

Rojava

Peoples in Arms



Insights into the reality of life of the fighting people
of North-East Syria, building and defending the
Revolution of the 21st Century



With a Foreword from
the Internationalist
Commune of Rojava



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Preface

It's a cloudless blue sky on 9th October 2019. The view is clear and only the late summer sun is glaring in the firmament. It is 15:30 when first pictures of Turkish fighter planes are broadcasted on TV screens. They are flying in wide circles over the skies of North-East Syria. Their white ring-shaped condensation trails appear almost delicate. People turn their eyes to the sky and hold their breath in anticipation of what is to come. This short prelude lasts only a few moments, then the first act of the Turkish invasion of North-East Syria begins.

With the detonation of the first aerial bombs and the beginning of heavy artillery fire, the long-planned invasion of the Turkish regime against the liberated areas of the Democratic Self-Administration of North-East Syria begins on the afternoon of 9th October. Under the cynical name of "Operation Peace Spring", Turkish dictator Erdoğan ordered his army and Islamist mercenary troops to invade North Syria. The goal is to occupy large parts of the liberated areas with the aim of militarily crushing the political project of the Autonomous Self-Administration. The entire Turkish-Syrian border area is to be transformed into a "security zone" extending up to 32 kilometers into Northern Syria, the residing population is to be expelled, and the region is to be incorporated into Turkish rule by settling Islamist mercenaries and their families.

The offensive was by no means a single-handed effort by the Turkish state. In its crusade against the revolution and its achievements, fascism receives every possible support from its allies and supporters. First and foremost, the United States, which was actively involved in the planning and execution of the war of aggression, as well as Russia, the self-proclaimed "protecting

power” of Syria, and the remaining NATO countries, all of which have never failed to provide military logistical and financial support. The autonomous organisation of the population of North-East Syria has always been a thorn in their side, especially since the peoples’ unbreakable bond forged in the struggle and their way of living communally together heralded the end of the century-old imperialist divide-and-rule policy.

The Revolutionary Defense Forces and the armed people of North-East Syria put up a fierce resistance against the occupying forces for almost two weeks. In street fighting, they confronted the tanks and shells of NATO’s second largest army and succeeded time and again in stalling the advance of the fascist formations. Confronted with the fierce and determined resistance of the Revolutionary Defense Forces and faced with a rapidly growing resistance movement that took to the streets worldwide and publicly denounced the inhumane crimes of the occupiers and their backers, the rulers in Ankara, Washington, and Moscow were forced to give in. Agreements were reached, a ceasefire was declared.

An extensive area between the cities of Girê Spî and Serêkaniyê fell into the hands of the occupiers, and hundreds of thousands of civilians were driven from their homes. Targeted attacks on food, energy, and water supplies were intended to break the spirit of resistance among the population in order to force them to flee. The war resulted not only in the loss of countless brave women and men who gave their lives in defense of the revolution, but also in widespread destruction and damage to the infrastructure in the liberated areas. For the Self-Administration of North-East Syria, the war also meant, above all, a humanitarian catastrophe that had to be overcome.

While the fighting was still raging in most areas, despite the illusory ceasefire and the hypocritical promises of the self-

proclaimed "guarantor powers", Russia and the USA, we decided to start working on this publication in the fall of 2019. Our goal was to provide an authentic snapshot of the revolution of Rojava and a picture of building society under the harsh conditions of war. Because the defense of the revolution does not only take place on the fronts, in the positions and trenches, but is organised in every village and every neighborhood, every house and every workplace. It is only possible for the revolution to defend itself against every attack and every form of attempted foreign rule and domination from the outside, through an unimaginable collective effort that takes place every day anew, in the inconspicuous self-sacrificing work of millions of women and men, giving life to the self-administrative system. It is this invisible effort of individuals that, in collective creation, unleashes the historical forces that give shape and direction to the revolutionary process and create the new life, every day anew.

In the coverage of the war by the bourgeois press, often only the developments at the front and the territorial gains are taken into account, which is why the resistance of society as a whole is usually ignored. Giving expression to the everyday struggle of the population against the occupation and for a free life has been the declared goal of the work on this publication. The essence of the Revolutionary People's War, i.e. the mobilisation of the entire society in defense of the revolution, can only be grasped if we look beyond the direct confrontation and hot battles into the reality of life of the fighting people of North-East Syria. With this publication, we want to give an insight into the reality of a fighting people to the widest audience possible, and also show that the Self-Administration of North-East Syria, contrary to all the rumors and false information spread, continues to stand confidently on its own feet; that the revolution of Rojava, despite all attacks and attempts at destruction, is alive and fighting.

Even though more than two years have passed between the beginning of the Turkish invasion and the release of this publication¹, we are still convinced that this work is an important historic document and a unique testimony of a historic people's resistance, and that the topic is still relevant today. After all, as we write these lines, Turkish fascism and its allies are working at full speed to unleash another major attack on the liberated territories. The so-called ceasefire has always been nothing more than a cynical farce and the attacks of the occupiers on civilians and their defense forces have not been suspended for a single day. But with the recent airstrikes and bombardments against cities and towns of North-East Syria and the self-administered areas of the Şengal Mountains in South Kurdistan (also known to some as Northern Iraq), it must be understood that a new phase has begun. At the same time, in the Mountains of Southern Kurdistan, where the fascist occupiers have been trying in vain to break the resistance of the guerrillas for more than 120 days with the use of poison gas and area bombardments, there is a noticeable intensification of the attacks.

The attacks on Rojava are continuing in different ways, drone attacks on important personalities and militants of the revolution, on civilians and almost daily artillery strikes on the front-lines.

In January the attack on the Sina prison in Heseke took place. It was a huge operation carried out by Daesh, supported by the Turkish state to destabilize the revolution. The attack was repelled by heroic resistance, 121 friends fell Şehîd. Airstrikes were carried out by Turkish warplanes on Maxmur, Shengal and the Dêrik-region in Rojava one day after the victory in Heseke was announced. A further example how the actions of

1 Since then some of the people, who are covered in this booklet, have changed their works, and continue, for example, in other structures within the revolution. We, nonetheless, decided to leave the descriptions provided to us during the time the interviews were held!

Turkish fascism and the Islamist Daesh are coordinated with each other.

We see a clear intensification of the attacks on the Rojava revolution.

The Turkish state's and the imperialists' concept of annihilation is coherent, regionally coordinated and continues without a break.

Therefore, it would be a serious mistake to consider the individual attacks in isolation and separately from each other. Therefore, there can be no question about any easing of the situation and it is necessary to prepare to decisively counter the coming attacks. The enemies of humanity will not be satisfied until they have succeeded in completely suffocating the ignited fire of the revolution, or in bringing the revolutionary forces to their knees. But the peoples and the revolutionary movement have also made their decision and are determined to fight until victory.

As internationalists who are part of this historical process, we see it as our responsibility to make the knowledge of the resistance and the reality of the revolutionary process accessible. Our side of history will never get a place in the official historiography of the rulers, and therefore it is up to us to record our own history, the history of the fighters and the revolutionaries, with all its facets, specificities, and small details, authentically in pictures, writing, sound, and film. None of these products can ever claim to be complete, they can only ever represent a brief snapshot in the dialectical process of transforming all existing order, - which is the revolution. Although a truly deep understanding of the revolutionary process can only be achieved through direct participation in it, we hope that these snapshots and insights can contribute to bringing the reader a little closer to the truth of the revolution.

The revolution of Rojava and North-East Syria does not see itself as an isolated and stand-alone phenomenon, but considers itself as an integral part and decisive key moment in the world revolutionary process, and is thus an important achievement and a fought-for position in the struggle for the liberation of humanity. In this sense, it is important that the revolutionaries of this world recognise this struggle as their own and join side by side with the people of the region in a front against fascism and imperialism. Because what is defended today in Rojava is nothing less than the future of all of us; it is the destiny of the global revolutionary movement.

We are all invited to take part in this struggle together.

Internationalist Commune of Rojava
21st March 2022



Kobanê is Internationalist. The whole world has to see it as its place because the fight against Daesh was the fight against the enemy of humanity

Ayşe Efendi, Co-Chair of the PYD in Kobanê²

Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. Could you please introduce yourself?

My name is Ayşe Efendi, I am from the Halinjah village in the region of Kobanê, and I am responsible for the international and internal relations of the PYD [Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat; Democratic Union Party] in Kobanê. I have been active in the Apoist movement from the beginning of 1980. All the things that have happened, we have lived through. It is not something that we have just learned or heard.

How did you get to know the movement?

In 1980, I married my husband and we went to Saudi Arabia to work. At the time, there were friends, also friends from the Apoist movement, going there, and so I got to know about the movement. In a place like Saudi Arabia, a really backward, reactionary country regarding women, you cannot go without your veil, you cannot drive. So, I was really inspired by the ideology of liberation of the Freedom Movement. There were three or four Kurdish families going there to work, but most were men without their families going just for work before coming back to Kurdistan.

So in the beginning of that time, we didn't do many activities, but we used to celebrate Newroz and also later on, we celebrated the beginning of the armed struggle, which is 15th August 1984. There

2 Ayşe Efendi, for example, is not PYD's co-chair in Kobanê anymore, but continues works in another societal part of the revolution (see footnote 1)

were tapes of Şivan Perwer, of Xelîl Xemgîn, of Koma Berxwedan, which were singing patriotic songs, and I used to copy and spread them, also by selling them in support of the movement. Apart from tapes, we also used to make pins and sell them, and in 1990, we returned to Kobanê to work.

I had three children in Saudi Arabia, and two others were born in Kobanê. In Kobanê, we started working officially as 'front-liners'; the people working in society and supporting the revolutionary forces by organising support and aid for the guerrilla. We also used to organise meetings and show screenings, using video tapes. Of course, it was really difficult because it was during the Syrian Regime times, and as a woman I was between the state, tribes, agents, and parts of my family who were not supporting the movement. So, I had to take care of those four factors. But at the time, women used to wear a kind of dress and veil in combination, and I used to hide things under it like tapes, which allowed me to continue my work.

In the early 1990s, my husband stayed in Saudi Arabia at times in the beginning, while I returned with the children to Kobanê, travelling to Saudi Arabia only in winter sometimes. I wanted my children to grow up in their land. Of course, they could not live their Kurdish culture because it was forbidden, but they would at least be on their land with our people, speaking also the language at home. Our home was open to our revolutionary friends, and the enemy was putting a lot of pressure on us at that time, sending agents, arresting people. I remember once there was an agent waiting outside our door, and we used to put a ladder on the house of the neighbours; in this way I could go onto the roof and leave from two houses further down. We also used to collect whatever we could to help and support our revolutionary forces. The people

were really poor, but we used to take our old bread and make it again to support our revolutionary forces.

In 2003, I was travelling to the mountains in South Kurdistan. I went from Mosul, and to do so we had to walk all along the border because our crossing was not authorised. We did so for several years, but in 2008, I was caught by the [Syrian] state and was put in prison for a year. I was already put in prison before for short periods of time. Overall, I was in prison three times, and in one instance, I was required to go to the court in Aleppo from time to time for 7 years. We would arrive in Aleppo at 8am, and return home at 11pm, without being judged or receiving any other information. There was no reason for it other than making our lives impossible.

Without prior organisation, the Syrian Regime or Daesh [Islamic State] would probably be here today. As you said, you were organising and helping the friends for a long time prior to 2011. Did you anticipate that a revolution would happen?

It was a surprise, but we had put all our work and effort into this objective, and we did it so our children could speak Kurdish and live their Kurdish identities. We always worked towards this objective but we didn't know it would be this big. At that time, we were thinking that Bakur [Northern Kurdistan/ to some known as Southern Turkey], where there are 20 million Kurds, would have a large uprising which we would join. We were supporting each other, but we were expecting what happened in Rojava to happen in Bakur, because there are only 4 million Kurds here. Of course, we were not anticipating the Arab Spring, where so many people would rise up. So we didn't know that this would come, but believed and worked towards it in our popular base which had been built for over forty-two years: Educating our people,

discussing our culture, discussing our identity, sending ten, twelve, fifteen bags of wheat to support our revolutionary forces and help our revolutionary friends. So it was a big surprise but we never had a doubt that it would come.

Could you tell us more about the time after 2011? What was your role at that time?

Until 2011 and 2012, the friends were making their preparations. The state was still putting pressure on the friends until 19th July [2012], when, in Kobanê, the decision was taken to get rid of the Syrian Regime in Rojava. We had orders and also made the decision that there would be no wounded or deaths but we should make them pull out. In two months, they had left Rojava and, in the elections that followed, my comrade Ehmed Şêxo and I were elected as Co-Chairs of TEV-DEM [Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk; Movement for a Democratic Society] in Kobanê. We established fourteen quarters here in Kobanê, each with a structure. Every quarter had a congress with two co-representatives and six commissions: the housing commission, the organisational committee, the health committee, the defence committee, the financial committee, and the services committee.

Was the population accepting this new system and approach?

When the state withdrew, the people started taking their place on the checkpoints to secure this region in the war that was starting. The people came to us and wanted weapons, but we told them there were no weapons. There were some Kalashnikovs but not much more. They said they needed bullets if they couldn't get weapons, but we said we didn't have any bullets either. So then the people were angry, but also happy at the same time. They said 'You

have no weapons and you just pushed out the [Syrian] Regime³ – the Regime will come back and massacre us all!' People were happy the Regime had left but were also really afraid after so many years under the Ba'ath Regime. The state brainwashed us with fear and this was visible.

How did you keep the Regime out of Kobanê without heavy weapons?

The people in Kobanê had some personal weapons. The Regime surrendered really fast, and we put them in their own prisons. We gave them food and water, and when the Regime asked us to release them, we found no reason to keep them, so we released them to the Regime areas.

When you ask whether there were weapons, there were personal weapons here, and we passed from non-existence into existence. You have to see this in the creation of the Asayîş [Internal Security Forces, officially: Hêza Ewlekariya Hindîrin], in the creation of the courts – you need people who have diplomas, you need people who can build the health committee, you need people who know how to treat people, people that can organise. This was all created by the people who had those qualities but also friends who didn't and who we were educating ourselves and educating others, in order to be able to do it. The people in those structures were not university students or people who knew how to do it, but they learned and we succeeded in doing it.

3 Whenever a person talks about the 'Regime', they usually refer to the Syrian Regime

We really understood from the beginning what Rêber⁴ Apo [Abdullah Öcalan] was telling us when he said 'our work is to dig a well with a needle'. It is a really long-term process. In Islam, there is the significant meaning of the Well of Zamzam [close to where the Kaaba is, the holiest place in Islam]. And in Islam, it is said, when you give a lot of efforts, and when you dig a well with a needle, the most beautiful thing you can have is the Zamzam water coming out, but us we did not see the Zamzam water; we dug for all those years, and all we saw, after all this effort, is the blood of our children. Before the war, many people in Rojava would ask 'why are your children going to the mountains to join the Apoist movement? Why are you giving them to Turkey? What has it got to do with our problems here in Rojava?' In 2014, all these people had their answer when hundreds, if not thousands of our children returned from the mountains and from Bakur, crossed the border to defend Kobanê. Many of them did not have time to drink a cup of water in Kobanê before they fell, defending the city and defending our population. The people of Kobanê who were sceptical about the fact that our children went to the mountains got their answer. In 2011, when the Arab Spring began, the Syrian Regime radically changed their attitude towards us. Everything was permitted, and we could carry out our work more or less without being arrested. They weren't encouraging us, but they were no longer stopping us. At the time, I remember one Regime official responsible for the region saying 'before, the tribes were killing each other and everyone was coming to us at the police station. But now, there is not so much of this, so you can continue to do your work but we

4 Abdullah Öcalan led the Kurdish freedom struggle as the PKK's chairperson from the founding of the PKK in 1978 until his kidnapping on 15th February 1999. He continues to be regarded as a philosophical pioneer and the most important political representative of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, which is reflected in the title 'Rêber' (literally: guide).

have to stay here. We can oversee things and you can continue to do your work for the purpose of bringing down tensions.'

For this short time, before the Regime withdrew, there was a system inside the system. We are finding an alternative to the state. Because if you want to tear down the state you have to find an alternative. For example, they had the municipality that used to clean the roads. We started to clean the roads ourselves. So when the municipality would come and see the work had been done, they would see that they're not so useful. It also proved to our people that we can make it by ourselves.

You said something before about having first worked with TEV-DEM and then moving to the PYD, and how those have changed over the years. Could you go into that?

PYD was founded in 2003. I told you, I went to Başûr (South Kurdistan /Northern-Iraq) at that time, because doing our work here was illegal, and we came together as a congress there to discuss the rights and demands of Kurds in Rojava. The objective was to become a social and political party for every Kurd in Rojava. At the time we called it the Party of the Martyrs, because it had cost a lot of blood. After that, there was TEV-DEM that was created because it was like the structure that developed. But now, after the revolution, there is more need for a political entity like PYD; a political party rather than the movement. That does not mean they cancel each other out, but for international negotiations on diplomatic matters you need the PYD to do it, it is not the role of TEV-DEM. You need a clear social and political identity to do it.

How does the work look like for the Co-Chair of the PYD in Kobanê?

Usually, the PYD works a lot with other peoples. This region is mainly populated by Kurds, but we do a lot of work with the Arab population on the Syrian side, too, and also with people who left the Islamic jihadist gangs, for instance, in the region of Şêxler, who today want to come back. We discuss with them to see and to think about practical steps of how they can come back. Also, when delegations come from outside of Kobanê, then they come to the PYD. But our work concerns mainly 361 villages, with which we discuss the political steps to take, and those that have been taken, giving also an account of the political situation and our relations with the Syrian Regime, because there is a lot of confusion and disinformation circulating around. We also discuss about relations with the USA, with Russia, and other countries. Our work is mainly to be in society and to discuss the political steps that have been taken and those we are yet to take, which includes organising the people.

Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Kobanê is Internationalist, for the whole world. And the whole world has to see it as its place because the fight against Daesh was the fight against the enemy of humanity, not only the enemy of Kurds. This also includes the fight against Erdoğan's politics. If Daesh had not been broken here, then humanity would have spilled the blood we spilled in Kobanê. Kobanê is also special for women, especially through the fight of the YPJ [Yekîneyên Parastina Jin; Women's Protection Units]. The YPJ has represented all women in its fight against Daesh, and against the fascist patriarchal mentality. Kobanê is also a really important place. In 2014, Rêber Apo

emphasised in interviews that Kobanê cannot fall, given its importance. Rêber Apo himself came first to Kobanê, when he came to Rojava in 1979. And 19th July, the anniversary of the Rojava revolution, started in Kobanê [in 2012]. The fall of Daesh started with their defeat in Kobanê. Kobanê was of course in all headlines, but it has just been supported with words by the international community and by solidarity movements. Around 80% of Kobanê was completely destroyed. This house, where we are sitting right now was completely destroyed and flattened to the ground. Who defended Kobanê? The people themselves, the people of Kurdistan, the people of Syria, they are the ones. So our goal is for the world to see Kobanê as its own, because this is where this world with its values usually spoken in words has been protected, where the values have been put in practice.

