SPECPOL

Special Political and Decolonization Committee

Authorized personnel only

Examining the Rojava Crisis: Ensuring Stability, Sovereignty, and Humanitarian Security in Northern Syria

SJBHSMUN 2025

Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Special Political and Decolonization Committee at SJBHSMUN '25. The agenda before us, ***Examining the Rojava Crisis: Ensuring Stability, Sovereignty, and Humanitarian Security in Northern Syria*** compels us to engage with one of the most enduring dilemmas of international politics: the balance between the sovereign authority of the state and the aspirations of peoples for self-governance.

The Rojava region, born out of the crucible of the Syrian Civil War, stands as both a bold experiment in democracy and autonomy, and a flashpoint of regional tension. Here, delegates will deliberate whether the international community can reconcile territorial integrity with self-determination, how humanitarian needs can be insulated from political bargaining, and how local voices can avoid being drowned out by distant powers with vested interests.

As your Executive Board, we encourage you to enter this room with conviction and open-mindedness. Engage with history, peel back the layers of international law, and remember that behind every statistic lies a human life yearning for dignity, peace, and stability. We look forward to dynamic discussions, bold diplomacy, and solutions that reflect not just power, but principle. Let us craft a debate that embodies the best of what SJBHSMUN stands for: integrity, innovation, and leadership.

Godspeed.

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Joshua Jesuraj Sanctus, Chairperson
Aadya Raj, Co-Chairperson
Manthan Surana, Vice-Chairperson
Carlton Noronha, Moderator

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1 Introduction to the Agenda

The agenda before the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, Examining the Rojava Crisis: Ensuring Stability, Sovereignty, and Humanitarian Security in Northern Syria asks delegates to think about one of the hardest questions in world politics today: how do we respect the right of states to stay whole, while also respecting the right of peoples to govern themselves? This is the core issue of sovereignty versus self-determination.

The area known as Rojava, officially called the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (**DAANES**), came into being during the Syrian Civil War. For the Kurdish people, who have lived for decades without full rights, it became a chance to build local democracy and protect their identity. For some, Rojava represents hope, fairness, and self-rule. For others, it raises worries about breaking up countries, destabilizing neighbors, and creating dangerous precedents for other regions.

The debate does not stop at Syria's borders. The Kurds, one of the largest stateless peoples in the world, live across Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. What happens in Rojava affects all these countries. Syria's government insists on keeping its borders intact. Turkey fears that Kurdish control in Syria will encourage separatism within its own territory. Iran shares similar concerns. Global powers like Russia and the United States have also entered the conflict, sometimes working with Kurdish groups, sometimes supporting the Syrian government, each driven by their own strategic goals. These overlapping interests make the situation even more complex. At the same time, this issue is not only about politics and power. Millions of people in northern Syria face daily struggles: displacement, poverty, and the trauma of war. The United Nations and its agencies try to deliver aid, protect children, and create safe spaces, but their work is often blocked by fighting or political disagreements. This means the humanitarian question how to protect and support ordinary people is just as important as the political one.

Should Rojava be recognized for the stability it provides, or would this weaken international law? How can the world ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those who need it? Is it possible to give local communities a voice while also respecting Syria's sovereignty? These are not easy questions, but they are central to this debate. As you prepare, remember that behind every policy and decision are real human lives, hoping for dignity, peace, and security.

2 Historical Background

Syria's modern political history begins in the early 20th century. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and Syria came under French mandate. The French divided the

territory and used local competing groups to maintain control. As Syria became independent in 1946, its leaders had to build a unified state over many ethnic and religious groups: Arabs, Kurds, Druze, Armenians, and others.

In the years after independence, politics in Syria were unstable — coups, shifting alliances, short-lived governments. Meanwhile, ideas of Arab nationalism gained strength. The Ba'ath Party, founded in the 1940s, called for Arab unity, secularism, and socialism. Over time, it became one of the dominant political forces in Syria. When the Ba'athists took power in the 1960s, they began to redefine the identity of the Syrian state around the notion of "Arabness." In doing so, they left little space for cultures and languages that did not align with the Arab majority, including Kurdish language, culture, and political claims.

Because of this ideological grounding, Syrians from Kurdish backgrounds increasingly felt marginalized. Their identity was often dismissed, their rights limited, and their demands for recognition seen as threats to national unity.

2.1 Kurdish Repression, Statelessness, and Resentment

Under the Ba'athist state, especially during the long rule of Hafez al-Assad beginning in 1971, the Syrian government centralized power, limited dissent, and tightly controlled all political life. For ordinary Syrians, this meant few civil liberties. For Kurds, however, the effects were heavier and more systematic.

