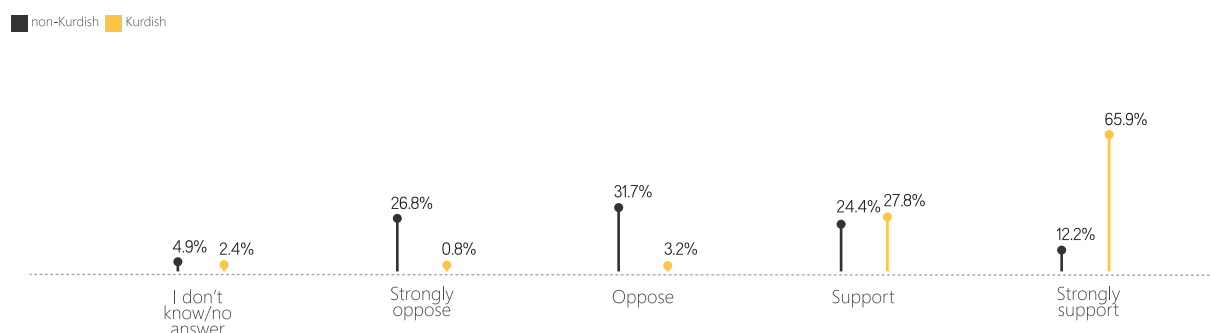
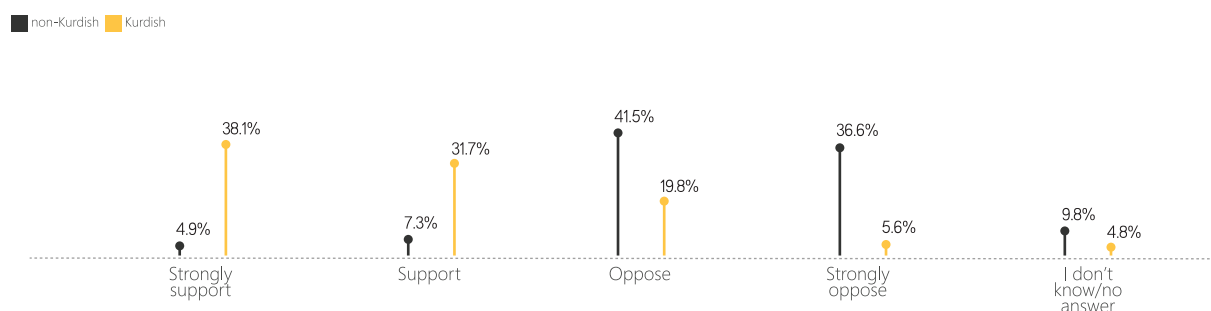


Figure 28. The stance on Democratic Self-Administration between Kurdish and other social components in the Democratic Self-Administration



²-We would like to re-emphasize that this survey was conducted before the Democratic Self-Administration recently announced the federal system in Syria; thus, this particular federal system is not specifically what is intended in this case.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on our findings, the issue of federalism raises concerns among the majority of the Syrian population, with the notable exception of the Kurdish community. A large percentage of our respondents reported they were either opposed or strongly opposed to a federal solution for the country. However, there is a tendency to endorse the allocation of broad competencies to local authorities, and this support explicitly increases in opposition-held areas compared with regime-controlled areas. It seems that the absence of the state in opposition-held areas has contributed to increased support for decentralization, and the spread of positive perceptions about it.

Perceptions on decentralization, particularly its advantages and disadvantages, vary between geographical areas, religious sects and ethnicities. Overall, however, we can see that concerns over separatism come at the forefront of the perceived disadvantages of decentralization, while the idea that it enhances “participation in governance” tops the list of advantages.

Based on these findings, it does not seem particularly prudent to bring federalism forward for the time being, not only because of the fierce opposition by non-Kurdish Syrians, but also because of the extreme polarization between the Kurds who strongly support it, and the rest of Syrians who strongly oppose it. Instead, there appears to be greater scope for building on the tentative commonalities expressed by different groups within Syria in favor of greater decentralization, as a joint path that wins support from all sides.

- Political practice and speech,
- Securing guarantees that enhance the positive perceptions around decentralization indicated by our respondents (especially in opposition and Democratic Self-Administration areas), and
- Working to dispel people’s concerns, particularly those associated with fears of separatism.

These results reinforce our previous study on sectarianism, which revealed the extent of the Syrian people’s rejection of the proposals of partition. Based on our findings, it seems that the general trend in Syria is heading towards a state based on citizenship, in which its citizens are treated equally before the law³. We have just finalized a study that complements our present assessment on attitudes towards decentralization⁴. This study comprises an evaluation of the performance of a number of Syrian local councils, in which respondents repeatedly emphasized the need for local elections as a means for managing their hometowns. All of these indicators confirm the trend towards support for a democratic transition, where the establishment of a state based on citizenship and where elected local administration enjoys broad authority, is the choice that will be backed by the majority of Syrians.