But this time it should not just be words. We want the world to take responsibility regarding the Turkish state's actions, and not just for Kobanê, but for Girê Spî, for Serêkaniyê, for Efrîn, and against the spread of Daesh and its ideas. The world is closing their eyes when it comes to the Turkish state. Thousands of refugees are here, but after the war in Girê Spî and Serêkaniyê, you cannot speak to the Kurds anymore about believing in human rights. It's just words for them. After all the things we have seen, after all the things we continue to live through, it is now widely known that children and people are chemically burned with white phosphorus, that people are cut into pieces when they fall on the front lines, that all these atrocities have been committed and continue being committed. We have given 11,000 martyrs in this struggle against Daesh, and 25,000 girls and boys that have fought in these battles, are wounded. More than 100,000 others are saying 'we are ready to sacrifice our lives because we will not let these efforts and sacrifices be in vain'.

It is known that Kurdish people are hospitable, that they are workers, and that they want to live in peace. But regarding all the crimes committed against us, we are saying: ‘This is enough!’ because as mothers we cannot have one, two, three, four times our hearts burned and shattered to pieces every time our children fall to defend our revolution. In many families, you have at least four Şehîds [martyrs]. Four times those mothers are dying, every time they put their children into the earth. And this is something new in Rojava; Bakur has paid this price for many years, but here in Rojava it is becoming like it is in Bakur, and this has to stop all over Kurdistan. We ask the international community ‘who is sending those weapons?’ Also, in Germany, for example, there should be pressure. It is German weapons that are killing our children. This is not done accidentally; it is not like they are selling the weapons and they don't know what's happening. Our flag is forbidden to be risen in Germany, which is a clear message that the German state is sending to us.

It is enough! I hope you will not take it as a threat, and misunderstand when I am saying: ‘If you don't let our Kurdish children live in peace, we will not let the children of the world live in peace.’ We continue to rise up around the world. Of course, we are saying this in a respectful, peaceful way, and so far all our actions have been with peaceful intentions, and we will continue this way. We continue to rise up and we will not stop our struggle. We have the right and we will continue to defend ourselves. When the Turkish state is saying that they are building a military ‘safety zone’ here, we need to understand it in the wider context, because we did not attack the Turkish state with even one bullet, before they invaded here. The Turkish state aims to return to the Ottoman times, building and expanding their neo-Ottoman areas of control also here. There is a world war that takes place in this region. We

are struggling for peace and want the whole world to be in peace, not only peace for Rojava, but also that the current wars end, for example, in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan etc. With these ongoing wars in the Middle East, and throughout the past 100 years, we see that new systems are intended to be created. After so many years of war, and after giving so many Şehîds, we are saying that it's time that Kurdish people also get their share of the world.



By joining Kongra Star I am able to liberate myself and, through that, also help other women to organise and liberate themselves

Mona Youssef, Member of Kongra Star's Coordination

Thank you for taking the time to speak to us. Could you please introduce yourself and your role?

My name is Mona Youssef⁵, I'm part of the coordination of Kongra Star, and I am from the city of Serêkaniyê. In the beginning, when the Rojava revolution came to Serêkaniyê, Al-Nusra gangs and militias were attacking the city and the early revolution. Of course, the people most oppressed by those groups at the time were women. Before the revolution, we were living with the violence and oppression of the Regime, we could not live our identities as women. When the 19th July revolution began, it was a big occasion for women, being able to play their role and to live their identities. Since the start of this revolution women have been at its base and organising themselves in all parts of society.

Women have organised themselves because women in society underwent complete denial and received no recognition. So, the woman organised herself not only in all segments of society, but also in all parts of her life in order to defend her rights against the people who want to remove or attack those rights. The movement I am part of today, Kongra Star, started in 2005; in other words, it

5 For more on Mona Youssef, her Palestinian background, and seeing Abdullah Öcalan's ideology also as a solution for Palestine and beyond, see:

Salav Abdul, Rahman. 2021. "A Palestinian Woman Adopts His Idea: Ocalan Is Our Savior, The Savior Of Humanity - ANHA | HAWARNEWS | English". *Hawarnews.com*. <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/a-palestinian-woman-adopts-his-idea-ocalan-is-our-savior-the-savior-of-humanity-h22910.html>., last access: 15th February 2021.

existed before the revolution. This whole movement started with five women. They started working in 2005 and are still part of the movement now. These five women organised themselves and saw themselves as responsible for making social change, not just regarding the system but also regarding a fundamental change of mentality. So these thoughts have not come out of nowhere, they came from a long story of oppression and observation of how the woman was living in the Middle East, how she has been enslaved, and the many attempts of liberation. The movement takes and learns from different experiences around the world to be able to have the tools to end the enslavement of women.

Could you tell us how you first became involved with Kongra Star? When did you hear about it first and what did you think?

When the revolution started, the commune system was built, and at the time I was a member of a commune. To be able to understand the commune system, every person had to have an education. I had an education on the liberation of women for about 15 days. I went there and this is how I learned and understood what the Kongra Star system was. Importantly, our liberation is something we always wanted to struggle for, against our social situation and against all oppression. And this revolution opened the door to put it into practice. I had 15 days of education which was mainly about the history and the liberation of women, and from this I was quickly convinced that by joining Kongra Star I am able to liberate myself and, through that, also help other women to organise and liberate themselves.

Since when have you been with Kongra Star?

It was 2014, when I joined Kongra Star, learning also about the thoughts, philosophy and practice of Abdullah Öcalan. Two points really convinced me to join this movement, First, Kongra Star is a movement that fights for all women, be they Kurds, Syrians, whatever their religion or nation; they have` their place in Kongra Star. Secondly, past revolutions would say ‘we liberate the country first, then we liberate the woman’, while the ideology of our movement is that only through the liberation of the woman can you liberate the country, and not the opposite way around.

Could you tell more about Kongra Star, also what it means to you, and difficulties women were facing in liberating themselves?

It is important to emphasise that in Kongra Star wherever you as a woman are from – if the woman is from here, if she is from Africa, if she from the West etc. –, coming to join Kongra Star means defending your rights and liberating yourself in and through this movement. I’m really happy in my work because it’s not just the work that is fulfilling and bearing fruits, but our motivation comes also from the conviction of fighting for the liberation of the woman everywhere.

Kongra Star works on different subjects and in different committees, but before we get there in more detail, it is important to re-emphasise what I spoke already a little bit about before, namely the need to organise. The awareness of women here really changed with the ongoing war. When some say that oppression creates a will to change things, we see here that women faced so much oppression that it has created a lot of awareness in them, and they saw the need to defend themselves, which included the need to organise themselves into a military force because this revolution

was for the most part peaceful until Turkey decided to militarily attack it. There was then the need to create the YPJ, the Women's Protection Units. And this women's military force took on the mission to clean all areas of Daesh [Islamic State], as well, and succeeded in this. They sacrificed a lot, but with heroic behaviour and resistance, they succeeded in getting rid of the Islamic State. So this was regarding the military force and defense. Concerning the society, all women in this revolution, wherever they are, if they are in the YPJ, if they are in *mala jin* [women's houses]⁶, they are automatically members of Kongra Star. One of the first steps in this revolution was to get rid of the traditions and practices that did not respect the liberation of the woman. Two main steps have been taken in society, and two laws have been passed, namely i) forbidding child marriage, and ii) polygamy. This is because we see these practices as destructive to society and they do not respect the woman as a subject at all. There is also the attempt to achieve equality between men and women, especially in our institutions; for instance, wherever you are, we always have co-chairpersons. But this is not just to say on paper that we have a woman and a man who decide, but it is also the power of decision-making in everyday life that is given to both. Through co-chairing, women have gained experience because there was nothing like this previously, and through this experience and practice an equality has been built. It also represents an example for many women and has created a positive social dynamic. We are having our place in society and this has a really big impact on the society of Rojava.

6 See Chapter on Mala Jin (pp. 33-39)

Could you tell us more about Kongra Star's structure?

Kongra Star is divided as follows: First, our autonomous administration systems; we have villages, regions, and cantons. In every village you have committees, and on each level you have a coordination of Kongra Star. There are ten committees under Kongra Star.

There is the society committee, which includes a lot of sub-committees, such as the Şehîd family committee, the *Sara* committee – which is a committee concerned with violence against women –, and the sports and cultural committees.

There is the economic committee, which is working towards a liberated economy of the woman. Having true cooperatives focusing on working together. So, we are working towards an economy of the woman by the woman in order for women not being dependent economically and being able to produce freely. But an important aspect about this committee is that we are building this while protecting nature. We don't want to build an industrial economy just for profit, which goes contrary to the fascist state that puts production before nature and is destroying our environment.

We have the education committee which is a council that brings together the autonomous educations, the open educations, and the closed educations. The open education is for 15 days, and you go and come back. Closed education is where you stay at the place of education between one and two months. The education committee coordinates all educations on the liberation of women.

To give you an idea about what is discussed in those educations. It is central to explain why building democratic nation⁷ is impossible without the liberation of the woman at its base. There is also women's history, how the woman has been struggling and resisting for all those years. And also the background on natural society and the woman's role in it. That can explain the situation we are in right now in most places around the world; namely, how, through the oppression of women, fascism and the capitalist mentality has been built. Educations also discuss *free partnership life*; how to unmask sexism and patriarchy in our society and how to fight and change it. There is also the importance of ethics and an explanation of religion; for instance, what is patriarchal in a religion and what we have to fight, but without falling in the opposite direction. We focus on taking the good and the society-building aspects of our religions, while having a clear discourse about what is oppressing the woman. This is an overview of the education committee.

There is also the Kevana Zêrîn [Golden Crescent] committee which is the women's committee for Art and Culture. The role of this committee is to bring together all the cultures which have been oppressed or annihilated, and to revive the traditions of the oppressed peoples like the Arabs, Kurds, and Syriacs who could not live their culture because there was only the state culture.

⁷ On Democratic Nation, see for example:

- a) Öcalan, Abdullah. 2017. "Democratic Nation". *Freeocalan.Org*.
https://www.freeocalan.org/books/downloads/en-brochure-democratic-nation_2017.pdf, last access: 4th April 2021
- b) Komun Academy. 2018. "Democratic Nation". *Komun Academy*.
<https://komun-academy.com/2018/06/27/democratic-nation/>, last access: 4th April 2021

Another crucial committee is the women's self-defence committee, which is working on protecting women in society, and society as a whole built by the vanguard of the woman, organised in autonomously women's self-defense forces. In the women's self-defence committee, you have all the institutions of women's self-defence, like the Women's Asayîş [Internal Security Force], who are the autonomous women's part that work with the general Asayîş. The YPJ has also a committee. The role of the women's self-defence committees is to militarily and socially protect all women's committees – also through the Women's Civil Defense Forces [HPC-Jin]⁸ – from patriarchal and sexist practices in our society. so from physical attacks to underage marriage, forced marriage and other violence against women.

You also have the committee of women's justice, under which there are two councils, which are the council of *dir al mara* [*mala jin* (women's houses)], and the council of women working in the judicial field. The goal of this committee is to protect women from domestic violence, marriages, and killings. Just in Rojava in 2019, twenty women were killed in really violent ways. There was one woman here in Qamişlo who was killed by being stabbed twenty-two times. The role of the committee is also to safeguard children in domestic life. Before the revolution, a women could not hope to guard her children in the case of divorce. So, you have 23 laws that have been passed to protect the woman, but it's really important to understand that we are not just protecting the woman, since by protecting the woman you are also protecting society.

There is the women's municipality committee, which plays a vanguard role when it comes to ecology and the hygiene of society.

8 See Chapter on HPC-Jin (pp. 123-127)

It is also linked to the fundamental values of natural society that were protected by the matriarchal system. Regarding the preservation of nature, the women's municipality committee works on all levels. For example, women will try to educate the employees of the municipality regarding using less paper, that they should take care of green spaces, as well. But ecology is not just about paper, or being conscious of using less electricity or water; the main battle is the reforestation campaign. For instance, on the 8th March you will see women of the municipality gathering all women, saying we will celebrate 8th March by planting trees. Similarly, on Abdullah Öcalan's birthday, 4th April, we celebrate by planting trees. We try to do this for all occasions.

There is also the women's diplomatic committee, which has two sides, an internal one and an external one. You have the internal relations between different parts of society, different regions, different nations and religions, like Christians, Muslims, Syrians, Kurds, Arabs, but also different political parties and associations. The committee brings these together and discusses how the role of women is developing in those institutions, parties, political groups, nations, and religions. And also in order to take the diversity of society's thinking and beliefs into accounts – after all, monolithic thought is not thought – it has to be composed of different opinions, different cultures etc., that are always in discussion with one another.

There is also the external diplomatic side. For instance, our comrade İlham Ehmed met with a representative of the White House, met Trump, and met other people in the world as a representative of the women's movement which also represents the Rojava revolution. The diplomatic committee also gathers the Kurdish and Arabic tribes together to find a solution for the Syrian

crisis. It also meets with institutions, such as human rights or aid organisations to organise logistics and discuss Rojava on an international level.

We also have the women's health committee, which is also linked to women's history in natural society. It prefers to push forward natural medicine and avoids chemical medicine as long as possible to be able to redevelop a culture of treating oneself naturally. If the Turkish enemy would leave us in peace and gave us time to work, we would also have a project to create agricultural fields to produce medicinal plants to be able to develop more natural medicine. The women's health committee also played a vanguard role in the study of medicine. In our education system it takes four years to be a doctor and two years to be a nurse, and things are completely different to the state approach. We don't teach them to be doctors at first, instead we teach them to be humans and then to be doctors. We teach them not to objectify the human body. They will have maybe three months of ethics courses before they can even dream of practising in the medical field. For instance, regarding the material gain of making medicine, we insist on the ethical duty of treating people and always trying to use natural treatments and giving chemical medicine only when necessary.

The last committee is women's media committee. Our media committee is really important. You have women's TV, Jin TV, but also a women's news programme on the other TV channels, like Jin News. The women's media committee's role is to display all the activities, all the gains, all the victories, but also all the pain and all the aggressions against not only the woman but all our people in Rojava and Northern Syria. This is really important work, because through the media committee people can know what

we are doing and we can publicly condemn the Turkish state's and the mercenaries' crimes against us.

At every level, from the communes in villages, over cities and regions, to the level of cantons, within the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, you have these committees and councils. And it is not just specialised, individualised work. Of course, everybody has their work to do but they are also working together. You have a meeting every month or every two months on the level of the region, on the level of the committees, and all this work is coordinated and analysed every three months. For example, you have the whole canton meeting together to show their actions, their activities, the problems they are facing, what are the perspectives of what is to be done in the future. Earlier, you asked me why I am motivated, afterwards I explained to you how our system works. I think you understand that I am really motivated to work as a member of the coordination of Kongra Star in all those fields.

Thank you very much!



Jineolojî was like a new light coming into our life, a new light for women, and a new light for society as a whole. A light of hope

Yasmin Hussein, Jineolojî Coordinator and Teacher in Qamişlo

Can you introduce yourself and your work here, please?

My name is Yasmin Hussein, and I'm from Amûdê. I am teaching and I am also part of the coordination here at the faculty of Jineolojî. I have been working in this faculty since 2017.

We didn't have Jineolojî at university. What is it?

Jineolojî is a science, and actually even more than that. It means literally the science of women, but it is for the whole of society and the whole world as a science of life, including the science of co-partnership life [Hevjyana Azad]. The word *Jineolojî* already suggests [lojî, deriving from the Greek word logos] that it is a science. The push to bring it forward as a science, as a scientific method, and as a topic for women and for the whole of society was actually proposed by Rêber Apo [Abdullah Öcalan]. He proposes it in the book 'The Sociology of Freedom' in 2008, when it was first published. From that moment onwards women actually started to bring this science forward, to work on it, to make research on it, to deepen it, to find out more about it. That is why Jineolojî is not only a science for one part of society, or for only one topic. For example, you have different topics like history, sociology, politics etc. What Jineolojî does, it is bringing all those topics together under the science of Jineolojî, so it's about society, it's about the way of living together, it's about women in general, it's about politics, about history, and about economics, as well. So it has

many, many different aspects that are coming together in this science. We can shortly define it like this.

And for example, especially *Hevjiyana Azad*, which can be translated as co-partnership life, as “a free life together”, as “living in a free way together”, or as “shared life in a free way”. In the patriarchal society and the patriarchal system, men are the ones in power, the leaders the ruling classes, and so on, and women are oppressed under this system. And what *Hevjiyana Azad* means is to find a possibility and a way of being able to live freely and equally together. So not having someone ruling over another.

Why is Jineolojî important?

You can say actually that for us here, Jineolojî was like a new light coming into our life, a new light for women, and a new light for society as a whole. A light of hope. Because what existed before in our lives was, you could describe it especially for women, as darkness. Living a life at the level of a slave, always being hidden, not being a part of society, and of course that’s not only the case for women in the Middle East. We consider Jineolojî as a necessity for women and all societies all over the world to rediscover themselves, to rediscover their history, and everything else that connects with that.

So actually it’s a new way, it opened a new way for us to gain back our lives. So, Jineolojî as a science may be new but actually – in the understanding of gaining back our lives – it is not. It is only new as a science, but this opened many new ways for us here to start a march to freedom. So, of course we are only at the beginning of it, but we are reading a lot, we are discussing a lot about different things, we are making research in many, many different topics to be able to push it forward and to develop it. And

that's actually the interesting thing about Jineolojî, as well, and also the importance of it. It's not like any positivist science that you can study in normal universities, like for example let's say mathematics, where more or less it's clear what you are going to read about, it's clear what you are going to learn, and in the end if you finish it you are going to be – if you are good – a professional in the subject of mathematics, for example. But knowledge in any other topic will be missing. Jineolojî, in contrast, is combining many, many different topics and necessities of the people, of society, and of women, and combines all of those according to the problems and the necessities existing.

Can you tell us more about the faculty? How many students do you have at one time, how is teaching Jineolojî organised?

The faculty itself was founded in 2017. Of course, it's a process like it's a process in society. It's a process not only related to studying here, but a process in this revolution, as well. It's a process with society to get more into subjects like this, about the struggle of women, and the freedom struggle of women in this society, and by doing this getting stronger and getting into more details of all parts of society. So, we can say in the beginning, when this faculty was newly founded, there was just a small number of students who joined the first year of studying. But it has improved a lot, and a lot of experiences have been made. This applies not only to this university and faculty, but to the whole of Rojava; overall a lot of improvements and developments have been made, so that we have reached a point where with every day passing, there are more people getting interested in those subjects, wanting to discuss, to learn, to get to know the works, and wanting to be part of it. Thus, this is a process we can see, and that is

important to understand it like that. So, of course, it has not been finished but it is continuing.

Concerning the way of teaching Jineolojî here. Of course, on the one side there are many ideas and subjects that are being taught in the form of seminars, for example, and therefore, those seminars and so on are being prepared, and the different teachers of the different subjects are giving those lessons. But besides that, we mainly try to have a method of everybody giving something to it. So, to be part of the research, to be part of the development and improvement of Jineolojî as a science and as a subject itself, discussions about that are very important.

So, it's not only about learning something by heart. For example, we can see this method about just learning something by heart in the schools and universities of the Syrian regime. But here we try to change this aspect and for that of course many topics exist, such as economics, politics, history of society, and especially women's history, but also psychology, pedagogy, and the definition of words [têgîn in Kurmanci] is also an important subject, for example. With regards to the definition of words, we, for instance, look at and go deeper into how we define different explanations; how we define words, we discuss about them and get into a process of clarification. At the same time, all of those subjects are being analysed and then after they are being analysed the results are being presented by the students and they are becoming a part of the whole project of Jineolojî.

