



# **Behind the Smoke Screen**

## **The Rise of Kurdish Rojava from the Syrian Ruins**

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Hereby I, Linda Bongers, declare and assure that I have composed the present thesis with the title 'Behind the Smoke Screen: The Rise of Kurdish Rojava from the Syrian Ruins' independently, that I did not use any other sources or tools other than indicated and that I marked those parts of the text derived from the literal content or meaning of other Works – digital media included – by making them known as such by indicating their source(s).

Hengelo, September 13, 2017

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party, party leader is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the President of Turkey
DAA	Democratic Autonomous Administration, administering the areas of Rojava
DAESH	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi l-Iraq wa-sh-Sham)
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HRW	Human Rights Watch
KCK	Koma Civakên Kurdistan, Kurdistan Communities Union, umbrella group including PKK, PYD and PJAK, trying to implement Öcalan's democratic confederalism
KDP	Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Democratic Party [Iraq], party leader is Masoud Barzani
KDPI	Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Democratic Party [Iran]
KDPS	Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Democratic Party [Syria]
KNC	Kurdistan National Coalition/Council, established by Barzani
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
NCB	National Coordination Body for Democratic Change
NDF	National Defense Force
MGRK	Meclîsa Gela Rojavayê Kurdistan, Peoples Council of Western Kurdistan, established by the PYD

PJAK	Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Free Life Party [Iran], linked to PKK
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, Kurdistan Workers Party [Turkey], party leaders are Abdullah Öcalan (imprisoned), Cemil Bayık (de-facto leader) and Murat Karayılan (military leader)
PUK	Yekêtiy Niştîmaniy Kurdistan, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan[Iraq], party leader is Jalal Talabani
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratîk, Democratic Union Party[Syria], party leader is Salih Muslim, linked to PKK
SKC	Supreme Kurdish Council, representing PYD and KNC after signing of the Duhok agreement
SNC	Syrian National Council (< 2012)/Coalition (> 2012)
TEV-DEM	Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, Movement for a Democratic Society, established by the PYD
US	United States
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, the PYD's peoples defense units
YPJ	Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, female branch of YPG

## Introduction

“The Kurds have no friend but the mountains” is a common Kurdish expression. In history many conquerors fought against the Kurds. To survive, the Kurds moved back into the mountainous areas. This saying remains part of the Kurdish culture today and expresses the present situation of the Kurds as an oppressed people without a state and for whom the mountains remain a safe haven where they return to when they are threatened.<sup>1</sup>

The Kurds are ethnically a non-Arab people in the Middle East, constituting the world largest nation without a state: the estimated numbers range from twenty to thirty million. Most of the Kurds belong to the majority of Sunni Islam. Shiites, Zoroastrians, Yazidis, Christians and Jewish Kurds are a minority. The Kurds are distinct from other groups in cultural, ethnical and linguistic sense. Kurdistan covers parts of the current nation-states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In all of these countries the so-called ‘Kurdish question’ remains a significant issue for the regimes as well as for the Kurds themselves.<sup>2</sup>

In Syria, where the Kurds make up between 7 and 10 percent of the total population of 24,5 million, the Kurds have for many decennia been a forgotten people. The Kurdish political parties in Syria remained badly organized and unlike the parties in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, these parties have never taken up arms against the regime. Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Kurdish autonomy in Syria would have been inconceivable. But despite the fact that Syria is currently going through the worst tragedy in its history, more than twenty years after the Iraqi Kurds seized the opportunity to establish an autonomous region, the Syrian Kurds followed their example. In 2012, one year after the uprisings in Syria, PYD suddenly emerged as the leader of a revolution for Kurdish rights, freedom and democracy. The PYD prepared to take over control in the Kurdish populated regions. This was a unique opportunity. The Kurds emerged as an important player in the Syrian civil war.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Denise Natali, *The Kurds And the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, And Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005); Jacob L. Shapiro, “The Kurds: Not Quite a Nation,” *Geopolitical Futures*, December 8, 2016, accessed November 6, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-kurds-not-quite-a-nation>.

<sup>2</sup> Natali, *The Kurds And the State*; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 115-150; Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness (ed.), *A Mountain River has many bends: an introduction to the Rojava revolution*, (Chico: AK Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2014), 7-128.

Mid-2013, PYD declared de-facto autonomy in northern Syria and proclaimed the establishment of what is called Rojava, Kurdish for 'West'. The area that the Kurds name Rojava consists of three cantons (Efrin, Kobane and Cizîrê) and covers approximately ten percent of the Syrian Arab Republic, of which more than seventy five percent borders Turkey. Logically not everyone was happy with the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region within Syria. In fact, the region is surrounded by enemies. And although the autonomous region is relatively stable, also many problems and challenges within the Kurdish region itself exist.<sup>4</sup>

In 2016, I attended courses at the Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. One of these courses, "State and Society in Comparative Perspective," was taught by professor Abbas Vali, a dedicated and warm-hearted Iranian Kurd. One half of the course was dedicated to the Kurdish question. While listening to professor Vali's stories, I remembered one of my teachers at the Police Academy in the Netherlands who once enthusiastically showed us a PKK-flag he had found in a former PKK training camp and motivated us to think about the situation of the Kurds. I decided to make an appointment with professor Vali. During our conversation he mentioned Rojava. He told me about its struggle for autonomy, and that the Kurds seemed to be quite successful in Syria at the moment. He explained to me that choosing this topic for my master's thesis would be a challenge, because the region and the dynamics are constantly changing. It would be impossible to draw any definite conclusions. In addition, it would be difficult to find accurate information about the topic. On the other hand, Vali told me, if I choose this topic, it would probably become a unique thesis and an opportunity to present new information. This challenge appealed to me and I decided to take up the challenge and make a contribution to 'the Kurdish question', by examining the functioning and prospects of the Syrian Kurdish autonomous region.

My main question in this thesis is: "How does the autonomous region function in practise?" To answer this question I will thoroughly research the ideology of the PYD, democratic confederalism. Then I will focus on the implementation of the idea in northern Syria under leadership of the PYD. I will focus on four aspects of Rojava: geography, structure, society and politics. As the autonomous Kurdish region has many regional and internal enemies. I will examine these as well. First I have added a chapter explaining the history of the Kurds.

This thesis begins thus with the chapter on the history of the Kurds from the end of the First World War until the present. The second chapter focuses on the ideology of the Turkish PKK, since this is the ideology on which Rojava is built. In Chapter three I will analyse the extent to which the ideology is implemented and how this functions on the ground. The fourth chapter

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

presents the challenges of the region. In these chapters I regularly compare the situation in Rojava with the Iraqi KRG and the former Mahabad Republic to contribute to our understanding of what might influence the attempt of the Syrian Kurds to achieve autonomy. In the conclusion the results of these analyses are presented, and finally I will try to answer the main question presented above.

During the research I faced several challenges. The main one was the lack of up-to-date, accurate and reliable information on the current situation of the region. I used four types of sources: books written by scholars, mostly dating from 2014 and 2015 and thus do not covering the latest developments; works written by activists, such as Abdullah Öcalan and anonymous writers, which were biased and unreliable; news articles, which were relatively trustworthy when used carefully; and finally recent articles written by scholars, which proved valuable but scarce sources. As a result, halfway through my research I realized that my intended method of research had to be supported by conducting interviews and personal conversations with eyewitnesses. I decided to reach out to scholars and Kurds in the Netherlands and abroad. In May 2016, with help of the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Erbil, I visited Iraqi Kurdistan to conduct interviews and informal conversations with many people. This was a really inspiring and valuable experience. Through these interviews I acquired qualitative good information about the Kurdish region in Syria.

Another challenge were the constant changes on the ground. For example, at first, the name of the region was 'Rojava', a name which many writers and Kurds refer to. But, as the region developed, the Kurds seemed to remind themselves of their inclusive ideology. Since Rojava is Kurdish for 'West', referring to Western Kurdistan, the official name of the region changed after the majority of the region's citizens voted on removing the Kurdish word from the name. At the time of writing there is not really conformity with regard to the name. Some refer to the region as simply 'Western Kurdistan', or a longer version 'Democratic Federal System for Rojava-Northern Syria'. The last version of the *Social Contract* calls the region the 'Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria'. Although I am aware of the name change and understand the reasoning behind it, I decided to refer to the region as 'Rojava' or 'the autonomous region' in this thesis to improve the readability.

# 1. Background

This chapter will deal with a background of the Kurds by examining the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent redrawing of the map of the Kurdish region. Many roots of the current problems lay in this process. I will give a brief analysis of the main developments in the four nation-states where the Kurds came to live in.

## 1.1 Disintegration of the Ottoman Empire

Since the emergence of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the thirteenth century, the Kurds succeeded in establishing some regional autonomy in what has become known as Kurdistan. The Ottomans managed their internal affairs through a system of millets, which are protected communities. The Kurds had, just like other ethnic minorities, no official status and thus belonged to the Muslim majority millet. They were permitted to govern many of their own affairs. In the seventeenth century the Ottoman Empire began to decline and after the First World War the empire collapsed. The European powers feared a new large Muslim empire and partitioned the Ottoman Empire in order to prevent a challenge of their European supremacy. After negotiations over the division of the Ottoman lands, including the Kurdish areas, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed in 1920. It promised an autonomous region for the Kurds and the right to vote for complete independence in a referendum one year later. However, the leader of the Turkish war of independence, Kemal Atatürk, rejected the treaty which would have portioned Anatolia into an Armenian, a Kurdish an Italian and a Greek part. However "Sèvres (...) was void before the ink was dry."<sup>5</sup>

Eventually in 1923, the Treaty of Sèvres was superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne. This treaty defined the new borders of the region but did not mention Kurdistan nor even the existence of the Kurds. Ottoman-era Kurdistan was divided between four states: Iran, which was already a sovereign state; Turkey, established in 1922 by Kemal Atatürk; and Iraq and Syria, which were first ruled as mandates by Britain and France but became independent later. The Kurds had become peripheral border populations without a central state.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Quotations from McDowall, *A Modern History*, 137. See also, Abbas Vali, "The Kurds and their "Others": Fragmented Identity and Fragmented Politics," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18:2 (1998): 83-94; Dawn Chatty, "Refugees, Exiles, and Other Forced Migrants in the Late Ottoman Empire," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32 (2013): 35-52, accessed August 10, 2016, doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdt001; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 115-150; Oso Sabio, Pseud., *Rojava; An Alternative to Imperialism, Nationalism and Islamism in the Middle East*, (Lulu, 2015), 5-40.

<sup>6</sup> "Treaty of Lausanne," last modified March 20, 2009,

## 1.2 The Kurds divided

After Kurdistan had been divided over four states, the little hope of becoming independent was dashed. Kurds faced ruthless state repression. They were forced to live under the new regimes of the four states, all taking on different shapes. In this paragraph the development regarding the Kurds in these states will be highlighted.

### *Iran*

In 1925, Reza Shah seized power in Iran by a coup. He followed Atatürk's example by secularizing Iran and creating a homogenous country. The Kurdish language and culture were prohibited and Kurdish political leaders disappeared. In 1941 the British and Soviet armies entered Iran. The Kurds were happy to feel themselves liberated from the oppressive shah and they experienced greater freedom under Soviet occupation. In 1945 the Iranian Kurds formed the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) under the leadership of Qazi Mohammed. Although more other political parties were active, KDPI was the most important. Many of today's Kurdish political parties, like KDP in Iraq, trace their history to the Iranian KDPI.<sup>7</sup>

In 1943, the first Kurdish attempt to attain autonomy was made by the Iranian Kurds. Because the Soviets wanted to keep some influence in Iran, they backed the Kurds in ruling the city of Mahabad. In January 1946, they eventually established the Republic of Mahabad. With the help of the Soviet Union a militia was set up and even in wartime the Mahabad Republic was economically, politically, militarily and culturally successful. The Soviet Union withdrew its support at the end of 1946 and just as quickly as the republic was established it collapsed. Without the support of the Soviet Union it was impossible for the Kurds to remain independent. The Kurds returned to their status as discriminated minority. Neither did the Islamic revolution of 1979 improve the lives of the Iranian Kurds.<sup>8</sup>

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[https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty\\_of\\_Lausanne](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne); McDowall, *A Modern History*, 115-150; Victoria Federici, "The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict," *Sais Review of International Affairs* 35 (2015): 81-88; Natali, *The Kurds And the State*; Vali, "The Kurds," 83-94.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Gunter, "Why Kurdish Statehood is Unlikely," *Middle East Policy* 11:1, (2004): 106-110; Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2016) 167-252; Michael Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," *Third World Quarterly* 34:3 (2013): 441-457; Geoffrey F. Gresh, "Iranian Kurds in an Age of Globalisation," *Iran and the Caucasus* 13 (2009): 187-196; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 115-300.

<sup>8</sup> Gunter, "Why Kurdish Statehood," 106-110; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Gresh, "Iranian Kurds," 187-196; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 115-300; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017.

## *Iraq*

Although Iraq became independent in 1932, the British administration exerted power over the country through indirect rule. However, the rule lacked fundamental legitimacy, because first, it was set up by a foreign western power and second, the democratic government had no support from the lower levels of society. In 1958 the monarchy was overthrown by a military coup, led by the Free Officers. In 1963 and again in 1968 the Ba'ath party gained power in Iraq. In 1963 the Ba'ath had come to power in Syria.<sup>9</sup>

The Ba'ath party exerted a tremendous influence on the fate of the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq. The parties emphasised Arab identity and unity, and denied the existence of a Kurdish nationality. In both Iraq and Syria Arabic was made the official language, Kurdish culture was suppressed and the Kurds were forced to become Arabs.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Iraqi Kurds had no rights, they experienced a few years of relative freedom under the Ba'ath party. In the 1960's, when the Kurds in Iran were ruthlessly oppressed, KDPI moved its headquarters to Iraqi Kurdistan where it founded KDP. KDP would soon become the most powerful nationalist Kurdish organization. However, in 1975, the increasing critique on the party's right-wing politics in Iraq resulted in the establishment of the leftist Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani. The situation further deteriorated when Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979. The Ba'ath party was hostile "to everything that is not itself".<sup>11</sup> During the genocidal Anfal operation hundreds of thousands of Kurds were deported, their villages raised to the ground and many killed. After the failed Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the invasion of Kuwait, both Kurds in the north and Shi'ites in the south took the opportunity to rebel. The

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<sup>9</sup> McDowall, *A Modern History*, 151-180; "The Fragile Gains of Syria's Kurds," Stratfor, accessed August 10, 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/fragile-gains-syrias-kurds>; Michael Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey* (New York: Palgrave mcmillan, 2008), 1-136; Mehran Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East: A Political History since the First World War* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 35-67.

<sup>10</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurdish Question: Whose Question, Whose Answers? The Kurdish Movement Seen by the Kurds and by their Neighbors," Lecture, Indiana University, Bloomington, November 19, 2004; Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 35-209; Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 53-68; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 186-267.

<sup>11</sup> Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 189.

regime tried to repress the uprisings but to no avail. The international coalition intervened to prevent other massacres.<sup>12</sup>

The international community eventually established a safe haven and a no-fly zone in northern Iraq. A UN resolution in 1991 demanded that the Iraqi central government immediately ended the oppression of the Kurdish people in this area. Never before had the Kurds received international protection on this scale. In 1991, they established a de facto autonomous region and an independent government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with the protection of the international coalition. It was beyond the reach of the regime of Hussein which was toppled by the American invasion in 2003. In the same year, after already twelve years of political autonomy, the Kurds gained the right to have their own parliament, budget and army in the new constitution. They institutionalized self-rule in the KRG.<sup>13</sup>

Since the recognition of the KRG in Iraq also the Kurds in Iran became more active again. A new movement, the Party for Freedom and Life in Kurdistan (P-JAK), which was found to have links with the Turkish PKK, started military action against the Iranian regime. Obviously Iran viewed the establishment of the KRG with suspicion, just like Turkey, having its own Kurdish challenges.<sup>14</sup>

### *Turkey*

In 1922, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, a former Young Turk, created Turkey with the support of colonial European powers. Atatürk wanted to establish a homogenous nation-state and began a process of modernization, shaking of the Islamic Ottoman heritage. After first promising the Kurds a certain amount of autonomy when they would back his ideas, Atatürk realized it was necessary to suppress minorities if he wanted to achieve a political unity for his new nation. The Turkish regime started to purge Turkey from non-Turkish influences, which meant for the Kurds

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<sup>12</sup> Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 151-180; Vali, "The Kurds," 83-94; Sabio, *Rojava; An Alternative*, 11-102; Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 171-209; Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds, Turkey and Iran after America's Iraq war: new possibilities?" (paper presented at the IDF Meeting on Justice, Security and Democracy, The Hague, May 25, 2003; Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 186-267.

<sup>13</sup> Bruinessen, "The Kurds, Turkey"; Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 186-267; Nevzat Soguk, "With/Out a State, Kurds Rising: The Un/Stated Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq," *Globalizations* 12:6 (2015), 957-966; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 151-180; Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 171-209; Denise Natali, "Transnational Networks: New Opportunities and Constraints for Kurdish Statehood," *Middle East Policy* 11:1 (2004): 111-114; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 53-68.

<sup>14</sup> Gunter, "Why Kurdish Statehood," 106-110; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Gresh, "Iranian Kurds," 187-196.

that their language became forbidden, their education was banned and Kurdish political movements were not tolerated. A series of Kurdish rebellions ensued.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1970's, Kurdish left-wing activists began to organize themselves on a national scale to find a revolutionary solution to their problems in Turkey. In 1978 they established the Kurdistan Workers Party, PKK. The leader of PKK is Abdullah Öcalan, who since 1999 is in prison. PKK became a large player in the Kurdish resistance against the Turkish oppression. In the following repression thousands of Kurdish fighters, but also civilians, were murdered and even more Kurds became refugees as a result of clashes with the state. Many of them sought refuge in Syria. The conflict between the government and PKK stabilized in 1999 when Abdullah Öcalan was arrested. Peace negotiations started and PKK seemed to abandon its violent strategy and around 2003 it adopted a more libertarian ideology (in chapter two I will focus on the changing ideology of PKK). After years of further repression by the Turkish regime, the conflict resumed in 2004. In 2012 new negotiations started but also these efforts ended without succeeding.<sup>16</sup>

### *Syria*

The modern Syrian state was established in 1924 as a mandate of France. The Kurds in Syria were not seen as a threat by the French mandate, so they were granted citizenship, got various influential positions and enjoyed substantial rights. The Kurdish rights decreased after Syria became independent in 1945. The first decades after gaining independence were unstable. A large number of military coups shook the country. In this tumultuous period the Kurds demanded recognition for their specific ethnic identity. Their demands were strongly opposed by the Syrian government. Syria proclaimed itself an Arab Republic, thereby confirming the ethnic Arab base. As already described, in 1963 the Ba'ath Party attained power, and in 1970 Hafez al-Assad became president. Under Assad's rule, the official policy line of the Ba'ath regime was to regard Kurds in Syria as immigrants from Turkey. It tried to remove the Kurds from their land, denied them access to legal jobs and receiving state education. In addition, it actively tried to divide the Kurdish population. Another measure was to create Arab settlements in the predominantly Kurdish areas in order to shift the demographic balance in favor of the Arab. As a result, the Kurds lost a large amount of land and their claim to the region became less legitimate.

