

# “We don’t want to fight the Syrian regime”: Q/A with Senior Kurdish Official Ilham Ahmed

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RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

By Wilson Fache – BIC Middle East Consultant

Last March, the Brussels International Center travelled to Syria’s Qamishli and sat down with top Kurdish official Ilham Ahmed, the President of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council (the political leadership of the Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria, AANES) to discuss the prospect of negotiations with the Assad regime, the conflict with Turkey, and the state of their diplomatic relations with Iran, Russia, and the new Biden administration. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**The BIC: About a year ago, you declared that the Syrian government had agreed to political negotiations with your self-administration under the aegis of Russia. What has happened since?**

*Ilham Ahmed: The Russian government has not yet made a move and the Syrian regime is still not seriously negotiating. There are no on-going negotiations. When [the regime] says it is ready for dialogue, it only says so in order to give itself more time and push back the issue as much as possible.*

**Why do you think the Syrian regime is not interested in negotiations with your authority?**

*The regime sees itself as militarily victorious, and they think that if they continue with their military plan, they could ultimately take over all of Syria. That is the goal of the regime.*

**Does that mean that instead of political negotiations to settle the status of your autonomous administration, an armed conflict between you and the regime is a possibility?**

*We do not want to fight the regime and I do not think the regime wants that either – not that they could even if they wanted to. But they will try to destabilize [North-East Syria] through armed groups and sleeper cells to show the world and the international community that we are unable to manage the region, therefore increasing [the regime's] legitimacy.*

**Can Russia be an honest broker to organise talks between you and the regime?**

*I don't think Russia can have much influence over the regime. Moscow does have some leverage it can use to put pressure on Damascus, but I believe Teheran has more. Iran can have more influence on the Syrian regime than Russia.*

**Does that mean Iran could help you reach an agreement with the regime? What is the status of your relationship with Teheran, if any?**

*There are no talks between us and Iran. We only have military agreements in the Aleppo region to protect refugees from Afrin [expelled in 2018 during Turkey's "Olive Branch" military operation against Kurdish forces], but politically, there are no negotiations between Iran and us.*

**Is developing a more formal relationship with Iran something you would like to do?**

*If negotiations with Iran can improve the situation in Syria and expel armed groups from it, that would be positive.*

**Is that something you plan on doing soon?**

*We have no desire to negotiate with Iran at the moment. It will depend on our needs.*

**It seems to me that your self-administration depends entirely on US support and on the presence of US troops in north-eastern Syria. If the US were to withdraw from the region, your administration would be left with no protection at all, completely vulnerable to the regime, Turkey... pretty much anyone who wants to get their hands on this territory. Is that a fair assessment?**

*The US is not our sole partner, we also have relations with Russia. Since the US [partially] withdrew [in October 2019, after Donald Trump gave Turkey the greenlight to launch its "Peace Spring" military offensive] and Russia deployed troops in the region here, we have been trying to have talks with all parties. We do not want to become enemies with anyone. We are ready for whatever serves the interests of the Syrian people and the region.*

**What if the US suddenly pulled their troops tomorrow, what would be the consequences?**

*A sudden withdrawal would have dramatic consequences; I hope that never happens. But through our relations with the United States, we don't see anything like that happening.*

**What is your assessment of the four year-long Trump administration and the impact it had on this region? It was Donald Trump, after all, that gave his greenlight for the Turkish offensive in October 2019, which allowed Ankara-backed rebel groups to carve out a 32km-deep strip emptied of Kurdish fighters between the towns of Tell Abyad and Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn, in Arabic).**

*The US withdrawal from the region and Turkey's incursion has had a terrible impact. Large numbers of people have been displaced and thousands have been killed. In the occupied areas, human rights are violated, women are kidnapped and raped, explosions are recurrent, and there is no stability. It used to be safe, but with the arrival of Turkish troops everything was destroyed. And it affected US policy as well. Overall, it had a negative impact on us, on the region, and on the United States.*

**What can the new Biden administration do to make-up for the shortfalls of the previous administration?**

*The Biden administration's job is very hard. Firstly, it has to correct the mistakes that were made [under the previous administration]. It has to return the refugees to their homes, and it has to remove from Syria the [Turkish-backed] terrorist groups that committed massacres - they are like the Islamic State. Today, in Serekanye, Afrin, and Tell Abyad, they commit even worse massacres than ISIS. Secondly, the Biden administration should not allow Turkey to attack again. For the past years, the United States was not particularly interested in the political file in Syria but now it has to be. Biden has to determinate what his position on Syria will be.*

**And what do you hope that position will be?**

*We are still not part of the [UN-sponsored Constitutional] talks in Geneva. So, the US could help with that. The political process must be strong, confront the regime strongly, and we need to find a political solution with the regime.*