Let me give you some examples about what is being taught and in which way, in short: So, it is important to understand that most of the things that have been written, or in a patriarchal system more or less everything that has been written, that has been researched, that has been shown to the people as reality or truth, has been done with and from the view of men. Therefore, for us Jineolojî is also

about looking at every aspect in society, every aspect that we have talked about, with and from the view of a woman. For that reason, we especially look at history, and the history of women. On the one hand, we look how history has been written, what different important aspects in history have shaped history. At the same time, we study the history of oppression, and on the other hand the history of resistance and struggle. We look at the history, starting thousands of years ago until today in order to regain this history. We strive to find the right ways and methods, and how to act today. Part of this is also how to write history from our perspective, the way how we can liberate ourselves from the oppressive systems, the enslaving systems, that exist.

There are many, many different things that are being taught in this faculty. I mentioned some subjects; other important things for teaching Jineolojî are for example self-defence. That means, the importance of self-defence and how self-defence should be organised, and put into practice, as well. So, for example, we have the possibility and ability to teach taekwondo as a self-defence method. On the other hand, for example, in times of war that we are living in here, it is important for us that every woman is able to know how to defend herself, and that in fact – by women knowing how to defend themselves – the whole of society will be able to defend itself against all attacks that are taking place against it.

Another aspect, for example, is more of a biological nature maybe. More biological in order to get away from the patriarchal and capitalist mindset of medicine and how medicine is being produced, how it's made, how it's being used as an industry in society; we rather focus on finding alternative methods and alternative ways to organise natural medicines, for example. And for that, for example, it's important for us to teach everybody to get

to know their body and how to be able to find the right medicine for different problems.

Another part of our teachings, for example, is what we call “ethics and aesthetics”; the importance of ethics is actually about everything in life, as we consider it a part of culture, a part of the way how we live together, how we live in society, how we interact with each other. And the meaning of aesthetics, of course, is a large subject, that cannot be explained by one or two sentences. However, we discuss, for example, what it means to be beautiful, what the real meaning of beauty is, and how can we truly become beautiful human beings, as well.

Are there men who are studying Jineolojî at the faculty, as well?

Up until now, there are no men studying Jineolojî in the faculty. Right now, we are also giving more importance to women to get into Jineolojî, and to become part of the science and all of what is connected with it. At the same time, it's importance for us now that women are going to become able to develop the science, – you could call it becoming cadres of Jineolojî – to spread the science as a philosophy in and of society, to become teachers of Jineolojî by themselves, to organise for that reason by themselves. And then, of course, our aim is that in the future men are going to become students of Jineolojî, as well. For now, in the high schools, in the 10th and 11th grade, Jineolojî is being taught. In the future, the 12th grade is going to be completely managed by our system, as well.

Then Jineolojî will be thought in the 12th grade, as well.⁹ And, as I said before, in the universities of the future, we have an aim like that, as well, but until now it has not been implemented.

In all other faculties of the University of Rojava, like agriculture or literature, for example, there is already the subject of Jineolojî as part of the student studies, with a seminar or something similar at least once a week. But, within the faculty of Jineolojî, which is especially focusing on the topic of Jineolojî and the studies of Jineolojî, there are no men that are part of it as of now.

The only thing that I would like to also add is that the studies of Jineolojî in the faculty of Jineolojî have usually a duration of two years at the moment – with some students also studying 3 years –, and student in their second year are also usually preparing and finishing up a thesis.

Thank you very much!

9 While the curricula differ between the Syrian Regime and the Autonomous Self-Administration of North-East Syria – that’s why the latter also puts emphasis and includes Jineolojî as a central subject -, the school system is usually still subdivided into 3 periods with schools changed after each period, namely 1st - 6th grade (primary school); 7th - 9th grade (middle school); 10th – 12th grade (high school; with baccalaureate examinations at the end of 12th grade).



I'm a woman who has been really impacted by the suffering of other women... Mala Jin is the structure which is able and has the aim to change this dynamic

Sultan Hamdi, Coordinator at Mala Jin in Kobanê

Could you introduce yourself, where you are from, and what you are doing?

My name is Sultan Hamdi. I'm from Afrin, from the village Mîrkan. After Afrin had been occupied, I came to Kobanê. I am working in Mala Jin [women's house], and I am struggling and fighting for women's liberation.

So, let's assume the reader knows nothing about the society here, the women's movement etc. What is the Mala Jin?

So, at the beginning, the Rojava revolution had also become to be known by its second name, namely the 'women's revolution', because women played a vanguard role in all the fields, whether the economy, society, the mentality, or whether it was in the military, social, political, or diplomatic battles. I'm a woman who has been really impacted by the suffering of other women. I wanted to stop the violence and to protect women. Women have been without rights for a long time. They have been divided. They have been oppressed. They have been persecuted.

So, the Mala Jin is the structure which is able and has the aim to change this dynamic, through the most important aspects: educating women in the quarters, in the villages, in the cities, and in each house; we help each other. We give education to each other on the liberation of women, asking also what liberation is, how to achieve it? What is the freedom of women? For example, just to

have a right to do something, is that freedom? So, we educate also on our rights, on our history, and our consciousness as the women's movement.

I heard that Mala Jin also intervenes in domestic abuse cases. Is that right?

We can start answering your question by saying that there is a lot of violence in our society, which is really a result of patriarchy and male oppression. As women, we cannot accept that, and the Mala Jin is the solution through which we are fighting against this violence. Before, women could be killed for so-called laws recognised by the state, called 'honour crimes', such as for 'disrespectful behaviour', or 'immoral behaviour'. And the men would not be prosecuted, or their punishment would be a quarter of what they should have received. And this is an example of something that we don't accept. Women have a soul and you cannot kill a soul for any price. Nobody should be able to do that, you cannot accept these kind of acts, and Mala Jin is taking measures against it.

We also intervene and don't allow the marriage of young children to take place; something that has been practised for a long time. There are also other forms of violence. You have sexism when it comes to children; preference of sons over daughters, which greatly impacts on a woman's life. It was also very normal to have a second marriage, so polygamy; but this is what we also treat as a crime, and something that is very painful for and a disrespectful approach towards the woman.

Also, the Turkish occupation is violence against women. They are the first victims of the Turkish occupation, especially by looking at all the practices and acts that have been committed by this occupation army and their mercenaries.

So, how do we intervene? Most of the time, the first thing is we go and we protect the woman, we ensure her protection. By taking her away from the place where she is in danger. Second, we then go to our institutions. We bring those people committing acts of violence to our committees and peoples' courts, and we really insist on following procedure to be sure that such things don't get unnoticed. During the time of the regime, and in other legal systems, the different acts of violence are often not seen as a serious issue, but we really make sure that here it is taken serious and measures are put in practice.

You make sure that it's prosecuted?

Yes. Also, in cases of minor forms of violence. For instance, we stand by the women, we protect them, and we try to find measures. We're able to do this through committees in all villages; there is a committee in every commune. And when a woman knows oppression or feels weak herself, and is not able to take measures to protect or to defend herself, then she goes to this committee, and members of the committee come to us. Then, we, as Mala Jin, go to fix the problem, taking measures, for instance, in the cases we talked about above, such as forced marriages, or other forms of violence. And we stop the acts of violence, and we stand by the women to help. So, we write a report, we interview the woman, to be sure of what's happening, and also for her not to be intimidated, we take the time to discuss with her what happened. And where necessary, we call the Asayîş [Internal Security Forces] for the process of punishing the person who committed the crime according to our law system. It's also really important that laws were passed relating to the rights of women, and to understand how our laws have been made and are put into practice. With respect to making the laws, all our committees from the different

parts of Rojava came together in a congress and passed the laws for women rights, because before there was no accountability regarding the great amount of violence and oppression against women. So, it was needed that laws were passed by women deciding directly for themselves for the protection of women.

I imagine the work of the committees to be very difficult in very tribal areas, in villages for example. Can you talk about that?

On this question, yes, you are right, because the society of Kobanê, for example, is very tribal. For instance, there is something called *berdê* which is a traditional practice where a families can exchange their daughters and son; so, if you don't have a son I can give you a daughter, you give me your son.

And marriages are also fixed by tribal customs. For instance, there is a tribal custom in all of Syria, not just in Kobanê, that the son of your paternal uncle can force a woman to marry him, and also take her as second wife. Even if the woman is going to marry someone else, and he arrives and says 'no, I want to marry you', she is forced to marry him. According to this mentality being the son of her paternal uncle is the best position one can have.

But, of course, this practice has been forbidden by the same congress that voted for women rights' laws we talked about above. So, if somebody does it, of course he gets punished; we don't recognise the marriage, and it doesn't get officially ratified.

When we talk about punishment, we also need to emphasise the importance we put on education, so things change in the long run. For instance, in the example of this tribal custom, we carry out the law in not allowing it, but we also educate the people used to practising the custom. And we can say that after the revolution the mentality regarding this practice has changed. We're not saying

that nobody's doing it, but if somebody does it, we intervene, and we try to and also solve it. And in this way, we aim to break the practice. So, this law forbids it, and our education is explaining why it is forbidden. And it's completely logical: you can't force a woman to marry her cousin or someone else; in no case can you force a woman to marry. For the time we have been doing our works, a lot of problems have been transformed, and in general the mentality after the revolution has also changed a lot.

When we punish a person to a prison sentence, the person also receives an education about women's rights and against the oppression of women, for example, there. It's not the case that they are just sitting there; they also receive good analyses about their behaviour and why the practices and acts they have committed are forbidden with the aim of having a positive lasting impact once the person leaves prison.

When we talk about polygamy, in many cases the crime is committed by two people, so by the man and also by the second woman. In this case both the man and the second woman – if she has not been forced – are breaking the law. And the second woman, who is not having solidarity with the first woman, and other women in general, is to be held accountable in front of the law, as well.

There are also local figures that take part in the process of solving issues. And these respected local figures, such as elderly people, have usually also got educated in this revolution. We talk about the so-called 'white beards' or also older woman whose opinions are also respected in society; so, their words cannot be ignored, given the weight they currently also have within the society.

The different approaches of solving the problems are united in the Mala Jin. And the Mala Jin manages to also involve elderly people in the process of solving problems. Through our education, our

attitude, through our way of speaking, through our critique, we are successful in understanding the realities of families, and also in solving problems with society together, given that we are coming from society ourselves.

To give also another example, namely the case of divorce. When such a case comes up, we try to understand the full extent of all factors, also always with the aim of finding a solution between the couple and not directly saying “yes, just separate.” Of course, if there is the necessity to separate this should happen, but if problems are minor, we try always to reunite the families. Here, we have to understand the reality of most families; what’s the cause of most separations? It is war. The man, for example, went to war, couples got separated, and the influence on the psychology to live under war is not minor. If there is a possibility of getting back together and not divorcing, we speak with the woman and the man about getting back together. But, on the other hand, if the situation is clear and the couple will divorce, we also care of what is necessary to be given to the woman in order to survive and to live, such as with respect to having a house and other things.

Educations and their ongoing continuations are what we are doing most of all and most of the time; so, they are the largest part of the struggle in order to be able to change things in the long run and on a large scale.

What motivates you personally to do this very important work? It is obviously not easy work.

The motivation for this work came especially when I myself took part in an education. In that education, I had the chance to get to know the history of women. I learned about natural society, and the neolithic revolution, and how it was a women-centered society at that time; women were the vanguard, ensuring the build-up, and

continuation of society as well as being at the forefront for a harmonious life.

But when this system based on male dominance and patriarchy changed society, destroyed society's natural necessity of a communal life, all harmony was also destroyed as a result. So what motivates me is to take back our history. We want to correct the exploitative turn in which we have been forced into, because it does not have to be that way. We want to 'go back', build up, and strengthen a society where there is justice, love, and unity, and we as women, we have to fight for our history and we have to fight for our rights. We want to 'go back' to the values – societal values without which there would not be a society – that were predominant at that time. A time of natural society, focusing on society living together peacefully, and without oppression. And we gave our promise that we will continue this struggle until victory for all women, and for all humankind. We want to call upon all the women of the world – no matter how far away they are, wherever they are –, and tell them that we will support and strengthen each other in this struggle. And wherever a woman is suffering in the world, we are also suffering here in Rojava. And this is also what motivates us to continue the struggle because we know that the success of our revolution, which is the women's revolution, will also be a major step in the world's women's liberation movement. After all, just as we are suffering if any woman in this world is suffering, each of our victories can also be seen as a common victory of the women in the world, fighting together against this violent and oppressive system. This is what motivates my struggle.

Thank you very much!



Youth and Women are the driving force(s) of this revolution and of society

Toleen Abdulwahid, Syrian Democratic Youth Council

Can you please introduce yourself, including the position you have?

First let me welcome you. I'm really happy to take the time to talk to you. My name is Toleen Abdulwahid, and I'm the co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Youth Council [MSD-Ciwan; Meclîsa Sûriya Demokratîk - Ciwan].

Can you briefly talk about your background, and how you got into this work?

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, we came into contact with the thought and philosophy of Rêber Apo [Abdullah Öcalan], and how did we begin practising that philosophy? It was by education and self-education in the youth movement. On that base, we took the decision to build a free life in our society, and this Council is one of the tools that we have to build the free life as the youth.

What is the Syrian Democratic Youth Council [MSD-Ciwan]?

The role of MSD-Ciwan is, in the first instance, to bring together all of the youth of Syria, but also of the whole Middle East, on the basis of working for a democratic society. Our thoughts are inspired by the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan. So, we also need to organise ourselves against the policies of the states, which are against women's freedom, against the democratic and social system that we are building. All of the youth of Rojava, of Syria,

and of the whole Middle East, must come together on the principles of freedom and democracy.

We are working with different groups and youth movements, coming, for example, from political parties, and from youth movements working in schools and universities. Apart from this, we are also working with the Revolutionary Youth, the Kurdish Youth, the Young Women's Organisation, and also with young people from cultural and sport groups, to name a few examples.

Our role as the Syrian Democratic Youth Council is to coordinate with these movements together. To also have common educations, common exchanges, to take part in actions and demonstrations together. We also have the objective and the hope that we will be able to gather many more youth organisations from all over Syria, and from all over the Middle East to be able to have better exchange and then a better coordination, to then also being able to take further actions together.

How is MSD-Ciwan working outside of North-East Syria / Rojava?

There is, for example, the youth of Suweida which is in South Syria. There are also some projects that have started with the youth of Damascus. Of course, regarding some of these organisations visiting each other is a little bit difficult because of the the political situation, but through phones and social media we are able to exchange. Amongst all those groups, the one of Suweida has been the one that can create the potential for a big step forward. There are many Druze living in that region and, some months ago, they came to visit the canton of Cizîrê (Jazira) here some months ago. We ran an education with them, and we had a lot of exchanges about how to organise, how to have a common perspective, and so on. Also in Aleppo, we've had really good exchanges with youth

groups. And of course, it is also very important that the Syriac youth organisation is part of the Council.

Are all these groups Apoist¹⁰? If not, what is it that is bringing them together under this umbrella?

No, in this Council, we are not all Apoists; there is a lot of other people and organisations, but the objective of the Council is to bring together all the thoughts of the youth. But, it is of course the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan that makes these things possible, providing an analysis of the role of the youth, given that the youth as a whole has been oppressed. So, of course, there is this influence, but I would not describe most of the people organised in this Council as Apoist. We want to protect and highlight the rights of the youth, and organise to fight back against the oppression that the nation states inflict upon the youth as a group or as a class. The role of this Council is to also fight against the nation states' mentality. We want to take back our history as youth, and oppose all the states that are trying to oppress the youth, or that are trying to take away our identity.

Why is it important for the youth to come together and to organise?

In the philosophy and the thoughts of Rêber Apo it is put best. For example, when he says that society has been torn apart by disconnecting the youth and women from society and destroying their identities. And so those are identities which are both the driving force of this revolution and also the driving force of society. Also, Rêber Apo says that 'we started our movement with the youth and we will succeed with the youth.' Therefore, as a

¹⁰ Following, supporting, and/or organising according to the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan. Apo is the short version of Abdullah.

youth movement, we want to focus on the youth as a force, and as women and youth together, we are the revolutionary force in this society, since a free society is not possible without those two social groups living freely. This is why it is important to come together.

I understand the Council in itself as a democratic coming-together of different groups, which is an Apoist idea, if I am not mistaken. Do you notice a change of thinking and approaching life in groups within the Council that are not Apoist, having different ideological backgrounds, and are now more interested in Apoist ideology through the exchange and common works?

Of course, this happens to an extent; other groups with ideological differences become influenced, but it is important to understand how it happens. We have to see that the common youth identity is stronger than the other political identities. In this Council, our identities as youth and as young women have been seen clearly, and people are convinced by this. So, no matter which ideological background a person has, the youth identity guides above all our educations, our discussions, our actions, and it is an identity that brings us, as youth, more strongly together than the different parties or the different movements from which we're coming. And of course the analysis of the social identity of the youth comes from the philosophy of Rêber Apo. He said that this identity has been here for thousands of years, and is now re-emerging, is getting clarified, is getting discussed, and is put in practice. So, our goal is to bring all those divided youth movements together again, to once more discuss together, self-educate each other, and to see how we can put that unity into practice, and of course stand against the enemy's attacks on our people and our movement.

Some people, who are, for example, 16 or 17 now, grew up in the revolution here. Do you see a shift or a change in young people? If so, what kind of change?

Of course, there are a lot of differences. Before this revolution, you could see how the influence of the regime resulted in completely broken personalities, where people as women or as youth were always belittled and looked at from above, as people with poor understanding, people that you need to explain things to. In the end, it was a period, we can say, when it was attempted to put the lives of the youth into cages. Now, we can see changes in the way young people work, in the most important areas, how they see themselves, how they move, how they take public space, how they organise their work in society. This is of course where we can see a major difference from how it was before.

But of course all that is only possible because the biggest change is that of mentality. Like, how the youth thinks and how they play their roles and see themselves as both individuals and as a movement. The most important aspect is that they know themselves now, they are much more self-confident, they have much more willingness to play their role; and of course in this revolution the youth plays a major role. Whether it's in the military, in ideology, or in society, it has been the youth and the young women's movement that have been taking a leading role. So, what it also shows is that once the youth and women are organised, the influence of the enemies from all sides is not persuading or intimidating them any more. They are not afraid to speak up, and to put into practice, that they are fighting for an equal, democratic, and ethical society.

I want to give an example of how you can see the change upon the youth. Just before you arrived, a group of young people from the Arab community, who are studying in the regime's schools, came

here. And they came to us after seeing our different youth movements; seeing how they live, how they discuss, how they move, realising and saying that they do not see and learn these aspects in the regime's schools, and that the regime's oppression continues the way it used to be. So they came to discuss and to see how we can work together and whether they can be part of an education. And then we gave them some books to read, and told them that there will be, of course, educations when the situation changes, and that we would be really happy to have those discussions together. This is one of the most clear signs of a change of mentality, and proves that our work is going well because we are not only going to the youth, but the youth is also coming to us.

This sounds great. Thank you. Is there anything you would like to add?

I would like to make a call, as we usually make it in our Council. A message to the youth. Our call is addressed to all the different areas in Syria, and also outside of Syria, to all the youth: come and join our revolution against not just the fascist state but the fascist mentality that is widespread around the world. Rise up against the states embodying this mentality. Come to know yourselves, join us in the revolutionary struggle, work with us, because our revolutionary struggle is a common one.

And to all the states of the world, "you should know that today exists a force, a revolutionary youth, that has been built by the youth and young women themselves in North-East Syria, and none of you [states] will be able to break our will, our strength, and our resistance."