There is no doubt that further studies on this subject will be needed, particularly since the data at our disposal was collected prior to the announcement of the federal system in the Syrian city of al-Rumeilan, by the Democratic Self-Administration in March 2016. This announcement has been met with opposition from large sections of the Syrian population, and several opposition military and political bodies have signaled their outright rejection of it. The declaration is likely to have a negative impact on people’s perceptions of decentralization across Syria, and lead to greater support for a model of centralized governance. Furthermore, the Democratic Self-Administration’s move is likely to exacerbate some of the most widely-held concerns about decentralization as outlined in this study, most notably those related to partition and separatism. The declaration of federalism was made by a single political bloc backed by the PYD, a party that does not have the support of many Syrians. Perhaps this explains the declining support for the Democratic Self-Administration, even among the ranks of those Syrians who say they want federalism or decentralization.

3-Refer to **Sectarianism in Syria**, The Day After, February 2016

4-Has been simultaneously conducted with the present one, and is entitled “Syrian Local Councils in the Eyes of their Communities: Evaluating the Performance of Five Local Councils Using Survey Methodology” – it will be released shortly, The Day After.

Chapter I: Federalism

- Respondents in both regime and opposition-held areas are united in their rejection of federalism. The largest percentage of respondents in both areas said they strongly oppose the concept: 44% in opposition-held areas and to 57% in regime-held areas. There is a near consensus in Self-Administration areas on endorsing federalism (79.6%), and more than half of respondents in these areas said they strongly support it.
- There seems to be a near consensus among Arabs on opposing federalism (79.6%), and about half of Arab respondents said they strongly oppose it. Most Assyrians also provided the same response as their Arab counterparts, with 67.4% opposing federalism, while the percentage of those who strongly oppose it

decreased to 17.6%. The position is reversed among Kurdish respondents, where there is a near consensus around endorsing federalism, and most of them say they strongly endorse it.

- Examining the stance on federalism by sect reflects that a majority of people across all sects oppose it. There seems to be a near consensus among Alawites on opposing federalism, and 93.2% of Alawite respondents said they strongly oppose it. This percentage declined amongst Ismaili and Shiite respondents, to 84.60% and 66.70% respectively. This ratio fairly decreased among the rest of the sects, but it remains quite high since it exceeded 40% (Figure 5).

Chapter II: Decentralization

- More than half of respondents (55.3%) in opposition-held areas opted for answers aligned with greater decentralization. 16.2% said that they want local authorities to be given greater competencies than that which they currently hold, while 30% were in favor of local authorities with broad administrative competencies. Finally, 9.1% said they want a federal state under which several regions enjoy semi-autonomous governance
- There is a tendency among Sunnis and Ismailis to endorse decentralization, a divergence of opinion among Christians, and a complete rejection among Alawites, Druze and Shiite who want a centralized State with a government that possesses full competencies.
- From our sample, Ismailis are the group most enthusiastic about decentralization, with a majority of respondents endorsing the concept. However this does not seem to correspond to support for a federal state, as not a single respondent from the Ismaili community selected this answer.
- Arabs are divided among themselves, although only a small percentage (7.1%) of them were in favor of a federal state that encompasses semi-autonomous regions. However, fully 85.7% of Kurdish respondents opted for the latter option, favoring the most extensive form of decentralization (Table 3).
- In opposition-controlled areas, the most prominent aspect cited by respondents as the basis of their concerns over decentralization was the political aspect, particularly "the tendency to favor local interests over the public interest". The second most commonly cited concern over decentralization was the economic aspect, followed by the administrative and other political aspects (including the fear of separatism).
- In regime-controlled areas, the political aspects topped the list of decentralization's disadvantages, with fears of separatism in the forefront.

- In the areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration, political concerns related to the fear of separatism were at the forefront, cited by almost 20% of respondents. Administrative concerns followed, and the economic aspect came at the bottom of the list.
- The administrative aspect, as well as the political aspect related to participation in governance, ranked top in the advantages mentioned by respondents in opposition-controlled areas. This was followed by the economic aspect, while the issue of national unity came last.
- In areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration, the political aspect – particularly the issue of participation in governance – ranked first in the list. The economic aspect was the second most cited issue, while the administrative aspect and the issue of national unity came last.
- 40% of respondents in regime-controlled areas said decentralization has no advantages. "Enhancing participation in decision-making" (participation in governance) topped the list at 35.9%, followed by "strengthening monitoring and community accountability vis-à-vis the performance of local authorities" (administrative aspect), while national unity came at the bottom of the list.
- Unlike in regime-controlled areas, a very low percentage of respondents in opposition-held areas said that decentralization has no advantages⁵. At the same time, however, and in contrast to areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration, a very low percentage said decentralization has no disadvantages. Therefore, it seems that respondents in opposition-held areas are aware of both the positive and the negative aspects of decentralization.
- In the list of advantages of decentralization, women give priority to administrative aspects and those associated with participation in governance, while men prioritize participation in governance and the economic aspect.