One of the starkest measures against Kurds came earlier but had lasting impact: in 1962, the government conducted a special census in the al-Hasakah region, a Kurdish-majority area. About 120,000 Kurds lost their Syrian citizenship in that census, being labeled "foreigners" or "unregistered" even though many had lived in Syria for generations. Statelessness meant these individuals could not own property, vote, hold public jobs, or travel freely. Their children often inherited this status. Over decades, this created a large population of Kurds excluded from full legal rights. In the 1970s, the Syrian government tried to change the demographic balance in Kurdish areas through the so-called "Arab Belt Project." Kurdish families were displaced from border areas, and Arab settlers were moved in. This was intended to weaken Kurdish presence in strategic zones. In tandem, Kurdish cultural life was suppressed: schools or publications in Kurdish were banned or discouraged, parents were pressured to give children Arab names, and celebrations like Newroz (the Kurdish new year) were restricted or blocked. Over time, Kurdish communities became economically marginalized, socially isolated, and politically resentful. Tensions occasionally erupted. In 2004, in the city of Qamishli, a Kurdish-Arab clash began after a football match and escalated into demonstrations against state policy. Syrian security forces responded with force, killing

several people and arresting many more. The event became a symbol of Kurdish discontent and the refusal of the state to tolerate dissent.

This pattern of repression meant that by the 2000s, many Kurds felt disconnected from the Syrian state. They had suffered loss of identity, loss of civil rights, and repeated denial of recognition. Many viewed local self-rule as the only way to protect their community.

2.2   War, Power Vacuums, and the Rise of Rojava

In 2011, protests spread across the Arab world in what was called the Arab Spring. In Syria, popular demands for reform were brutally suppressed, and the crisis escalated into full war as opposition groups took up arms. The Syrian government found itself fighting on multiple fronts and gradually losing control in many peripheral regions.

In the north and east of Syria regions with strong Kurdish presence state authority weakened more quickly. As government forces withdrew or were overstretched, local Kurdish groups stepped in to provide security, services, and governance. The People's Protection Units (YPG), along with political partners, began to administer these areas. Over time, they called their administration Rojava (later formalized as the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, DAANES). The Kurdish-led administration filled crucial gaps: running schools, hospitals, local courts, and councils. They defended territory both from extremist groups like ISIS and from rival militias. Their governing model emphasized local councils, representation, women's participation, and communal decision-making. Because the state had withdrawn, the Kurdish administration became a de facto authority. This development drew attention and intervention from external powers. The U.S. provided technical, logistical, and air support to Kurdish forces in their fight against ISIS. But that support was often tenuous because it conflicted with alliances (for example, Turkey, a U.S. ally, views some Kurdish groups as linked to the PKK and considers them a security threat).

Over time, as the war dragged on, the territories under Kurdish control became more stable and institutionalized. Yet tensions remained with Damascus, with neighboring Turkey, with other Syrian armed groups, and with regional powers. The question of whether these Kurdish-administered zones would ever be integrated into Syria or recognized as autonomous became central.

2.3   Recent Developments and International Dynamics

In recent years, the Syrian central government under an interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has moved to reintegrate Kurdish-held areas. In March 2025, Damascus and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) signed an agreement to integrate the SDF into state

institutions and bring critical functions border crossings, oil fields, airports under central control. This deal aims to unify Syria again under a central government.

Still, tensions persist. In 2025, clashes broke out between the SDF and government forces in Aleppo province, underlining the fragility of the integration process. Also, the Syrian Defence Ministry and SDF traded blame over a rocket attack near Manbij, showing distrust between the parties.On the political front, Kurdish leaders have advanced proposals for a federal system in post-conflict Syria, in which regions including the Kurdish majority zones would have legislative and administrative powers over local affairs. But the central leadership opposes full federalism, citing national unity and security concerns. In December 2024, the UN raised alarm over escalating violence in Syria, reminding parties that civilian protection must remain a priority during conflict. The Kurdish-administered northeast is among the contested areas. Meanwhile, reports indicate that Kurdish factions have been losing some ground. In late 2024, with shifting alliances and pressure from Turkey and others, observers say the Kurdish factions are "on the back foot," trying to preserve gains made during the war. (Reuters)

These recent developments show that Rojava's fate is not predetermined. Whether it becomes part of Syria's structure with autonomy, merges fully under Damascus, or faces renewed conflict depends on how regional powers, the Syrian government, and international actors negotiate core issues: sovereignty, decentralization, and human rights.

3 Foreign Intervention and Actions Taken by Relevant States and Parties

The Democratic Autonomous Region of North and East Syria, often called Rojava, has been a flashpoint of conflict and intervention. Different states have acted in ways that protect their own national interests, while others have supported local governance or humanitarian aid. This section provides a simple overview of key interventions and why they matter for the committee. It is not a complete record but should help delegates understand the main dynamics.