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Rouleau, "Turkey: Beyond Atatürk," *Foreign Policy* 103 (1996): 70-87; Durukan Kuzu, "The politics of identity, recognition and multiculturalism: the Kurds in Turkey," *Nations and Nationalism* 22:1 (2016): 123-142; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457, Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 7-27.

<sup>16</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Transmedia Publishing Ltd, 2011), 50-69; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457.

Finally, the regime changed the Kurdish names of towns into Arabic. Due to the suppression, the social and political structures in Kurdish society remained underdeveloped.<sup>17</sup>

While Assad severely oppressed his own Kurds, he fostered strong relations with PKK in the 1990's. For almost two decades, Syria has used PKK as a bargaining tool against Turkey while giving them the possibility to grow in Syria. Hafez al-Assad even granted PKK, and its leader Öcalan, a safe haven in Syria, until Turkey threatened to invade Syria. In 1998 Turkey forced Assad to sign the Adana Agreement. In this agreement Turkey demanded that Syria declare PKK a terrorist organisation and expel it. In the Syrian-Turkish agreement is stated:

(...) obligations should include a formal commitment not to give terrorists support, sanctuary, and financial assistance. Syria should also prosecute PKK perpetrators and extradite to Turkey the chief of PKK, Abdullah Öcalan and his collaborators.

Since 1998, when the Syrian regime clamped down on PKK activities and Öcalan was forced to leave the country, the relations between Turkey and Syria began to improve. In 2003, mostly former members of PKK formed a separate political party in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Chairman of the party is Saleh Muslim Mohammed. The Turkish government however, regards PYD as a political branch of PKK and as a terrorist organisation. To parry this accusation, the party itself says it is independent, having only ideological ties to PKK. PYD aims to gain constitutional recognition for Kurdish rights and autonomy. It does not want to acquire independence. It is not known when the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of PYD, was established, but it was probably after the ruthless oppression of the Qamishli uprising in 2004 during which forty people were killed and thousands injured. Until the Arab Spring eruption in 2011 YPG was not a significant force, but with the civil war it became the main armed service in the northwest of Syria, becoming the main support of the Rojava project.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Zahra Albarazi, "The Stateless Syrians," (May 24, 2013) *Tilburg Law School Research Paper* 11 (2013): 1-32, accessed August 16, 2016, [dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2269700](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2269700); Samer N. Abboud, *Syria* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 1-187; Vali, "The Kurds," 83-94; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 151-180; Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 35-67; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; "Canton Based Democratic Autonomy of Rojava: A Transformations Process From Dictatorship to Democracy," Kurdistan National Congress, accessed December 20, 2016, <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/rojava-info-may-2014.pdf>; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 7-27; Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava*, trans. Janet Biehl (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 1-60.

<sup>18</sup> Quotations from "Relations between Turkey-Syria," Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed August 12, 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/reasons-between-turkey%E2%80%93syria.en.mfa>. See also, Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; Kuzu, "The politics of

The involvement of the Kurds in the Arab uprisings is a complicated story. In 2011, Syrian citizens began to protest against the rule of the Ba'ath Party, demanding regime change and political reforms. Many individual Kurds joined the protests, but the parties decided to wait to commit themselves for strategic reasons. YPG also avoided fighting against the Syrian government. Its main intention was to defend the Kurdish areas. YPG united the Kurds and became the only legitimate army of the Kurds in Syria. Being prepared, YPG immediately took over northern Syria when the Syrian regimes decided to pull its troops back in 2012 - a godsend for the Kurds. The main reason was that the remote area did not have a strategic value for the regime at the time. Withdrawing its troops saved resources. Moreover, rather than trusting the oil rich areas to Jihadis, the regime found a tacit ally in the Kurds who were also opposed to Sunni majority rule. Most probably there is some form of agreement between PYD and the Syrian regime. Given this leeway, in 2013 PYD started to form an interim government, and declared de-facto autonomy. This Kurdish region came to be known as Rojava, also known as Western Kurdistan.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.3 Responses to Syrian Kurdish autonomy**

The Syrian civil war quickly evolved into a conflict involving various actors. It reflects a centuries-old Ottoman – Persian antagonism. Many parties use their Sunni or Shia identity to mobilize their followers and to frame the enemy. Some of the regional powers see advantages in the establishment of the autonomous region for the Kurds and sometimes the Kurds are used as a pawn in the conflict. Others see the Kurds as a threat. In this last part of the chapter the

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identity," 123–142; Tulay Karadeniz, "Turkey's Erdogan: peace process with Kurdish militants impossible," *Reuters*, July 28, 2015, accessed November 11, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-kurds-idUSKCN0Q20UV20150728>; "The Kurdish Democratic Union Party", Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed September 30, 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48526?lang=en>; Abboud, *Syria*, 1-187; "The Fragile Gains".

<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; "Democratic Autonomy in Rojava", Janet Biehl trans., *New Compass: Toward an Ecological Society*, October 10, 2014, accessed November 15, 2016, <http://new-compass.net/articles/revolution-rojava>; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Abboud, *Syria*, 1-187; Marwan Kabalan, "The illusion of a Kurdish state in Syria," *Gulf News*, April 7, 2016, accessed August 10, 2016, <http://gulfnews.com/opinion/thinkers/the-illusion-of-a-kurdish-state-in-syria-1.1706169>; "The Fragile Gains".

positions of the regional powers Turkey, Syria and Iran towards the Syrian Kurds and Rojava are explained, as well as the position of the West.<sup>20</sup>

Since the Syrian regime withdrew from the Kurdish areas a second Kurdish state became an option. It has been at least uncomfortable for Ankara to see PYD succeeding in establishing an autonomous area and in increasing its legitimacy - Turkey has been repressing the Kurds within its own borders for decades. Ankara worries that the Kurdish success in establishing autonomy will spill over to the Turkish Kurds and that the area might be used by PKK as a base for its struggle in Turkey. In July 2015 the peace talks between the two broke down and hostilities renewed between Turkey and PKK. The Turkish interventions that followed on Syrian soil led to tensions with the Kurdish forces fighting Daesh in the Kurdish areas. In this regard minister Çavuşoğlu declared to the BBC "How can you say this terrorist organisation is better, because they fight Daesh. They are [the] same and must be eradicated."<sup>21</sup>

The Turkish government's policies in the region are completely the opposite from those of PYD. It plays a key role in supporting the Sunni opposition in the Syrian civil war - including armed groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda - to undermine Kurdish unity, decrease Shia domination in Syria and to expand the Sunni regional power. This policy has been explained as the continuation of the so-called neo-Ottoman Sunni identity on which the foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is based. Professor Cemgil explains that the mix of Turkish nationalism with Islamism of the ruling AKP party pushes the Sunni population towards supporting Daesh by portraying PKK and PYD as allies of the United States and the Alawite regime. In addition, Turkey tries to secure its influence in the Syrian conflict in a more indirect manner as well, through, for example, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) that is based in Istanbul. The SNC is viewed as hostile to Kurdish demands and rights as well as to the Iranian

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<sup>20</sup> Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 9-34; John Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 3-32; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 151; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> "Turkey and US 'planning buffer zone' in northern Syria," *BBC*, July 27, 2015, accessed June 10, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33681215>; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; "The Fragile Gains"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 195-222; Shapiro, "The Kurds"; "Erdoğan implies Turkey doesn't want another 'Iraqi Kurdistan' in Syria," *Rudaw*, October 28, 2015, accessed December 30, 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/281020151>; Personal interview with Joost Jongerden, Wageningen, December 13, 2016; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; "Canton Based Democratic"; "Turkey v Syria's Kurds v Islamic State," *BBC News*, August 23, 2016, accessed June 10, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>.

regime. Turkey also hopes that its influence on KDP in the KRG helps to restrict any possible pan-Kurdish ambitions of PYD.<sup>22</sup>

As can be imagined, in this process the relations between Turkey and Syria have severely deteriorated. The Turkish support for the uprising against Bashar al-Assad, gave Assad the opportunity to ignore the Adana agreement of 1998. After years of exile Saleh Muslim was invited back to Syria bringing with him more than two thousand PKK fighters. Assad allowed Muslim to operate freely in harassing Turkey. Restrictions on all Kurdish activities were rescinded and they were given relative freedom. Even when PYD openly established Kurdish language schools and checkpoints in Kurdish areas where the regime was still present, the Syrian regime did not intervene. The Kurds had become a tool of the Syrian regime against the Turkish policies in Syria. For instance, the Syrian regime supports the PKK-PYD strongholds along the Syrian-Turkish border which pose a threat to Turkey. Many Kurds are, however, concerned about Assad's strategy because the support might cause divisions between Kurdish parties.<sup>23</sup>

The situation became more complicated with the involvement of Iran. When the Syrian regime became weaker and lost control over large parts of Syria to armed opposition groups, Iran provided military support and training to the mainly Alawite National Defense Force. The involvement of Iran in Syria's military seems extensive and the Shia state has become a major influence in the Syrian decision-making process. Although the Assad regime is officially secular, the two states have common enemies and have drawn closer together after US intervention in

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<sup>22</sup> Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; "Turkey and US"; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; Lionel Beehner and Gustav Meibauer, "Who is Turkey really targeting with its buffer zone?," *Washington Post*, July 30, 2015, accessed June 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/07/30/who-is-turkey-really-targeting-with-its-buffer-zone/>; "The Fragile Gains"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; "Syria's Kurds"; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; Gunes and Lowe, "The Impact of"; "Canton Based Democratic"; Joost Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie Tussen Droom en Werkelijkheid," *Grenzeloos*, May 6, 2015, accessed June 27, 2016, <http://actievoorrojava.nl/koerdische-autonomie-tussen-droom-en-werkelijkheid>.

<sup>23</sup> Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 452; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; "The Fragile Gains"; "Syria's Kurds"; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; Victoria Federici and Yezid Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek Regional Cooperation," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, September 25, 2012, accessed July 29, 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2012/09/25/syria-s-kurds-must-seek-regional-cooperation-pub-49466>; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017.

the region. As an isolated Shia regime in an otherwise Sunni area, the survival of the Assad regime is crucial for Iran. Syria also functions as “a springboard for Iran’s Shia expansion into the Arab world”.<sup>24</sup> Protecting and exporting the Islamic revolution to other parts of the Middle East became another of the main goals of Teheran. This is especially the case with the ideologically motivated Quds forces which arrived with the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>25</sup> Besides the Syrian regime PKK and PYD have become an tool of the Iranian regional policies. What is even more important, is that the Quds forces encourage terrorist activities and support PKK by supplying heavy weapons and ammunition. Khoshnaw Tillo - director of an NGO founded by Syrian activists and professionals - explained to me that although Iran and PKK oppose each other on ideological grounds, Qasem Suleymani, – the chief commander of Quds force, has significant influence over Murat Karayilan the commander of the military wing of PKK. Suleymani is using his influence over Karayilan to steer PKK into a bigger conflict with Turkey, away from new peace negotiations, in order to create an instable and divided Turkey, which is to the benefit of Iran.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth player is Barzani’s KDP, but unlike the PYD Barzani is a close ally of Turkey and an enemy of the Iranians. In an attempt to organize Syrian Kurdish politics through parties aligned to the KDP Barzani established the Kurdish National Council (KNC) as an umbrella organization under which many Syrian Kurdish parties can operate. His main aim is to acquire hegemony

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<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with Joost Jongerden, Wageningen, December 13, 2016; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; “Canton Based Democratic”.

<sup>25</sup> Quds force is a special forces unit within the Revolutionary Guards of Iran and is responsible for extra-territorial operations, by the United States designated as a supporter of terrorism.

<sup>26</sup> Federici, “The Rise of Rojava,” 81-88; “Syria’s Kurds”; Abbas Qaidaari, “Who is targeting Iranians in Turkey?,” *Al-Monitor*, August 13, 2015, accessed June 26, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-pkk-attacks.html>; “Canton Based Democratic”; Martin Chulov, “Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general 'secretly running' Iraq,” *The Guardian*, July 28, 2011, accessed June 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence>; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Fazel Hawramy, “Despite deadly border clash, Iran-PKK war unlikely,” *Al-Monitor*, June 2, 2017, accessed June 27, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/iran-pjak-pkk-may-27-border-clash-syria-iraq-turkey.html>; Jongerden, “Koerdische Autonomie”; Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, “The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East” (Research paper, Chatham House 2015), accessed August 16, 2016, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150723SyriaKurdsGunesLowe.pdf); “Canton Based Democratic”; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Abboud, *Syria*, 120-161; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 145-165.

over this organization, which he tries to achieve through presenting himself as a conciliator between PYD and the KNC and arranging a power-sharing agreement between the two parties (in chapter three this agreement will be described further). Barzani has also been trying through the KNC, to pressure PKK and PYD to come to a peace agreement with Turkey. This pressure did not really improve the relations between the two Kurdish parties, which find themselves on opposite sides of relations with Turkey. While the PKK has been involved in an armed struggle with the regime in Ankara for decennia, KDP is utilizing its dominance within the KRG to improve the economic and political ties with Turkey. The KRG relies on its only real ally Turkey and it would not be in their advantage to put this alliance with Turkey at stake. However, Kamaran Palani, a Syrian Kurdish researcher, explains Turkey does not want to see the development of good relations between the KRG and Rojava.<sup>27</sup>

### **The position of the West**

At the time of writing, the international coalition, led by the US, is supporting the Kurdish forces in Syria militarily. This has angered the Turks and fueled the rising anti-Americanism of the post-coup regime. Ankara insisted that the United States excludes the Kurds from their operation in Syria against Daesh, but US officials declared there is no real alternative to cooperate with. Moreover, Turkey has proven to be an unreliable partner. The US currently need the Kurds as an military ally, but to establish political relations is against their interest because it will further damage the relation with Turkey. An important question is addressed here, also questioned by Tillo: Is the US ready to lose their ally Turkey in the Middle East in exchange for the Kurds? In short-term perspective this answer might be positive in order to defeat Islamists in the region. In the long term geo-politics and oil are important factors in the foreign policy of the US; they want their allies to control the oil-rich areas. However, both the US and the European Union have not been willing to spend much political and financial resources in the war. For now it is a complex situation in which the US is supporting YPG militarily, while Turkey is attacking them.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "The Fragile Gains"; Gunes and Lowe, "The Impact of"; "Syria's Kurds"; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; Aliza Marcus, "Kurds in the New Middle East," *The National Interest*, August 22, 2012, accessed December 19, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/kurds-the-new-middle-east-7377>; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 103-128.

<sup>28</sup> Kariran Hajo, cited in Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 245; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 237-252; "Trump to send arms to Kurdish YPG in Syria," *Al Jazeera*, May 10, 2017, accessed June 10, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/trump-send-arms-kurdish-ypg-syria-170509190404689.html>; Shapiro, "The Kurds"; Personal interview with Yilmaz Saeed, Erbil, May 24, 2017; Abboud, *Syria*, 120-161; Julian Borger and Fazel Hawramy, "US providing light arms to Kurdish-led coalition in Syria, officials confirm," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2016, accessed November 6, 2016,

As we have seen, the struggle for Kurdish autonomy was already present in the process of dividing the land of the former Ottoman Empire. After a period of profound change, the Kurdish aspiration for a Kurdish state became lost, making the Kurds a people without a nation, living under the rule of four different regimes, all denying the Kurdish identity. The minorities were seen as obstacles in building new nation-states.<sup>29</sup>

In the last decades, various Kurdish political parties came into existence. PKK in Turkey ended up in an ongoing battle with the Turkish regime, which declared PKK as a terrorist organisation. Several attempts were made in negotiating over a solution to what is generally called 'the Kurdish problem', but no solution is in sight. Other parties proved more successful in pursuing their aims, like KDP and PUK in Iraq, now ruling in the KRG. Also in Iran the Kurds have had their moments of success in the form of the Mahabad Republic. In Syria, PYD has become the major Kurdish party. From the moment the regime withdrew its forces from the north of Syria in 2012, the Kurds gained more autonomy than ever before in Syria and proclaimed the establishment of what is now called the 'Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria'.

Turkey opposes the autonomous areas and worries that this Kurdish success will spill over to their own Kurds. It supported the uprising against Bashar al-Assad and consequently relations between Syria and Turkey deteriorated. Syria played the PKK-card against Turkey: Assad invited the leader of PYD back to Syria, and allowed the Kurds to operate freely in the northeast of Syria. When the Syrian regime became weaker, Iran jumped in and provided extensive support, because Assad's regime is their main asset in extending Shia power in the region. Other important asset for Iran are PKK and PYD, which, again, are used as tools. By steering these parties into conflicts with Turkey, Iran preserves chaos and disunity in the region. It is difficult for the KRG to determine their stance towards Rojava. Also the United States find themselves in this inconvenient position; supporting YPG and PYD means angering Turkey. Since YPG is the United States' only reliable ally in the region, they chose to support them.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/syria-us-arms-supply-kurds-turkey>.

<sup>29</sup>Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 35-67; Natali, "Transnational Networks," 106-131; Vali, "The Kurds," 83-94; Chatty, "Refugees, Exiles," 35-52; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88.

## 2. Development of Ideology

While Syria was ripped apart in a civil war, PYD has been establishing the autonomous regions of Rojava based on a well-defined ideology. In this chapter I will focus on the development of this ideology. To do so, we need to step back and first take a look at the ideology of the PKK, developed by Abdullah Öcalan. The ideology of PKK changed over the years, particularly when Öcalan, during his imprisonment, began to explore the work of the American social ecologist Murray Bookchin.