5-It was less than the percentage in areas controlled by the Democratic Self-Administration and amounted to 4.2% only.

- The majority of respondents in regime-held areas (65.6%) rejected any form of decentralization, instead favoring a single government in the capital that possesses all powers (Figure 6).
- In areas of the Democratic Self-Administration, there is roughly a consensus of opinion of endorsing decentralization, and 72.7% of respondents in these areas opted for utmost decentralization choices in our sample: a federal state that encompasses semi-autonomous regions
- Topping the list of the Alawites and Christians are the three political aspects, where those related to fears of separatism top the list at rates exceeding 70%. Political and administrative aspects were the biggest concerns for Druze and Ismaili respondents, cited by more than 60% of people. The economic aspect was the second least cited concern among Druze and Ismaili respondents, while it is the fourth most cited concern for Alawites and the second for Sunnis. Although the political causes came to the fore among both Kurds and Arabs, the economic concerns surpassed the administrative in the list of Arabs, while it ranked last in the list of Kurds.

- Although political aspects topped the list of both men and women respondents, what remains remarkable is the emergence of economic concerns in the list of women. Concerns of an economic dimension ranked second in women respondents' list, but dropped to fifth for men. Fears over the unity of the country meanwhile ranked second for men, but last for women.
- In the list of advantages of decentralization, the economic aspect occupies an advanced rank in the list of Kurdish respondents compared with Arab respondents, since it ranked second and third, but ranked fifth and sixth in the list of Arab respondents. It appeared at the bottom of Assyrian respondents' list.
- In the list of decentralization's advantages, the answers of Sunni, Ismaili, and Christian respondents were roughly similar in terms of ranking national unity at the end and tackling issues associated with participation in governance. But what is noticeable is that Ismailis rank the economic aspect at the top of the list, alongside participation in governance.

Chapter III (and last): Democratic Self-Administration

- In regime and opposition-held areas, there seems to be near consensus opposing the Democratic Self-Administration. A large proportion (over 40%) of respondents in these areas strongly opposes the system
- Respondents from all religious sects seem to oppose the Democratic Self-Administration except for Ismailis. Alawites constituted the group of respondents that opposed it the most (70.5%)
- Assyrians and Arabs likewise oppose it, and a high percentage of them said they strongly oppose it, 52.9% among Assyrian respondents and 43.8% among Arab respondents. A majority of Kurdish respondents (69.1%) support the Democratic Self-Administration, and more than a third of Kurdish respondents strongly support it
- It seems that the main reason behind people's opposition to the Self-Administration in regime and opposition-controlled areas is the fear of partition. Respondents reported that the main reason behind opposing the Democratic Self-Administration is its repressive practices. The reason that ranked second is perceiving it as a private project of the PYD, which Kurds do not trust.
- Nevertheless, even among Sunni respondents, the largest proportion of opponents to the Self-Administration (47.5%) cited their belief that the system constituted the first step towards the break-up of Syria as their primary concern. Other primary motivations for opposition to the Self-Administration cited by Sunni respondents was the system's repressive practices (20% of respondents), the belief that it constitutes a private project of the PYD (15.7%) and the perception that it is a Kurdish project which is not trustworthy among the Arab population (14.9%).
- It seems that for Arabs residing in the area of the Democratic Self-Administration, the main motive for opposing the system is the fear that it will lead to the territorial division of the country, and constitutes the first step towards this partition. As for the Kurds who oppose it, they are divided into two main streams: a private project of the PYD and Kurds do not find it particularly trustworthy (50%) and repressive practices (40.6%).
- Our results indicate that that the motives for supporting the Democratic Self-Administration vary significantly by geographical area. The main motive cited by respondents in opposition-controlled areas, is the need to organize and manage towns under the control of the Democratic Self-Administration. In fact, more than half of the respondents in opposition-held areas have selected this answer
- The main reason for supporting it in regime-controlled areas said their primary motive is the need to protect these towns from terrorists (more than half of respondents opted for this answer).
- In the regions of the Democratic Self-Administration, primary motivations cited by respondents included the need to protect these towns from terrorists, and the belief that the Democratic Self-Administration is the only democratic project that currently exists in Syria.
- Our results indicate that the main reason for Arab respondents supporting the Democratic Self-Administration areas is the need to organize and manage the towns under its control as 42% selected it for an answer, while the second reason is the Democratic Self-Administration being the only democratic project currently put forward in Syria (about a quarter of Arabs supporting the Administration). As for the Kurdish respondents, the percentages for each of the reasons put forward in the survey were similar.