The Syrian Regime's aim was always to connect the student with the state, while in our education we are trying to connect the student with society.

Sihan Daoud, Education Committee in Dêrik

Can you please introduce yourself and your work?

My name is [Mamoste] Sihan Daoud. I am the representative of the education committee of the city of Dêrik. I joined this work in 2017. I love my work. When this revolution started, my work was in the educational field. It's a really good and sacred work. Through our work, we want our teachers and our students to change their mentality. We want to build free humans with a strong will. We want to work on and overcome the problematic and wrong consciousness built up by the education of the state. We also want to change the method of teaching and of pedagogy that the state created here. And we want to also reconnect the human with nature. We want, finally, to reconnect the human with society, because the big transformations start with the change of one person, and by changing the personality you change also the society.

How has the teaching changed? Could you give some examples, too?

When we look at the old system of the [Syrian] Regime, before the revolution, we can see that the work of teachers was to only give classes, and there was a really scientific way of teaching, and not a close connection with and orientation towards society. Students were only educated in a limited and divisive way, of what is important to the state and not in close connection with and orientation towards society. The aim was always to connect the

student with the state, while in our way of teaching we are trying to connect the student with society. So, our aim is to change this dynamic, and I can give you some examples.

What we teach is what we live, which is also love, in order for students to love their education, love their school, taking responsibilities and care of each other, also in relation to everything connected with the education. So how do they love the school and their education? For instance, they clean their own school, in a self-administrated way. There is also strong comradeship between teachers and students and among students themselves; this is something that we have to underline: Comradeship is also at the core of the relationship between teachers and students; and not just relationships that we know from elsewhere where teachers are only with teachers, and students just with students. And of course, we are really focusing on pushing forward the ethics upon which our revolution in Rojava and North-East Syria has been built. Hence, on regaining and further building upon the societal ethics that have been lost.

That's really interesting. How do you strengthen the relationship between teachers and students? You know, for me in school, there was always a big distance between teacher and student, and mostly not a great relationship. How do you build that?

Here, we want to build up everything together. We have to see that teachers and students spend most of their time together; sometimes students spend more time with the teacher than at their homes, and so we see in the teacher the person responsible for building up this comradeship. The teacher is the solution, and they have to build an equal relationships between themselves and the students by dissolving the classical distant teacher-student relationship. And

this is built by genuine love and comradeship. To give you examples, we really focus on the personality of our teachers, on humility, on being sensible, on making an effort, and changing themselves. Then the students see that their teacher is giving effort and not simply a lesson. The aim is to show in an exemplary way an ability to adapt, a willingness to develop their personality in order to become better teachers and humans through which the students also develop themselves.

I assume the subjects have changed to before? What are the subjects, and are they different?

A lot of things have been changed, like there are two subjects that have been added to the programme. Actually they replaced one of the Syrian Regime's subjects, which they called national education. Today, they have been replaced by culture and ethics, and the science of society. The national education programme was a programme that used to deny social identities, and always tried to create a national subject loyal to the state. It really insisted on Arabism, on the ruling family; it was an assimilation machine. And, of course, Kurdish history was completely absent. So what we are doing in those two subjects is to tell history that is not built on the history of division, or on genocides, like the Regime's insistence on one country, one flag, one religion; the Regime's way is something that we reject. And of course our education aims to teach something really important which is the respect of diversity; so concerning different religions, concerning different nations, concerning different societies. Like, today in the history course, we teach the story of all the nations of Rojava, whether the Arab nation, the Kurdish nation, or the Syriac nation, and also of religions, whether Christian history or Muslim history, for example; it concerns and relates to all people living here.

So what we want to build is an understanding – through explaining to our students – that peace means that all nations, that all people, and that all religions can live in society together in a dignified and respectful way; that it's not something impossible.

Can the fruits of these teachings already be seen? Does it show itself in society, or in how the students relate to each other?

Our objective of changing the current dominant mentality cannot be achieved in only a few years. It's not so easy to change it. But of course, we hope and we insist that through our work this mentality will have changed in the future.

And as of now, we can see a lot of developments in our teachers and our students. However, can we say that 100% of everything that we are teaching has been incorporated and understood? No. But since the beginning of the revolution, you can see constant progress, much more conviviality, and improvement of relations towards others and within society, including also improvements in relation to religious and national diversities.

So, we have two fronts in this revolution, we have the one revolution that you can solve militarily, like for instance the struggle against Daesh, or the struggle against the invasion of Rojava, and there is also the revolution that we are building from within, which is this front line, working towards changing the previously destructive mentality.

Do you think the biggest challenge are religious and ethnic divisions you are seeing in changing the mentality?

Within schools, in particular, we can say that religious conflicts or national conflicts are not that big of an issue and not really a concern any more. We are in city, for example, where approximately 90% Muslims and 10% Christians and other

religions are living together, but this is not a big problem. This applies also similarly with regards to the topic of Kurdish identity; we believe that we have overcome the problems that were related with that in the past.

But, in general, we have to take into consideration that most problems do not come from the students, but they are coming from the teachers, because we, myself also, are the product of Regime education. And this is something we have always to be aware of, so as to not fall back into some reflexes. So, the main problem that we have is to change the mentality of the teachers who had been raised and educated within the system of the Regime for a long time. And this is also why we take sometimes more time to educate our teachers than our students.

With regards to our students and the education on nations and religion, we can say, first of all, that all students have an education on religion, but not as religious education but on what a religion is. For them to be able to understand what is the other religion, but also what is their religion, too, and what is the relationship between them. And, second of all, not only the characteristics of other religions, but also the characteristics of other nations. In order to not let others instrumentalise those subjects. So, we educate our students on the principles of peace and equality between those different parts of their identities and the society they live in.

Thank you, that was really interesting. Is there anything else, you would like to say?

I would like to say something to the governments: we hope that you will stop blinding yourselves when it comes to the Turkish invasion on and the occupation of Rojava. What is happening right now is the massacre of our population. And the peace that we built

here, we will defend it as we have been doing. But it would be good if the governments stopped helping those who massacre us. We call onto the governments to have some conscience and be aware of what is happening. This is my message for governments.



Women played the vanguard role historically, and have been continuing to do so in this revolution today

Viyan Cudi, Teacher and Researcher at the Centre for Research on the Kurdish Language in Qamişlo

Can you introduce yourself and your work?

My name is Viyan, and I am 26 years old. I'm from the city of Dêrik, and I'm a teacher. But right now, I'm also the co-responsible of the Centre for Research cent on the Kurdish language, which is based in Qamişlo.

When did you first get involved in researching and preserving the Kurdish language?

When I was 12 years old I already started to teach. I was a student at school, but I was also teaching on the side. This was before the revolution. At that time, I was in Damascus, the capital of Syria. I was just teaching the alphabet to other people. After the revolution had taken place here, I opened a language centre. And in all those years of teaching, I saw the problems, the developments, why we should put more effort, what the contradictions were, while at the same time also taking up a lot of other works. I have been a teacher, I was also co-responsible of centres, I was also a member of other committees, but this committee of research for the Kurdish language, I joined three months ago. The research we are doing here is essential for teaching. The research is the base of teaching, and this is how we are developing our work and also our knowledge of Kurdish language.

What exactly are you researching? I've never seen a language research centre, I have no idea what goes on. What is the everyday work? Can you name some examples?

The Centre for Research on the Kurdish language works on producing the materials for learning Kurdish, but here, we also conduct research on the language. How does it look like in practice, for example: The books that are used in schools, in universities, as materials for teaching and learning are produced by this centre. At the same time, we are also working on a complete dictionary in Kurdish language. As you know, because of different states forbidding the Kurdish language, the Kurdish language has never been an official language, which led to difficulties of having a standard Kurdish language. So right now we are working on different dialects. As you know, the Kurdish language has a lot of dialects and sub-dialects, so right now we are working on the dialects of the Kurmancî language. What are the meanings of a word, how has it been used, from where does it come from, is it a Kurdish word, is it not one, from which region does it come etc. So, we work on etymology but also on the real meaning of words, and also the Kurdish word for a lot of words that are used in other languages. So, with this in mind, we produce material not just for schools but also for television and in other areas that touch the Kurdish language more generally. One of our current objectives is to also make a website about the history of the Kurdish language, where the meaning of words can be found, so that Kurds anywhere can have access to it in order to be able to educate themselves. This is also important because there are a lot of difficulties when it comes to Kurdish writing, including a lot of wrong ways of writing Kurdish. Since there is not one standardised Kurdish language, we attempt to work on this in this centre. Of course, these works would not be possible without this ongoing revolution. This

revolution gave us the opportunity of opening this centre and to make research on our language and also to develop it further.

How do you establish these standards in Kurdish language?

In our science and research of the languages, we are founding it onto these 5 tools and bases:

- Koknasî [the root and history of words; etymology]
- Şêwenasî [the structure of words, how are they formed; morphology]
- Watenasî [the meaning of words, signification]
- Ferhengnasî [the knowledge, analysis of words through and compilation of dictionaries; lexicology]
- Dengnasî [the sound and pronunciation of words; phonology]

So, these are the tools that we use to find out more about language; to be able to know the words of how and why they are formed the way they are, their meaning and usage, where they come from, and how they sound. Let's give an example by understanding the interplay between Şêwenasî [morphology] and Koknasî [etymology]. So, for instance, if we take the English word *pen*, which is in Kurmancî *pênûs*. Nûs is the Sorani [another Kurdish dialect] word for writing, so we know it has a Kurdish origin.

And through understanding how a word is formed, we can find the origins of where it is coming from. And there are a lot of factors that play a role. Such as the geography from where those words come from, the history of the peoples, if the peoples are from different places etc. We are, of course, interested to see how those words have been shaped through time; so, the history of the words is also something that we take into consideration in our work. And we know there had also been the influence of the Semitic languages onto Kurdish languages (which are Aryan languages)

that we can find especially with the Arabic incorporation in our daily Kurdish life. For instance, there is the word *kanûn*, which is the word for the month December, which has clear Semitic roots. Of course, this work is not just made by us. There are a lot of research centres in North Kurdistan, in South Kurdistan, in Paris, in Germany, for example, and we try to put and bring all those works and all the results of our researchers together, discussing the different understandings and coming to an agreement with the ultimate goal of being able to have a more common approach towards Kurdish language(s).

So, this revolution is primarily a women's revolution, isn't it? In Europe, to speak briefly about my experience, language has changed a lot in the last ten years since gender has become more of a topic. Are there any parallels here? Is language affected by patriarchal culture? Is this something you are looking at?

Of course, in our field of study and in our work, we try to look at all aspects of language, which includes the influences onto society; looking at gender, class, and other different influences in society. So, how is language influencing and also influenced by society. Of course, every language has its specificities, and we have to underline also the role in our Kurdish language, and in Kurdistan that women are the first teachers of children. There is a lot of things that children learn from women before they go to schools or somewhere else. And also since Kurdish language has never been an official one, this language survived because of the woman. Through songs, stories, lessons etc., the woman managed to continue this language, also being able to protect it in this way, too. After all, there have been a series of attempts to eliminate this language. Therefore, over 1000 years at least by teaching children,

in particular, and Kurdish in the houses, Kurdish languages were continued and defended by women, showing also the gendered connection to Kurdish language, which is mainly linked with the woman.

But of course, we need to ask ourselves how much was it practised in the house? In the end, there was also an immense influence of the state and the male-dominated mentality. Even if it wasn't everywhere, the state and the male-dominated mentality could reproduce itself into this language. Therefore, there are a lot of things that were really normal before the revolution that are really shameful right now concerning how we use the Kurdish language. For instance, it was totally normal before and at times even today, to use the work *pîrek* for a married women, which is for women that got married. However, it seems like its meaning in its origins is 'witch' and a 'person subordinated to a man'. After the revolution, of course, there was 'hevjin' that has been used usually, which is coming from 'hevala/hevalê jiyanê' – like a companion in life. With the example of *pîrek*, we can clearly see the patriarchal mindset that always wanted to portray the woman as subordinate, not giving the real meaning of women [jin] in Kurdish, which means life [jiyan], as well.

I can also give other examples about words that were used to belittle women. So before, when the woman was not married, you used to call her *keçik* which means girl. And you know, by calling women like this, they were always not taken seriously. The ending 'ik' in Kurmancî is a diminutive form to make something or somebody small, to be belittled. This is similar with the word *jin* for woman in Kurmancî, there is also a version of the word with the same 'ik' ending, making it *jinik* to make a woman smaller than she is. In this sense not taking her as a subject, but to refer to her

always as ‘something’ small, and treating her in a subordinated way.

Overall, in all aspects, we see that a lot of work has been done, especially by men, to keep up the patriarchal system. Take for instance, also the word we use for ‘shopkeeper’ here, namely *firincî*, by which we usually associate a man; if it was a woman doing the work, it used to be something really shameful, but after the revolution this has changed. So the process of changing has begun, maybe not in terms of changing the name, but women were in practice increasingly taking their place in all the fields of society, for instance as shopkeepers, as well as different works. If we look at the area of teaching, for example, today 98% of teachers in Rojava are women. There are just 2% of teachers that are men. Therefore, you can also see the influence of women onto children with regards to the language in the education here; with regards to being aware of how and which words are used, and also on the way of educating and teaching. Women are continuing to take their role in the teaching field, and in all areas of society. Also, in the field of education for Kurdish language. We can say that the woman played really the vanguard role historically, and has been continuing to do so in this revolution today until now.

Thank you very much!



The focus lies fundamentally in finding a solution through reconciliation

Yohannes Hanna, (Alternative) Judicial System in Derîk

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Yohannes Hanna and my father's name is Aissa. I was born in this village here called Jisr, near Derîk, in 1962. I started to study, but did not finish and worked within agriculture until the start of the 'events' in this region in 2011/2012. I am Syriac and came to this [Kurdish Freedom] movement. This movement has been based on the philosophy and thoughts of Abdullah Öcalan, and I found my place with my identity as a Syriac in this movement. This movement says: come with your identity, with your clothes, your profession; it is not only for one kind of people, or for just one nation.

When was your first contact with the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan and the movement?

I read a lot of books, going really deep into the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, whom I saw in Lebanon, in the village of Anjar [in the Bekaa Valley], in 1992. I studied his writings since he has been in prison, too.

How did you end up seeing Abdullah Öcalan?

I was in Beirut and I was told that Abdullah Öcalan was in Anjar, so I did spend around 2000 Lebanese Lira [Pounds] at that time on traveling just to see him, but I did not really have a chance to speak to him. When I arrived, he was speaking with people for around 30 minutes, and then he left. His thoughts have really inspired me because I found a lot of similarities with the gospel. All of his

philosophy is for me very close to the holy book for us Syriac Christians, and he can be put on the same level of significance like many other politicians, such as Gandhi, for example, whose political ideas are also very similar to the Christian faith.

What are the most important similarities for you, having the most impact, that connect the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan with other political figures?

How to live with others! Whoever the ‘other’ is, if they are black or white, or from another religion, or another ethnicity; the ‘other’ is another human being. So, it is a fundamentally humanist approach. It is also the philosophy of true democracy and the siblinghood of the people. This is the only solution for the Middle East, and in this sense the philosophy behind what’s practised here in Rojava which can also be an example for the whole world.

So, already before the beginning of the revolution in 2012, you did study Abdullah Öcalan and his thoughts. Were you able to express thoughts openly before the revolution?

Before 2012, you could only say God and the Ba’ath [Party], or God and Bashar [al-Assad]. Today, of course, there is much more freedom of expression. Not only freedom of thought and political expression, but also freedom of religion. Before, the Syrian state would not let you live your religion, nowadays it is also for Kurds, for example, not a problem to become Christians, but before it was not really possible. If it was not the state that was putting pressure on you, then they would encourage some segments of the society to put pressure on you and the state would turn a blind eye to whatever happens, including the killings of people.

As far as I understand, your role is to be a mediator/judge. Can you explain the beginning of this alternative judicial system that you have been part of building up here, too?

In Spring of 2012, together with a friend who fell Şehid since then, we decided to build this judicial system because there was a void. The state was gone, and there was a void to fill. In the beginning, we did not have the means for a proper judicial procedure, neither at the first level of reconciliation, nor at the second level¹¹. There was nothing, no salaries for anyone, no proper infrastructure, we did not even have chairs or folders etc. Everything had to be made from scratch. As there had been no means in the beginning, but given that there was the need for a judicial system, we did use our personal money to start with this alternative judicial system here, too.

At that time, we were at the vegetable market, we had just two rooms. Later we went to the another place where the Asayîş [Internal Security Forces] are situated today. At that place, we had a room for the first reconciliation and for appeals, and also a few other rooms. Today, we have a judicial building where we have enough room for all the procedures.

Can you explain how this judicial system works; what is the approach?

Regarding our paradigm, you never only have one judge. You have committees of 3, 5, or 7 people. I am a member of the executive committee of the judicial system here [in Dêrik]. We have to understand this as an alternative to the sort of classical judicial system, In the beginning, you have the reconciliation committees in the communes, and in all social structures.

11 The different levels of reconciliation, as alternative dispute resolutions, are explained further below, starting with the next question.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM IN ROJAVA



Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)

A Corporate Watch diagram, based on the work of Erkan Aytağa in *Revolution in Rojava* (Pluto Press)

Table: Democratic Confederalism in Rojava¹²

So, how do reconciliation committees work? Let's say, you have one person that has a debt. The person arrives to the court and says "I want to solve my problem". We say 'no, this is not the right place in the beginning. Please go first to the reconciliation

12 This diagram was adjusted with the new name for the region, namely the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). [An earlier version of the diagram by corporate watch included the name Democratic Federation of Northern Syria; a name not in use since 6th September 2018, being replaced by AANES].

committee in the commune¹³ which will try to find a solution, that can be accepted by both parties'. For example, one person owes another one million [Syrian pounds]. The committee will analyse the situation, given the material realities of the people involved, and they will propose a plan. For example, let's say a plan where the one person gives the other 100,000 [Syrian Pounds] every month. If this is accepted, the committee will send a report to the executive committee, which will then ask again both parties involved if this decision is accepted. If the people involved say 'yes', they will have to sign a paper that will prove that there was a consensus between these two people. If this is violated, then the executive committee will send a notice to fulfill the agreement within 5 days. If this does not happen, both people involved will be called and the situation will be discussed with them, where it is possible to agree upon or impose, for example, expropriation of property, or in case of severe crimes, and offenses, that I will get into in a bit, also incarceration.

For severe crimes, there's also a more classical judicial system. For example, if we have a robbery or a murder, the person who committed the crime will, of course, go to court, where there is prosecution, with the internal security forces [Asayîş] usually present. But there is also something here we have to mention that

13 If a problem cannot be solved at the communal level within reconciliation committees, the case then usually goes to the Peace and Consensus Committee at the neighbourhood level, where reconciliation is still the primary goal. Peace and Consensus Committees cannot imprison people (see Kakaee 2020* for a good overview of the structure and principles of restorative and transformative justice in Rojava that this interview deals with).

*Kakaee, Miran. 2020. "Democratic Federalist Approaches to Addressing Patriarchal Violence within the Justice System." *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, April, 23–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2020.1751222>.

differs to a lot of other judicial systems: All the statements of the accused person are reviewed in detail with the prosecutor to make sure that there was no pressure put on the accused person. That the person was, for example, not beaten, not tortured, or that no other violence and pressure was put onto the person when making statements and so on. Only after that, it goes to the first instance of the court. It is important to see this procedure of double checking the statements of the accused people here. To add to this, if there is a case that any of the people involved, such as the accused, or the accuser, are from the same town or village in North-East Syria as the judge, the judge will withdraw due to the possibility of bias, and another judge will be found.