### 2.1 Origins

Originally, the ideology of PKK was based on Marxism. Marxism has always had a strong appeal to oppressed peoples. It attacks capitalism, exploitation, and liberal individualism. Marxism argues that history is determined by the means of production (the economy). Capitalism, Marx argued, caused alienation between worker and their product of labour. This will lead to class consciousness in society. It is this class consciousness that will inevitably cause a revolution and a classless socialist society, which would replace the system of commodity production by 'production for use'. Lenin, founder of the Bolshevik Party, did not believe that the proletariat could develop a class consciousness on its own. It needed a vanguard party, leading it to revolutionary consciousness. United around the party, the proletariat would be awakened and possess a revolutionary potential to crush capitalism and oppression.<sup>30</sup>

Inspired by these Marxist-Leninist ideas, PKK tried to find a revolutionary answer to what it calls the Kurdish question. It believed that class struggle was only one part of the struggle for liberation. It had to be connected to other struggles related to culture, gender and geography. PKK criticized various aspects of existing models, and tried to develop an ideology that applied to the Kurd's particular situation as a suppressed minority. Above all, PKK realized that Marxists social and political ideas would lead to tyrannical and dictatorial regimes. PKK realized that in the countries where communists gained power, they were able to reach some of their goals, but no socialist party was able to create an equal, free society.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 51-142; Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 23-110.

<sup>31</sup> Personal interview with Joost Jongerden, Wageningen, December 13, 2016; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 44-91.

## 2.2 Ideological transformation

PKK was established in 1978 and led by Abdullah Öcalan. From the moment Öcalan was imprisoned in 1999 PKK suffered major defeats. This resulted in power struggles within the party. Eventually the organisation was marked by splits and open banditry and the moral and ideological rules were ignored. During the following crisis, Öcalan started a process of critical self-reflection. He concluded that PKK's concept of the state and its approach to violence were its main shortcomings: "It has become clear that our theory, programme and praxis of the 1970s produced nothing but futile separatism and violence and, even worse, that the nationalism we should have opposed infested all of us."<sup>32</sup> Öcalan tried to replace the violent struggle by promoting a political struggle based on civil resistance. Violence or force cannot be accepted, only legitimate self-defense as a basic principle of universal law can be recognized. Not all members of PKK followed his example. Some still have an nationalist/separatist outlook and at some point initiated new attacks on the Turkish state under the name 'Kurdistan Freedom Falcons', the TAK.<sup>33</sup>

Öcalan's scepticism about the concept of the state was followed by the questioning of the desirability of a Kurdish nation-state as a response to Turkish nationalism. Many freedom movements criticize the nation-state they are living in but in defence of their interests strive for the creation of a nation-state of their own. Öcalan developed a different view, arguing that the nation state cannot constitute the solution for the Kurds; the state would be as authoritarian and bureaucratic as the nation-state the Kurds tried to liberate themselves from. In such a nation-state, a certain exclusionary, imposed identity would again become the norm of the nation, marginalizing other minorities.<sup>34</sup>

What we need is not fulfilment of nationalist demands and ideologies. Rather, we need to recognize the existing borders of the Middle East as fixed and therefore lead a struggle

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<sup>32</sup> Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Important to note is that Öcalan does see armed resistance as legitimate self-defense when the state, in this case Turkey, is not acting according to justice and universally accepted laws; Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory: An Introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 51-88; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 44-91, Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Sabio, *Rojava; An Alternative*, 11-102; Kuzu, "The politics of identity," 123-142; "TAK: We aren't dependent on PKK, our actions will spread," *ANF News*, December 31, 2015, accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.anfenglish.com/kurdistan/tak-we-aren-t-dependent-on-pkk-our-actions-will-spread>.

<sup>34</sup> Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91; Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; Sabio, *Rojava; An Alternative*, 11-102; Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilisation* (London: Pluto Press, 2007) 243; Personal interview with Joost Jongerden, Wageningen, December 13, 2016.

for basic rights and democracy within the existing countries and states. The point is to realize equal rights and unity in freedom.<sup>35</sup>

This quote shows an important radical shift which is still visible in Rojava. Öcalan realized the Kurdish question could no longer be solved by any form of nationalism. He rejected the nationalist call for independence and supplanted it by a call for equal rights and autonomy for minorities. This had to take place within the existing state entity which had to become democratic. At the same time, Öcalan did not abandon his Marxist background. In his view, humanity can only be able to live a meaningful life if it abandons the modern capitalist and statist system. “We shall, sooner or later, understand that “the wrong life cannot be lived rightly”<sup>36</sup>

### 2.3 Bookchin and Mies

While in prison Öcalan wrote various texts, seeking an alternative for the violent and nationalist ideology he wanted to replace. To fill in the gaps in the search for an alternative to capitalism and a replacement for the failure of socialism, Öcalan began to study the ideas of various thinkers of the Sociologist Movement. Two of its thinkers, Murray Bookchin and, to a lesser extent, Maria Mies, have had the most influence on Öcalan’s ideas.<sup>37</sup>

Bookchin regards himself as a libertarian socialist, a current within socialism. This current criticizes socialist ideas about wage labour relationships and a state controlled economy. In its view, the state should have a minimal influence; it should not intervene in the private lives of the citizens because it undermines their capacity of self-organization and it denies their knowledge and free choice to determine their lives. According to libertarian socialists, a high level of individualization exists in contemporary societies undermining the strong force of community. Instead of building a strong state, the strong self-organizing principle should be built up again. After years of study, Bookchin realized that capitalism conflicts with the sustainability of humankind and nature. In the capitalist system agriculture became

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<sup>35</sup> Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization* (Porsgrunn: New Compass Press, 2015),93; Alexander Kolokotronis, “The No State Solution: Institutionalizing Libertarian Socialism in Kurdistan,” *New Politics*, November 2, 2014, accessed November 14, 2016, <http://newpol.org/content/no-state-solution-institutionalizing-libertarian-socialism-kurdistan>; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91; Jongerden, “Koerdische Autonomie”.

<sup>37</sup> The list of authors Öcalan read in prison is ongoing, but for the purpose of this thesis, I will highlight the two most influential thinkers.; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91; Jongerden, “Koerdische Autonomie”.

industrialized, towns grew into cities cut off from nature, and materialism prevailed, further harming the natural balance. Most importantly, in this system the majority of the people lost their capacity to make their own decisions and became alienated from themselves and nature. As an alternative to capitalism, Murray Bookchin introduced libertarian municipalism, arguing that society should be based on decentralized structures and associations like trade unions, assemblies and local councils. In this structure a form of direct democracy replaces the power of the state. For instance, cities have to decentralize into small communities, re-introducing self-government guided by people's decisions instead of the capitalist market. These small communities should not operate on their own only on a local level, but should be connected to each other, forming a confederal system. Bookchin explains confederalism as consisting of a network of administrative councils with members elected via direct democracy.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.4 Democratic confederalism

Öcalan adopted these ideas on decentralization in development of the ideology of PKK. He called Bookchin's original idea of libertarian municipalism 'democratic confederalism'. Öcalan shares the idea that a society needs some form of administration and coordination but not in the form of a fully-fledged state. The decision-making process has to be made at the bottom of the structure by the citizens so they can decide over matters that concern themselves. This set-up means that parallel societies have to be built within the existing nation-state. The institutions established will form a network opposing the dominant political and economic system, in the case of the Kurds nationalism and capitalism. In Öcalan's words, peaceful coexistence between the nation-state and democratic confederalism is possible "(...) under certain circumstances (...) as long as the nation-state does not interfere with central matters of self-administration." The system focuses on self-sufficiency in every field, including the economy. For this to work, the Turkish and Syrian state should be democratized, to such an extent that every minority, every citizen has the right use its own language and culture, and most importantly, has a vote.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (California: Cheshire Books, 1982) 1-191; Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 99-202; Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91; Francesca la Bella, "The Roots of the Kurdish Women's Revolution," *Academia*, accessed November 15, 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/27491454/The\\_Roots\\_of\\_the\\_Kurdish\\_Womens\\_Revolution](https://www.academia.edu/27491454/The_Roots_of_the_Kurdish_Womens_Revolution).

<sup>39</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia Publishing, 2011), 32; Abdullah Öcalan, *Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question* (London: Mesopotamian Publishers, 1999); Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy in Rojava"; Murray Bookchin, "Libertarian Municipalism: An overview," *Green Perspectives*, October 1991, accessed November 20, 2016, [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist\\_archives/bookchin/gp/perspectives24.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/gp/perspectives24.html); Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91.

We see Öcalan's ideology of democratic confederalism reflected in the southeast of Turkey and in the political structure of Rojava. In Turkey, Öcalan established a body to implement the ideology of democratic confederalism, the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK). The union includes Kurdish parties from other countries, such as the Syrian PYD and Iranian PJAK. Since 2009, in the southeast of Turkey, under influence of its imprisoned leader Öcalan, PKK has attempted (and succeeded to some degree) to implement democratic confederalism in several villages. The aim of this territorial experiment is to gain experience in its workings and then spread this form of autonomy through the Kurdish regions and eventually connect the different Kurdish communities that have been divided over four nation-states with each other. As a result, in various provinces in Turkey's southeast are two parallel authorities, the KCK and the state, of which the first is more powerful on the ground. In Diyarbakir for example, many neighbourhood councils are set up. At the time of writing, the KCK is designated as a terrorist organisation and many detentions and trials of alleged members have taken place, making it unclear what is left of the councils. However, this experience served as an inspiration for the Rojava Revolution.<sup>40</sup>

This democratic confederalism brought into practice by an autonomous people, is social ecology. Bookchin was a pioneer in this specific movement. Ecologists share the notion that capitalism as an economic system, is destroying the balance in nature. They claim capitalists make the mistake of believing that humans stand above nature as some kind of possessors of nature. Bookchin describes the world as an interconnected whole consisting of a natural harmony between humans, non-humans and nature. In practice, Öcalan says, the ideal life for humanity can only be sustained in towns that are in balance with the nature and pursue an ecological politics. This is impossible in modern cities where destruction of ecology takes place.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Heywood, *Political Theory*, 220-251; Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 52-53; Sabio, *Rojava: An Alternative*, 11-102; "Backgrounder on the Union of Communities in Kurdistan, KCK," Kurdish Info, November 29, 2011, accessed December 19, 2016, <https://kurdishissue.wordpress.com/2011/11/29/1-29>; Constanze Letsch, "Sur, Turkey: residents pay price of violence as curfew enters fourth month," *The Guardian*, March 3, 2016, accessed December 19, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/03/turkish-police-kurd-activists-clash-diyarbakir-curfew>; Zaher Baher, "The experiment of West Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) has proved that people can make changes," *Libcom*, August 26, 2014, accessed November 6, 2016, <https://libcom.org/news/experiment-west-kurdistan-syrian-kurdistan-has-proved-people-can-make-changes-zaher-baher-2>.

<sup>41</sup> Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 255-280; Bookchin, *The Ecology*, 315-347; Öcalan, *Manifesto*, 32-93.

## 2.5 Gender

Gender is of special importance in this project of equality. It is especially the work of Maria Mies that has contributed to the development of Öcalan's ideas on this issue. In her book *Woman: the Last Colony* Maria Mies highlights the link between patriarchy and capitalism. In her view, society needs to be radically changed. She finds it important to make sure that autonomy preserves the qualitative different characteristics of women. Women need to integrate in mixed gender organisations, but should also form autonomous, 'women organizations', in order to learn to use their feminine-skills. In this manner, men will become aware of the specific qualities of women and consequently male-female relationships will change. Öcalan has introduced this idea to PKK and PYD members and made women integration an integral part of the ideology. He emphasizes that woman's freedom cannot just be assumed once a society has obtained general freedoms and equality. An autonomous and conscious feminist struggle is needed. Already in the 1980's PKK set up women battalions and women education projects. In Rojava gender discrimination is strongly condemned. In the *Social Contract* a specific article is included, ruling that all governing bodies and institutions "shall be made up of at least forty percent of either sex"<sup>42</sup>.

## 2.6 The Social Contract

To implement this ideology, the people in Rojava established the Social Contract of Democratic Autonomy, functioning as a sort of constitution. The idea of a social contract originates with thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. According to them, men are by nature not social creatures living peaceably in social groups. Rather, men are driven by self-interest and if two men want the same thing, conflict arises. Hobbes describes in his famous book *Leviathan* that "during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre."<sup>43</sup> Because men want to preserve themselves, every individual will voluntarily agree to sign a contract to evade the condition of perpetual war. The multitude becomes united in one, which Hobbes called the 'Common-Wealth'. All citizens are equal in a situation of Common-Wealth. We can simply say that the citizens are signing a contract among themselves - setting the rules of the game - and together they can change the rules. It is not about unquestioned obedience. The Syrian Kurds use a social contract - setting

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<sup>42</sup> Quotations from "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International. See also, Maria Mies, *Patriarchy & Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1998), 37-41; Personal interview with Joost Jongerden, Wageningen, December 13, 2016; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-69; Abboud, *Syria*, 162-187; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1651) 185.

rules on which all citizens voluntarily agree - to bring an organized society into existence, consisting of cantons and a commune system.<sup>44</sup>

As we saw in Bookchin's and Öcalan's work, they linked the Kurdish struggle with the dominant capitalist system. They discovered that without challenging the existing modern political economic system one would inevitably become involved in the same problem again. Öcalan realized the nation-state was the root cause of many problems in the Middle-East, and looked for an alternative. The following shift to democratic confederalism leaves behind the nationalist goal of creating a homeland where all the Kurds can live together.

In line with the libertarian socialist thinking of Bookchin, Öcalan argues a capitalist system fails to produce freedom for all citizens and will not lead to democracy. To attain this freedom, a democratic confederal system must be established. This would be the solution for the Kurds and many other minorities in the Middle East. Power will be derived through a bottom-up structure, directly from the people. Democratic politics, taking into consideration the religious and ethnic differences, should be the norm and the society must be in ecological balance. In Öcalan's words, small but effective moves in this direction can be made by democratic, ecological, libertarian and egalitarian movements.<sup>45</sup>

This is what the Kurds claim they are trying to achieve in Rojava. PYD has been very clear that it strives for a federal political system in which minorities have autonomy. Not demanding their own nation-state is a major strength. Following the principles of democratic autonomy, the party strives for freedom, justice, equality and environmental sustainability to create a freer society for people in Rojava, as an alternative for capitalism and nationalism. However, what has been written in this chapter is only the theoretical framework of how PYD aims to shape the new society. The question is whether this ideology is realizable. In the next chapter we will see how Rojava operates on a daily basis and discover what theory in practice looks like.

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<sup>44</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 183-185, 227; Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 93; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, ed. Jonathan Bennett, December 2010, accessed on November 10, 2016, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/rousseau1762.pdf>; Andrew Heywood, *Politics*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 93.

<sup>45</sup> Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91.

### 3. Rojava

The first chapter ended with describing the establishment of the Rojava after the regime withdrew from the northeast of Syria in 2012. A new society was built based on the ideology of democratic confederalism. In the second chapter, its ideology has been described. The third chapter focuses on the situation on the ground. I will first describe the expansion of the conquered region and its structure. Also the practice of social ecology, as explained in chapter two, will be described. Finally, I will analyse the political situation in Rojava.

#### 3.1 The area of Rojava

After withdrawal of officials from most of the government buildings in July 2012, PYD raised its own flag. Rojava, with Qamishli as its capital, became an autonomous federal region consisting of three self-ruling administrative units, Efrin, Cizîrê and Kobane. Before I focus on the geography and expansion of the Kurdish region, it is important to spend a few words on the unexpected appearance of PYD. It is important to remember that many PKK members fled from Turkey to Syria before the Adana agreement was signed in 1998. At the time, Assad permitted PKK to resettle in Syria. At first PKK focussed only on liberating northern, Turkish Kurdistan, realizing it had to be careful not to jeopardize its safe haven in Syria, which was crucial for its survival. In 2003 however, PKK leaders decided to establish a separate Kurdish political party in Syria that was not labelled as a terrorist organisation, PYD. The former PKK members could now move more freely in Syria. According to Ibrahim Barro, secretary of the KNC (the umbrella organizations initiated by Barzani), PYD and PKK are one and the same organization, despite the difference in names. "This is shown, for example, by the fact that those holding high-level positions within YPG or its political arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), have a long history as PKK-cadres and -fighters."<sup>46</sup> This interrelatedness between PKK and PYD has contributed to the preparedness of PYD and its activities on the ground at the time of withdrawal of the Syrian army.<sup>47</sup>

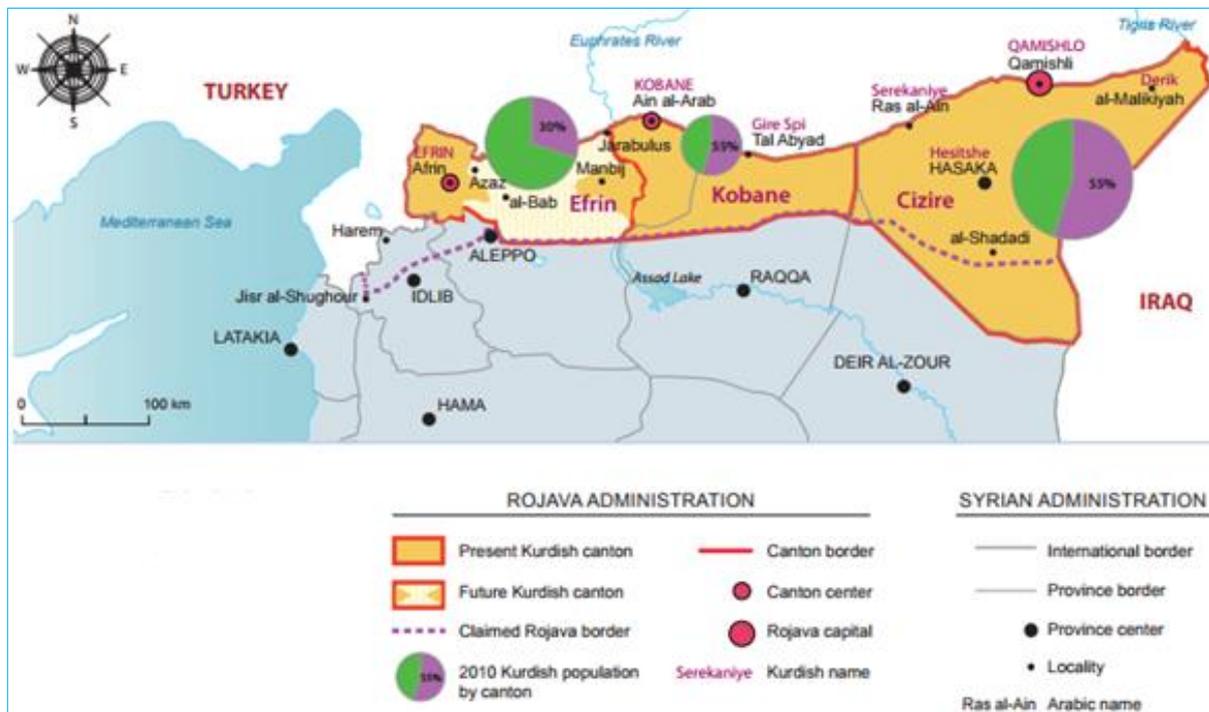
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<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil, May 26, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 103-128; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 1-60; Vali, *The Kurds*, 83-94.

