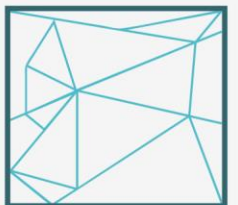


Northeast Syria: Partisan Life Without Protection



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In this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) highlights the failure of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to assume its responsibilities in providing an appropriate environment that allows individuals and groups to exercise freedoms, including partisan activity, guaranteed by several international agreements, and in protecting these individuals and groups from arrest or any other forms of assaults.

On 1 July 2024, a group believed to be affiliated with the Revolutionary Youth (RY-Ciwanên Şoreşger in Kurdish) [attacked](#) a peaceful sit-in organized by the Kurdish National Council-Syria (KNC),¹ which took place in front of the headquarters of the Council's General Secretariat in the al-Seyahi neighborhood in Qamishli/Qamishlo city, northeast Syria. The demonstrators were demanding the release of "those kidnapped by the armed members of the Democratic Union Party (commonly abbreviated as PYD),² and protesting against repressive practices that suppress freedom of opinion and expression."

The attack resulted in injuries among civilians, some of them serious, and damage to more than ten cars owned by residents of the neighborhood where the headquarters is located. Several civilians, who were present at the scene, in addition to members of the KNC's Presidency and General Secretariat, were [arrested](#) and then released after hours of detention and interrogation.

This attack is a continuation of a series of assaults and arrests that STJ has been monitoring since early March 2024. STJ has documented at least **nine** [attacks](#) on partisan offices and **12** prolonged detentions of activists and members of local parties, marking an unprecedented escalation of similar incidents in AANES-held areas over the past years.

The offices, most of which are spread across different cities and towns in al-Hasakah province, were subjected to acts of vandalism, arson, or attempted arson. **Three** of these offices are of local councils affiliated with the KNC in the cities of Amuda, Qamishli/Qamishlo, and Ma'badah/Girkê Legê.

The other offices include **one** of the Kurdistan Unity Party and **five** of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (commonly abbreviated as PDK-S).³ One of these PDK-S offices, located in Ma'badah/Girkê Legê, was burned on 10 March 2024, while a Molotov cocktail was thrown at another in Qamishli/Qamishlo the following day. Both parties are under the umbrella of the KNC, which is supported by the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG) and politically affiliated with the Turkish-backed Syrian National Coalition.

The KNC [condemned](#) the attacks on the two offices, stressing that these "intimidating practices" occur "amid widespread public discontent with the deterioration of economic and living conditions and the imposition of taxes and levies on citizens."

The party responsible for most of the attacks on the offices has not been identified, either because the attackers were "masked" or because the attacks occurred late at night. However, the KNC and the targeted parties point the finger at the RY, which is licensed by the AANES, for its involvement in similar [attacks](#) on the KNC's offices and [suppressing](#) demonstrations it organized in previous years.

¹ Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê (ENKS) in Kurdish.

² Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat in Kurdish.

³ Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê- Sûriyê in Kurdish.

Although senior officials in the AANES have condemned the attacks on the offices, the administration's apparatuses face criticism for their passive response to the RY's violations, and their [failure](#) to hold its members accountable, which includes attacks on [journalists](#) and obstruction of their work, and most importantly, the ongoing [recruitment](#) of children in areas controlled by the AANES.

The U.S. embassy in Syria, via its account on X platform, also [condemned](#) the attacks on the offices, indicating that those responsible must be "held accountable", and calling on all parties to engage "in meaningful discourse to advance the Syrian people's aspirations without violence."

The violence and lack of protection were not limited to partisan offices in northeast Syria. Since the beginning of April 2024, the region has witnessed an escalation in "kidnappings" of political activists and members of local parties, most of whom are also affiliated with the KNC.

The "kidnappings" have affected 12 individuals, seven of whom were released, while the fate of the remaining five remains unknown. The circumstances of the arrests were similar in seven cases, as armed groups, whose members were either masked or refused to identify themselves, raided the detainees' homes without presenting legal arrest warrants nor explaining the reason for the arrest. Some of the detainees' families described the raids as "[barbaric](#)," especially since they occurred in front of children.

Families of the detainees held armed groups affiliated with the PYD, which constitutes the "backbone" of the AANES, responsible for the arrests. The KNC [condemned](#) the detentions, stating that "their aim is to undermine any efforts to unify the Kurdish stance."