What kind of problems do you encounter the most?

The problem we see most in our daily works, especially in this region in Kurdistan which is in the triangle of 3 nation-states [Syria, Iraq, Turkey], is the problem with big traders, for example smugglers that are trading cigarettes on the borders with South Kurdistan, (Northern) Iraq. We are speaking here of numbers that are at times around half million US-Dollars. At other times, problems can also be the result of bad calculations or ambitions for big projects, or factories that fail; then money has to be paid back to the people that gave you money. These kind of cases are the ones I am seeing the most, and have to deal with the most.

How does somebody become a member of the justice commission?

This has happened throughout in different ways. In the beginning, we did just fill the gap, but one year later, there were elections here in Dêrik. Unfortunately, not all people of Dêrik came. It was a little bit like an Athenian democracy, in the way that whoever wants to

come comes. There were many social figures present, including tribal leaders, but everybody could come and vote. One could introduce oneself, and tell from which village one is from, and even if the person did not have a diploma, but thought and convinced others that they can do the works, one could have been elected. The election took place by raising hands in a room or in a bigger hall, such as a theatre hall. So people from the different communes and neighbourhood councils, are coming together in the city council.

But, the procedure of suggesting oneself and being voted for has changed. If you want to become member of the justice commission, you have to apply to the Legislative Council, within the structures of democratic confederalism. They will then check your motivations, skills etc. Before it was just the population in the city council deciding, but while the justice commission is still voted for by the population, the Legislative Council has to approve the nominees beforehand.

Just to clarify things regarding the justice commission, every commission that has, for example three members, has to have at least one woman as a member; if there 5 members at least 2 women, and in case of 7 members at least 3 women.

Also a bit more on the different procedures. If somebody comes to the reconciliation committee usually the case will not arrive to court – excluded are severe crimes that we talked about earlier, such as murder that will be prosecuted by higher courts. Why does a case usually not arrive to a court? Cause the problem was able to be resolved in a more communal way beforehand, which is the fundamental goal of this alternative judicial system. But sometimes, there are unfortunately people that are not interested in reconciliation; they want to go to court straight away, demanding that the person who wronged the accuser is put in jail. To illustrate

with the example, we gave earlier. So, if a person is not paying one's owed debt in a 5 day period, they demand the accused to be put in jail. In many cases this way of dealing with things is used to put pressure upon people than to really go through with that demand. But there are cases where this demand is pushed in front of a judge. In those cases, there are also usually inspection committees to see whether everything has been tried, and a judge was not bribed. If irregularities in the procedure become clear to that inspection committee, then decisions can also be corrected.

If you get to the upper level of people's courts, where it may be decided whether someone is to be put in jail, the executive committee and judges will still focus on reconciliation, really trying everything to convince the two parties to find the most reasonable and in a way most honourable solution. Why does this make sense? For example, in the case of somebody having lost everything. If we put that person in jail, it will not help the accuser much, because they will not receive what they are being owed. But if a reconciliation is agreed upon, and if the person who wants the money agrees that the money can be paid back over a 10 years period, for example, this will be better for both, and nobody will get into jail. But sometimes, as we said before, the person who wants the money says: "No, I want the other person to pay, or to go to jail". Then, we can just put the accused for a maximum of 2 times for up to 90 days in jail; so, the maximum jail sentence – for non-severe cases, such as murder etc. – is 180 days in Rojava for cases that did not get resolved in the reconciliation committees and consensus procedures.

But jail is really only the last step, when everything else did not work. The focus lies fundamentally in finding a solution through reconciliation. Just to give another example, of what is often suggested and done to avoid the accused ending up in jail. If a

person owes money to someone else, but also has property, it is possible to expropriate parts of that property, such as a car for example, so that the debt can be settled. But no one can ever touch the house; unless, a person owns several houses. The house cannot be touched because the accused is not the only one affected by it, and it is not their house alone. The house is also the house of the wife or the children, for example, and why should they pay for the mistakes of their husband or father? So, other kind of properties could be expropriated, but not the house.

This is interesting; in the USA in 2008, around ten million people lost their houses, many ending up sick in the streets, in poverty.

Yes, that is true. Here, we try to find a solution based on reconciliation that works for everyone. In general, we can say it is more in the interest of people to find a solution through a reconciliation process, and to come up with finding a long-term plan together than to push for other people to go to jail in the short-run. If the accused goes to jail, there is nothing that the accuser will get out of it.

I understand, and it makes sense to have the focus on encouraging people to find a common solution.

Yes, totally. Look, I did never study law; my focus is social, and social relationships, of how to deal with and to build society. In our committees, we also have 'professional lawyers', so to say, but mainly for other things [such as severe cases], but our main focus is to always try to come back to reconciliation because it is the best for everyone. We have to deal with practical questions of life, taking into account different aspects. So, if a person made a mistake and lost someone else's money, one important question to

consider is for example, how is the family of the accused going to survive. That's why we also talk to the accuser a lot, trying to emphasise to always go through a reconciliation process, considering the different aspects, as well, instead of simply demanding to bring it to the people's court. In our approach, we always focus on society-building and on ethics. What if the accused is going to jail, then the accuser will not get any money back, but through reconciliation it is aimed to come to an agreement where at least a part will be paid back. At the same time by resolving the matter with a different underlying logic, like society-building and ethics and, for example, through a reconciliation, ties between families are not lost, which is important, especially, when living in the same city.

The most important thing is the logic, the idea behind a law, not the law itself. The law itself is instrumental, it is 'hard', in the sense that it can usually not be bend, and just a means to an end. We have to constantly remind ourselves and ask the question of why laws are made? To solve problems. The spirit of the law has to be put in practice more than the law itself, to put somebody in jail is not solving anything.

What is the spirit of the law?

The spirit is that people come to a reconciliation, in the sense of coming together to find a solution in the community, in society. For example, if a law somewhere says: When someones owes you 1.000.000, and it cannot be paid back, then the person is to be put in jail. But that is not a solution. In these cases the law is just a form of punishment but it does not bring about solutions. It is supposed to be something with a decisive aim of contributing to finding solutions.

A last question from my side: For you, as a Syriac, what is the essence of this self-administration, of this revolution?

Che Guevara used to say something along the lines that in many revolutions there are people doing the revolution and others benefiting from the work and efforts of the first ones, But what I have seen here in this revolution, in Rojava, is the importance of living and building up together as well as defending what has been built up together. These are two essential points I really insist on, building and defending together. Together means, for example, that you, as a Kurd, and me, as a Syriac, are finding their places in this revolution, working together without oppressing each other, or taking something away from each other. One may say with regards to level and size of this revolution that it is a relatively small place where we are living this revolutionary experience. But a lot of things are happening in this relatively small place with a revolutionary process and communal experience that also goes beyond this locality, where similar experiences and processes can be made.

Thank you a lot. Is there anything you would like to add?

Let me tell you something briefly about this village here. We are here around 7 to 8 kilometers from the border to 'Turkey' [North-Kurdistan, also known as Bakur; the part of Kurdistan occupied by Turkey]. When the war in October 2019 started, this village was also bombed in the middle of the night by Turkey. There is no frontline here, no military target. And they bombed this village, terrorising the people here, and killing my cousin, who was a shepherd, together with his 80 sheep around 500 meters from here. Another cousin of mine, who was with him, was also hit, and his leg has to be amputated. At another occasion, we can talk in more detail about how we see this invasion and this war, giving you also

our perspective of this war. What I can just briefly say is that what the Turkish invasion is doing it is following the way it was done during the Ottoman Empire. This invasion can, for example, also be seen as a preparation what happened in 1860 when Syriacs got massacred in the areas that are called Lebanon and Syria today. Before the genocides, there were around 70% Christians here, with all kinds of peoples living here together. In Syria, it was around 40% Christians. Where are these people now? If you go, for example to Brazil today, a lot of people fled there due to the Ottoman expansions here. It is important to see this in historical contexts, and to give you a parallel of what will happen to the peoples here as a result of Turkish invasions, that follow Ottoman aspirations, if nothing is done to stop this.



The extremist Islam is the one of the state, but the Islam of society is the one of Sufism

Şêx Mihemed El-Qadirî, Co-Chair for Religious Institutions in Rojava

Thanks for taking the time. Can you please introduce yourself?

My name is Şêx Mihemed El-Qadirî. I'm the Sheikh of the Tariqa [school/order of Sufism] of Qadirî. I'm also part of the *rêveberî* [administrative leading role; co-chair], one of the responsible persons, for the system of religious institutions in Rojava.

What are the religious institutions in Rojava?

At the beginning of our revolution in 2012, this work started – with me working in Amûdê – and developed through the work together in cities and villages amongst our three main religious groups, Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis. On 21st January 2014 [with ratifying the Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Efrîn, Jazira (Cizîrê), and Kobanê on 29th January 2019], the Democratic Autonomous Administration was founded, and chose me as the responsible of the committee of religions in the democratic autonomous system. I was the representative of the Muslim religion; there were also representatives for the Christian, and Yazidi religions. We worked for legitimate rights for all the religions to live freely their faith and their life, and as the three representatives, we gave a promise on this social contract. This social contract has been freely made, and respects the autonomy of all religions. We took the decision that there should be a separation between state and religion, between the administration and religion. And also another agreement has been made with and for the Yazidi people, because it is a religion and a belief which has

suffered a lot of oppression and difficulties. Here, a home for the Yazidis has been officially declared, and the Yazidi faith took its equal place in the system of democratic autonomy. Thus, a special point has been made on the Yazidi faith in this social contract, so that the Yazidi faith and all cultural practices should be practised as freely as Islam and Christianity. And here, we created a siblihood between the different faiths and religions. There is a centre especially for that in Qamişlo. Muslim, Yazidi, and Christian people work there together. The Union of Muslim religions was also built there at the same time. In order to defend the Muslim people, the mosques, and the *waqf* [land in Islamic law, usually without any profit-intent] of the Muslim faith. We want to reduce and weaken the influence of extremist Islam in our society. We built the Democratic Islam Academy, and a research centre on the faith. Through this centre, we intend to create published materials in a vision and with values that we also got from the writings of also our guiding person, namely Abdullah Öcalan. In short, the philosophy of Öcalan on religion is that we should be able live with the soul of all religions in our society, namely Islam, Christianity, Yazidism for our society. We cannot live Islam in the society as it was done with the old practices; but we can live it in our society, for example, in a Sufi way.

Can you explain that?

The extremist Islam is the one of the state, but the Islam of society is the one of Sufism. So, Sufism says that the land is for the people and religion is for God. Sufis don't accept that homelands are built with swords and bombs. For this, we see that it makes sense for our society to have the Sufi approach for all the three religions, for the Muslim one, for the Christian one, and for the Yazidi one. Sufism says that if you get close to your people with love, then you

are also getting close to God with love, that you should have the same approach with your people that you have with God. The Sufi approach, the philosophy of the respected Abdullah Öcalan, and the one of the autonomous self-administration, are really close to each other.

So, we have a project right now in the village of Tel Habash [close to the city of Amûdê] to develop and to make progress in religious thinking. We are trying to develop new opinions, new readings of the holy Quran, the gospel, the Meşhefa reş – which is like the holy book of the Yazidis –, and also the Torah of the Jewish people. We also accept and are really happy to welcome people without religion, and other-believers.

I want to say that we have to renew our life and to break the dogmas that are imprisoning our minds. What the respected Abdullah Öcalan says, is that we have to make a revolution today like the revolutions of 'Ibrâhîm [Abraham], Mûsâ [Moses], 'Îsâ [Jesus], Muḥammad against the dry thoughts inside the minds of believers and religious people.

Could you briefly explain how the work between you and the Kurdish Freedom Movement started?

In 1994, I was part of an Islamic committee in Europe, and there we met some members of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, and they were speaking about this approach of Democratic Islam. But then the [Syrian] Regime put a lot of pressure on us. And then we had to stop this work, and could not continue it. But when the revolution started, a representative of the Kurdistan National Congress [KNK, Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê] came to us and said that we should continue this work, that we should continue this research on Democratic Islam. But most of the people with whom we sat down, and had discussions on how to further

this research were Sufis; a lot of people close to Salafism and Wahhabism did not want to work with us, telling also others not to work with us. So, until now we have people in our society who are hard liners, extremists, following the Saudi line or the Qatari line like ISIS, and they are really against us. They don't want to hear about Democratic Islam.

Can you tell us more about this religious centre?

The religious centre is planned to be in Tel Habash. The project has started but we have not yet finished the construction of the centre. We prepared 1,250,000 Syrian pounds and put it into the project for the beginning of the construction, but we haven't finished because of the [war] situation, and the ongoing Turkish invasion. For the religious centre, the plan is to have three floors, the first floors will be for meetings, the second for study and research, and the third will be a guest house for people from all religions and nations to come together and to discuss religious thought. So the project is to give a space of discussion, of dialogues for all religions, and for all people that would like to come here.

What are the similarities or touching points between Democratic Confederalism and Sufism?

In the beginning, we can say that the philosophy of Apo [Abdullah Öcalan, intellectual pioneer behind Democratic Confederalism] is giving rights to everybody for a common life. Everybody is having freedom and rights, every nation, every language, every religion, especially focusing on the rights and freedom of women. And it's a common point with Sufism, saying that all people have rights in a common life together, all different languages, all different religions, all different nations through a personal link to God, and nobody should restrict this. This is very close to one another.

Rêber Apo [Abdullah Öcalan] is emphasising to build up Democratic Islam, which is in a way similar to what the prophet Muḥammad did in in the Charter of Medina. In the Medina Charter, at that time, Muslims, Jews, Christians, other-believers, and non-believers had the right to practise their religions in their common life together. These are the similarities and what's really close and special between and in the philosophy of Apo and of [Sufi] Islam.

Can you say a bit more about your activities as a teacher, please?

In Rojava, if you participate in an education of three days, or a month, or forty-five days etc., you have at least one or two days that are reserved for a seminar on religion. In these educations, you get also an overview on the interrelation of different areas, such as politics, economics, philosophy, religiosity, military, society etc. At least one or two days of 8 hours of these educations, I, for example, also teach on the philosophy of religion, the relationship between religion and society, on free thinking, on politics, on the discipline of security forces etc. to a lot different groups in Rojava. I give these seminars, for example, also to the high diplomatic responsables here, in order for them to know how to interact. Apart from high diplomatic responsables, many different other groups in society receive this religious education, including also the security forces, and people doing their military service.

Besides, when the road of Ayn Issa was still open, I used to go to Tabqa and Raqqa to give seminars on religious thinking, which is really important because in these predominantly Arab regions, there's been existing a hard-line extremist vision of religion, as well.

Apart from that, I also have a television programme on Ronahî TV and Rojava TV to speak about religion and faith, and I explain and speak about Democratic Islam, and the right ethics of Islam.

Of course, I don't work alone. There are a lot of comrades from the Union of Muslim religions [Yekitîya Oldarî Musilmana], and from the Congress for Democratic Societal Studies [Kongra Civaka Demokratik ya Lekolin], who also join these works.

We also focus a lot on women's rights and the women's movement. There is Waqfa Jina Azad [Free Women's Foundation], which exists throughout Rojava, and where also Muslim women are organised. So from every city, two or three women comrades work in Waqfa Jina Azad, coming together on the whole Rojava level. They have monthly meetings, which are autonomously organised, but we have relations and collaborations with them. For example, together with Waqfa Jina Azad, we work on religious matters in the Congress of Democratic Islam, in the academies of Democratic Islam, and in all the different places in the religious committee, such as in the city committees, and in the research centres, where the women comrades – organised freely and autonomously – give also seminars.

Thank you very much!



Heyva Sor isn't just health work. Heyva Sor is working for humans, for humanity

Shirin Ismahim Hamed, Nurse working at Heyva Sor

Can you introduce yourself and your role in this hospital?

My name is Shirin Ismahim Hamed, and I was born in 1997 in Til Temir. I started working at Heyva Sor in 2013. When this hospital was newly built here, I was responsible for the nurses. When there was an election within the hospital, I was also elected as the co-chair of this hospital, so I am now also responsible for all other areas, and also work in those areas myself, as well.

Why did you start working at Heyva Sor?

When the revolution started in 2011/2012, the standards of health work were in a very bad condition. Health-care was very bad and this is what motivated me to start working at Heyva Sor. Heyva Sor isn't just health work, it's also the work of attending to people in need, including refugees. For example, we drove to Şengal to take care of the refugees there, too. Work at Heyva Sor is working for humans, for humanity. There are a lot of Şehids in this revolution, and a lot of injured. I saw the necessity to choose between two types of work that I myself had a lot of motivation, a willingness, for, too. It was on the one hand military work, and on the other hand health work. In the end, I chose Heyva Sor.

How did the work and the organisation develop throughout the time of the revolution?

Heyva Sor evolved extremely in the last years. The organisation was built by only seven people. It was very small in the beginning, but progressed massively and especially incredibly fast. Also with

the help of different NGOs, that came since the war took place in front of the world's eyes. Today, we are at a point, where it's difficult for myself to understand how big the organisation got. There are Heyva Sor employees in every town. We have institutions everywhere. We took a place at every front line, and by now turned into a very big and important organisation in Rojava.

What makes Heyva Sor what it is, and why do so many people want to work here? Or, in other words, what's so special about our organisation? You can clearly see that every employee puts their heart and soul into it. Everyone wants to do something for the people, wants to help and be part of the revolution. That's the main reason why Heyva Sor could grow so fast.

One also needs to point out, that many workers of Heyva Sor had no medical education beforehand. I also didn't have any previous medical knowledge. Like me, many got accepted without any prior medical experience. Those with knowledge and experience taught others. We have constantly continued and improved our own and each others' education. Everyone joining our structures, first, undergoes a fundamental training. This is how we improved together and got to a high level.

What are the fundamental problems that Heyva Sor has had to deal with at the front due to the recent¹⁴ Turkish invasion?

We, as Heyva Sor, also suffered a lot over the past weeks because of the recent war. Some of our members have also been killed, injured, or kidnapped. Our problem doesn't really lie in the hospitals. We may also have some weak spots in the hospitals and in health care in general, but those aren't as determining. Over the

14 This interview took place at the end of 2019 and refers to the Turkish invasion that started on 9th October 2019, especially in Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî.

years, despite difficulties, we have built a good health-care system. But what is more important is that sometimes, we can't fulfill our tasks, and this is hurting us a lot. That we can't fulfill our tasks at the front line the way we want to. We have often been at the front line, that's where we work, as well. But, if, for example, injured people or dead bodies need to be retrieved, we often couldn't get there. We are helping everyone; it's not a question of whether that person is a civilian or from the military force, that doesn't make a difference to us. It is our job to save lives, and that's what we're trying to do as well as possible. We often get massive obstacles in our way due to the attacks. We have been shot at by tanks and drones; we have also been bombarded by planes. They're trying to put us in difficult situations, so that we can't do our work. Those we fight against are people without humanity, without ethics, they attack us, the medical workers. It affects us and pains us, when we can't do our work in the best possible way. The biggest problem is retrieving injured people from the front lines, and taking them to a hospital.

Were you in a situation where you were targeted, and if yes, can you describe the situation?