## Territory and resources

Unlike the highly concentrated Kurds in Iraq, the Syrian Kurds are scattered across the north of Syria. South of the 822 kilometre long border dividing Syria and Turkey, three geographically separate areas of mostly Kurdish settlements are located. These three cantons embarked on the task of establishing an autonomous administration.<sup>48</sup>



Map 3.1 Rojava: Population and Future Administrative Organization in August 2016 <sup>49</sup>

Efrin - the westernmost canton - stretches along the Turkish border to the west and north. It covers about 2,070 square kilometres. Although Efrin's territory consist mostly of hills, the lowlands are cultivated intensively. Cotton, wheat and various kinds of fruit are grown on its slopes. Cizîrê - the easternmost canton - is the largest of the three cantons, covering 23,000 square kilometres and is bounded by the Turkish border to the north and the Iraqi border to the east. Wheat is the main product of this canton. While most of the inhabitants are Kurdish, the population in the Cizîrê canton is diverse, resulting in the use of three official languages. Cizîrê is also the canton that suffers the most from the Arab belt, created by the Ba'ath regime. The Arab belt extends approximately 270 kilometres along the Turkish border, from Serekaniye to the Iraqi border in the east. The Kobane canton lies approximately 100 kilometers east of Efrin. The Euphrates marks the western boundary, and because of the water it provides Kobane is of great

<sup>48</sup> Kabalan, "The illusion"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 1-60; Abboud, *Syria*, 164-171.

<sup>49</sup> Fabrice Balanche and Mary Horan, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2016.

strategic value for various players like Turkey, Syria and, of course, the Kurds themselves. In each canton the number of inhabitants has been growing since the Syrian civil war, but especially Kobane experienced massive immigration. Its number of residents almost doubled after 2011.<sup>50</sup>

<b>Canton (capital)</b>	<b>Official Languages</b>	<b>Official Religions</b>	<b>Approximate population 2016</b>
<b>Cezire (Amude)</b>	Kurdish, Arabic, Syrian	Islam, Christianity, Yezidi	1.4 million
<b>Kobane (Kobane)</b>	Kurdish	Islam	400.000
<b>Efrin (Efrin)</b>	Kurdish	Islam, Alawi, Yezidi	1.3 million

Table 3.1 Cantons of the Rojava Administration <sup>51</sup>

The Kurdish areas are the most fertile parts of the country and are the biggest source of raw materials. To limit the Kurds political development, the Ba'ath regime restricted economic development in the area until the beginning of the Arab Spring. For example, the regime did not allow the Kurds to build mills to grind flour for bread or oil refineries to process the oil that is concentrated in the area. Immediately after declaring autonomy, the Kurds started to develop their economy. The Minister of Economy for the Efrin canton, Dr Yousef, told: "We are working on developing commerce around dairy products, fruit and other foodstuffs. (...) We forbid the founding of any more olive factories from an environmental perspective."<sup>52</sup> Only recently, after years of western trade sanctions, the citizens of the cantons were able to restart oil production. The oil export in the neighbouring KRG is an example how PYD can develop its own economy.

<sup>50</sup> Kabalan, "The illusion"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 1-60; Abboud, *Syria*, 164-171; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 19-27.

<sup>51</sup> As described by Samer N. Abboud, in *Syria* and Knapp, in *Revolution in Rojava*.

<sup>52</sup> Quotations from Stanley Reed, "Iraqi Government and Kurdistan at Odds over Oil Production," *New York Times*, November 14, 2012, accessed December 30, 2016,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/15/business/global/delicate-balancing-act-for-western-oil-firms-in-iraq.html>; See also, Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Strangers, *A Mountain River*; "Canton Based Democratic"; Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; "The Fragile Gains"; Personal interview with Yilmaz Saeed, Erbil, May 24, 2017; "Efrîn Economy Minister: Rojava Challenging Norms Of Class, Gender And Power," *The Rojava Report*, December 22, 2014, accessed June 16, 2017,

<https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/efrin-economy-minister-rojava-challenging-norms-of-class-gender-and-power>; Fabrice Balanche, "Rojava's Sustainability and the PKK's Regional Strategy," *The Washington Institute*, August 24, 2016, accessed December 12, 2016,

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy>.

Under the KRG regime foreign oil companies are able to make more than double the profit they made under the Iraqi regime. Monthly, the KRG receives an income of about 350 million dollar from crude oil exports. Looking at the current unstable situation in the rest of Syria, foreign companies would be pleased to arrange similar contracts with the Rojava government. However, in general it is difficult to establish a full trade structure since many resources are used in the war. In addition, when the Kurds would be able to refine a greater amount of oil and start exporting and making profit, this would conflict with their idea of ecology and “production for use”. I will return to this in chapter four.<sup>53</sup>

**Expansion**

After the regime withdrew its troops from the Kurdish regions and PYD declared autonomy, the party has been expanding militarily and administratively the autonomous region under its control. In this paragraph this expansion will be visualized using maps and a chronological report of the strategically important developments, first displayed in a timeline.<sup>54</sup>

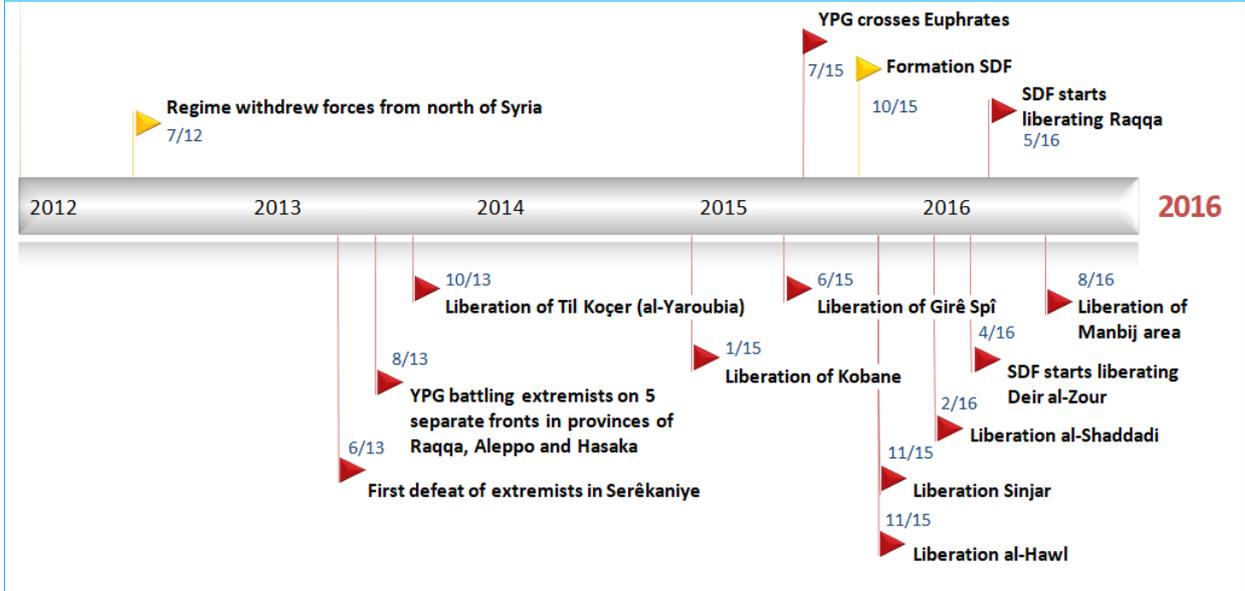


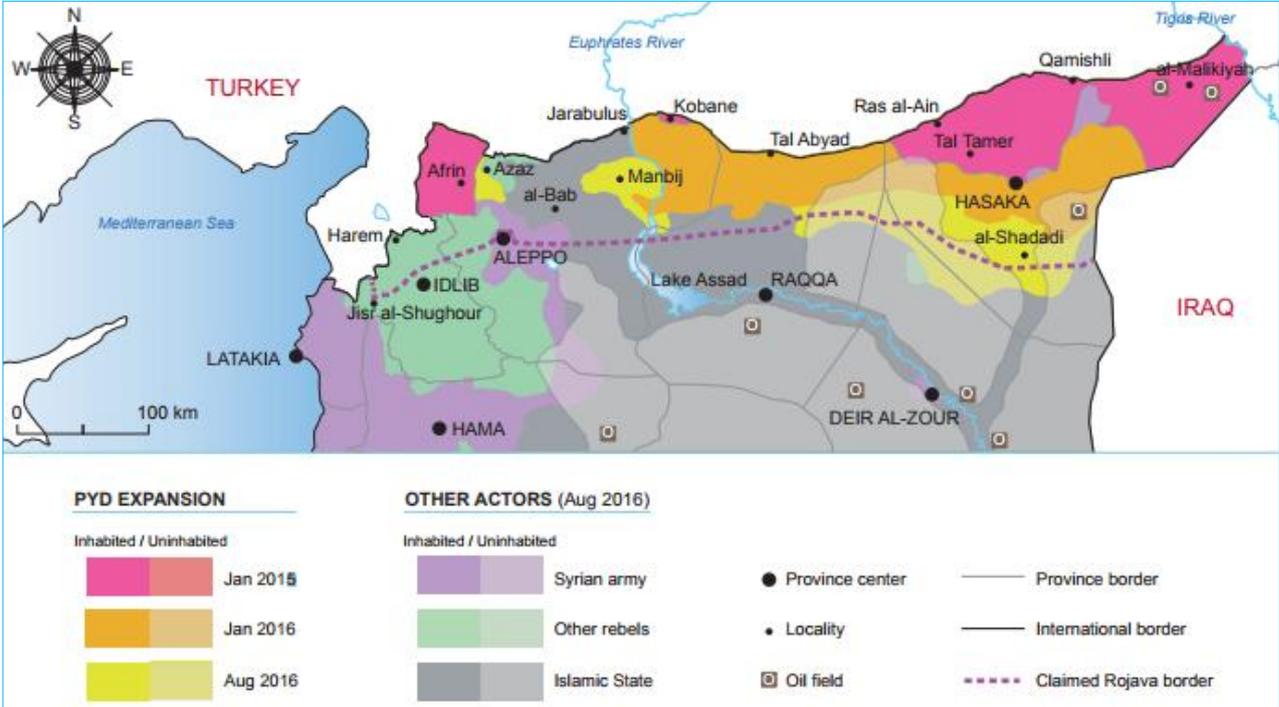
Figure 3.1 Timeline of important developments

<sup>53</sup> Strangers, *A Mountain River*; Jongerden, “Koerdische Autonomie”; Tim Arangodec, “Iraqi Government and Kurds Reach Deal to Share Oil Revenues,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2014, accessed December 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/world/middleeast/kurd-pact-with-baghdad-against-islamic-state.html>; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-189; Julian Borger and Mona Mahmood, “EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2013, accessed December 30, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/19/eu-syria-oil-jihadist-al-qaida>.

<sup>54</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 103-128; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163.

One of the first attacks from Daesh and Jabhat Al-Nusra was on the city of Serêkaniyê (Ras al-Ain). Serêkaniye is a predominantly Kurdish city, in the west of the Cizîrê canton that was cut in two when the Syrian-Turkish border was drawn in 1920. In November 2012, Jihadi groups entered the city by crossing the Turkish border, but after a few weeks they started to terrorize the population and they lost its support. Although few commentators gave YPG a chance to take over the city, after months of fighting Serêkaniye became the first city to be liberated by YPG. From all accounts YPG also showed that it was able to gain the confidence of the whole ethnic and mixed population of Serêkaniye.<sup>55</sup>

In March 2013, Jihadi groups overran Til Koçer (al-Yaroubia), a predominantly Arab city at the other end of the Cizîrê canton. YPG was asked by Arab tribal leaders to drive out the enemy. Arabs fought alongside YPG, and after the city was liberated a large part of the population supported PYD and the project of Democratic Autonomy. The city is an illustration of how PYD managed to increase its legitimacy and support under the (non-Kurdish) residents.<sup>56</sup>



Map 3.2 PYD Expansion in Northern Syria, August 2016 <sup>57</sup>

During this struggle, the Syrian Kurds were, unlike the Iraqi Kurds, unable to attract international attention. Few noticed the introduction of what was called democratic

<sup>55</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 103-128; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163.

<sup>56</sup> Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163; “YPG takes control of Til Koçer,” *ANF News*, October 27, 2013, accessed July 28, 2017, <https://anfenglish.com/news/ypg-takes-control-of-til-kocer-8449>.

<sup>57</sup> Fabrice Balanche and Mary Horan, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2016.

confederalism in 2011, the liberation of cities like Serêkaniye and Til Koçer, or even the creation of democratic-autonomous administrations in the three cantons in January 2014. The Syrian Kurds only started to attract international attention after the battle with Daesh in the city of Kobane in January 2015.<sup>58</sup>

Kobane is a strategic gateway between Turkey and Syria. Daesh and other jihadi groups had repeatedly tried to take over control in this city and it seemed certain Kobane would fall. YPG fighters were tenacious but were ultimately outgunned and about to lose the town. The international media, which carefully monitored the battle, provided the Syrian Kurds with the necessary international attention. The United States and the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga intervened and as a result YPG, the United States, and the KRG started to coordinate their efforts. Through this support the US acknowledged the regional presence of the Syrian Kurds. Western media described the Kurds as their ally against Daesh and the United States started to supply the Kurdish militia with weapons and medical equipment. The combined efforts resulted in a successful defence of Kobane. This success and that in Sinjar in Iraq later that year<sup>59</sup> provided the Kurds the needed legitimacy and publicity for their project.<sup>60</sup>

Like Serêkaniye, Girê Spî (Tal Abyad) is located on the Turkish-Syrian border and lies between the Kobane and Cizîrê cantons. For the Kurds it is an important connection between the two cantons. For the jihadists the city is important because the road between Turkey and Daesh's Syrian capital Raqqa runs through Girê Spî. Daesh succeeded in occupying the city in 2012. In 2015, PYD launched an operation with the aim to unite the middle and eastern Kurdish cantons under the guise of cutting off Daesh supply routes. In June, during their first campaign, the Kurds liberated the region of Girê Spî and in October the city became officially part of the Democratic Autonomous Administration under the canton of Kobane. The canton of Cizîrê could now provide support to the Kobane canton (see map 3.2). Many argue that after connecting the two cantons, the aim of PYD was to move westward across the Euphrates river and to capture a mixed area of Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds, what would result in the uniting of Efrin with Kobane

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<sup>58</sup> Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, xxiii-xxvii.

<sup>59</sup> The YPG and the PKK rescued tens of thousands Yezidis who fled from Daesh to Mount Sinjar.

<sup>60</sup> Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; "Why Kobane Matters," *Time*, October 23, 2014, accessed August 10, 2016, <http://subs.time.com/current-articles/why-Kobane-matters>; Julian Borger and Fazel Hawramy, "US providing light arms to Kurdish-led coalition in Syria, officials confirm," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2016, accessed November 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/syria-us-arms-supply-kurds-turkey>; Barak Barfi, "Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria," *The Washington Institute*, October 9, 2015, accessed November 6, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria>.

and Cizîrê. The success in connecting these regions, however, posed a threat to Turkey, which regarded it as a red line that could not be crossed. I will return to this later.<sup>61</sup>

At this stage in the war, in October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a unified fighting force consisting of Kurds, Arabs, Syrians and other ethnicities, was established. YPG is the dominant force within the SDF. Some even go as far as to state that the SDF is in fact the same as YPG. The SDF aims to liberate Syria from jihadi groups and to establish a democratic autonomic entity in Syria. It has been highly successful in combating Daesh. For example, in November 2015 it liberated al-Hawl from Daesh and more than 250-square kilometers of its surrounding area and in February 2016 it occupied an important city called al-Shaddadi, the last major city in the Cizîrê canton under control of Daesh.<sup>62</sup>

At the time of writing, YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are still expanding their region beyond traditionally Kurdish territory. Since April 2016, the U.S.-backed SDF managed to take up position only forty kilometres away from Deir al-Zour. In February 2017, the SDF has launched a sustained attack on Raqqa. Both these cities are Arab and located far from historical Kurdish territory (see map 3.3). The Syrian army could not liberate the cities by itself, but why would the SDF help the Syrian army? There are various possible explanations in circulation. The first is that the SDF is liberating Raqqa and Deir al-Zour with the aim to simply expand its territory and increase its power (hence limiting the power of extremists) or political negotiating leverage in the future. To counter this strategic consideration the Kurds claim that various non-Kurdish groups participate alongside YPG in these operations. Moreover, many of the fighters are citizens of Raqqa. The Kurds assure their critics that they will withdraw from the city after it is liberated and that the city will be given back to its population. This does not mean that the city will not be under YPG-control. The SDF has made clear that these cities will have the same

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<sup>61</sup> Soner Cagaptay and Andrew Tabler, "The U.S.-PYD-Turkey Puzzle," *The Washington Institute*, October 23, 2015, accessed July 14, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-u.s.-pyd-turkey-puzzle>; "Kurdish forces seize border town of Tal Abyad, cutting off key Isis supply line," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2015, accessed July 28, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/16/kurdish-fighters-cut-key-supply-line-to-islamic-state-capital-raqqa>; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish militia aims to connect Kurdish enclaves in Syria," *Al-Monitor*, November 24, 2013, accessed July 28, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2013/11/kurdistan-syria-militias-turkey.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163; Ari Khalidi, "Kurdish-led Forces Liberate Al Hawl from ISIS," *Kurdistan 24*, November 13, 2015, accessed July 21, 2017, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/1174954c-0c81-4335-8021-30abc5034373/Kurdish-led-Forces-Liberate-Al-Hawl-from-ISIS>.