These attacks and arrests coincide with a discussion about U.S. [efforts](#) urging to resume the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue, which brought together the KNC parties on one hand, and the PYD and the National Unity Parties on the other hand in 2020. However, it was suspended by the end of the same year. The U.S. attempted to continue the talks through a guarantee document to resume the negotiations, which was signed by the U.S. State Department through its representative in Syria with the commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Mazloum Abdi in June 2021, and approved by the KNC that expressed its readiness to resume talks. Nevertheless, these efforts did not yield results either.

In the latest form of tension between the KNC and the AANES, the KNC and its affiliated parties announced their [boycott](#) of the municipal elections that the AANES was preparing to hold at the end of May 2024, before announcing their postponement. Furthermore, the KNC also expressed its [support](#) for farmers in the AANES's areas regarding the "[wheat pricing crisis](#)," which led to widespread popular protests in al-Hasakah, Deir Ezzor, and Raqqa.

This report is based on four interviews, with two members of KNC-affiliated parties, who were both familiar with the details of the attacks on the offices, and two sources close to now-released detainees. All four interviews were conducted in Kurdish and online, using a secure communication app. While obtaining their informed consent, the sources were informed about the voluntary nature of the interview and how the information they shared would be used, including for the publication of this report. Two of the sources asked for the withholding of their identities and other identifying information, due to concerns about potential reprisals by local authorities in northeast Syria against them or their families. Accordingly, STJ used pseudonyms to refer to these sources.

In addition to the testimonies, STJ reviewed a wide range of open-source materials, including social media posts that include details of the arrests and attacks on offices, in addition to responses from relevant parties, some of which are cited in this report.

In the context of the deteriorating state of freedoms, including freedom of press and expression, in AANES-areas, STJ published a [report](#) on the arbitrary arrests of four journalists and media professionals linked to the KNC: Berivan Ismail, Rakan Ahmed, Ahmed Sofi, and Marwan Layani. The fate of the four remains unknown, while Berivan's arrest sets a precedent that the KNC considers "[dangerous and escalatory](#)."

Attacks on Partisan Offices

The series of attacks on offices began on 1 March 2024, where the office of the KNC in Ayn al-Arab/Kobani in Aleppo province was attacked minutes before the start of a ceremony organized by the Council to commemorate the 45th anniversary of the passing of Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani, founder of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq. The attack resulted in injuries among the attendees and material damage, some of which affected the property of people unrelated to the memorial service.

As the guests arrived at the memorial hall, a group of 40 to 50 masked individuals appeared at the site, carrying sticks and iron rods, chanting "slogans that accused the assembled people of treason," and began beating them, according to Adnan Bozan⁴, head of the city council office:

"At exactly 11:25, we were surprised by the arrival of a large group of PYD (Revolutionary Youth) militias... I went out to inquire what they wanted... Without saying anything, dozens of them stood at the entrance to the office and demanded that everyone in the hall leave. There were dozens of people in the hall. They started beating me with sticks aimlessly, breaking my finger. They also started beating the attendees, including women and older people."

In addition to the injury to his hand, Adnan said that the assault resulted in the breaking of the leg of his young son, Naqshi, and the leg of Wais Sheikhi, a member of one of the political offices affiliated with the Yekiti Kurdistan Party-Syria (commonly abbreviated as PYK-S).⁵ Additionally, many attendees were left with bruises.

According to Adnan, after evacuating the hall and assaulting the attendees, the group engaged in acts of vandalism and theft, as they destroyed all the furniture in the office:

"Then they burned the furniture in front of the office after they forced people away from the area. They also stole whatever they could get their hands on, including mobile phones and bags containing devices and money. After that, they smashed the windows of cars in the neighborhood, which belong to people who had nothing to do with the celebration. All of this was documented with video and photos."

Adnan's statement aligns with the testimony of Nafe' Abdullah⁶, a member of the PDK-S's Central Committee, who stated that: "the attacking group forcibly removed those present in the office, acting under the eyes of the Asayish (the AANES's Internal Security Forces), who did not intervene to stop them."

⁴ A researcher with STJ conducted the interview with the witness online on 28 May 2024.

⁵ Partîya Yekîtiya Kurdistanî – Sûrîyê in Kurdish

⁶ A researcher with STJ conducted the interview with the witness online on 29 May 2024.

Nafe' added that on the same day, 1 March 2024, members of the PDK-S office in the city of Darbasiyah were subjected to harassment while commemorating the same occasion, saying that: "the local notables intervened, and the event was held despite the threats made by gunmen from the PYD, who were mostly from the RY."