- Our results suggest that non-Kurdish respondents, who reside in the Self-Administration areas tend to oppose federalism: 58.5% of respondents from this group said they either oppose or strongly oppose transforming Syria into a federal state with semi-autonomous regions, compared to 93.7% of Kurdish respondents who advocate this step.

- Comparing the attitude towards federalism with the attitude towards the Democratic Self-Administration, we note that the percentage of non-Kurds who oppose it increases significantly when asked about the stance vis-à-vis the Democratic Self-Administration, as this opposition turns into a near consensus. This suggests a large polarization between the Kurds who predominantly support it (69.8%) and the other social components that largely oppose it (78.1%).

Questionnaire

Question 1. What would be your stance in the event that it was agreed to transform Syria into a federal state that encompasses several semi-autonomous regions?

- ☐ Strongly support
- ☐ Support
- ☐ Oppose
- ☐ Strongly Oppose
- ☐ I don't know/No Answer

Question 2. I will display multiple forms of state organization and administration, and I would like you to please say which one you think is best suited to administer the future of Syria. (Please select one answer)

- ☐ A single government based in the capital that possesses all powers
- ☐ Granting the local administration a smaller role and less competencies than what it currently has
- ☐ Granting the local administration greater role and competencies than what it currently has
- ☐ Local authorities receiving broad administrative competencies in each region or province
- ☐ A federal state under which several regions enjoy semi-autonomous governance.

Question 3. What do you think are the most prominent advantages of having local authorities with broad administrative competencies? (You may select more than one answer)

- ☐ Preventing the monopoly of power
- ☐ Enhancing participation in decision-making
- ☐ Contributing to strengthening national unity in a multi-religious or multi-ethnic society
- ☐ A better and more efficient performance in accomplishing tasks
- ☐ A fairer distribution of wealth
- ☐ Creating a better economic situation
- ☐ Strengthening the monitoring and community accountability vis-à-vis the performance of local authorities
- ☐ Does not have any advantages

Question 4. What do you think are the most prominent disadvantages of having local authorities with broad administrative competencies? (You may select more than one answer)

- ☐ Threatening the unity of the country
- ☐ Creating a climate of negative competition among local authorities as well as with the authority in the capital
- ☐ Encouraging separatist movements
- ☐ Increasing expenses and financial burdens
- ☐ The tendency to favor local interests over the public interest
- ☐ Chaos in the administration
- ☐ Does not have any disadvantages
- ☐ I don't know/No answer

Questionnaire

Question 5. What do you think about the "Democratic Self-Administration" that the PYD has declared?

- ☐ Strongly support it (skip to 5.b.)
- ☐ Support it (skip to 5.b.)
- ☐ Oppose it (skip to 5.a.)
- ☐ Strongly oppose it (skip to 5.a.)
- ☐ I don't know/No Answer

Question 5. a. What is the main reason?

- ☐ Because it constitutes a first step towards the partition of Syria
- ☐ Because it constitutes a private project of the PYD and Kurds do not perceive as trustworthy
- ☐ Because it is a Kurdish project that Arab residents do not perceive as trustworthy
- ☐ Because of its repressive practices
- ☐ Other reasons

Question 5. b. What is the main reason?

- ☐ The need to organize and manage the towns under the control of the Democratic Self-Administration
- ☐ The need to protect these towns from terrorists Being the only democratic project currently put forward in Syria
- ☐ This area is a Kurdish area, and therefore must fall under a Kurdish self-administration
- ☐ It achieves the aspirations of the Kurdish people to establish their independent state
- ☐ Other reasons

Question 6. Ethnicity

- ☐ Arab
- ☐ Kurdish
- ☐ Armenian
- ☐ Assyrian
- ☐ Turkmen
- ☐ Circassian
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Question 7. Religion – Sect

- ☐ Sunni
- ☐ Shia
- ☐ Alawite
- ☐ Ismaili
- ☐ Druze
- ☐ Yazidi
- ☐ Christian
- ☐ Murshidi
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Question 8. Gender

- ☐ Man
- ☐ Woman

Question 9. Age



SYRIA

Opinions and Attitudes on Federalism, Decentralization, and the experience of the Democratic Self-Administration

Survey Study | May 2016



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