regime as al-Hawl and al-Shaddadi, south of Hasaka, and Girê Spî, after they were conquered by YPG. These towns are officially under PYD control but in practice are ruled by their local populations (see map 3.3). A second explanation for YPG strategy is presented by Knapp, who visited Rojava twice. Since its establishment, YPG claims that it has fought only in self-defence. Recently this idea has evolved into an official policy: “if the majority of the population (Kurdish or not) of a region that is under Daesh or Al-Nusra control support [our] liberation [of their territory], then YPG, or more recently the SDF - as happened in Til Abyad and al-Shaddadi – will do so.”<sup>63</sup> In this light the previous explanation of the Kurds about their presence in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour makes sense: the plan might be to liberate the cities because the inhabitants support liberation by YPG and to hand over the rule to the people afterwards.<sup>64</sup>

Many argue that the ultimate aim of the Kurds is to connect the three cantons and establish one contiguous area to stand stronger when negotiations start. This would strengthen the defense of the area, secure fresh water supply from the Tigris and Euphrates and eventually provide trading opportunities. Both Palani and Balanche mention the Kurdish ambition to eventually have access to the Mediterranean sea, and an Iraqi Peshmerga even told me that PKK, PYD and KRG are currently trying to acquire a land strip under Kurdish control connecting the KRG, Rojava and the Turkish Kurdish areas to the Mediterranean Sea. However, by connecting the three cantons the Kurds for the first time have acquired a bridge over the Euphrates river, a major setback for Turkey which threatened to intervene in Syria if the Kurds achieved this goal. The Euphrates is Ankara’s ‘red line’.<sup>65</sup>

Despite Turkish threats, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) began removing Daesh and other militants from the almost 100 kilometers of land that stretches along the Turkish border between the cantons of Kobane/Cizîrê and Efrin. In August 2016, the SDF encircled and liberated

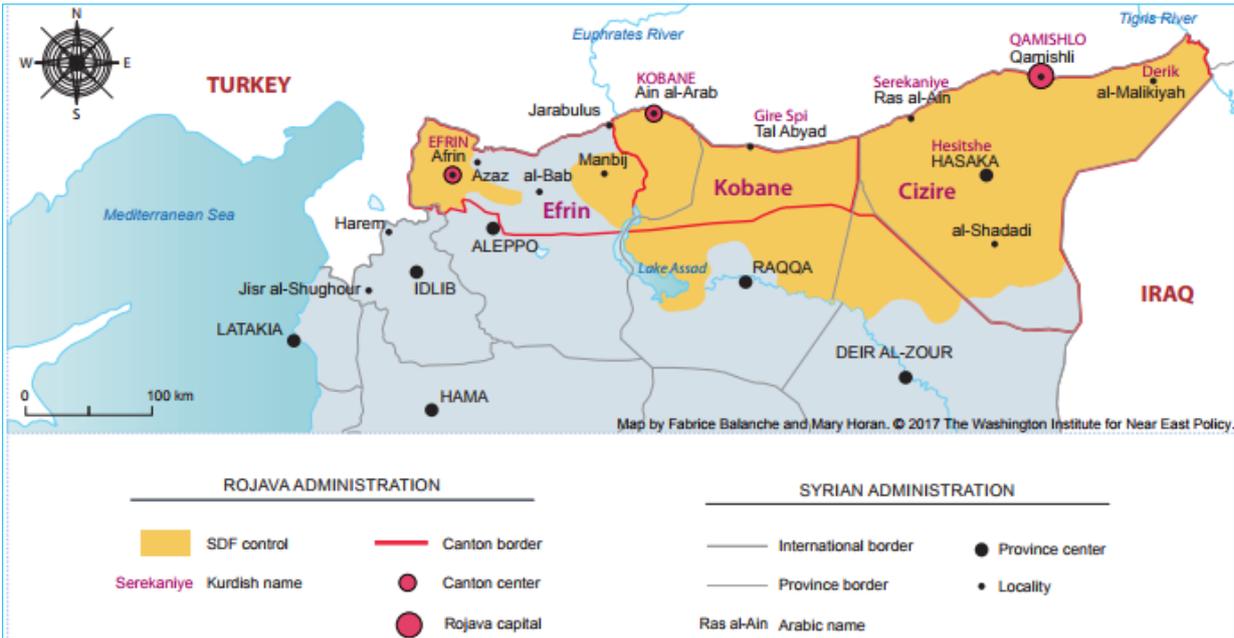
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<sup>63</sup> Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 139.

<sup>64</sup> Fabrice Balanche, “An Opening for the Syrian Regime in Deir al-Zour,” *The Washington Institute*, July 12, 2017, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-army-and-allies-bound-for-deir-al-zour>; “BBC – do your fact checking!” *Peace in Kurdistan*, November 11, 2016, accessed August 1, 2017, <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2016/11/11/bbc-do-your-fact-checking>; Fabrice Balanche, “The Campaign to Retake Raqqa Is Accelerating,” *The Washington Institute*, February 9, 2017, accessed August 1, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-campaign-to-retake-raqqa-is-accelerating>; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163.

<sup>65</sup> Personal interview with Iraqi Peshmerga fighter, Nijmegen, November 21, 2016; “Canton Based Democratic”; Balanche, “Rojava’s Sustainability”; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 103-128; “The U.S.-PYD-Turkey Puzzle”.

the city of Manbij and its surrounding area west of the Euphrates (see map 3.3). Their next step was to occupy al-Bab and thus connect the cantons. While the SDF was making progress, Turkey kept its word and launched Operation Euphrates Shield under the guise of pushing Daesh back from the Turkish border, but it was clear it intended to prevent the Syrian Kurds from uniting the cantons. Turkey attacked the SDF several times and imposed control of the al-Bab region, but it was not able to obstruct the Kurds in reopening the Aleppo-Efrin highway in June 2017. The people in the Efrin canton can now reach the other cantons, opening the possibility of commerce and military support between the cantons. Although it seems an illusion, the Kurds still wish that Turkey would withdraw from Syria, so that they can physically unite the cantons.<sup>66</sup>



Map 3.3 The territory under SDF control in May 2017.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Fabrice Balanche, “The Battle for al-Bab Is Bringing U.S.-Turkish Tensions to a Head,” *The Washington Institute*, January 9, 2017, accessed July 20, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-for-al-bab-is-bringing-u.s.-turkish-tensions-to-a-head>; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 133-163; Fabrice Balanche, “Syria conflict: What is at stake in the battle of al-Bab?,” *BBC News*, February 11, 2017, accessed July 20, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38939492>; Mahmut Bozarslan, “Kurdish cantons in northern Syria already linked,” *Al-Monitor*, June 2, 2017, accessed June 16, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/turkey-syria-kurds-are-cantons-already-linked.html>; “Kurdish forces 'cut off IS escape route' through Manbij,” *BBC News*, August 12, 2016, accessed July 20, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37063857>.

<sup>67</sup> Fabrice Balanche and Mary Horan, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 2017.

### 3.2 New structures

When the regime withdrew from the northeast of Syria in 2012, PYD realized this withdrawal was a unprecedented opportunity to realize its goals of autonomy. The party immediately began to set-up people's councils to protect the Kurdish local communities in Rojava as well as in others parts of Syria where many Kurds live, like Aleppo. PYD copied the practical model from the Turkish KCK, which created neighbourhood councils in Kurdish areas in Turkey. After one year into the conflict, the PYD was able to create a functioning council system in Rojava parallel to the current Syrian state, although especially in areas where the majority of the population is non-Kurdish or favours the Kurdish National Council (KNC), structures remain weak.<sup>68</sup>

To further develop the councils and coordinating bodies PYD set up the Peoples Council of West Kurdistan (Meclîsa Gela Rojavayê Kurdistan, the MGRK) as a coalition under which councils could be united and controlled by PYD. It has the function to fill the gaps where the regime was not able to run the economy and social services any more. Its function increased especially after the number of councils continued to rise. According to Knapp, the councils were overwhelmed in 2012 when hundreds of thousands of people were incorporated in these new structures. The MGRK created a new level between the people and the councils: the commune. It is the commune that became the foundation of Democratic Autonomy. A commune consists of 30 to more than 400 households in a street or city. It is supposed to handle the problems of daily life and meet the basic needs of the people on the local level. The commune does this, for example, by drawing up lists of the beneficiaries of the distributions of fuel and bread. Each commune has a coordinating board, consisting of two co-chairs (one male and one female) and one representative from each of the eight commissions: defence, economics, free society, justice, political, civil society, ideology and woman's council (see figure 3.2). Most of the political activity of Rojava takes place within these commissions, functioning like taskforces. The commune board meets weekly, and every resident can attend these meetings to ask questions, make suggestions or to just listen to the proceedings. At first, only Kurdish communes were created but now they are also established in neighbourhoods of other ethnicities. When YPG liberates an area, it creates a commune and if necessary a council, representing the people of that region. The communes are the backbone of PYD's territorial network.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Baher, "The experiment"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 84-121.

<sup>69</sup> Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91; Sabio, *Rojava; An Alternative*, 11-102; Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution"; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Fabrice Balanche, "From Qamishli to Qamishlo: A Trip to Rojava's New Capital," *The Washington Institute*, May 8, 2017, accessed July 14, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/from-qamishli-to-qamishlo-a-trip-to-rojavas-new-capital>; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 84-121.

After the commune, the neighbourhood is the second level, consisting of seven to thirty communes. In less densely populated areas, this level is the village council, consisting of seven to ten villages. The commune’s coordinating boards represent their commune at this neighbourhood level. The third level is the district, usually comprising a city and between seven to twenty villages in its surroundings. Also at the district level, the eight commissions as mentioned above are formed. Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (TEV-DEM) is the coordinating body of the third level, the district councils, and thus represents many neighbourhoods and its more numerous communes. It is an inclusive popular movement, attracting to its ranks people with different backgrounds, including Kurds, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, Assyrians and Yazidis. These minorities are only accepted when they accept the PYD ideology. The highest level in the structure is the before mentioned MGRK. Since 2013, the two highest levels experienced difficulties in their functioning due to attacks by jihadi groups. This made it difficult for people to move among the cantons. Since then the MGRK, TEV-DEM and the eight commissions function separately in each canton. As described earlier, only recently a connection between the cantons has been re-established. At the time of writing, no information was available about possible unification of the organisations.<sup>70</sup>

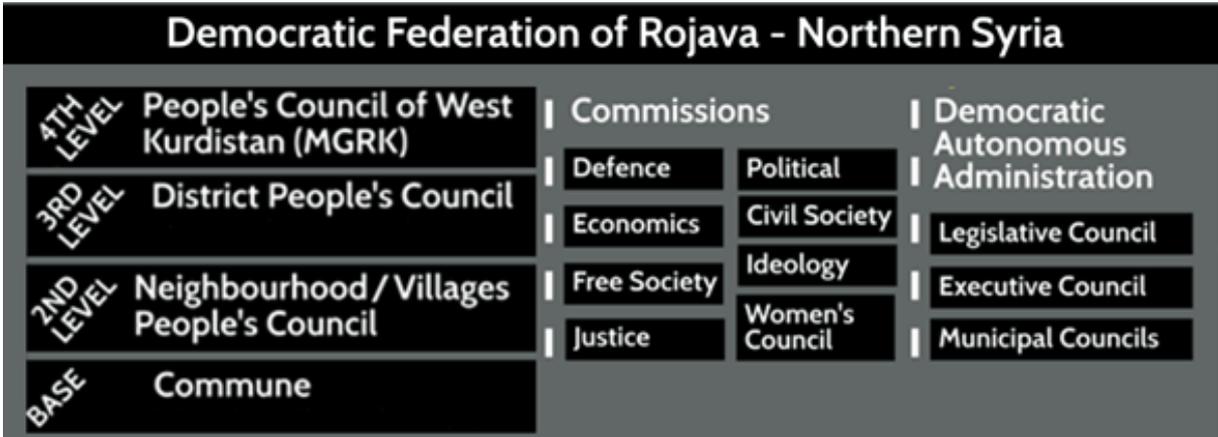


Figure 3.2 Federal System in Rojava/Northern Syria, a dual structure consisting of the four level commune system (left) and the DAA (right).

In 2013, the MGRK realized that Syrian citizens, as well as the international community, might not have enough confidence in their revolutionary idea of a direct democracy in this form. They thought that maybe a common representative parliament, made up of traditional political parties, would be identified as more trustworthy. Thus, in that same year, PYD set up a ‘transitional administration’ in each canton. A representative parliament leads the

<sup>70</sup> Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 84-121; Abboud, *Syria*, 162-187; Alex MacDonald, “A Guide to the Kurds in Iraq and Syria,” *Middle East Eye*, October 29, 2014, accessed November 10, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurds-2135687288>; Baher, “The experiment”.

administrations. On paper, all the political and social groups must be represented in the parliament. In practise, until now only PYD is represented in the parliament. In addition, a legislative and executive council and municipal councils are formed. These larger bodies together with the parliament form the official DAA of Rojava. Within the administration, the executive council assigned ministries to the political parties, until now especially to the PYD. Also the highest council, the MGRK, has half of the ministries. Hence, the power should be divided between the parliamentary system and the commune system; a form of dual leadership arose. However, as a anonymous Syrian Kurds stated: "This whole structure of communes, organisations and after that, the establishment of a parliament, is only a formality to deceive. The real decisions are made elsewhere."<sup>71</sup> I will come to this later.

In March 2016, the three cantonal DAAs issued a declaration for a Federal System in Rojava/Northern Syria with the aim to improve coordination between all the territory they now control. The declaration emphasizes that the federal system of direct democracy fits within a democratic and federal Syrian state, and that a separate state is not the aim. However, immediately after the manifestation of the declaration the Syrian regime, the SNC, Turkey, and less forthright, the United States, rejected the move. The Syrian foreign minister warned: "Creating a union or a federal system (...) contradicts the Syrian constitution and all the national concepts and international resolutions."<sup>72</sup>

### 3.3 Social ecology

PYD emphasizes social ecology as much as direct democracy. Its idea, inspired by Öcalan, is that ethnic and gender conflicts, as well as economic imbalance, lie at the core of many serious ecological challenges we face. Thus, to become a freer and more sustainable society, not only ecological awareness is crucial, but also a mental transformation with regard to the role of woman, youth and minorities. A notable point is ecology in the *Social Contract*. It is seen as a moral and sacred national duty to develop the region in a sustainable way. There are attempts

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<sup>71</sup> Personal interview with anonymous Syrian Kurds, Erbil, May 26, 2017; "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International; Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Baher, "The experiment"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 84-121.

<sup>72</sup> Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 84-121; "Syria civil war: Kurds declare federal region in north," *Al Jazeera*, March 17, 2016, accessed July 20, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-civil-war-kurds-declare-federal-system-north-160317111902534.html>; "Constituent assembly for a Democratic Federal Syria releases final declaration," *Kurdish Question*, December 31, 2016, accessed July 20, 2017, <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/article/3755-constituent-assembly-for-a-democratic-federal-syria-releases-final-declaration>.

by movement activists to create ecological awareness among the Kurds. For example, seed banks are developed, mining companies are not allowed to enter Rojava and special programs have been set up to focus on the preservation of species and climate change. However, in practise the success remains limited to for example crop diversification to enhance the soil and the planting of a first 'national park' near the city of Dêrîk.<sup>73</sup>

Education is seen as an important means to foster an ecological and political consciousness. Under the Assad regime the curriculum was dictated by the state, and no local initiatives were allowed. After the establishment of Rojava, cultural centres, Kurdish-language schools and academies have opened in which courses are offered such as learning technical and practical skills for woman, political courses focussing on law, women's rights and democratic autonomy, and for instance cultural and historical courses. Also ecological courses have become an important part of the curriculum. Many of the students carry an anti-capitalist outlook and the academies are critical of patriarchy. PYD realize that the youth is their future. It is aware that including the youth in the development of the region is necessary to prevent dissatisfaction and unemployment, one of the triggers of the Arab uprisings. The special focus on the youth is demonstrated by the establishment of special youth councils, both by PYD as well as by civil organisations. Youth can participate in commune meetings as well.<sup>74</sup>

Compared to other societies in the Middle East, both PKK and PYD have set themselves apart by emphasising the freedom and rights of women. Indeed, women take leading roles in social and political life and through a system called 'Joint Leaders', every position of head of office is filled by one male and one female. In addition, while the military is largely seen in the region as an exclusive male activity, in 2013 the Women's Protection Units, a woman equivalent of the peoples militia YPG, was established. It played a key role in the defense of the city of Kobane and became well-known for its successes. According to Cengidar Mikail, director of a security force, all male and female recruits have to pass two weeks of feminist instruction before they receive their weapons. Focussing on a more local scale, we see that many communities have their own woman's houses, where women can find help against sexism and they have the opportunity to participate in classes teaching computer techniques, politics or agriculture. However, this stance towards woman is also a strategic appearance to win support from the west. Despite these examples, in reality women in Rojava play a subordinated role. Although

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<sup>73</sup> Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 211-221; "Canton Based Democratic"; "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy".

<sup>74</sup> Personal interview with Yilmaz Saeed, Erbil, May 24, 2017; Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution"; "Canton Based Democratic"; "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International; Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 51-142; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 175-184; Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 291.

PYD is officially co-chaired by a female (Asia Abdullah) and a male (Saleh Muslim), it remains a largely male-dominated party. In addition, many families cannot afford to send all their children to school, so they send their boys while the girls stay at home. In addition, many girls drop out of school to take care of younger children and female genital mutilation, practised in many regions in the Middle East, is also still practised in Rojava, although in a lesser extent.<sup>75</sup>

### **Minorities in Rojava**

Abboud describes the Rojava administration as a body that assumed responsibility to administrate and protect a certain geographic area in the interest of all citizen rather than an administration based on ethnic Kurdish authority. In Rojava Kurds, Arabs, Armenians Assyrians, Turkmen and Chechens, often following Islam, have equal rights as Christians and Yezidi. Hence the official languages in Rojava are Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac. The *Social Contract*, especially the new one published late 2016, reflects the de-emphasis on Kurdish identity and interests. In addition, the separation of church and state means that there are no religious restrictions on public behaviour. Religious groups, sites and building are respected. YPG will protect a non-Kurdish council form attacks as much as a Kurdish one. Janet Biehl, social ecologist and Bookchin's widow, wrote to me that PYD insists that the Kurds in Syria will not be liberated as long as the other minorities are not liberated as well.<sup>76</sup>

Although the Kurds experienced marginalization themselves, this inclusion and freedom for minorities is mostly realized at the local level in communes. In its weekly meetings any person that is interested can participate. At a higher level in the administration, for example in the military and in the decision-making process, this inclusion seems to be a facade. According to Palani, PYD uses the minorities as ploy: the more we include them, the larger the international support. It seems also that only minorities which support PYD are taken on board. According to Ibrahim Barro, the PYD version of democracy resembles the infamous communist "people's democracies"<sup>77</sup> which before the fall of the Berlin Wall terrorized the inhabitants of Eastern

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<sup>75</sup> Baher, "The experiment"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International; Sabio, *Rojava; An Alternative*, 46-66; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 29-34; "A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard," *New York Times*, November 24, 2015, accessed August 1, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html?_r=0).