The KNC [condemned](#) the attacks on the attendees of the commemorative events for the passing of Barzani in both Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî and Darbasiyah, accusing "a group of PYD affiliates" of carrying out the assaults. The KNC also noted that these attacks "increase in March, which is full of Kurdish national occasions, in a desperate attempt to frustrate the nationalist sentiment of those celebrating these events, and to instil fear and anxiety among them."

In the following days, the harassments escalated into actual attacks, including an attack on the PDK-S's office in the city of Amuda on 7 March 2024. According to Nafe', "masked men" set fire to furniture, including chairs and tables, in the office courtyard at around 12 a.m. He added:

"The matter was not limited to burning the Amuda office, as our office in al-Malikiya/Dêrik was also set on fire in a suspicious way, as suspicions indicated to the use of highly flammable substance. The office is two stories high. The cement of the ceiling was damaged, and the ceramic tiles on the walls collapsed. After that, our office in Girkê legê/Ma'badah suffered a large fire and completely burned, including its contents and furniture."

Although the identity of the group responsible for burning the party's offices in [al-Malikiya/Dêrik](#) and the town of Ma'badah/Girkê legê on 10 March 2024 remains unknown, both offices were subjected to fires in a similar manner and after 12 a.m., according to Nafe', which may suggest that the party behind both attacks is the same.

The Internal Security Forces (Asayish) issued a [statement](#) following the attacks on the KNC offices in the cities of Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî and Amuda, in which they said that their forces "continue investigations to uncover the circumstances of the two arson incidents and bring the perpetrators to justice."

Nafe' ruled out that the attacks on the offices were instructed or directed by the AANES. However, as the "existing authority", he holds it responsible for protecting these offices and headquarters from parties that seem to be "above the law, committing these violations." As for the reason for the attacks, Nafe' said that both the KNC and the PDK-S believe that:

"The attack on the offices and the following arrests are a message and an attempt to prevent the resumption of the Kurdish dialogue between the two parties."

The discussion about resuming the intra-Kurdish dialogue began in mid-May 2024, after Suleiman Oso, a member of the KNC Presidency and PYK-S Secretary, [told](#) North Press Agency that there were American and European efforts to resume the Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue, adding that meetings would take place between the KNC and the U.S., and between the latter and the SDF, which will explore the possibility of "holding a meeting with the SDF leadership to determine the foundations for restarting the dialogue," as he confirmed the KNC's readiness to return to the dialogue table.

Days after this statement, the member of the Kurdish National Unity Parties delegation at the dialogue table, Mohammad Mousa, [said](#) that "The American side met the Kurdish National Council, and scheduled a meeting with our delegation. However, an unexpected trip by the U.S. envoy postponed the meeting."

It is worth noting that the attacks were not limited to sites where the KNC organized events to celebrate symbols that are highly regarded by a large segment of the Kurds, such as the commemoration of Brazani's passing, but rather extended to places where the KNC held general national celebrations. In mid-March, a group [vandalized](#) a site set up for Newroz celebrations, the Kurdish New Year, in Derejik in the countryside of Qahtaniyah/Tirbepî. Several days later, the group sprayed fuel on the celebration scene, amid accusations against PYD-affiliated gunmen.

On 25 April, Elham Ahmed, co-chair of the AANES's Foreign Relations Department, [condemned](#) the attacks on the offices, and noted that the AANES "does not endorse these attacks" and that "the AANES and its relevant institutions are responsible for investigating such incidents, holding the perpetrators accountable, and bringing them to justice."

"Kidnapping" Party Figures

As the frequency of attacks on offices decreased, the violence, which indicates the fragility of political and party pluralism and lack of its protection, in areas controlled by the AANES, took another turn at the beginning of April 2024. This manifested in a series of arrests that affected 12 political activists and members of local parties, five of whom remain forcibly disappeared:

1. On 1 April, a group of masked men [took](#) Hassam Hassam (known as Hassam Dorsen) from the city center of al-Malikiya/Dêrik to an unknown location while he was returning from work. Hassam is a member of the regional committee of Kurdistan People's Party-Syria and a member of the city's KNC-affiliated council.
2. On 21 April, Nasser Ghaleb Jaro was [taken](#) to an unknown location while returning to his home in Amuda. Nasser is a member of the PYK-S's regional committee in Amuda, and a writer and playwright in the party's "Khunaf" folklore troupe. Nasser was released on 24 June, nearly three months after he was detained.
3. On 9 May, Majdal Daham Haj Qasim, a member of the PYK-S's regional committee in Amuda and head of the Khunaf folklore troupe, was [taken](#) to an unknown location after leaving the party's office. On the same day, two other members of the troupe, Saad Kawa Kanrash (18 years old) and Saleh Hamid Bakari (17 years old), were kidnapped as they were leaving school. Saad was released on 9 June, after a month in detention, whereas Majdal and Saleh were released on 24 June, nearly two months after detention.
4. On 7 June, an unidentified group [took](#) the brothers Ali Taher Ramo and Ahmed Taher Ramo to an unknown location after raiding their homes at dawn, in Ma'bdah/Girkê legê. Ali is an independent political activist, while Ahmed is a member of the PDK-S's local council. The brothers were released on 1 July.
5. On 9 June, an armed group [raided](#) the house of Abdulrahman Shanki in Tabka village in the countryside of al-Malikiya/Dêrik, and took him to an unknown location. Abdulrahman is a member of the PDK-S's regional council.
6. On 9 June, an armed group with masked members [raided](#) the house of Khaled Miro in al-Malikiya/Dêrik and took him to an unknown location. Khaled is a member of the PDK-S's branch council.
7. On 10 June, an unidentified group [took](#) Saleh Benko to an unknown location after raiding his home in Amuda. Saleh is a member of the leadership committee of Kurdistan Democratic Unity Party and a member of the KNC.

8. On 10 June, an armed group [raided](#) the home of Mohammed Tahlo in Ma'badah/Girkê legê and took him to an unknown location. Mohammed is a member of the PDK-S's local council in Ma'badah/Girkê legê. He was released on 1 July.
9. On 15 June, an unidentified group took Fathi Sarhan Kado to an unknown location after raiding his home in Ma'badah/Girkê legê. Fathi is a member of the advisory committee of the Kurdistan Unity Party - Syria.

STJ contacted two sources close to Khunaf folklore troupe members, including Khalat Ibrahim⁷, a relative of Saad Kawa Kanrash, who was detained on 9 May and released about a month later. Khalat recounted the details of the arrest of Saad and his schoolmate Saleh Hamid Bakari, who is now also released:

“Saad and Saleh left school at around 11:30, along with their schoolmate, when a car stopped on the road near Amuda cemetery, and some members arrested them and left their friend behind. Their schoolmate went and told their family about what happened, and mentioned that those who detained the two young men were wearing green shirts.”

Khalat met Saad after he his release, and learned that he had been detained in Qamishli/Qimishlo, where he spent 14 days in solitary confinement at the headquarters of the AANES's General Intelligence Service, after he was transferred there from one of the Asayish's headquarters in Amuda, where he was initially taken after his arrest. Khalat added that Saad saw Saleh in the Intelligence prison, and that the reason for their arrest was taking part in a theatrical performance.

The theatrical activity being the reason for the troupe members' arrest was corroborate by the testimony of Radwan Haji,⁸ relative of Nasser Jaro who was released on 24 June. Radwan learned from Nasser's family that he was accused of “high treason” for presenting a theatrical performance about “[Amuda massacre](#)” in which a number of civilians were killed on 27 June 2013, by the People's Protection Units (YPG) of the SDF. According to the family, Radwan said that Nasser was detained while returning from their village of Zoba'iyā in Amuda countryside, where he was working on repairing his harvester in preparation for the season, to his home in the city:

“He decided to return to (the city of) Amuda, so his brother drove him. Near the southern entrance to Amuda, he met his friend who was having his car repaired at a workshop before the checkpoint (of the Asayish), so he got off and joined his friend... When they approached the checkpoint, they were met by two masked men in black clothes. They asked him about his name, and as soon as he replied that he was Nasser Jaro, they pulled him out of the car, blindfolded him, put him in a van that was parked at the checkpoint, and took him to prison.”

Nasser learned that he was being held in Amuda from one of the guards. He was repeatedly interrogated over the four days he spent there in solitary confinement, before being transferred to Qamishli/Qamishlo blindfolded. According to Radwan, the interrogation on the first day lasted about four hours, during which Nasser was asked the same questions by different interrogators. He added that one of the interrogators accused him of attempting to cause “great strife” by staging plays about what happened in Amuda.

⁷ A pseudonym was used at the source's request during an online interview conducted by STJ researcher on 6 June 2024.

⁸ A pseudonym was used at the source's request during an online interview conducted by STJ researcher on 27 July 2024.

In the detention center in Qamishli/Qamishlo, where Nasser spent about ten days, he was also repeatedly interrogated for four days, during which Kurdish interrogators questioned him in Kurdish and Arabic. Radwan added that one of the interrogators asked Nasser:

“Why haven’t you (the troupe) performed any plays about our martyrs?... It seems that the Kurdish National Council is the one pushing you to sabotage.”