When we got attacked during the war in Serêkaniyê, I wasn't there. But when I was in Efrîn, our ambulance was shot at. At that time, when we drove to Efrîn, we were shot at on our way to Cindirês, which was a city at the front line. We were bombarded strategically. There was, for example, also a Heyva Sor Centre, that was bombarded. I can't remember for sure if it was by plane, but I think it was. Everything was very chaotic, and as we retrieved the injured people, planes dropped bombs directly next to us. Splinters flew through the air, onto the ambulance, as well – everything was

in uproar. The enemy knows if it is an ambulance or not; those in the planes can see it, and they are dropping bombs anyway.

When it comes to the war in Serêkaniyê, is there something you would like to add in the context of your work?

The war in Serêkaniyê was a difficult war. It was also a painful experience for everyone. Serêkaniyê is a big city with a big population. Lots of people died; friends, comrades, relatives, some of our co-workers, many people got killed. The inhabitants got displaced, and there was a lot of suffering everywhere. The displacement of people is also one of the main problems. People were turned into refugees. It is hard to put into words what has happened and what it means.

I'm urging every state, all aid organisations, and NGOs not to close their eyes when it comes to the truth, but to see it. People are getting displaced and killed – no one, not one single person on this planet should close their ears and their eyes to what has happened, and what is still going on. They should be willing to help, so that the situation calms down again, so that the people can go back to their cities and houses, so that no one will be displaced anymore.

For us, as Heyva Sor, the most painful was actually that we often couldn't help in the way we wanted to. That's why a lot of people died, too. It is really difficult to put into words everything that happened. But what we can say, as well, is that we won't give up Efrîn and Serêkaniyê. We still try that one day, every person can go back to their home, and as Heyva Sor we will do our share in this respect.

Have you ever treated an enemy, too?

Yes, that's quite normal. I myself treated jihadists who were injured south of Girê Spî in 2015, and also around 20 people in Raqqa.

How long do you want to continue this work?

I would continue with this work as long as I can do. I have been in these works for quite some time now, and it is also with the full support of my family, who all consider this work as really important. It is also a great work, a work for the people, being there to help our population, and I will do this as long as I can.

Thank you very much.



**This house has been open for people that need us,
and we are ready, with our hands and our soul, as
humans, as *welatparez*¹⁵, as Kurds to continue this
work for humanity**

Nuri Abu Bakr, Natural Healer from Qamişlo

Can you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about yourself?

My name is Mohammed Nuria, but I'm also known as Nuri Abu Bakr. I was born in Qamişlo in 1953. I can tell you a bit about my life. I studied 5 years in school. When studying, my family's economic situation worsened and we became poor. In 1964, I was in fourth grade, and I didn't know much about politics, but my family were supporters of Barzani back then. There was no Apoist movement at the time, and I wrote 'Long live Mustafa Barzani' on the school's board. There was no Asayîş [Internal Security Force of North and East Syria] or another people's defense force at that time. There was what we called the 'second office', which was like the intelligence service in Syria at that time. They asked me and others 'who wrote that?' Everybody just said 'some students'. But they said 'no, we want to know who it was'. Eventually, they came after me but I manage to escape.

Later, in 1981, I went to Libya, where I got to know the Kurdish Freedom Movement. I used to work as a construction worker at that time, working mainly with concrete, and at the same time I was doing all political works alongside that. Some neighbours without good intentions told the Libyan government about me,

15 Often translated as patriots, but Western conceptions and connotations do not suffice here; literally it means defenders of the land, which is a crucial understanding for oppressed people to defend themselves, to survive, and to potentially pose an alternative to oppressive systems.

saying that I was doing political work that was against the Libyan revolution, so I went to prison. But a friend, a comrade of mine, helped me out of prison. And in 1985, when I wanted to go back to Syria, I was arrested again at the airport in Libya. I had some books with me, including literature and also political writings, so they asked me ‘what are those books?’ I told them, I was a Turk and that I was against the oppression of my government. They asked whether I came to Libya for this, and I denied, saying there was other work to do here. The security forces at the airport then let me go. If they had known that I was Syrian I would have had more problems.

So, in 1985, I came back home. At home, there was also my brother, whose name was Mahmoud Abu Bakr; he is not alive anymore today. He was also working with me when I was in Libya, and he was already back in Qamişlo when I arrived. In 1986, we celebrated the Newroz celebration in Qamişlo. Of course, as you can imagine, it wasn’t accepted by the Syrian government and my brother was one of the organisers of this celebration. So, there was a lot of pressure put on my brother and on all of our family by the Syrian government.

But, what I would like to highlight is that you can see through our early involvement that the revolution was in the building for a long time, and it is not simply to be understood as something new that sprung about in 2011/2012. Our involvement and work in this movement dates back to the 80s; that’s when we got to know the movement. I have been three times responsible for the families of martyrs, and since the revolution we built up the institution here, as well. We together built the Şehidlik [the cemetery of martyrs]. Our work has never stopped, and in the beginning of the revolution, I was also involved in helping to build up the YPG-structures in Rojava.

It is also important for me to introduce myself as the father of three martyrs. Two of my daughters, Sarya Cudi, who was the older one, and Sarya Cudi, the younger one who took her older sister's name, fell in the defense of this revolution, as well as the son of my dead brother, whose name was Cudi, too, who I also always considered as our own son. So, I am the father of three martyrs.

Where did they fall?

So, Sariya Cudi fell in the Free Mountains of Kurdistan, in Gabar, in 2009, and the younger Sariya fell also in the mountains, in Qandil, in 2016. My son Cudi fell during the liberation of Minbic in the ranks of the YPG in 2016.

We can say that since we are in the works, since 1981, our main enemy, the Turkish state, has not changed a bit. This enemy with a clear Ottoman expansionist mindset that is embodied in the person of Erdogan knows that in order to expand their neo-Ottoman control, they need to eliminate the Kurds, and they try everything to do so. But they are not succeeding in getting rid of us. The protectors of this region and the ones finding and proposing solutions that lead to the peaceful living amongst peoples are the Kurdish peoples and the Kurdish Freedom Movement today, that manage to go against neo-Ottoman expansion.

As I have said before, I was imprisoned 2 times in Libya; overall, I was imprisoned 5 times in my life, the other three times in this region of Western Kurdistan during Syrian Regime's rule. I was still imprisoned by the Regime at the time when the Rojava revolution happened. I have dedicated my life to this revolution. And I have to say that we as Kurds, we are proud to be Kurds, and whatever will happen, we will continue to claim our identity. We got betrayed as Kurds, amongst other, around 100 years ago, in 1923, when our house and the land got sold off. But we as a

peoples have ever since still survived, even though they wanted to finish us off with all their oppression, they have not and they will not manage to finish us.

And today, we are living in a time when nation states like the USA, Russia, and different powers like NATO in general, think they can buy and sell us off like on an international market. That's also why we say that World War 3 has also arrived and is being waged in Rojava at the moment. It is a war of those without honour and the ones with honour, I would say. Those without honour do not follow any principles; no humanity, no ethics, but they only follow their own interests. Nation states think they can sell and buy other peoples on this international market. And we are waging a war with honour, with principles, and with ethics for the interest of the peoples, against this dishonourable approach.

Can you tell us about your work, how you started as a medical worker, and what your approach is?

Concerning the work I am doing, I learned it from my brother, whom I mentioned before, Mahmoud Abu Bakr, who was well-known in Qamişlo. He was somebody with a lot of skills and knowledge. For example, he knew a lot about religions, was himself a religious person. He was also very knowledgeable in politics and involved himself in political matters. He also wrote a lot, including poems, and he was a doctor. There was one thing that he really did not know how to do well and that was economy and finance. Like when it came to calculus or to money, for example, he wasn't really good at that. I learned a lot from him, especially the medical knowledge. There is a hand-written book of his that is with his children, but they are not continuing this work. I'm continuing this work.

This medical work and the medicine used is based on herbs and on natural products. We call it Kurdish medicine. It's been a science that has been practised for hundreds of years, and this medicine is made for each case on a case-by-case basis. We make it for free if we have the ingredients and nothing else is needed, but at times there may be a lot of things to get, then we talk to the person to buy the things in order for us to make the medicine. I can give you an example, one time a wounded friend arrived with horrible headaches, that did not go away, and everyone was telling him that he needs to go to Europe, so a solution can be found for him to get better. But he said that he did not want to go, that he wanted to be treated by me. So, I treated him. Some of the ingredients were spiced onions that you press until they become liquid, the yellow parts [yolk] of four eggs, and a bit of black cumin oil, all mixed together in a kind of paste that I put on his head until the next day. After that he never had this kind of headache again, as he told me.

Have you found someone to pass on the knowledge?

No, unfortunately not. At the moment, I'm just the one doing what my brother taught me.

Are there at times difficulties in getting herbs or the necessary ingredients in order to make the medicine?

Yes, there are at times a lot of difficulties in getting the ingredients that are needed, or to afford them. But what we do at times – which also relates to your previous question in passing on the knowledge – is to give people who arrive with certain problems or diseases a list of what to get. We give them the recipe – a recipe which has been tested and where the experience of others was positive, too – and instructions, and they then organise the ingredients themselves. So in that sense, I am also giving advice to the people, transmit

knowledge, and that knowledge is then of course also spreading in society because of the experiences and the practice of people, but education in a formal sense or so are not given to pass on the knowledge.

Why practise natural medicine instead of medicine you usually get taught at school, or ‘Western’ medicine?

Excuse me for saying this, but when you go with a sickness to a lot of students and doctors that studied seven years of medicine or so, and they try treating you, you may have got rid of that one sickness, but very often you go out with 15 other sicknesses as a result of so-called ‘modern medicine’. If we take antibiotics, for example, it may be good for the sickness you came with, but the side effects are usually very severe, and it is very bad for your stomach, which can lead to big problems in the long run, creating also a dependency on being treated, and checked upon the entire time with new things coming up, which is not really effective. The problem is also the standardisation of everything within that kind of medical approach.

Our medicine is focused on the sickness and the sick person. Sometimes, it doesn't have a quick effect but it's really regarding the problems the patient has and something that is not standardised, but accustomed to the different people, and has been practised on hundreds of people, amongst many generations over many, many years. We try to avoid any side effects, so the medicine we produce is focusing on the specific sickness, and it is not affecting other parts of the body in a negative way.

Do you only work on physical illnesses, or do psychological aspects also play a role?

Of course it is important to work on the psychological aspects, as well, because any sickness is also psychologically based. Sicknesses come from many different factors, and the physical and the psychological is connected, and so are psychological and physical sicknesses. For example, the food we eat with all those chemicals inside has an influence upon our psychological health, as well. Also, if a person's psychological health is not good, this also affects eating patterns, in eating more or less, which eventually has a negative impact on the physical and can destroy someone.

There are of course some problems, and sicknesses, that are coming through our blood and genetics. Diabetes is quite often like this, or some liver diseases that we come across. But even here, we have some natural treatments that can help. Once we came across a child who had asthma, and when they went to the hospital, the doctors said that oxygen treatment would be needed. It is important to assess all the different aspects. So we talk with the people coming to us, trying to understand the different realities, and changing living habits can help. So when having asthma, dust, humidity, wool from sheep blankets, or mattresses are not good for that person. Avoiding those things, for example, can already have a great impact upon your health and one's problems with asthma, for example, will get better. And there are some natural recipes that we have like some creams, drops, and oils we make, with which people have been treated for a long time and they work well against asthma without taking those kind of medicine with all those chemicals.

But in general, of course the psychological aspects of a sickness are also important to consider. If we, for example, look at the

feeling of fear. It gets people sick, as well, and can have a negative influence on one's physical body, resulting in some organs getting sick. So, in our work we always look at the interconnection between the psychological influence and the physical state, as well.

Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to add?

We thank you very much for coming. We were very happy having you here. As you know, our movement is for all humanity. We are here to help in whatever way we can help; this also includes being ready and doing whatever we can do for the health of the people.

This house is open for everyone. For those who believe we can help them, with the natural medicine we make, we welcome them. And if somebody does not believe in natural medicine, then we cannot really help them. I can just give an example also from myself, when I was really sick, having problems with my shoulder, I could not properly sleep for 10 months or so. I went to doctors and they could not help me, so I helped myself in a 'natural' way. I took the root of a specific tree. I cleaned the roots, broke them into small pieces, and put them on a tissue before putting it on my back and shoulders. It burned a lot, and people around me saw how it was burning and said after 30min that it was enough. But I insisted on having it overnight until it was supposed to be finished. In the morning then, I took it off, and after that I have never had problems with my shoulder again.

Once again, I want to repeat that we are ready if anything is needed, which also includes anything related to health. Of course, if there is something we cannot solve, or something I do not know, I will say so, and we find a solution together, but so far for most things people come to us we were able to find a natural treatment.

This house has been open for dozens of years for people that need us, and we are ready, with our hands and our soul, as humans, as *welatparez*, as Kurds to continue this work for humanity.



Support this Autonomous Administration, and this Revolution. Support, support, support!

Rashid Mohammed, Villager from Ain Diwar

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Rashid. First, I want to welcome you and thank you for coming, given the situation. I want to also condemn the Turkish invasion, and I hope that our voice will reach the international community. Shame on the international community, and especially on Trump and Erdogan; there is no difference between the two of them.

We welcome and also send our greetings to the youth movement. The youth protects us, and Rêber Apo [Abdullah Öcalan] is right when he says that we started with the youth and we will win with the youth.

Can you tell us a bit more about yourself, and also how you experienced the Turkish invasion?

I'm Rashid from Ain Diwar. I've been in Ain Diwar for 65 years. We condemn the Turkish invasion. We were there, when on 11th October [2019], at 11pm the bombardment started and more than 25 projectiles fell onto Ain Diwar. We were at home, we went a little bit outside and heard that the bombardment had started. I was a shopkeeper of this now destroyed shop that you see behind me here. All the economy of my family was built upon this shop you see today. I had all my furniture here – there was also a part that was the depot where I used to stock the goods that I was selling –, and everything burned down due to the Turkish bombardment.

Did you stay here during the bombardment, or did you leave Ain Diwar?

When the bombardment started, we left the house straight away because there was fire and projectiles were falling around and in Ain Diwar. And because of that we went to the city. After three or four days, we came back to our house.

What were your thoughts when you came back and saw the shop?

Like I said, when I came back everything that I had built was lost – and this is why I also started this interview by condemning this invasion, and say that we have to stop this invasion by all means. This is why I take this occasion, as well, to condemn the international community for its silence in face of those actions that made me lose so much spent work.

What is your perspective now? Are you thinking to rebuild the shop?

Of course, I would like to rebuild my shop, but I don't have the funds for it. To rebuild that and also the furniture that was inside you need at least 20,000 - 30,000 dollars. Where shall I get that kind of money from?

Do you feel safe here now?

No, of course not. I don't feel any safety, the bombardment can start here anytime again The war is continuing, for example, in Girê Spî, in Serêkaniye, in Til Temir etc; today, Til Temir is getting bombarded, and those are our people, those are our siblings, those are our cousins, so how could we feel any safety? Right now, just here they [the Turkish state] have opened the wall, and its a clear sign and a clear message that they could constantly cross and start

an invasion again. So, no. We cannot live in a peaceful, relaxed way, we are always under pressure, we are always on our nerves, as from one minute to another this ferocious state, the Turkish state, can restart that war, and can come closer, entering our village.

Did they take out some pieces of the wall, is that correct? They opened it up?

Yes, they opened the wall. I can even show it to you on my cell phone, I took some pictures. The wall is open just in front of Ain Diwar and they are saying this was done for the patrol of Russia and Turkey that came from here and went out from here. But they could also open the wall in other places whenever they want and just invade Ain Diwar.

What does the project of Rojava, the autonomy of the self-administration mean to you?

We want this autonomy, and this support and protection of the Autonomous Administration of Rojava. This Autonomous Administration did not just protect us as the people of Rojava, but protected Europe, as well as well as the whole Middle East through the fight against Daesh for all those years. If this Autonomous Administration had not been here, Daesh could have hit Europe much more, as well as other people. So, this is why I repeat this to the international community: Stop selling weapons to the Turks who are attacking this Autonomous Administration, and help in this fight just like we protected you against Daesh.

Thank you. Very well said. Is there anything else you would like to say?

I also thank you, and once again we're really happy to have met you. You have to bring our voices to the whole world. Tell the whole world to support this Autonomous Administration, and this revolution. Support, support, support!



What impressed me and led me to join the SDF initially was their behaviour between each other and between them and the population. It was radically different from Daesh.

Member of Revolutionary Youth and former SDF Member from Minbic

Can you tell us about your life under Daesh and what you saw?

It was a really difficult experience. People were suffering and living in fear. You could not say anything that did not fit their opinion or mood. If you said something wrong you could die or spend unlimited time in custody.

A lot of our friends who lived nearby joined Daesh and began denouncing us. This was something really difficult to live through because you could see how people changed, how those you lived alongside with became accomplices of the oppressors.

Can you tell me about one of these friends?

I can give you an example. There was one friend from school. We spent all our school years together. When Daesh arrived, he became the *emir* [leader] responsible for recruitment. One day, I was in an internet café chatting with my aunt who lives outside Syria, and he tried to recruit me. I said to him: 'Leave me alone. You and your crazy ideas.' This cost me forty days in custody.

When they took me to the judge, the judge said there should be some witnesses, but the people in the internet café did not give testimony what the *emir* was accusing me of. But they did not release me, and all those who did not agree to act as witnesses were imprisoned and subject to torture and other violence. This is why many of the ones not agreeing with Daesh, including myself,

went, for example, to Turkey, Lebanon, Europe, to Germany etc. Some of us preferred to go to the Regime areas rather than living under Daesh rule.

Were you tortured in prison?

Yes. Most of the torture consisted of the *balenkgo*, which is a kind of hook pulling you up. People put your hands behind your back and then lift you from your hands with the *balenkgo*. Daesh would do this to make us confess to things we had not done. Anyway, we knew if we confessed that meant it would be the end for us, that they would just execute us. This is why we never confessed, and many times a week we were held like that for two hours.

Did you see any executions in prison?

Not just one, but a lot of people, and not just in prison. Every Friday there were between five and eight people executed on roundabouts, both women and men.

Did you witness this? Or did you avoid being there at that time?

I was not joining in, but if I made the mistake of passing by the roundabout on Fridays, they used to take me and others and make us stay and watch. So I avoided passing near those places on Fridays.

What else did you see at the roundabout?

They would also erect something like a cross and crucify people with their heads between their legs. They did this to terrorise the people, to create fear in the people, so that they would not rise up against them.

Were you thinking of resisting at that time? Or is that something that doesn't cross your mind, knowing the dangers involved?

There were people among the youth who wanted to take action against Daesh, but it was really difficult to get at them. There were actions when some youths would take their guns and go at night to find Daesh when they had left their post and execute them as an act of revenge. But it became more and more difficult.

What circumstances were you living in at the time? Were you living with your parents?

At that time, it was difficult to live with my parents because they were always living in fear, telling me 'don't go out,' 'be careful', 'don't do that'. I felt really contained. So I went to live with some of my relatives in the village, because there were far less Daesh patrols than in the city. They used to come, but not as much, while in the city they were permanently there.

How many people do you think ended up actively joining Daesh?

I don't have an exact number, but I would say 35 percent of the population.

Why did people join?