<sup>76</sup> Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; "Under Kurdish rule,," "Canton Based Democratic"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; Janet Biehl, e-mail message to author, February 5, 2017; "Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution," *BBC Our World*, November 21, 2014, accessed August 1, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3csw9bw>; Abboud, *Syria*, 164-171.

<sup>77</sup> This is a form of government in communist states; a dictatorship of the proletariat.

Europe, establishing a one-party state and forcing all other groups to subordinate themselves to this party. PYD rule will be described in more detail later in this chapter.<sup>78</sup>

### 3.3 Political activity in Rojava

Although Kurdish political activity has always been illegal in Syria, at least twenty political parties exist, with more than ten claiming to be heirs to the original Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS). The parties were tolerated by the regime as long as they did not cross certain unwritten red lines. Currently most of these parties operate under the Kurdish National Council (KNC), established by Barzani and now based in northern Iraq. The KDPS and the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Syria are the two major parties in the coalition. They are offshoots of respectively KDP and PUK in Iraq and hence under heavy influence of the KRG. Although the main reason why Barzani orchestrated the establishment of the KNC was to protect his interest in the region; for the participating Kurdish parties it was an important attempt to oppose the power of PYD and to enter negotiations with other Syrian opposition groups. However, the parties within the KNC are unable to extract meaningful concessions in the interest of the Kurds and without achievements, support from civilians decreases. In addition, within the KNC fragmentation due to tribal ties and power struggle remains present. This causes continuation of unilateral actions of parties, instead of the implementation of one united approach. The KNC's vice president, Mustafa Juma, states: (...) coordination is rather weak. Since the leadership of the Kurdish National Council has different political leanings, everyone does his own thing and doesn't worry much about the others."<sup>79</sup>

The Kurdish parties are often united on certain broad principles such as acquiring full rights for Kurds in Syria, including education in Kurdish, and changing the name of the country from Syrian Arab Republic to Syrian Republic. However, sharp differences remain within the numerous Kurdish parties and between them and Arab national parties. In general, according to Allsopp, the right wing prioritized their Syrian identity over the national Kurdish identity, and demanded only to be recognized as an ethnic minority within Syria, with minimal cultural rights and equal citizen rights for the Kurds. The Kurdish left wing demands to be recognized as a

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<sup>78</sup> Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; "Canton Based Democratic"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; "Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution".

<sup>79</sup> Mustafa Juma, cited in: Federici and Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 7-27, 93-128; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; Abboud, *Syria*, 1-187; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Christopher Philips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 126-147.

nation which should be consecrated in the constitution. Coalitions are often disbanded or ineffective due to conflicting views on these important issues.<sup>80</sup>

### **Power Balance**

It is impossible to understand the political dynamics of Rojava without taking the role of tribes into consideration, because tribal ties remain powerful structures of solidarity. Leadership and legitimacy are often derived from these ties instead of from personal qualities and political institutions. In border areas the local Kurdish population is often loyal to tribes across the borders. Tribal membership provides the citizens often with economic advantages, security, power and status. Political leaders obtain funds and prestige from their family's tribe or region. Trust is often lacking between the various tribes in a region. An example of such a tribal conflict is the dispute between Barzani's tribe (Hozî Barzanî) and the leader of PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, (originally belonging to Pazukî tribe) over who represents the Kurds as the Kurdish national leader.<sup>81</sup>

As has been mentioned before, the Kurdish political landscape in Syria is mainly divided between PYD, a party supported by its Turkish Kurdish ally PKK, and the KNC, supported by the two major Iraqi parties. While PYD enjoys a larger popular support and subsequently, especially through the establishment of communes, has been able to acquire military and administrative hegemony in the Syrian Kurdish region, the KNC enjoys more international support from for example Turkey and Iraq because it does not have ties with PKK. In 2014, after the defense of Kobane and Sinjar the relations between PYD and the KRG have improved, Barzani drew up the Duhok Agreement. This declaration was designed to end the conflict between the two factions by a power-sharing agreement. According to this document members of PYD and the KNC would be represented in a Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC) for Syria. But this agreement was undermined by distrust. Only shortly after its signing Barzani accused PYD of acting unilaterally and of marginalizing the coalition. One of the major problems hampering an agreement with PYD is that it does not accept to share power with other political parties that do not support its ideology. Barro clarified:

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<sup>80</sup> Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-189; Eric Bruneau, "KDP's failed meddling in Syrian Kurd politics," *The Kurdistan Tribune*, August 30, 2013, accessed June 2, 2017, <http://kurdistantribune.com/kdp-failed-meddling-syrian-kurd-politics>.

<sup>81</sup> Nihat Ali Özcan, "Could a Kurdish State Be Set Up in Iraq?," *Middle East Policy* 11:1 (2004): 119-122; Gunter, *The Kurdish Spring*, 441-457; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava", 81-88; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 72-98; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; M. Hakan Yavuz, "Provincial Not Ethnic Federalism in Iraq," *Middle East Policy* 11:1 (2004): 126-131; Shapiro, "The Kurds"; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Baher, "The experiment".

No power sharing agreement between the PYD and the KNC exists. (...) The KNC has no possibility to participate in the governance of the region. We solely function as non-parliamentarian opposition (...) However, the PYD and its security forces (Asayish, YPG) regularly burn down our offices, arrest and kidnap our members, arguing that our work is not legal.<sup>82</sup>

### **The PYD Supremacy**

In my interview with Yilmaz Saeed, head of the Kurdish Youth Movement, he told me he and some colleagues have been arrested multiple times by PYD forces because his organisation does not support the party. According to a Syrian Kurdish researcher who rather stays autonomous, there are only three groups of people who can live under PYD-rule: “Refugees, because there is a special focus on them that protects them – harming them would reveal the truth -, PYD supporters, and people who remain silent and accept the situation as it is.”<sup>83</sup> A resident said: “On paper, there is democracy and a coalition rule, but in reality PKK [PYD] is the only one with the weapons to force the people.”<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW) heard many of these type of allegations. In 2015, the organisations released a report uncovering waves of forced displacement and home demolitions in areas controlled by PYD. Countering the critique, YPG officials stated that the forced displacements were in the interest of the security of the residents. However, many residents told HRW they were not threatened by Daesh. In addition, Saeed confirmed to me that every man between the age of eighteen and thirty is forcefully recruited to fight for YPG. This was also claimed by the KNC. Thousands of Kurds fled to Europe, Turkey and the KRG to escape the forced recruitment of men and women. PYD even published a decree forbidding Kurds to leave the autonomous areas, and thus forcing the inhabitants to stay and fight with them. The party denies the accusations of threatening, arresting or murdering the opposition and said only terrorists and smugglers were arrested for crimes. The party defends itself by pointing out that it shares the ideals of Human Right Watch and respects international human rights, and that these rights are laid down in its *Social Contract*. It argues that if people have become victims of its actions, this has been the result to the civil war. “It is necessary to bear in mind the extraordinary circumstances under which we live; the constant threat of war,

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<sup>82</sup> Quotations from: Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil, May 26, 2017. See also; Abboud, *Syria*, 1-187; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Fehim Tastekin, “KRG trench divides Syrian, Iraqi Kurds,” *Al-Monitor*, April 21, 2014, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2014/04/krg-trench-divides-syrian-iraqi-kurds.amp.html>; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Gunes and Lowe, “The Impact of”; Federici and Sayigh, “Syria’s Kurds Must Seek”.

<sup>83</sup> Personal interview with anonymous Syrian Kurds, Erbil, May 26, 2017.

<sup>84</sup> Oum Beshank, resident of the Syrian Kurdish region, cited in Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 187.

the devastating blockade, the flux of refugees, the shortages of basic services related to communication, electricity, water, and many other challenges.”<sup>85</sup> The party admits that sometimes mistakes are made, but that they would never tolerate or condone violations or abuses carried out by its fighters.<sup>86</sup>

Also militarily PYD has obtained a leading position. It decided to limit the militias in Rojava, unless the militias accept to be under command of YPG, which the parties under the influence of Barzani have refused. In an interview with the International Crisis Group, a PYD member said about preventing pro-KDP parties to operate in Syria:

Our opponents (...) want to end the unified military leadership and allow everyone to have their own force. If we did this, we would be as disorganised as the rebels. We are fine with individual military units maintaining their specific political loyalty, but they must come under YPG umbrella. That’s the condition.<sup>87</sup>

This citation shows that PYD legitimizes its dominance as a military force by saying that without one central command, chaos will reign and eventually every party will fight each other. Although

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<sup>85</sup> “The Democratic Self-Rule Administration’s Response to the Report of Human Rights Watch Organization,” *Human Rights Watch*, accessed July 20, 2017,

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/The%20Democratic%20Self-Rule%20Administration%E2%80%99s%20Response%20to%20the%20Report%20of%20Human%20Rights%20Watch%20Organization.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/The%20Democratic%20Self-Rule%20Administration%E2%80%99s%20Response%20to%20the%20Report%20of%20Human%20Rights%20Watch%20Organization.pdf).

<sup>86</sup> “The Democratic Self-Rule”; Can Acun and Bünyamin Keskin, “The PKK’s Branch in Northern Syria, PYD-YPG,” *SETA*, 2017, accessed July 20, 2017,

[https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2017/05/PYD\\_YPG\\_En.pdf](https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2017/05/PYD_YPG_En.pdf); Yerevan Saeed, “YPG dismisses Amnesty report accusing Kurds of ethnic cleansing,” *Rudaw*, October 10, 2016, accessed July 21, 2017,

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/191020152>; “Under Kurdish rule,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 19, 2014, accessed December 27, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>;

Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; “Syria: US ally’s razing of villages amounts to war crimes,” Amnesty International, October 13, 2015, accessed December 10, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes>;

Personal interview with Yilmaz Saeed, Erbil, May 24, 2017; Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil, May 26, 2017; “Charter of the social contract in Rojava,” YPG International;

“Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria,” International Crisis Group, May 8, 2014, accessed December 27, 2016,

[https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/pages/attachments/2015/05/29/icg\\_050814.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/pages/attachments/2015/05/29/icg_050814.pdf).

<sup>87</sup> “Flight of Icarus?”.

all above mentioned remarks are biased, fact is civilians and organisations have expressed strong reservations about the intentions of PYD and YPG.<sup>88</sup>

Despite more and more communes and councils are established and people are becoming relatively safer under YPG rule, there are at least two more reasons why increasingly more people are becoming critical of PYD regime. First, many people express their concerns about the cooperation and ideological links between PYD and PKK. During my interviews in Erbil, I noticed many interviewees make no distinction between the PKK and PYD, stating that PKK has adopted this name to get rid of its terrorist label. Some interviewees do not want to be associated with a party that has links with PKK, or they are concerned that the link with PKK and its terrorist label might pollute the reputation of Rojava. Others are worried PKK has its own agenda on Syrian soil, using the opportunity to invest in a new military campaign against Turkey and taking this opportunity to make new recruits and carry out attacks on Turkish territory from Syria. There are many indications for the links between PYD and PKK. To begin with, the network of PYD is especially strong in areas where PKK recruited its members and where many families have members who fought alongside with PKK. In addition, PKK is responsible for a steady flow of equipment and manpower into the region and with their help and necessary training YPG has become one of the strongest militia's in Syria. Lastly, with regard to independence, according to Gunter and Tillo it is in reality PKK's military leadership in the Qandil mountains that dictates the decisions for PYD instead of PYD making decisions based on meetings of the popular councils.<sup>89</sup>

Second, many argue that PYD has at least some kind of an agreement with the Assad regime that might damage the interests and legitimacy of the Kurds. There are multiple indications for an agreement between the regime and PYD. First and foremost, the speed and ease with which PYD was able to capture power in the region raised suspicions. The regime's army voluntarily withdrew from the northern areas and practically handed over power to PYD. Also, it is known that the leader of PYD, Muslim, has strong connections to both the Assad regime as well as the opposition. Federici states there is little doubt that the regime still has forces in the autonomous areas. Also Palani and Tillo confirm that military forces of the regime are still present in some of the cities of northern Syria. YPG checkpoints are only meters away from

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<sup>88</sup> Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Personal interview with Yilmaz Saeed, Erbil, May 24, 2017; Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil, May 26, 2017; "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International; "Flight of Icarus?"

<sup>89</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Federici, *The Rise of Rojava*, 81-88; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Personal interview with Yilmaz Saeed, Erbil, May 24, 2017; "Syria's Kurds"; Federici and Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek".

those of the regime, they say, and in the area of Hasaka YPG and regime forces coordinated battles against Daesh. In addition, Knapp mentions that for example in Qamishli and Hasaka, PYD does not initiate attacks on the regime. Kurdish forces control the majority of the city, while the Syrian army still controls the airport and a border crossing. The Kurdish forces could easily defeat the Syrian army in these areas, but not doing so seems a strategic decision; the government would retaliate against the Kurds, possibly even after the civil war. An agreement with the regime to control northern Syria might be an advantage.<sup>90</sup>

In addition, PKK has been supported by the Syrian regime in the past before signing the Adana agreement. This makes Syrians think the success of PYD is part of Assad's strategy to use the Kurds as a tool again to destabilize his opposition and its regional support. Muslim denies any support from the regime, and states that his own party is also limited by the regime, which has arrested PYD members. In an interview he explains that PYD does not necessarily demand the fall of the regime, it demands the fall of the oppressive authoritarian system. Although the agreement may be implicit, tactical, and only partial, it is an important political fact to take into account as the Syrian regime will most probably be an important factor in negotiations concerning the future of the region. In chapter four this will be analyzed in more detail.<sup>91</sup>

PYD has been expanding its territory through self-defense in Kurdish territory, but since the Kurds have extended their strategy of self-defense (when the majority of the inhabitants of a town or city under control of extremists call for liberation by YPG, YPG comes in action now), PYD also extends its territory into historically non-Kurdish territory. The cantons of Cizîrê and Kobane were connected and the Kurds are trying to unite the canton of Efrin with the other two cantons at the time of writing.

The realization of Rojava is clearly based on the idea of democratic confederalism. The democracy consists of four layers, from the commune, the base of the society, to the People's

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<sup>90</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; Federici and Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek"; "Western powers will support Syrian Kurds: Kurdish Leader," *E Kurd Daily*, Februari 6, 2012, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/2/syriakurd417.htm>; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 72-222; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; "The U.S.-PYD-Turkey Puzzle"; Balanche, "From Qamishli to Qamishlo.

<sup>91</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 441-457; Federici and Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek"; "Western powers"; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88.

Council of West Kurdistan. As a result of a lack of legitimacy of this formation, confusingly, a second structure has been set-up in the form of the Democratic Autonomous Administration. Also with regard to shaping social aspects of society Öcalan's ideas are reflected, although inconsistency between idealism and realism is visible. In chapter four the challenges with regard to the implementation of democratic confederalism will be addressed.

Finally, despite an inclusive society with broad political participation is aimed for, and whilst the Erbil declaration was meant to divide the power between PYD and KNC, it seems that the Rojava administration is rather one politically, militarily and ideologically led by PYD. It appears, until now, there has not been much consultation with its members regarding decision-making. In addition, concerns over the links between PYD and PKK, and over a damaging agreement between PYD and the regime exists. However, while the inhabitants are concerned about the increasing authority of PYD, the party also gained credibility after showing its ability to defend the people as they did in many towns and cities, and because their demands for self-administration seem reasonable to the people. Also the challenges posed by the seemingly authoritarian PYD rule will be analyzed in chapter four.

## 4. Challenges

In 2004 Michael Gunter wrote that the Syrian Kurds had little chance to intimidate the government, partly due to their division and weakness, and partly because the Kurdish region consists of three separate non-contiguous geographical regions. He concluded with the words: “The best hope for the Kurds in Syria, therefore, would be the gradual liberalization of the regime of Bashar al-Asad.”<sup>92</sup> We know now the story took an unexpected turn. Because of the civil war in the region, the Kurds were able to establish a relatively safe autonomous region, as sketched in chapter three. However, the previous chapter already hinted that the reality of implementing the ideology and creating stability in Rojava faces a number of challenges. This chapter serves to discuss these challenges. First, I will highlight the problems Rojava faces with regard to its ideology of democratic confederalism. Then the issues concerning the expanding rule of PYD will be explained. Third, this chapter focuses on the influence and challenges that ensue from the complex ties between Rojava and other actors in the region. Like in the first chapter, the focus will be on Turkey, Iran, and the Syrian regime, but also on non-state actors and ‘the West’ (the US and the EU). In conclusion, I will spend a few words on the ongoing peace talks.

### 4.1 Ideological obstacles

The ideology of democratic confederalism as described in the second chapter is an ideal that is difficult to fully implement in every aspect in reality. In addition, it is impossible to transform a society overnight; change needs time and focus. This focus is difficult to achieve because the region still operates under war conditions. Besides, many resources needed for this purpose are used in the war. The difficulty of implementing the ideology under war condition is reflected in, among other things, establishing an open and democratic electoral process and building a viable economy. After the declaration of autonomy in 2014, the High Commission of Elections recommended elections had to take place as soon as possible. In order for elections to take place, the administration needs to determinate the borders of each canton, its constituencies and voters. In the chaotic situation of war, this is often impossible. In addition parts of the autonomous region do not fall under the official administration. It is difficult to decide whether to include them in the electoral process or not, and the elections in these regions have often been postponed.<sup>93</sup> With regard to transforming the industry, the development of ecological,

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<sup>92</sup> Gunter, “Why Kurdish Statehood,” 110.

