

Governance in Transition

Perspectives on Decentralization in Syria

Organized by

Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien
European Center for Kurdish Studies



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Disclaimer: The principles in this paper reflect the discussions of the workshop. This does, however, not mean that all participants agree on all points of this document.

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1. There are many different forms of decentralisation and federalism. These must be regarded as tools for helping to achieve certain goals. In Syria, such a goal could be the political participation of all components of society in future decision-making structures.
2. Decentralisation and federalism are not necessarily tools of colonial domination. Forms of decentralisation – some of which are more, and some less successful – can be found all over the world. While Syria can learn from the experience of other states, it must nevertheless find its own form of decentralisation. Transferring federal models from other states without critical appraisal does not promise success.
3. When we talk about successful models of federalism or decentralisation, we have to start by defining what success should actually mean. There are different approaches. A model can be considered successful if it has ended a war. A model can also be considered successful if it enables equitable participation of different ethnic, religious and political groups in decision-making processes.
4. A possible success factor for a decentralised system in Syria could be whether it contributes to preserving the country's unity. Another success factor lies in granting minority groups, such as Kurds, Druze, Alawites or Assyrians, forms of self-determination and autonomy. Different success factors are by no means mutually exclusive – in fact they can even reinforce each other.
5. The members of the different components of Syrian society can only make steps towards rapprochement or reconciliation if they share and understand each other's experiences and perspectives of Syria. Federal models require cooperation and communication much more than centralised solutions do.
6. The widespread fear of federalism in Syria is unfounded because federalism is not the same as separatism.
7. It could make sense to use other terms than "federalism" for a while in order to avoid provoking defence and stereotypical ideas among other discussion participants. The decision to use certain terms should not feed into unobjective narratives that prevent discussion.
8. The goal of a federal / decentralised solution should be the preservation and promotion of the rights and self-administration of certain components while ensuring their active participation in decision-making structures within the Syrian state, for example through the fixed representation within the central state. This will integrate Syria as a country and its cultural diversity will be officially recognised, thereby breaking with the historic forms of oppression and centralism.

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