Another investigator, who spoke in Kurdish, told Nasser that his arrest was disciplinary and that he would be held for one to three months. Radwan added that after about two weeks of interrogation, Nasser was transferred to a cell in the New Jirkin prison (an anti-terrorism prison). About five days later, he was transferred to the public prosecution, to be presented to the judiciary 45 days after his arrest, “during which Nasser did not see the light of day.” Nasser’s family learned of his arrest from one of those released, and hired a lawyer for him.

Radwan said that Nasser met with Majdal and Saleh during the second trial session, in which the verdict was pronounced. The judge dropped the charge of “high treason” and imposed a fine of 100,000 Syrian pounds, despite the judge’s assistant attempt to argue that “the KNC comes to destroy everything we build.” The public prosecution appealed the case, resulting in Nasser being held for an additional three weeks, after his lawyer managed to get him out a week before the end of the appeal period. Radwan added that Nasser suffered from itching and skin allergies due to the humidity in the prison.

Responsibilities of the AANES

The Autonomous Administration’s Constitution officially titled [the Charter of Social Contract](#) to the democratic self-management (in the province of Al Jazera) states in its preamble – which is as an integral part of the Contract according to Article 1 of it – “We ...have announced this to materialize justice, freedom and democracy ... with mutual understanding and coexistence.” ...“The areas of the democratic self-management ... [are] open to the forms of compatibility with the democratic and pluralistic traditions, to enable all social groups, cultural identities, the Athenian and national to express themselves through their organizations”.

Article 6 of the Contract of the self-administration says: “All members and democratic managements are equal in front of the law in their rights and duties.” Furthermore, Article 21 states: “The self-management ensures the human rights and his supreme values in accordance with the international covenants and conventions and considers freedom the most precious thing that human individuals and groups own.” The AANES also considers all international human rights covenants and charters an essential and complementary part of its Social Contract, relying in particular on “the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, [the International Covenant on Civil, Political, Cultural, Social and Economic Rights](#) and other relevant charters.”

As the ruling authority in the areas under its control, the AANES is also responsible for ensuring the security and safety of all individuals in those areas, in addition to its responsibilities to protect all their rights and freedoms, especially those it pledged to adhering in its Social Contract. Noting that, in order to fulfil its obligations under international human rights law and the principles of the rule of law, any state or legitimate authority must bear two types of responsibilities towards individuals and groups within its areas of control or authority regarding fundamental rights and freedoms: First, “negative responsibilities” that require it not to interfere with or prevent these individuals or groups from exercising their legitimate rights stipulated by law; Second, “positive responsibilities” that require it to intervene to enable, support or protect these individuals or groups and their rights, against any violation or

interference by any other party that may hinder their exercise of those rights, and to ensure that they enjoy their legitimate rights within the framework of the law.

Regarding freedom of opinion, thought, belief and expression, stipulated in Article 18 and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the AANES has committed to guaranteeing and respecting them as a basic right for every individual or group in a manner consistent with civil peace, according to Article 24 of its Social Contract.

As for the right of individuals to freedom of forming association with others, and their right to peaceful assembly, as stipulated in Articles 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 32 of the AANES's Social Contract guarantees "the right to form parties, associations, unions and civil society organizations and to join them in accordance with the regulating laws." Additionally, Article 34 of the Contract guarantees "citizens the freedom to organize, express opinions, demonstrate peacefully and strike in accordance with the regulating law." Accordingly, the AANES must abide by its negative and positive commitments to protect and guarantee the right of all individuals and groups to enjoy their rights guaranteed by law.

The assaults by groups believed to be affiliated with the AANES on citizens, and the use of violence that threatens the safety of these individuals, in addition to threatening social peace, constitute a clear violation of the laws of the AANES itself, which necessitates it to immediately open an investigation into these assaults, hold the perpetrators accountable, and take all necessary measures to ensure that such violations do not recur.

In the event that a transparent, public, and impartial investigation is not conducted, and those involved are not held accountable, the AANES will have violated its "positive obligations" towards individuals and groups in the areas under its control, in violation of its Social Contract.

Furthermore, the security services linked to the AANES must also reveal the fate of the detainees and release them immediately, and refrain from engaging in similar arbitrary arrests in the future. If the AANES failed to commit to taking these steps, it will have violated its "negative obligations," in violation of its Social Contract, which abide it to work in accordance with Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which protects citizens from arbitrary arrest, in addition to Article 14, which guarantees their right to a fair trial.



ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unflinching dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.