3.1 Syrian Government and Kurdish Repression

The roots of the crisis go back decades. Kurds, a large non-Arab minority in Syria, live mostly in the north and east, near the border with Turkey. In 1962, the Syrian government conducted a census in the al-Hasakah province. About 120,000 Kurds lost their citizenship and became stateless. Without citizenship, they could not own land, get state jobs, vote,

or even register marriages. This left many families vulnerable and excluded from Syrian society. Under Hafez al-Assad, who came to power in 1971, the government carried out an "Arab Belt Project." Kurdish families were forced off their land, and Arab families were moved in to change the region's demographics. Kurdish schools, publications, and cultural associations were closed, and even celebrating Newroz, the Kurdish new year, was restricted. This repression created deep resentment. By the time of the Syrian Civil War, many Kurds no longer trusted Damascus and were ready to pursue self-rule.

This history of repression explains why Kurdish groups were determined to establish self-governance when the war created space for local control.

3.2   Erosion of State Authority and Rise of Rojava

In 2011, protests broke out in Syria as part of the Arab Spring. The government responded with violence, and the situation escalated into civil war. While Assad's forces held Damascus and other big cities, they lost control in much of the north and east. Islamist groups took parts of the north, while Kurdish groups organized themselves in the east.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD), founded in 2003, and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), stepped into the power vacuum. They created local councils and security forces. Over time, these areas became known as Rojava. To broaden support, the YPG allied with Arab and other minority militias, forming the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This force became a key military player in the war.

The collapse of central authority gave Kurdish groups their first chance at self-governance. Delegates must consider whether such de facto administrations should be recognized or reintegrated.

3.3   External Support for Assad: Russia and Iran

Russia and Iran have been Assad's strongest allies. Both see Syria as vital to their strategic interests. Russia maintains its naval base at Tartus and wants influence in the Middle East. Iran views Syria as part of its "axis of resistance" linking Tehran, Damascus, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

From 2011 onward, Russia used its veto at the UN Security Council to block resolutions that condemned Assad or called for sanctions. In September 2015, Russia launched direct military operations in Syria, bombing rebel areas and providing advisors, weapons, and contractors. This support allowed government forces to regain territory. Iran sent members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and organized militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These fighters played a crucial role in defending Damascus

and retaking Aleppo. Iran also provided weapons and money to keep Assad in power. For Tehran, this secured a corridor to Hezbollah and increased its influence in the region.

Russia and Iran defend their actions as protecting Syrian sovereignty. Critics argue they prolonged the war and blocked peace efforts. Delegates must debate whether sovereignty justifies such interventions.

3.4   Support for Kurdish Forces: The United States

The United States became heavily involved in Syria after the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014. ISIS captured large territories and declared Raqqa its capital. The U.S. looked for partners to fight ISIS and chose the Kurdish-led YPG and later the SDF. With U.S. training, weapons, and crucial airpower, the SDF defeated ISIS in key battles, including the recapture of Raqqa in 2017. For Washington, the SDF was an effective "partner force." But this cooperation was controversial. Turkey, a NATO ally, considers the YPG to be linked to the PKK, a group it classifies as terrorist. This strained U.S.–Turkey relations and created tensions inside NATO. Damascus also saw U.S. support as a violation of its sovereignty. In 2019, the U.S. withdrew most of its troops, which allowed Turkey to launch new military operations against Kurdish forces.

U.S. support strengthened Kurdish forces but raised legal and political questions about intervention and alliances. Delegates must weigh sovereignty against counterterrorism.

3.5   Turkish Interventions in Northern Syria

Turkey has been one of the most aggressive foreign actors in Syria. Ankara fears that a Kurdish-controlled zone across its border will encourage separatism at home. To prevent this, Turkey launched several military operations. Operation Euphrates Shield (2016–2017) targeted both ISIS and the YPG. Operation Olive Branch (2018) captured Afrin, displacing thousands of Kurds. Operation Peace Spring (2019) created a "buffer zone" along the border after U.S. troops pulled back.

Rights groups have accused Turkey of demographic engineering — moving Arab and Turkmen families into Kurdish-majority areas. Turkey argues it is acting in self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. Ankara says it does not oppose Kurds as an ethnic group but opposes the YPG–PKK connection. Turkish-backed councils, schools, and police now operate in parts of northern Syria, changing the local balance of power.

Turkey's interventions raise questions about security, sovereignty, and demographic change. Delegates must consider whether such actions are justified under international law.