<sup>93</sup> Kabalan, “The illusion”; “The Fragile Gains”; Baher, “The experiment”; “Rojava Goes To The Polls,” *The Rojava Report*, March 14, 2015, accessed January 29, 2017,

democratic and communally run factories is topic of debate. There are many ideas, but due to the ongoing attacks the implementation of numerous projects have been hindered. According to Knapp, it is inevitable that sections of the economy will remain capitalistic because of the regional economy. Even a bigger challenge is when after peace negotiations the borders open and the international community would recognize the autonomous region. If this happens people will have access to the world market, and the trade restrictions will be lifted. This could boost income and commodities could be imported. But at the same time the regime will be faced new dilemmas: How can the communal economy be protected? How is income to be divided? Should foreign investment be permitted? The most glaring example is the oil-issue. As soon as the Syrian Kurds can refine a greater amount of oil and start exporting and making profit like the KRG does, their communal idea of 'production for use' would be threatened. The temporary solution that the PYD has adopted is to protect the cooperatives and public enterprises until these questions are answered.<sup>94</sup>

Oil brings up another dilemma: the people of Rojava threaten the environment, and do not adhere to the principles of social ecology by refining petroleum. Most people use diesel generators to produce electricity and in the cities the air quality is bad. This pollution is probably not going to change in the near future. The environmental minister is trying to inform the public of the danger, but is not able to enforce environmental measures. Another ideologically conundrum is that families in Rojava keep their daughters home from school, while the ideology is clear about the important role of woman in the society. Likewise the councils struggle with landlords. In Rojava's *Social Contract* land is regarded as common property. However, the practice is not to expropriate current landowners, although tenant farmers work on the land, which is a form of exploitation. Regarding these contradictions, it is difficult to decide whether action is needed.<sup>95</sup>

### **Decision making**

To decide over these kind of issues, and many more, the structure of the confederal region is important. As we have seen before, democratic confederalism establishes a system of councils to form a direct democracy. There is often one delegate for every hundred people in a district,

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<https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/rojava-goes-to-the-polls-2/>; "Canton Based Democratic".

<sup>94</sup> Strangers, *A Mountain River*; Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; Tim Arangodec, "Iraqi Government and Kurds Reach Deal to Share Oil Revenues," *New York Times*, December 2, 2014, accessed December 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/world/middleeast/kurd-pact-with-baghdad-against-islamic-state.html>; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-189; "EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 192-221.

<sup>95</sup> Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 192-221.

which is indeed far more direct than other democratic systems. Political scientists Heywood and Kolokotronis however point to a few weaknesses of such a direct democracy. Despite the fact that citizens can express their concerns and views without having to rely on often self-serving politicians, a direct democracy leaves them with the burden of deciding without proper expertise and experience. Representative democracy creates stability, precisely by distancing the citizens from politics and encouraging them to accept compromises reached at by professional politicians. In addition, in a direct democracy decisions are preferred to be made by consensus. This is a time consuming process, and only achievable in small communities. Because of the ambitions of the Rojava administration to expand their confederal community, direct democracy may limit the decision-making process. A representative democracy, characterized by elected politicians who rule on behalf of the people, offers a more practicable form of governance. Also Palani emphasises that although communities are an important democratic experiment, the Kurds eventually need some form of government or central authority to make final decisions on issues of general concern.<sup>96</sup> Ibrahim Barro adds that the KNC-parties are well aware that a council system is not sufficient to ensure democracy.

A constitution defining standards that cannot be subject to change (e. g. the equality between men and women), the division of powers, and fair electoral laws are examples of other urgent topics to be discussed and decided upon regarding Syria's future and the future of Syrian Kurdistan.<sup>97</sup>

Because PYD did realize it needed the support from more people than only their participants, a parallel parliamentary structure has been established to the popular councils system, as described in chapter three. Despite the fact that this has been a strategic attempt to secure support, the structure of the region became topic of heavy discussion. The parliament and the highest council within MGRK now have the power to make decisions, but it is unclear which of these two makes the final decisions. While PYD has the strongest political support on the ground, does it control the decision-making process through parliament? Or is TEV-DEM, the more inclusive organisation? It seems like the decision to govern through a parliamentary democracy or a direct democracy has been postponed to satisfy supporters from both sides. This makes the decision-making process diffuse and untransparent. The reality shows us however

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<sup>96</sup> Sabio, *Rojava; An Alternative*, 11-102; Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution".

<sup>97</sup> Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil. May 26, 2017; Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, 71-77; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: the PKK*, 45-91; "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International; Sabio, *Rojava; An Alternative*, 11-102; Strangers, *A Mountain River*; Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution"; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017.

that PYD, currently the only party represented in the parliament, has no intentions of allowing local councils to make important decisions at all.<sup>98</sup>

### **Ideological education**

To transform production and consumption habits the administration set-up ecological academies, launched projects and initiated seminars to teach the people, and especially youth, about social ecology. However, Baher emphasizes another side of the coin with regard to teaching an ideology. He argues ideology can be problematic when it gives people a ready-made answer from a book, failing to connect with the reality of the situation. Ideologists, he says, can become dangerous when they apply these standard answers on a changing situation. They can become narrow-minded and persistent, not open for other ideas or discussions. Often they do not respect people who do not share their opinion. Their ideology, whether it is religious or political, becomes sacred. Baher met many ideologists among PYD and TEV-DEM members when he travelled in the region. He claims Öcalan is constantly cited, which is confirmed by other observers. Öcalan still seems to be a hero for the Turkish and Syrian Kurds, who have total faith in him. This explains why the educational system and youth centers are heavily influenced by Öcalan's ideology. Baher believes that in a democracy nothing should be sacred. It is important that everything can be criticized and changed according to circumstances and based on compromises. This is not what PYD stands for, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Baher asked himself whether you should teach children to believe in an ideology, religion or the supremacy of race. This is the source of future extremism. The point Baher makes is visible in the restricted freedom of the people that do not follow PYD ideology. Various Kurds I interviewed explained that although their organisations, for example youth organisations, are helping people, their members were threatened or even were arrested by PYD because they did not support its ideology.<sup>99</sup>

## **4.2 Political challenges**

Despite the fact that nobody seems really sure how the structure of democratic confederalism should function, the Kurdish parties are trying to balance the power and create stability. Seemingly unusual alliances have emerged between parties with divergent interests and

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<sup>98</sup> "Charter of the social contract in Rojava," YPG International; Kolokotronis, "The No State Solution"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Baher, "The experiment"; Knapp, *Revolution in Rojava*, 84-121.

<sup>99</sup> Baher, "The experiment"; Abboud, *Syria*, 162-187; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; Personal interview with Yilmaz Saeed, Erbil, May 24, 2017; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil, May 26, 2017.

authorities. These blocs often lack substantial political foundations, causing new disagreements. Gunter points out that this gave PYD a head start with the opportunity to retain leadership, while the party pretends at the same time to include local populations and to implement grass-roots democracy. By doing so, PYD appears to have the aim to gain international support, but it also tries to create support among the people, not only Kurds, in the region.<sup>100</sup>

In chapter three the balance of power has been described between PYD and the KNC, two major players in the Syrian Kurdish political arena. We have also seen that PYD appears to dominate the administration on ideological, political and military level. With the help of theory the socio-political tendencies and PYD rule in the autonomous regions might be explained. First, Hobbes mentioned that the lack of legitimate power of the assembly or sovereign can undermine the authority of a social contract. This is what we see in the divided political situation in Rojava and in the rule of PYD; although partially accepted, none of the powers is truly legitimate. According to Hobbes, the social contract might become poisoned and this might eventually end up in some kind of civil war. Second, a theory of sociologist Robert Michels - the Iron Law of Oligarchy - is connected with this line of thinking. It suggests that every form of organisation, whether originally democratic or autocratic, will eventually become oligarchic; a society will be dominated by a small self-serving elite, forming cohesive groups because they recognize that this improves their chances of holding power. It is a 'Iron Law' because sooner or later one powerful group will rule. This is stressed by Hobbes statement about men having a "lifelong perpetual and restless desire for power".<sup>101</sup> Democratic structures and so-called participation only disguise oligarchy, Michels argues. A gap between members of the political community and the politicians eventually arises, because politicians have greater expertise and better organisational skills than ordinary citizens. Specialisation is needed to make certain decisions. In addition, Michels states that it becomes physically impossible to get together every time a decision has to be made, which is basically the idea of Rojava's council system. For these theorists of elite formation direct democracy is no more than a delusion and political power is always exercised by a privileged minority. These theories confirm Heywood's and Kolokotronis' earlier points regarding the weaknesses of a system of direct democracy.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128 "Democratic Autonomy in Rojava", trans. Janet Biehl; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 72-98.

<sup>101</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 227.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 227; Heywood, *Politics*, 83-280; Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 298-324; Danny Schechter, "That 'Iron Law' of Oligarchy Is Back to Haunt Us," *Huffington Post*, April 28, 2014, accessed January 31, 2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danny-schechter/that-iron-law-of-oligarch\\_b\\_5205911.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/danny-schechter/that-iron-law-of-oligarch_b_5205911.html).

It becomes clear that behind the smoke screen of PYD's communist ideology an authoritarian party is concealed. While PYD often emphasized its commitment to political pluralism to the outside world, no other party stands a real chance to get involved in the process of politics and decision-making. PYD tries to mask this as long as possible to maintain support. However, this causes the base of the revolution to be rather shaky. For example, the Christians and Arabs are probably not enamoured by the Kurdification of the education system. The result has been that thousands of Arabic speaking teacher will be replaced in secondary schools. As in Rojava's new society the working-class and small peasantry are favoured over the landowners and urban middle class, they fear they will also be victims of the revolution. And while on paper the rights of minorities are secured, in practise they are disadvantaged groups because they are not represented by a powerful party. Since the demands of other parties, non-PYD supporters and the minorities are limited to security - which PYD provides - this strategy might be effective for the short-term. However, in the second phase of transition the demands might change from security to for example political reforms and more influence of minorities on the political process. In YPG controlled mixed Arab - Kurdish regions of al-Bab, Manbij and Azaz (see map 3.2) the Kurdish population will end up as a minority amongst other minorities. It seems unlikely that they will acquiesce in the supremacy of PYD rule. The question is how PYD will react when parties established by other minorities start making demands instead of simply accepting democratic autonomy under a Kurdish party.<sup>103</sup>

The threat of the rise of authoritarian rule in the autonomous region may become more serious in the long-term. As described in chapter three, the KNC is a coalition formed by Barzani with the aim to oppose the power of PYD. At the moment of writing the KNC mostly adjusts to the wishes of PYD - some leaders of KNC-parties even live in exile in the KRG at the moment - because the parties within the KNC realize the popular support for PYD is massive in this stage of the civil war. Again, it is important to realize that PYD derive the legitimacy from their protection of many cities and towns. To counter the strength of PYD, Barzani has trained thousands of Kurdish defectors from the Syrian army. At the moment, about 3,000 Rojava Peshmerga - politically linked to the KNC but originating from Syria - are fighting against Daesh in Iraq. They are prevented from going back to Syria by YPG because YPG is unwilling to share power. Ibrahim Barro, secretary of the KNC, explained to me that when the KNC was lobbying in the United States and Geneva for the Rojava Peshmerga to enter Syria, PKK attacked the Rojava Peshmerga in the Sinjar mountains. To prevent fights between YPG/PKK and Rojava Peshmerga in Syria, the

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<sup>103</sup> "The Fragile Gains"; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; "Canton Based Democratic"; Biehl, "Democratic Autonomy"; Balanche, "From Qamishli to Qamishlo"; Balanche, "Rojava's Sustainability".

KNC has so far chosen not to bring the Rojava Peshmerga back to Syria without an agreement with PYD.<sup>104</sup>

According to Palani, one of the main reasons for the bloody civil war in the mid-1990s fought between Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK in Iraq was that the political parties, which represent their tribes, only follow their own interests. The Kurds were trained in opposing the state, not in running a state themselves. Although PYD has a clear idea how to run the state, firstly they still have not been trained or experienced, and second, they do not seem to be able to implement their democratic ideas. In addition, according to Palani, one of the main reasons no new armed conflict has arisen in Iraq is because they currently focus on the war against Daesh. Also this point is comparable with the circumstances in Syria. As described earlier, the people particularly accept the rule of PYD for the moment because they provide safety. However, from the moment the power balance begins to shift – what is most probably going to happen in the second phase of transition – the KNC might try to gain more ground in the Syrian Kurdish region. The severe accusations of PYD of the existence of an agreement with the Syrian regime and the links between PYD and PKK might then become an advantage for the KNC. PYD - a PKK branch that shares its sympathies for the PUK - and the KNC - under Barzani's KDP influence - will then stand against each other, since consensus around major topics, like negotiations with the regime, peace negotiations and relations with regional powers, has not been reached. Also recent clashes in Iraq between the Rojava Peshmerga and PKK confirm that the implementation of an agreement is far away. While it is particularly important for the Kurds to unite in some way, these kind of tensions are weakening the stability of Rojava and have the potential to develop into a civil war, which will paralyze or even collapse Rojava.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil. May 26, 2017; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Iraqi Kurdistan's president Barzani against Kurdish civil war in northern Syria," *Aranews*, January 21, 2017, accessed June 16, 2017, <http://aranews.net/2017/01/president-barzani-against-kurdish-civil-war-in-northern-syria>; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; Abboud, *Syria*, 1-187; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle," International Crisis Group, January 22, 2013, accessed December 10, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle>; Federici and Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 291; Özcan, "Could a Kurdish State," 119-122; Shapiro, "The Kurds"; "Western powers will support"; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 72-222.

<sup>105</sup> Personal interview with Ibrahim Barro, Erbil. May 26, 2017; Wilgenburg, "Iraqi Kurdistan's president Barzani"; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; Abboud, *Syria*, 1-187; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle"; Federici and Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Kamrava, *The Modern Middle East*, 291; Özcan, "Could a Kurdish State," 119-122; Shapiro, "The Kurds"; "Western powers will support"; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 72-222.

### **4.3 (Inter)national relations**

The functioning of Rojava not only depends on whether it succeeds in a revolutionary change of the society, overcoming ideological challenges or its parties abilities to cooperate and prevent intra-Kurdish fighting, but also on their relations with the surrounding oppositional forces and regional powers. In this paragraph I will focus on these complex ties.

#### **Non state actors**

The main opponent within Syria is the Sunni opposition, including jihadist groups. As we have seen in the previous chapter, YPG has repeatedly waged battles against jihadi groups in the Kurdish areas and towns. Nevertheless, the success of the radical Sunni Arab forces and the threat of Daesh has resulted in two advantages for PYD. First, it has pushed Kurdish groups to support PYD, since it has the only militia capable of protecting the area as well as providing services and employment. Second, the battles PYD waged in Kobane, for instance, provided legitimacy for PYD. As a result, the United States and its allies began to see YPG as its most constructive partner in the fight against Daesh. This can be seen as an important development since PYD lacked international support compared to the KNC. Whether this is a development that destabilizes the balance between the parties in Rojava even further or not remains unknown, depending on the intentions of PYD.<sup>106</sup>

#### **Regional political influences**

Turkey is one of the main factors bearing down on Rojava. As explained in the first chapter, Turkey has been fighting PKK within its own border for decades. Since PYD - a party established by former-PKK members - has defeated extremists supported by Turkey on many fronts and legitimacy of the autonomous areas in Syria increased, Ankara began to worry that the Kurdish spirit to gain rights would spill over to the Turkish Kurds. Turkey has tried everything in its power to undermine Kurdish unity, to support the Sunni opposition, and to prevent the Syrian Kurds from expanding their territory and uniting the three cantons. After YPG was successful in uniting the Cizîrê and the Kobane canton in 2015 Turkey made clear that crossing the Euphrates river would mean crossing a red line. During the occupation of Manbij, Turkey launched for the first time an operation on Syrian soil and succeeded in gaining control of al-Bab region, splitting the two Kurdish cantons. Ever since, there have been continuous clashes between YPG and the Turkish army. YPG can attack the Turkish positions, but the dilemma is that the Turkish army is

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<sup>106</sup> "Uzay Bulut, "Why ISIS hates the Kurds," *Arutz Sheva*, June 7, 2017, accessed June 10, 2017, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/20602>; "Syria's Kurds"; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; Gunes and Lowe, "The Impact of"; Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; "Canton Based Democratic".

present in Syria under the guise of defeating Daesh. An attack on Turkish forces would give Turkey the pretext to openly tag YPG as a target.<sup>107</sup>

In these circumstances, the breakdown of the peace negotiations between PKK and Turkey, as described in chapter one, is alarming. Many are worried PKK might drag the Syrian Kurds into PKK-Turkey conflict. This is partly already happening. As described above, Turkey has intervened militarily in Syria, and the Kurds are facing serious opposition from armed Sunni groups supported by Turkey. This also minimizes any chance that Ankara might develop relations with Rojava or respect any form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. To reduce this threat it is important to bring Turkey and PKK back to the negotiation table. This is however unlikely to happen in the near future. Turkey as well as PKK has no interest in finding a solution for the Kurdish question. Tillo explained to me that in his opinion Erdoğan already reached two goals by using the Kurds as a tool for his political purposes: to stay in power after the elections of 2015, and to change the constitution. Tillo stated “Erdoğan has been singing a melody acceptable for nationalist Turks” by blocking the peace negotiations and labelling PKK as threat to Turkey. According to Tillo, creating an enemy is part of the existence of many countries in the Middle East, exploiting a threat seems to be the best way to stay in power. From its side, PKK, especially its military wing under leadership of Murat Karayılan - does not show inclination to negotiate either. It seems that the war has become the militants’ profession. They would not only lose their weapons, but also their jobs if peace is established. Another reason is that the military wing of PKK is heavily influenced by Iran, whose interest it is to prevent a stable, regional hegemonic Sunni Turkey.<sup>108</sup>

According to Tillo, a split within PKK between Murat Karayılan - its military leader who closely allied with Iran - and Cemil Bayık - a political PKK leader in favour of a new ceasefire and pursuing peace talks - is crucial for finding a solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey and Syria. Tillo predicts the split within PKK might occur in the near future, because the youth and supporters of Cemil Bayık are tired of fighting. For the moment, however, it seems that Murat

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<sup>107</sup> Gunter, “The Kurdish Spring,” 441-457; Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; Shapiro, “The Kurds”; “Erdoğan implies Turkey”; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; “Canton Based Democratic”; “Turkey v Syria’s Kurds v Islamic State”; Balanche, “Rojava’s Sustainability”; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Cagaptay, “The U.S.-PYD-Turkey Puzzle”; “The Fragile Gains”; “Turkey, US Try to Establish Buffer Despite Differences,” *VAO News*, July 27, 2015, accessed July 20, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-united-states-to-coordinate-syria-islamic-state-buffer-differences/2881081.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; Federici, *The Rise of Rojava*, 81-88; Khoshnaw Tillo, interview by author. Personal interview, Erbil, May 23, 2017; “Syria’s Kurds”; Federici and Sayigh, “Syria’s Kurds Must Seek”; Shapiro, “The Kurds”; Federici, “The Rise of Rojava,” 81-88.