**The new US administration has said already that the Middle East will not be its top priority. "If you are going to list the regions Biden sees as a priority, the Middle East is not in the top three," a close adviser to the president has said. Are you concerned you will not get from Washington the support you say you need?**

*The Middle East may not be America's primary concern, but it does not mean it doesn't care. People say the United States has lost its prestige in leading the world, but it should regain its influence, and the Middle East is one of the files that can help the United States reclaim its place as a superpower. So, I think the US presence in the Middle East*

*will not be weak, but rather strong, and the first goal of our self-administration is to have a strong US presence in the Middle East.*

### **And is there anything the European Union can do?**

*The European Union is not powerless. The sanctions that they imposed on [the Syrian regime] have an impact. When the EU says that it will not rebuild Syria before a political solution is found, it has an impact. The EU is directly concerned because of the refugees [that settled in Europe]. But the EU has to clarify its position on the opposition. We know it has stopped supporting armed factions, but there are still abuses and its position on the opposition remains unclear.*

### **Does that mean the EU should pressure Ankara, for example to allow the safe return of civilians displaced from areas in northern Syria now under the control of Turkish-backed rebel groups?**

*Yes, the EU can and should put pressure on Turkey. If the EU wants to solve the refugee issue, it has the means to do so. And if it exercises pressure to remove [Turkish-backed] armed factions out of [occupied areas in northern Syria], then the refugee issue will be solved. If a secular and independent force takes over, refugees will be able to return to their homes in Azaz, Al-Bab, and Jarablus.*

### **Is it impossible for civilians to return to these areas as long as these groups operate there?**

*At the moment, there are radical groups such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya that are very bad in Serekanye and other areas. There are [within the opposition] more moderate factions that exist, and if there is a support to reorganise these factions for the sake of safety and stability [in occupied areas], then refugees will go back home.*

### **What is the likelihood of Turkey launching yet another military offensive on the region?**

*There is always a possibility that Turkey will attack the region again, and we expect it will at some point.*

### **Where could that attack be? In which areas?**

*To this day, there are constant Turkish attacks on Ain Issa, Tell Tamer, and Tell Rifaat. And there are threats to Kobani, and Manbij. Their aim is to control the whole border [between Turkey and Syria].*

**There are rumours about an upcoming Turkish offensive on Ain Issa after Russia withdraws its troops from the area. Is it true? The capture of this town, with its strategic position on the M4 road, would irreparably fragment the region under your control.**

*There are fears. Sometimes Russia threatens to withdraw its troops from Ain Issa, leaves for three hours, then comes back again. What Moscow wants is for the regime to control the area. It wants us to withdraw our forces so as to allow for the regime to take over the area, and not Turkey. But we will not accept that.*

**If Russia wants to put pressure on you and says: ‘We are withdrawing, so the vacuum can either be filled by Turkey or the Syrian government – your choice’. What would you do in that scenario?**

*We try to solve these issues politically and through dialogue. If we cannot, we will explore other options according to the situation.*

**Including military options?**

*We always try to solve these problems politically, not militarily. But when the time comes, all options will be on the table. But for now, we do not plan to fight.*

**Circling back to negotiations with the regime, what do you think is the likelihood of the regime agreeing in the near future to enter talks with your administration, namely, to settle your status as an autonomous region? And if these negotiations do happen, what kind of incentives do you have to reach a deal that suits you?**

*Despite the regime's stubbornness, the door for dialogue is open. We have leverage to put pressure on the regime, like the economy. Syria's whole economy revolves around our region because of water resources, electricity, wheat, and oil. We want to solve the problem through a political solution and if not, we are going to put pressure on the regime through the economy.*

**If the regime refuses to engage in political negotiations, you stand ready to use these leverages?**

*We need to find a political solution for Syria as a whole, not just for this region. And if we must, we will put pressure on the regime with these leverages.*

**So, you stand ready to cut off the regime's access to these resources if need be?**

*I hope the regime does not force us to do it.*

**One last topic I would like to discuss with you is the issue of the Arab-majority areas within north-eastern Syria. In a city like Raqqa, for example, many people say that the Kurdish-led administration is obviously better than the ISIS occupation, but they do not consider you as their rightful authority because they never voted for you. So,**

**what steps is your self-administration going to take to become the rightful authority in those areas?**

*We recently decided to hold elections within a year. Of course, no one voted for us because we established our administration during the war, and it was then impossible to hold elections. But now we have a plan to organise fair elections in the coming months.*

**Before the end of 2021?**

*Yes, elections will be held in 2021.*

**So, soon the people of Raqqa will be able to elect members of the Civil Council for example?**

*Elections will be held on everything from the municipalities all the way to the city head, and there will be electoral standards, and anyone will be able to run for office.*

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"


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