For a lot of them it was fear. In order to live and to protect themselves they used to join. Sometimes, people would join to settle personal disputes. For instance, if I had a problem with one guy, I could solve it under their political name. Others used to seek protection from them, saying 'I have a personal dispute, but if I join Daesh nobody will touch me.' A mix between fear, protection, and revenge.

What year did you leave Minbic?

It was really difficult to live under Daesh, and if I had the chance to sacrifice myself to eliminate some Daesh I would not have hesitated, but we had not had the means. So it was a family decision for me to leave. My parents said to me: ‘You have to leave because we will lose you, and in losing you they would kill us also’. Because I was a really tough person and was getting into a lot of conflicts and fights. Since my childhood, I could never accept anything that was forced upon me. So, with the help of a resistance network in Minbic, I went to Azaz in 2014 and then crossed to Turkey.

How long did you spend in Turkey?

I spent three and a half years in Turkey. It was really difficult. I had no relations, no relatives, no friends around me. I was by myself, alone. I was working in a glass factory and injured my hand. But as a Syrian, you have no social security, no health treatment, even when you are injured at work. You don’t have the right to work there officially. When I was injured my boss just threw me out of the job. I was subject to a lot of injuries and a lot of disrespectful behaviour, just like any Syrian worker experiences it in Turkey. Not just in the factory actually; any Syrian experiences this in Turkey. And every week there were two or three Syrians getting killed in Turkey. But legally they don’t ‘exist’, so nobody knows or cares about them.

Why did you decide to come back to Syria?

Minbic was liberated – this was the first factor. I also wanted to see my parents, because I started to lose hope to ever see my home again. And seeing my parents still alive was something completely

unrealistic in my mind. I was completely losing hope. But Minbic was liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces, and for this reason I wanted to join the forces that were coming to liberate my people and my land from the oppression I had left from.

What were your impressions of seeing the YPG/YPJ liberate Minbic?

When I arrived in Minbic, it had been liberated six months before, more or less. What really impressed me and led me to join the Syrian Democratic Forces, too, was their behaviour between each other and between them and the population. It was radically different from the behaviour of Daesh. But it wasn't just their behaviour. There were so many forces in Syria, but I saw them as the only serious force fighting against Daesh. There was the Free Syrian Army, there were the Regime Forces, and even though the Regime was supported by so many states and had great military ability, they were not fighting against Daesh. In the Syrian Democratic Forces I saw the means to take revenge for the friends that I had lost, who were killed by Daesh in those years. So, I joined. My first deployment was in the villages around Tabqa, and after this I went home.

I went home because at the time we did not have an ideological motivation to join QSD¹⁶ (*Quwwāt Sūriyā al-Dīmuqrāṭīya*). It was initially a means to take revenge against Daesh for all the torture, all the executions, all the oppression that our people lived through, but what were our goals? What were we building? It wasn't really clear to some us, since we just wanted to take revenge in the beginning. We did not have an ideological education, we did not know the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan at that time. But after a short time, the youth proposed to run a short ideological education

16 The local abbreviation for SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces).

of more or less 22 days. I got to know the Kurdish Freedom Movement through this education. How it works, what the objectives are, what the project is we are building here. It was then that I found my place in this movement, being then part of the self-defence structure of the Revolutionary Youth.

Whilst I was in Minbic, we heard more and more about the attacks on Kobanê, so I wanted to go there. The comrades said they could not send me there. But I gave them an ultimatum, and said either you send me there or I go there by myself. Today, we are in Kobanê with the same revolutionary structure, defending the revolution.

Thank you very much!



**It is important that we, especially as young women
– we, as the youth –, protect and defend our
people, and are present in all areas**

Nicha Fourier, Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces
Commander – All-female Assyrian Military Unit, part of SDF

Can you tell us a bit about these Women's Protection Forces?

The Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces [HSNB, Ḥaylawotho d'Sutoro d'Neshe d'Beth Nahrin], an all-female Assyrian military unit, was founded in 2015. We, as women, have taken part in all areas of the defense. We participated in all the operations, from Til Temir to Bahouz, wherever the Islamic State [Daesh] has been defeated. For us, as women, it is important to stress, that women are not only able to participate in society, but that they can also defend freedom with the weapon in their hands. We live up to our role to defend society and the woman not only through civil works, but also militarily.

The defense forces do not only consist of Syrian women, but also of Armenians, and in fact all Christian women of all faiths (Syriac, Chaldean etc.) are involved. It is a union.

Can you tell us more about your life before, and why you joined these works?

I had a relatively normal life, like most Syrian or Christian young women from this region here. I went to school, I benefited from a good education and I have a great willingness to learn a lot in my life. When the attacks of Daesh in villages started, many people were displaced or murdered. Friends of mine were murdered, as well, or fell in battle. I wanted to give an answer to that. So, I also joined the defense forces out of revenge against Daesh, but also to

defend society, so that something like that is not possible anymore, and does not happen again. And, also to show that women can defend themselves. The women's defense units started to be built up six months after the attacks. They were not officially founded, but it was started to build them up. I have been part of it since the beginning.

What was your work during the Turkish invasion in October 2019?

In that war, we were in action in several villages. We defended the villages together and fought against the enemy. I myself did not fight since I am the commander. As a commander, I am in the second line of defense, from where I can coordinate the operations. Wherever help is needed, wherever an emergency arises, I send the unit there. There is also always a change; other units are sent, then they are withdrawn, and another group goes etc.

What kind of challenges do you still experience as a liberated woman in society?

In society, up until today, it is still the case that women who have gone to school and completed their education are often married, even if they have a good education. Those who do not have a good education often get married even before finishing school. This is also something we fight against. In a society that is under such massive attacks, it is not acceptable that only men defend it. Women should do the same. Women should be able to decide for themselves what is best for them in their lives.

My experience is that a lot has changed in society since the revolution. But, on the other hand, there are still many who have difficulties accepting these changes; for example, that women fight with weapons. That is also a struggle. One part of society sees it as

something positive, and another part is still sceptical. But these achievements are very important. It is important that we, especially as young women – we, as the youth –, protect and defend our people, and are present in all areas.

Being a commander is a great responsibility. What kind of difficulties do you encounter?

Before I became commander, I knew that many difficulties would come my way. That it would not be easy and that in such a position one needs a strong will, which I try to put in practice. The strong will and determination is needed, especially, when there is criticism coming from society regarding a woman not being able to do something; but I am not listening to that anymore. When something like that comes from society you have to close your eyes and ears. Otherwise, you become insecure and you cannot do your job well anymore. When I am here, I am completely focused on my tasks. I try to meet my own standards and do everything what a commander should do. Of course, I have problems too, but the life that is led here is different than life in society. It is a new life. I just try to do justice to all the tasks and goals that I have, with all the difficulties that are part of it.

How do you work together with other women's units, such as YPJ [Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, Women's Protection Units]?

We have a good relationship with the YPJ. We do meetings together, we coordinate together, and collaborate a lot. But we are different units. Every unit, every organisation has their characteristics and different backgrounds. But of course we have a common goal; we women have a common goal. We all want to defend women together. This is why, of course, we work closely together. There is actually no significant difference. We are

organised autonomously, but in the end, it does not make a huge difference with regards to the common goal. The goal is the same. All women's units and also all men's units are organised together in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and are under a general command.

Why should anybody in Europe or the US be interested regarding what is going on here?

1915 was the genocide against Armenians and Assyrians in [today's] Turkey, committed by the Ottomans. 2015, so exactly 100 years later, Daesh/ISIS has done exactly the same with us and now the same is happening again. We want the governments in the USA and in Europe for once feel this pain here; try and show empathy with what is happening to us, and try to understand and feel the pain. But they are not stopping this war. That has, of course, to do with the Turkish government. Our concern is that they should at least for once feel the pain. This would be important to us. Another attempt of genocide is taking place at the moment, and again nothing happens.

What do you personally think, when Angela Merkel, as a Christian Democratic, as part of a Christian Democratic Party, supports Turkey? There are a lot of Christian parties in Europe, that all know about the atrocities Turkey commits; what do you think about their support for Turkey?

We know, of course, that there is much talk and little action, and we are not expecting anything from governments anymore. We have not received any help. Apparently, the governments do not have much to say about that. Apparently, Germany does not want to, or is not able to. We had more hope in the US government before, that the US will play a certain role, but the US is not doing

anything either. Nevertheless, we have a bit more hope in the USA than in Germany, where it is really just talk, but nothing follows from it.

Ishow Gowriye, the chairperson of the Syriac Union Party [Gabo d'Ḥuyodo Suryoyo] is also the party's co-chairperson of the canton Cizîrê. So, she also does a lot of diplomatic work and has also been, together with Îlham Ehmed [co-president of the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)], to Europe and to the US a lot, and there were many meetings. The experience we brought back with us is that there is a lot of talk, a lot of press, but practically nothing happens. So everyone who wants to participate practically, especially in society, is welcome to participate practically. We are very happy when we see practical solidarity and not just talk.

Thank you very much!



We go from house to house to discuss with women, showing the necessity of organisation, of self-organisation, and of self-defence; for everybody in society, but especially for women

Semira Mohammed, Member of HPC-Jin in Qamişlo

Can you tell us your name, where you're from, and your role in the HPC [Hêzên Parastina Civakî – Civil Defense Forces]?

My name is Semira Mohammed and I'm from the Herbî quarter in Qamişlo. I have been a member of the HPC and of HPC-Jin [Hêzên Parastina Civakî-Jin – Women's Civil Defense Forces] for many years, and I am a member of the education and training committee of HPC. So, this involves the organisation of the social defence forces on the one hand and, on the other, giving training and education to women and people in different quarters, streets, and villages.

Could you describe the work of HPC for somebody who doesn't know anything about it?

The HPC's role is the organisation of the self-defence of the people, in the frame of the self-organisation of the people, in all the villages and quarters and so on. HPC-Jin is for the self-defence of all women in society. What is the difference between the HPC and a typical military force? We have the Syrian Democratic Forces, the YPG/YPJ, and so on, which are defending the people of Rojava directly through military means as a professional military force, but they are not present everywhere in society, twenty-four hours a day. The HPC is directly organised from the grassroots, from and with committees in all the different communes and self-defence committees in all the different councils. The HPC are, therefore,

able to intervene or directly take precautions inside the society because it's the people defending themselves in the places where they are living.

What was your personal motivation for becoming involved in HPC?

I joined the HPC and HPC-Jin in 2014, and at the same time I was really involved in the commune where I was living. For four years, I was mostly involved in the various works of my commune whilst also working in the self-defence committee of HPC-Jin. That was important for me and for many of us here because as women, we have been confronted with a lot of oppression and violence in the past, and with the revolution and the idea of freedom, the wish for freedom in practice came about. So, we worked towards that goal. We were able to organise ourselves, get to know our own past, our own history, and the necessity for the present, how to act and what to do, and how to organise ourselves to take responsibility for our own lives and being able to defend that at the same time. This is especially important for me as a woman and for all women in this society and why we are working in society with our male comrades but are also organising autonomously at the same time. For me especially, to be a part of the HPC, to be able – if necessary – to take a weapon in my hand and defend my people, myself, and my city is important as we are convinced by the ideas of this revolution and Rêber Apo. And we are deeply connected with all the fallen comrades, the martyrs of this revolution, of which there are thousands. It is important for us to continue what they have started and to take responsibility for the cause they have given their life for.

Earlier you mentioned that HPC-Jin is also involved in interventions in society. What kind of interventions?

For HPC-Jin, our work is especially related to the problems that women have in society. So, wherever a woman is hurt, wherever a woman has a problem, we see it as our duty to intervene, to help, and to see what is necessary. For this reason, our work is not an intervention in the military sense of using physical force; it is more than that. Our work is more social work and the work of interacting with the people, especially women. We go from house to house to discuss with women and to show the necessity of organisation, of self-organisation, and of self-defence; for everybody in society, but especially for women. That can be young women or old women, it doesn't matter. For example, sometimes we have problems in society or in families where we can see immediately that a woman is exposed to direct oppression, such as the case of domestic violence; and we work closely with Kongra Star¹⁷ and the women's Asayîş, with the women's house¹⁸, and other autonomous women's structures that exist in all communes, quarters, cities, villages, and so on. If necessary, we intervene directly to protect the woman, but more importantly, we try to convince every woman to organise herself as a woman in order to protect herself, to act as an organised identity rather than as an individual that has no protection, no defence, no will. But for us it is important that every woman can live and act in her own way. So our work is, first and foremost, about that. It is not about trying to convince everybody of our ideology, this is not the point for us. The main point for us is for every woman to be able to defend herself and for that reason, our main intervention in society is to discuss, to organise, and to talk to the people, to see what problems

17 See Chapter on Kongra Star (pp. 13-23)

18 See Chapter on Mala Jin (pp. 33-39)

exist, and to try to find a solution to those problems together. But, as I said, if it is necessary to protect the woman, we can also intervene in a different way.

Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to say?

I want to call upon all the people who read this, all the people outside of Kurdistan and outside of the Middle East, and especially our people who left their country and went to Europe or elsewhere, to see the protection of this revolution as their duty, as well. For all the people to see their responsibility for defending this revolution, and at the same time to act together against oppression, and against violence that is inflicted upon the people. And for all the women in the world to come together, to take each other's hands and to take the steps in their lives together as an organised identity, as an organised force, as an organised part of society. Here in the Middle East, and in Kurdistan especially throughout the previous years, we have seen what happens to women if they do not self-organise themselves, if they do not organise their self-defence and self-protection. It happened in Şengal in 2014/5, where thousands of Êzidî woman were sold in the market like slaves. It happens in many other places, women that are being killed, women that are being raped, women that are being abused. But the solution exists, and the solution is the self-organisation of women for their own freedom, for their own protection. My call is especially for that cause, for everybody to take responsibility not only for this revolution but for themselves and their own people wherever they are. And for those who left their country, who left Rojava and Kurdistan, to come back to their soil and to live a dignified life on their own land.



We want to live on free land. We will not let anyone take it away from us. That's why we won't be careless for a single minute!

Mossa Yassin, Member of HPC in Til Temir

A discussion, providing a bit of background, took place before the start of the interview (you can find the interview below). The discussion is summarised here:

This interview was taken at the Komuna Şehid Demhat in Til Temir, while Mossa Yassin had his night guard (*nöbet*) as part of the civil defense units, HPC. Like most communes, this commune is named after a martyr from the commune. The commune got its name from Şehid Demhat, who was from this commune. Different communes are connected with one another. HPC are not part of the military and security forces, but they are the make up of normal families who also have other works during the day, while they take their *nöbet* in the evenings or at night, guarding and defending their neighbourhoods and cities. Due to Til Temir's proximity to the frontline and the intensified threat of attacks after Turkey's and their allies' invasion in October 2019 – when the interview took place –, guarding the neighbourhoods and cities also intensified.

Can you explain how you organise yourselves?

We have a meeting once a week. At the meeting, the families and members come together, and we see who can and who cannot participate in the upcoming week. The ones who are sick or who have other work to do, they do not participate. Right now, there are three friends here who have agreed to to do their *nöbet* tonight. The shift goes until 5am in the morning. We also have a motorcycle that we can use to ride around the neighbourhood and district, so

we at times change places, and are also in other parts of the district. In the morning, after 5am, the Asayîş [Internal Security Forces, officially: Hêza Ewlekariya Hindîrin] is guarding the roads again more in the city. The Asayîş are of course also there at night, but firmly at their positions.

So, during *nöbet*, as I just explained, we are not only fixed at one place, but the task is also to drive through parts of the city. Our task is to protect the district, or rather the city, and this approach and understanding exists in every district. While it's the three of us having their shift right now, there are of course always others on call. If something happens, we call quickly, or give a message, and others come to support. We are all ready to fight at any time in order to defend the city.

What does the revolution mean to you?

This is our city, these are our children, this is our land. We want to live on free land. We will not let anyone take it away from us. That's why we won't be careless for a single minute. We do it for our children, for our street, for our district, for our city, and of course for all of Rojava. We want to live in a free Rojava.

What is your work when you do not have *nöbet*?

When I am having *nöbet*, I work as a cook, a *Kebabçi* so to say, preparing and selling varieties of meat, for example varieties of Shawarma, Kebab etc.

Can you say something about the Turkish invasion?

At first, they set Daesh/IS loose to attack us with the goal of flattening us, but they didn't succeed because we successfully defended ourselves. Now, they are trying to destroy us again with the recent invasion. In the end, the same forces are attacking us

here again. But if we, as Kurds, stand together and fight with the whole society, together with all ethnic groups, we will defeat them this time, as well. Essentially, there is no difference between Turkey and Daesh/IS.

What are you saying regarding NATO and the behaviour of Western states?

NATO must be judged by how it deals with Turkey. They should get Turkey out of NATO, otherwise you cannot take them seriously anyway. Trump fought against Daesh/IS only with us, but at the same time he knows that Turkey has supported Daesh/IS. It is in itself a contradiction. With Trump you can see that he is only thinking about money. The European states, like Germany, Denmark, Italy, and so on should strongly rethink their policies. They should give us a hand, because in the end, we are the ones who really fought against Daesh/IS. But Erdogan of course tries to put the European states under pressure by threatening to open the borders and to send Daesh/IS fighters and Islamists to Europe. That would then of course be a great danger for Europe. We also want to reach a stage where we could work together with Europe to solve the problems. Because in the end the cooperation with Turkey will solve neither their problem nor ours. Of course we want to solve the problems, so that we can all live in freedom.

Is there anything else you would like to say and others to know?

What we are asking for is not much, actually we are only asking for support in certain aspects. You can see that we really only want to have our rights, especially the right to a free life. We want to be autonomous and free, with the right to self-determination,

independent from state forces, like Iran, the Syrian state, Iraq etc.; in other words, free from the hegemonic local powers.

Europe must understand that if they continue not supporting us, more and more people will have to leave and then come to Europe and Germany, for example, as refugees. This is also a contradiction: Germany does not want so many people to come. If Europe supported us a bit, then they would not have the problem of us going to Europe.

Thank you very much!



If we don't protect our homeland, who should and will protect it? It's our duty

Shedwan 3awdi, Revolutionary Youth Movement in Ain Issa

Can you introduce yourself?

I am Shedwan 3awdi. I'm from Ain Issa, and a member of the youth movement – the Revolutionary Youth Movement. I'm 36 years old. I'm one of the main responsables for the youth in Ain Issa.

What is the youth movement doing in Ain Issa?

Right now, there is a full military mobilisation in Ain Issa, because of the ongoing war, and we as youth take our role in the defense, as well.

What's the situation right now in Ain Issa?

When the attack on Ain Issa began, there were a lot of people fleeing and there was a heavy war there. Right now, the situation is good. There is not a lot of fighting any more and we're really happy because people came back; not everybody but people continue coming back and it's really good.

So people are returning to their homes from the different camps and school halls and so on?

Most of them didn't go that far. They went to the surrounding villages in the South or West. Right now, the city is living again. People are back in Ain Issa.

What's the situation with the Islamist gangs?

The last attack of the gangs was yesterday, but it was countered by the friends.

So, they are still doing small attacks at night? Where are they attacking?

It's the so-called Free Syrian Army [FSA] that is attacking. They claim they are coming to protect civilians and to create a safe zone, but it is not like that. What you can say concerning their objectives is that they are not attacking in order to take over military points. What they are trying to do is to enter a village and to steal everything from a house, to plunder it, and then they withdraw. There is not a military objective to that, it's just plundering. And this is why our answer is to not let them pass to those villages, and not to allow them to annihilate the population. But usually when they cross to some villages they don't stay. They come, they steal everything, and they retreat.