Karayılan has the upper hand inside PKK, and as long as he is in power, it is unlikely a peace deal will be signed. In this respect, the heavy Iranian involvement in the conflict constitutes a severe threat to the long-term survival of Rojava.<sup>109</sup>

In its conflict with Turkey, which supported the opposition, the Syrian regime used the Kurds to destabilize Turkey. This position constitutes an advantage for the Kurds in the sense that for now the Syrian regime is favourable to Kurdish autonomy if they keep posing a threat for Turkey. It is important to remember the influence of Iran in this, because its influence also prevents the signing of any agreement between the Syrian regime and Turkey. This is a major advantage for the Syrian Kurds, because cooperation between Turkey and Syria would be disastrous for Kurdish autonomy within Syria. Palani even called this Turkish-Syrian rivalry the main reason why Rojava still exists. In a scenario in which Assad would be ousted and an agreement would be signed between a new regime and Turkey, PYD would experience massive pressure to act in accordance with the regime. In such case, the only chance for survival is Saleh Muslim's connections and popular support. But under this kind of pressure, PYD risks losing its independence and might no longer be able to defend Kurds and other minorities rights and autonomy.<sup>110</sup>

Palani stressed that the weakness of the central regime is an important factor working to the advantage of the Kurds to retain their autonomy. As long as the central regime is facing opposition and the country is divided, the relatively stable Kurdish region is not a priority for the Syrian regime. Palani explains that in fact, the longer the civil war drags out, the better this is for the Syrian Kurds because they can seize the opportunity to institutionalize autonomy. As stated at the beginning of this chapter: change needs time. Palani refers to Iraq, where twenty-six years of history has changed the perception of Baghdad with regard to the Iraqi Kurdish region. The reality of an autonomous Kurdish region can no longer be denied, and the central regime realizes it has to face this new reality. Also Gunter argues that the longer Syria remains a failed state, the more likely Kurdish autonomy will become regularized and therefore institutionalized. All commentators agree, however, that in any political solution which ends the

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<sup>109</sup> Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 145-165; Fazel Hawramy, "Despite deadly border clash, Iran-PKK war unlikely," *Al-Monitor*, June 2, 2017, accessed June 27, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/iran-pjak-pkk-may-27-border-clash-syria-iraq-turkey.html>; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88.

<sup>110</sup> Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 195-222; "Syria's Kurds"; Federici, "The Rise of Rojava," 81-88; Federici and Sayigh, "Syria's Kurds Must Seek"; Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," 452; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128; "The Fragile Gains"; Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 45-68; Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; Personal interview with Khoshnaw Tillo, Erbil, May 23, 2017.

Syrian civil war the new regime will try to recover the Kurdish areas as these areas also contain oil. We can also assume that although PYD demonstrated it is keeping the option open to negotiate with a potential central government, it would not wish to give up the established autonomy.<sup>111</sup>

### **International support**

Since the Kurdish region in Syria is surrounded by enemies, it seems important for the future existence of the region to gain at least some international support to prevent that control over the Kurdish region will be regained immediately by the central regime after the opposition is defeated. The emergence and collapse of the Mahabad Republic in Iran, as described in chapter one, serves as an example of what might happen with and without this support. The republic was first militarily and economically backed by the Soviet Union and experienced enormous prosperity. When the Soviet Union withdrew its support, Mahabad was reabsorbed into Iran without much resistance.<sup>112</sup>

Joost Jongerden, assistant professor at Wageningen University, questions whether support from the western coalition is crucial for Rojava to survive. He states the Kurds have a strong army and became even more powerful after the success in Kobane. He also questions the influence of the US in general in the Middle East, because this has declined dramatically since the invasion of the US in Iraq in 2003. In addition, western policy in general has been limited; neither the US nor the EU seems to be willing to spend much political and financial resources on achieving their goals of regime change and a political transition. Hence, the weight of regional actors like Turkey and Iran seems much more important.<sup>113</sup>

### **Peace talks**

Although various international mediation talks and peace processes have not been successful until now, I think it is important to mention this topic briefly. Since 2012 there has been three rounds of peace talks under the auspice of the United Nations; the fourth is ongoing. Although the peace negotiations were meant to include a mosaic of parties and opposition groups, many parties withdrew from the process, mainly because they disapprove of the participation of one of their adversaries in the talks and because they saw the talks as useless political theatre. Another problem is that parties and coalitions that did participate, do not enjoy enough support on the ground and hence do not have any actual influence. For the Kurds it is important to

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<sup>111</sup> Personal interview with Kamaran Palani, Erbil, May 23, 2017; "The Fragile Gains"; Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 93-128.

<sup>112</sup> Strangers, *A Mountain River*; Gunter, "Why Kurdish Statehood," 106-110; Erlich, *Inside Syria*, 167-252; Gresh, "Iranian Kurds," 187-196; McDowall, *A Modern History*, 115-300; Shapiro, "The Kurds".

<sup>113</sup> Jongerden, "Koerdische Autonomie"; Abboud, *Syria*, 120-161.

extract a few commitments from the peace talks. Turkey and armed groups should not be allowed to attack the autonomous regions. It would be an asset for PYD if the US and EU support YPG and SDF militarily and maybe economically. In addition, the Kurds need the Syrian regime to implement a form of federalism in a democratic Syria, which means a transition to a form of government that includes the present regime and opposition members. A Shia regime would be less harmful for the Kurds than a potential Sunni regime, because it will form a powerful Sunni block with Turkey what will probably be fatal for Rojava. Anyhow, the prospect for the Kurds in any peace process is not positive. The participation of PYD in the talks was rejected by Turkey for obvious reasons, while Russia and Iran stated that the Kurds should be included in any meaningful peace deal because they are part of the conflict and have fighters on the ground. Another probable reason to invite the Kurds is because this excludes an outcome in favor of the Turks. The KNC did join the fourth round of the peace talks, but decided to suspend its participation because the Syrian opposition refused to recognize Kurdish demands. In general we can conclude that PYD and the KNC do not recognize any outcome of the talks as long as the parties are excluded, Iran prevents the Syrian regime from participating in a real peace process that might give any power to the Sunni camp, Turkey prefers a military solution in favor of a future Sunni regime, while Western states and the UN have proven unable to exert any meaningful influence.<sup>114</sup>

This chapter has shown that there are various challenges ahead for the people in Rojava. First there are some ideological challenges. One of the main problems is that for an ideology to be implemented in a society, time and focus is crucial. The region lacks this focus at the moment, because under war conditions survival is the main aim. In addition, the dual structure of which Rojava consists – the four-level council system and the parliament – is untransparent and although the establishment of the parliament was a strategic move to maintain support from non-PYD followers, it is also a confusing move. The parallel idea to enhance support through education, entails the danger of creating extremism. The political challenges the autonomous

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<sup>114</sup> Abboud, *Syria*, 162-187; Marcus, “Kurds in the New”; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Three KNC officials to join Syria peace talks in Geneva,” *Aranews*, February 13, 2017, accessed June 26, 2017, <http://aranews.net/2017/02/three-knc-officials-to-join-syria-peace-talks-in-geneva>; Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Kurdish National Council suspends participation in Syria peace talks,” *Aranews*, April 2, 2017, accessed June 26, 2017, <http://aranews.net/2017/04/kurdish-national-council-suspends-participation-syria-peace-talks>; Karen Zraick, “Syria Talks Are Complicated by Competing Opposition Groups,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2016, accessed June 26, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/world/middleeast/syria-talks-geneva-opposition.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/world/middleeast/syria-talks-geneva-opposition.html?_r=0).

region faces seem even more important. In this chapter the consequences of the authoritarian PYD rule, as illustrated in the previous chapter, became more clear: other parties are, at least for now, not able to balance the power. The KNC, PYD's biggest competitor, is not even able to function in Syria. For now the coalition does not seem to challenge the status-quo, but when it does – and it most probably will, at least after the civil war – there is a chance intra-Kurdish fighting might break out. It is also unclear how PYD will react when minorities start making demands after the worst fighting is over. It appears to be that the inclusive and democratic outlook of PYD is only a facade for the outside world.

Finally, regional powers – especially the Syrian, Turkish and Iranian regime – provide some challenges for the autonomous region. Turkey clearly opposes the autonomous areas. Ankara even started a military campaign to prevent the Kurds from uniting the cantons. At the same time, Turkey has no interest in reopening the peace talks with PKK. To be dragged into the Turkey-PKK conflict is one of the biggest threats for Rojava. The position of Iran is twofold. On the one hand, Iran is heavily limiting the prospects of Rojava by supporting PKK-terrorism under the guise of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. Shia Iran is making sure that there are not going to be new peace talks with Sunni Turkey. On the other hand, Iran is also preventing any agreement to be settled between the Alawite Syrian regime and Turkey, probably one of the main reasons why Rojava still exists. Last but not least, it is important to note that the longer the Syrian civil war and the instability continues, the better the chances of survival of Rojava are because then the Syrian Kurds would have a chance to institutionalize autonomy and create stability in the region. This will make it very hard for a future regime to ignore the Kurdish region.

## 5. Conclusion

After the First World War Kurdistan has been divided over four new nation-states: Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq. The Kurds faced ruthless repression in these states which were built on Arab, Turkish and Iranian nationalism and denied the Kurdish identity. The Kurds became the largest people without a nation. During the last decades, Kurdish parties began to develop. PKK became the biggest Kurdish organization in Turkey, becoming engaged in a deep-seated struggle with the nation-state. In Iraq KDP and PUK were successful in establishing the autonomous Kurdish region, the KRG. The Iranian Kurds experienced their peak in autonomy with the Mahabad Republic in 1945, but this success was short-lived. In Syria, PYD became the most influential Kurdish organization. Without the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the subsequent chaos in the country, the story would have probably ended here. But the Syrian regime was militarily over-extended and withdrew its forces from the north of Syria. This was the opportunity for PYD to begin its own revolution, and the establishment of an autonomous region in northeast Syria based on Democratic Confederalism. As explained, Democratic Confederalism is an idea of PKK leader Öcalan and is developed in opposition to the concept of the nation-state and capitalism. In Öcalan's view, these modern systems take away freedom from citizens. By applying Öcalan's principles, PYD founded a new society, a federal region within the Syrian state.

After the "Declaration of Democratic Autonomy" the reactions of neighbouring powers did not take long to materialize. Turkey - basing its foreign policy more and more on their neo-Ottoman Sunni identity - was vehemently opposed to the establishment of an independent Kurdish region. Its aim is to expand the Sunni identity in Syria, finding new allies in the Sunni majority, decreasing the Iranian power in the region, and undermining Kurdish unity. In its opinion, PKK and PYD are one and the same entity, and both terrorist organizations. To expand the Sunni sphere of influence Ankara supports the Sunni opposition, even the extremists, as long as they pose a threat to Rojava. Iran, as the biggest Shia state, is covertly backing the Syrian and Turkish Kurds and uses them as a tool in to enhance its power in the region and limit the power of Sunni Turkey and the West. More precisely, Teheran is opposed to any peace talks between Ankara and PKK in order to destabilize Turkey. Iran's main strategy is to support PKK's military wing and prevent the implementation of any agreement between the Syrian and the Turkish regime. From its side, Assad's regime has given the Syrian Kurds enough space to become a force to be reckoned with. It is apparently using the Kurds as a tool against Ankara again to destabilize the regime's internal Arab opposition as well as to block the interests of Turkey. For this purpose, for instance, the Syrian regime supports PKK-PYD strongholds along the Syrian-Turkish border.

Furthermore, I have shown that the region is led by a party that has a clear ideology and with the potential to develop a free, democratic society in which minorities have a place and in which special attention is given to woman and youth. PYD enjoys much popular support in the region. The establishment of the KNC has been an important step for the Kurdish opposition to create a better power balance. When implemented successfully, the inclusive and direct democracy the Kurds are striving for could be a revolutionary force in the Middle East. However, this seems not the case at the moment.

PYD has been able to apply many of its ideas in practice because it has been able to expand the autonomous region not only by conquering Kurdish territory but also by liberating cities outside historical Kurdish lands. The party has been able to connect the cantons of Cizîrê and Kobane and is trying to connect the third canton, Efrin, as well. The political structure PYD established in areas under its control consists of four levels, from communes at the bottom of society to the People's Council of West Kurdistan. The meetings of the communes are open to everyone, and representatives take part in meetings at the higher levels. As a result of a lack of legitimacy and support for this ideological structure, a second, more common structure has been erected in the form of a representative parliament. Power is thus divided between the highest level of the commune system and the parliament dominated by PYD. Nobody is sure how this system operates.

However, I have also demonstrated that although PYD claims to establish a democratic society in which all the Kurds and other minorities can participate it seems that this is only a facade. PYD plays an authoritarian role in almost all levels of power. It refuses to share power with the KNC and other parties, causing imbalance in the division of power. Since the KNC and other small parties lack popular support and suffer from internal struggles, it is unable to form a counter-weight. The PYD is also militarily the strongest group. This becomes manifest in its directive that minority militias are only allowed to operate under YPG leadership. Ideologically, the PYD is also intolerant of dissident voices; it only accepts other minorities when they accept the ideology of Öcalan. Interviewees and eyewitnesses declare that the structure that has been set up is only a formality; decisions are made by PYD or PKK-leaders and opposition leaders are regularly arrested. In addition, the links between PYD and PKK as well as the existence of an agreement between the Syrian regime and PYD are worrisome.

Given these factors mentioned above, the region faces three kinds of challenges. The first are ideological, the second are political and the third are regional and international in nature. One of the main problems in implementing the ideology is that, for the moment, the main objective for the organization is survival. Taking the necessary decisions needs more time and focus. The confusing dual administrative and representative structure is not helpful in this

matter. In order to overcome this democratic deficit PYD's has given more emphasis to transform the society and to enlarge support through reforming the educational system, which is become completely based on instilling Öcalan's ideas and notions of ecology into children. This could enhance the danger of extremism rather than curtailing it. Finally, direct democracy is a time consuming process, only achievable in small communities. It might not work at all when it is applied on a much larger scale.

The biggest political threat for the region, however, is the rule of PYD itself. As already made clear, democracy, freedom and equality preached by PYD seems only a smoke screen. Behind it an authoritarian party is concealed. From recent developments PYD appears to follow Michel's Iron Law of Oligarchy: every structure, whether originally democratic or autocratic, will eventually end being led by a small, self-serving group. Although other minorities in the area might for the time being accept the dominance of PYD - because it provides the people in the region with the one thing they need most security - this might change once the civil war is over. At present it is quite uncertain how PYD will react to demands from minorities in the future. There are also tensions between PYD - with strong links to PKK - and the KNC - under heavy influence of Barzani. In Iraqi Kurdistan similar tensions resulted in a civil war within the Iraqi Kurdish region. Barzani's power within the KNC and the ties between PKK and PYD, in any form whatsoever, could have a negative influence on Rojava and increase the threat of civil war in the future.

Lastly, this thesis focused on challenges the region faces with regard to relations with its neighbors. The breakdown of the peace talks between PKK and Turkey heavily threatens the survival of the Syrian Kurdish region. Without negotiations Turkey will always keep resisting a Kurdish region in Syria that has links with PKK. On the other hand, it is unlikely that peace negotiations will be reopened, since Turkey as well as the military wing of PKK have no interests in peace. The result is that Turkey has tried everything in its power to undermine Kurdish unity, to support the Sunni opposition and to prevent the Syrian Kurds from expanding their territory in Syria. Militarily Turkey is active in Syria to prevent the Kurds from linking the cantons. From its side Iran has gained a major influence over the autonomous region, indirectly either through PKK or the Syrian regime. But Iran is also a threat to Rojava as it supports the military wing of PKK in order to pursue the war with Turkey, a major threat to a stable future for Rojava. On the other hand, Iran also provides probably one of the main reason why Rojava still exist. Adamantly opposed to any agreement between Turkey and the Syrian regime, Iran will prevent the Assad regime to sign an agreement such as the Adana Agreement that might end the Kurdish autonomous experiment. Thirdly, support from Syrian regime is not assured either. Until the present the Kurdish have been able benefit from the weakness of the central regime and the chaos in the Syria. The Kurds have used this opportunity to institutionalize their autonomy and

the longer they have to strike roots the more difficult it will become for the regime as well as the Turks to dislodge them. A fourth party affecting Rojava are the jihadist groups. But on the whole the Kurds have operated cleverly in gaining international support for their cause by joining the battle against terrorism. Here as well, however, dangers lurk. It is difficult for the United States as well as for the KRG to decide what their stance is towards Rojava, because supporting the region means alienating Turkey. Finally, the process and eventually outcomes of international peace talks will also affect Rojava.

In sum, the region and the revolutionary ideology can be successful on paper and in the minds of people, who seem mentally ready for a thorough change in the current system, but in practice it is clearly less successful and many challenges exist. Democratic Confederalism as a form of self-rule is a fundamental different form of governance than the model used in nation-states. It is an attempt to permanently change the social structures in every facet of society. At this moment, implementing this ideology seems one step too far. This may be extended in the future, but key is that the PYD should avoid becoming an authoritarian party. Only then the people in Rojava might get the chance to keep working on this long term goal. Therefore, most important for a successful autonomous region in northern Syria is that the PYD has to share power with other parties - maybe most obvious with the KNC - and it has to implement real democratic means. However, it seems like the PYD is moving away from the ideology of Democratic Confederalism of Abdullah Öcalan; the signs and stories are not pointing in a direction of freedom and inclusivity.

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## Summary

In this thesis I describe how the Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, which is based on the ideology of democratic confederalism, functions in practise. To draw conclusions, I have studied literature and interviewed a variety of people. Democratic confederalism opposes the concept of the nation-state and capitalism and has the potential to create a free, democratic society in which minorities have a place. This could bring revolutionary change in the Middle East. However, the current practice seems different. Although PYD claims to establish a democratic inclusive society, it seems that this is only a facade. PYD has an authoritarian role in almost every aspect. The war conditions, authoritarian PYD rule and antagonistic neighbours are the region's main challenges.