3.6 Humanitarian Action and the United Nations

While states pursued their own agendas, the UN has focused on humanitarian aid and mediation. The Security Council authorized cross-border aid deliveries from Turkey and Iraq without Damascus's approval. This allowed food, medicine, and shelter to reach millions in need. Agencies like UNHCR and UNICEF provided services in displacement camps, including water, sanitation, education, and child protection. The UN also pushed for political solutions. The Annan Peace Plan of 2012 and later Resolution 2401 (2018) attempted to pause fighting and allow humanitarian access. However, ceasefires often collapsed. In 2025, the UN Special Envoy again emphasized that only a Syrian-led political process, in line with Resolution 2254, can bring lasting peace.

The UN highlights the gap between humanitarian needs and political rivalries. Delegates must consider how to strengthen the UN's role in protecting civilians and supporting peace.

4 Key Issues at Stake

- **Sovereignty vs. Autonomy:** One of the central debates in this agenda is how to balance Syria's sovereignty with the Kurdish demand for autonomy. On the one hand, international law, as set out in the UN Charter, emphasizes the importance of respecting the territorial integrity of states. From this perspective, recognizing a separate authority inside Syria could undermine the principle of sovereignty and set a dangerous precedent for separatist movements in other parts of the world. On the other hand, Kurdish groups argue that decades of repression and statelessness justify their right to self-rule. Since 2012, they have built governing institutions that provide security and services in areas where the Syrian state has been absent. Delegates must consider whether the international community should support these de facto authorities or focus on reintegrating them into the Syrian state.

- **Regional Security and Power Politics:** The Rojava question cannot be separated from the wider security dynamics of the Middle East. Turkey views the Kurdish-led YPG and SDF as linked to the PKK, a group it considers a terrorist organization. As a result, Ankara has carried out multiple military operations in northern Syria to block Kurdish autonomy. Iran and Russia have backed the Assad government, seeing Syria as central to their influence in the region and to their confrontation with Western powers. Meanwhile, the United States has relied on Kurdish forces as key partners in the fight against ISIS, even though this has created tensions with Turkey, a NATO ally. These overlapping interests make the situation unstable, with each actor trying

to secure its own position at the expense of long-term peace.

- **Humanitarian Access and Rights:** Beyond politics and security, millions of civilians are directly affected by the conflict. Displacement, poverty, and destroyed infrastructure have created a humanitarian crisis. Aid delivery is complicated by active fighting, restricted border crossings, and political disagreements between Damascus and external actors. The United Nations has authorized cross-border aid to reach people in need, but funding gaps and security risks remain major challenges. At the same time, the rights of Kurds and other minorities are at stake. Stateless Kurds lack full legal protections, and children in camps such as al-Hol face harsh conditions. Delegates must ask how humanitarian needs can be met and human rights protected while navigating political obstacles.

5 Questions A Resolution Must Answer (QARMA)

1. How can the United Nations balance the principle of state sovereignty with the right of peoples to self-determination in the case of Rojava?

2. To what extent can international recognition or support for Rojava be reconciled with Syria's territorial integrity and the UN Charter?

3. What role should humanitarian considerations play in shaping political decisions about the status of Rojava and its people? Should aid delivery be separated from political recognition?

4. How can the interventions of major powers such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States be managed in a way that ensures local voices and communities are not silenced?

5. Should the international community view the Kurdish-led administration as a temporary wartime authority or as a long-term governing structure with legitimate rights?

6. How can the UN and member states address Turkey's security concerns while also safeguarding the rights and autonomy of Syrian Kurds?

7. What steps can be taken to ensure that children, displaced families, and stateless populations in northeast Syria are given protection and a future beyond the conflict?

6 Conclusion

The question of Rojava highlights one of the most difficult dilemmas in international politics: how to respect the sovereignty of states while also addressing the demands of peoples who have long been marginalized. For decades, Syria's Kurdish population faced repression, statelessness, and cultural restrictions. When the civil war weakened central authority, Kurdish groups built governing structures that provided security and services. These institutions now exist as a reality on the ground, even though they are not formally recognized. At the same time, the Rojava issue is not just a local matter. It sits at the heart of wider regional rivalries. Turkey fears that Kurdish autonomy will embolden separatism within its borders. Russia and Iran defend the Assad government to protect their influence. The United States has supported Kurdish forces against ISIS, but this has created tensions within NATO. Meanwhile, millions of civilians continue to face displacement, poverty, and uncertainty. The United Nations has tried to bridge these divides through humanitarian action and political mediation, but progress has been slow.

For delegates in SPECPOL, this agenda is an opportunity to think beyond narrow interests. The task is not only to analyze power struggles, but also to consider human dignity, stability, and international law. The challenge is to find creative solutions that balance sovereignty with autonomy, security with rights, and political order with humanitarian need.

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