Were you able to witness the plundering?

Yes, we saw it, when we were on the front line. We used to observe them, how they empty the houses. Also when we arrived to some villages that we liberated we spoke with the people of those villages, saying “yes, we were sitting in our house, we did not let them enter, but they managed to enter the houses of our neighbours, bringing a truck to take everything they could and then leaving with all the stuff.”

Where does the stuff go?

They take it to the occupied territories of Girê Spî, and sometimes also to Turkey, and they sell it there.

When and how did you get involved with the youth movement in Ain Issa?

When the youth centre opened in Ain Issa, there was a football team and this is how I got to know the youth movement. And as members of the youth, we used to spend at least one or two hours a day in the youth centre to meet and to discuss with comrades. At that time, there were really influential comrades in the centre, and they explained the perspective of the youth movement, and this is how I joined the youth – the Revolutionary Youth Movement of Rojava – really fast. And up until now I have been inside of it, and this is how I got involved.

Which position did you play in football and were you also team captain?

I was the captain of the team, but my position was mostly defense and goalkeeper.

Do you see yourself in the same position here, in and around Ain Issa? Are you also in a position of defense?

In a football match you protect your goal, here you are protecting your homeland. And if we don't protect our homeland, who should and will protect it? It's our duty, it's something that should be natural, you know. And we are not waiting for anyone to defend us, to defend the homeland. We will defend the homeland and we will defend us ourselves.

I've heard a lot people saying that they find 'their place' in the revolution. From military to cooking, to whatever. What is your place in this movement?

Yes, I've found my place, but I am still developing. I'm feeling good in what I'm doing; I'm protecting our land, my people, and

also my region. I'm seeing that the more I stay in this work, the more I'm developing the meaning that I give to the role that I'm playing.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

I like to send a message to the Syrian Youth that went outside of Syria, that left Syria. What I would like to tell them is that they should come back and also protect their people and their homeland because nobody else is going to come and do for them. They think they are playing their role by sharing news about Syria on their phone, and that they are making revolutionary work. This is not their role. Their role is to be here, to protect their homeland, their people. So, I would like to tell them to come back right away.

Thank you very much!



When we fight imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy in the Middle East, we also fight it in every other part of the world at the same time

Member of YPG International

Can you tell us about your background?

There are ideological backgrounds for joining the revolution and for fighting here. I used to be less ideological and was brought here by a moral stance, which was also the general stance and the beginning of my politicisation, namely the history of my homeland, German history. In particular, in relation to World War II; not only focusing on German fascism, but also looking at it in a more humanistic sense: what did actually happen back then? Apart from the fact that it was Germany during that time, there have always been genocides throughout history - although I am aware, that they might not have happened everywhere in the same manner. German fascism might stick out in terms of the means and technology used, but the underlying logic was nothing new. I had already engaged myself a lot in the topic and had, therefore, already known a lot about the topic before I visited Auschwitz a few years back, but I never saw it as real and as clear before my eyes as I did during that visit. Being there did not shock me; I had already known about the scale of it, but it touched me on a deeper way.

It made things clear to me and that was the moment when I told myself: Never Again! This means that as long as I live I will fight against this and not let it happen. Fascism is happening right now, and I have the ability to act against it, and to do so is the responsibility which emerged from these historical happenings. It is especially my historical responsibility because my family was

involved in Nazism. If I want to be honest to myself and still be able to say that I learned from the past, then I have to take responsibility for the future.

The examples of Serêkaniyê and Gîre Spî, and the deals which were made there make it obvious that organisations like the UN haven't learned anything from history. Seventy years after World War II, they just let these genocidal policies happen by saying "It's OK", and being at peace with a fascist regime. If we want to stop fascism, we have to do so ourselves. Those who call themselves "responsible" within those institutions will never actually take this responsibility for humanity.

How did you get here? What were your general motivations for coming to Rojava?

Before I really got to know the Kurdish movement, I was part of the so-called 'autonomous movement'. I was organised in *autonomous* contexts, and at some point I started asking myself whether that will actually get us anywhere. We were getting less and less people, and everything started revolving around our personal issues. There was a strong separation from the rest of society, and I kept seeing houses being evicted, but never new houses being squatted successfully. I saw us running, but the cops were never running. At some point, I was asking myself why I was risking my 'individual freedom' and investing so much time into this if in the end it was all meaningless. Then a friend invited me to go to Greece with him, and in Athens, I saw for the first time what's possible if people come together, organise, and uncompromisingly reject the state. That gave me new perspectives and hope; that it is possible, that it is nothing far away but instead only a question of our willpower to organise ourselves.

Then I learned about the revolution in Rojava, especially because of the war against Daesh [ISIS]. My experiences from Greece connected with what was happening in Rojava. On the one hand, there was internationalism. I had not experienced this understanding of a common struggle shared by comrades from different parts of Europe before I came to Greece. There, they really saw us as brothers and sisters, all fighting the same fight together. I had never felt it that way in Germany. That came together with the knowledge regarding the revolution in Rojava. I got more involved in serious progressive politics and had the feeling that I was actually achieving something. This led to the desire to come here in order to understand. How are things done here? What tools and methods do people use to organise? How is also struggle fought here – also in the military sense? These issues have to always be part of a perspective for a revolutionary movement. Military fighting is not a perspective in itself, but it must always be taken into consideration because it is important to be able to organise self-defense. That was my intention when coming here. Then the war in Efrîn happened, and the stories of the Şehids, the ones who fell, fighting here, coming from Europe, America, or Australia gave me motivation in a moral, ethical sense. From that moment onwards, I was also personally and emotionally involved. After the war in Efrîn, I told myself: “Time to pack.” And then I came to Rojava.

Can you talk about how one is organisationally embedded in the structures of the self-administration?

That depends on the branch of the organisation you’re in. There are youth structures, the women’s movement, military structures, and many more. I can only speak for myself, and explain what it’s like in YPG International.

We, as internationalists in military structures, are grouped together in one organisation, in an administrative sense. We then evaluate together which skills we have, what we think we can do, and where reinforcements are needed. Then we are sent and connected to other units and fight together.

And what is your position?

I am the commander of a small unit, and the Biksici [heavy machine gunner].

What are the challenges of working with internationalists in a war zone?

One of the biggest challenges are the different socialisations. Throughout the history of our lives, all of us are used to different methods of problem-solving. For some, it's rage and for others it's becoming passive when it comes to reacting to a situation, and this can be really different. It also depends on the country of origin. "Individual freedom in a universal sense", for example, is a specialty of many Americans. If you tell many of them, for example, "because of the circumstances we're living under, we cannot allow certain behaviour", or "right now, we cannot do it the way you want it", then they might be upset and won't accept what you say.

But the biggest problem in general, out of my experience, is the patriarchal socialisation. Especially the dominant behaviour when we're dealing with conflicts within the group. It doesn't get violent but very loud and aggressive. And then people do not get along anymore, and that has fundamental impact on our work. It's the everyday problems that cause the most trouble. Dealing with the combination of different upbringings, while facing the reality we're in here is hard, especially in the beginning.

So, you keep the group together?

I don't want to exaggerate the impact I have. It is my responsibility to keep the group functional and to solve conflicts when it is necessary. But normally, we also have regular meetings for criticisms and self-criticisms [a so-called Tekmil]. If possible, we hold them everyday but sometimes we're not able to do so for up to three days. Tekmil is the best tool to prevent conflicts, or to solve conflicts step by step. People speak to each other, voice criticism or self-criticism, and over time it slowly gets better. It also makes people work on their personality. So my task is supporting people to solve their conflicts themselves.

Why is it important that people in other countries express their solidarity and also do work from 'afar'?

There are different forms of oppression and violence in different parts of the world. Speaking from the viewpoint of a European, I can say that Europe managed to export suffering. That way some forms of suffering which are normally visible within capitalism cannot be seen in Europe but somewhere in South-East Asia or Africa. The suffering was outsourced if you want to phrase it in neoliberal terminology.

At home, in Europe, there are subtle forms of oppression. They are not as obvious as other forms, but they follow the same logic. And the responsible structures are located in the West, in Europe, North America etc. But the decisions made within these structures impact the whole world. They also have their henchmen, loyal heads of states and officials working with and for them in all parts of the world. So, it is the same enemy, no matter where. The form might differ, but the logic and the aims behind it are the same everywhere. That is why, when we fight imperialism, capitalism,

and patriarchy in the Middle East, we also fight it in every other part of the world at the same time. Because what happens here impacts other parts of the world, and our struggle is also seen as an example. And when progressive politics are done in Europe, it also has an impact on us here. And the same thing is true for other regions of the world. If a region is freed and the self determination of the people there becomes reality, it will have an impact on Europe, as well. On the other hand, when the logic of capitalism is overcome in Europe than this will also impact Asia, Africa and South America. Because it is all connected. The structures we're fighting against are the same. It is the same conflict. Therefore, the struggles cannot be separated from each other.

Can you tell us something about the revolution here? What moves you or impresses you the most?

I cannot give too many examples because until very recently I did not speak enough Kurdish to be able to personally speak to the people in the cities and villages, and ask them where they see progress and accomplishments. That's why it is hard for me to really evaluate things. But in one of the structures I was in before, I met a girl who was an example of the impact of this revolution, making me think: Yes, this is the revolution. She was a young woman, about 14 years old, who was not ducking away from thirty-year-old men. She wouldn't sit still and just listen but instead confidently take her stance with vigour. You could tell that her soul has not been broken. Many people reach a point in their life where something breaks inside them, and that will influence the rest of their lives. Looking at her, I had the feeling that exactly that did not happen. She was encouraged in what she is doing and in her development. Which should be a normal thing. It's an achievement of the revolution. There are many women here,

especially young women, which unlike many others in this region were encouraged, or at least not put down. You can tell it from their vigour, from the way they move and talk, their whole way of being. If you then take into account that she was about six or seven years old, when everything started, and that she grew up and developed in this revolution and that this is the outcome, then you know the meaning of this revolution. You can see it by looking at the people themselves. That really impressed me.

Is there something else that is important to you, that you want to share?

What we need, especially in Europe, is not numbers or resources. We need to change our struggle because it cannot go on the way it has been fought until now. The structures and methods we are used to do not work anymore, and do not lead to any goal if we continue as we did before. And this is becoming more clear every day.

Do you mean the existence in a ‘bubble’? The separation from society?

Yes, and above all the the methods – subculture is not necessarily something bad. I used to be a punk, and I could actually still call myself one although it might be a bit complicated – the subculture is not bad in itself. But if we really want to successfully work on something, then we need a certain philosophy, or a certain ethics and mentality. If we see politics just as a hobby or always step a bit back out of it, thinking that we did enough, then we won’t get anywhere. We need to develop a new idea, a new mentality of struggling, which will be the condition for working together with a long term perspective, and not with an understanding of “Today I do this, and tomorrow that”. With such an understanding, we will always merely react to what’s happening.

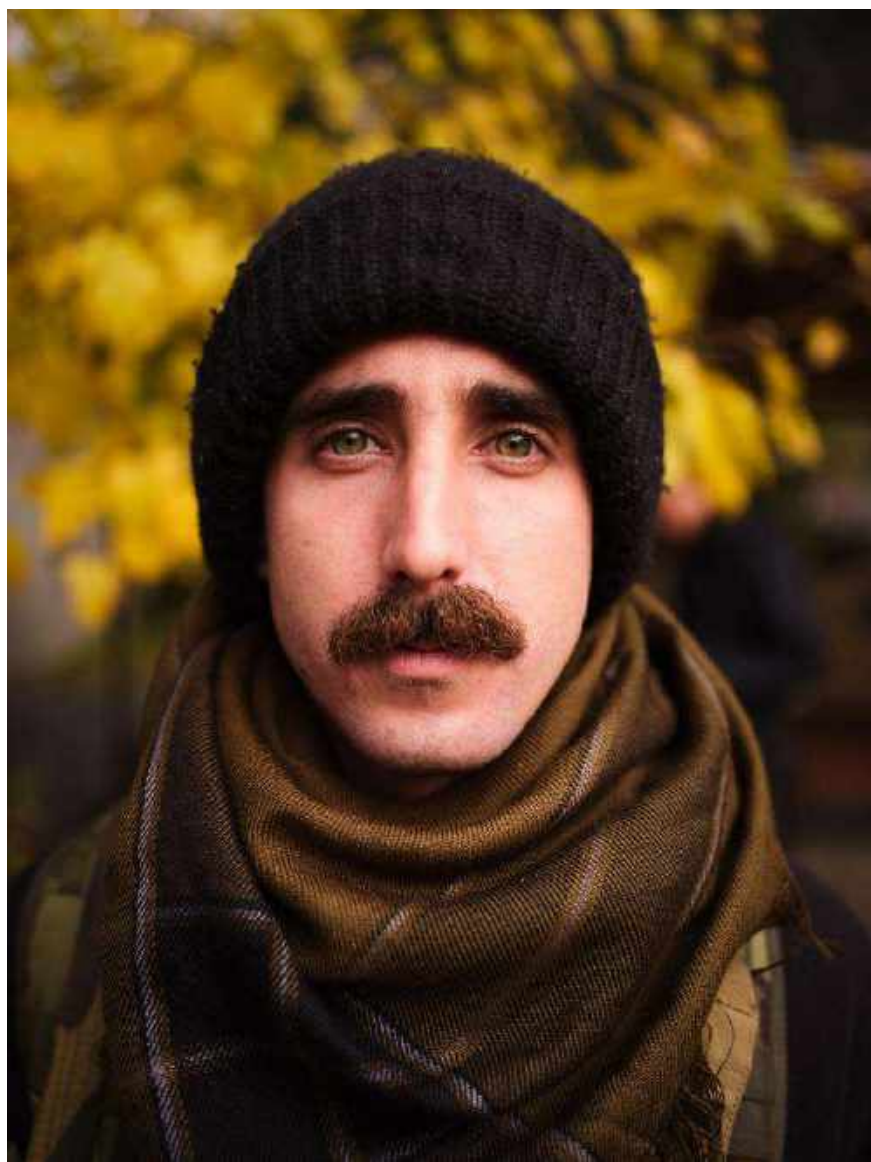
Long-term perspective means also thinking about the consequences. We also have to be aware that political victories will lead to imprisonment. If we become more successful, then also the German state will start to defend itself with methods which are not in accordance with the Geneva Convention and so on. We have to be aware what it actually is that we're fighting against and what we want to achieve. From these thoughts, we have to draw consequences for ourselves but also for our comrades. What is necessary and what is needed? Only if we do that, we will have the chance to start something. In the way we are going about it at the moment, we will not progress. And when I speak to friends at home, that is exactly the fact they do not want to accept, the thing we disagree upon, with them saying: 'I am not sure, I do not see it that way; maybe this is a bit too determined.'

But if you're here, you can see exactly what the final consequence is. Til Temir is a very good example for this. In the villages here you can see it: All the Christian communities are empty. The people living there now were displaced from Deir ez-Zor, Efrîn, or other places. All were displaced by this war and nearly all are suffering from hunger. If they can't feed themselves, their situation gets worse, and unfortunately we can only take care of the bare necessities. And why is it like that? Because superpowers are marking and occupying territory here. That's all. It's not about Bashar al-Assad still being president in the next five years. It's about the influence the superpowers want to have onto the Middle East, and nothing more. And the population is suffering from it, and the superpowers simply do not give a sh*t.

Do you think people not being willing to commit to a fight has something to do with comfort and that a certain clarity means giving up comfort?

I do think that it is a factor. But it's only one aspect. I think the main reason is fear. Just plain fear. Fearing the uncertain, fearing the future, fearing consequences like death or prison. But friends and family also play a part. And, of course, also comfort, be it a relationship, or a warm apartment, or the co-workers with whom you can have a beer with after finishing work. That doesn't exist here. And the revolution will not be all done in three years. The revolution is a task for life and a decision for life and that makes a lot of people back away. I have lived through this myself and it is the hardest fight to be fought. And it has consequences, which will make you ache from time to time. In difficult times, when you feel really sh*tty, you will of course sometimes think of Mum and Dad and your buddies at home. But if we leave behind our family, and our personal belongings in order to dedicate our whole life to the revolution, to freedom, then our actions will have an impact on society. The people see that I have left many things behind. They are thinking: "He has so many options. He could do anything he wants. But he is here and chose to fight." That's giving hope to the people. That's what in a way defines a vanguard. That you with setting an example show that it is possible to achieve a free life, and having so much hope and trust in history that it will come true one day. And that attracts other people.

Thank you very much.



There is a sense of honour around the inclusive term ‘Heval’ [comrade], and this sense of honour is also very horizontal, showing that we are the same, at the same level, and can work together in society.

Heval Egîd, Internationalist from Italy

Can you briefly introduce yourself and tell us why you came here to Rojava?

My name is Heval Egîd. I am in my late 20s, and I’m from Italy, I came here the first time to get in contact with the revolution. I think this is the only revolution that in our time is looking towards victory, establishing in practice a new form of life as an alternative to capitalism. And, of course, because I am a Leftist; I organise and in our country, we are trying to build a revolutionary way to live in opposition to capitalism. I was reading a lot but to have the possibility, to have the chance, to live a real revolution is something different. And so this was the first reason to come. Of course, also in some way to support, but mostly to learn.

What is the most important thing you have learned here?

For me, it’s very impressive, and the main thing that I learned is how to establish a deep connection with society. Because many times, for example, in Italy, the term ‘comrade’ is very exclusive. We call each other comrades in the way that comrades are good people, and then there are the others. It’s not inclusive. Here, the term ‘heval’ is something very inclusive. The term is used here to form this dynamic of inclusion. So, for example, between the people, you use this term to reach a level of communication to show that we are the same, at the same level. This is especially

important here, because society was really divided here, and coming together as society really failed in the past; so, there is a sense of honour around the term, and this sense of honour is very horizontal, and this helps to really get in contact with one another and to work with society.

Another aspect I learned a lot about, is gaining an understanding of the real power of Abdullah Öcalan and his philosophy. Like for me, at the beginning, when I had my first education, it was very, very strange, and it seemed in a way like I know it from Catholicism, for example. I don't know, it sounded like something from when you were young and went to church and they tell you these stories. But in Italy, we have very high philosophical discussions that are very deep with a very specific language that no one understands. Most of the time even comrades don't understand what we want to say either. So, here, for me in the beginning, it was difficult to understand the way of speaking, the way of spreading this philosophy. Because I was thinking "ok, we will speak about Marx, of course, of economic theory", but it was not like that. It was more about little stories, about the lives of martyrs, but behind these stories revolutionary values were coming through. Giving practical examples and, of course, while it was in the beginning very, very strange to me, after some time I came to understand that these stories reach also most of the population, especially since many didn't go to school. But it is also important for our context [in Italy, for example], because many times we speak in a language that is not reaching most of the people.

Like talking to your neighbour about surplus value?

Yes, no one understands you. We are very closed in our spaces, social centres, a little bit sectarian. For me, this was very powerful to see here differently: Ok, like they have a clear understanding,

they have it all clear, they deeply know the Marxist, Leninist writings – they even know Gramsci from Italy, much more than many Italian comrades. But, then they find a way to translate these complicated theories and ideas in little stories, spreading it amongst the population, and establishing connections in ways that we have not reached [in Italy] until now.

And also the change of paradigm and approach amongst the Arab population is very interesting. Before it was more about liberating the different areas here [where the Kurdish population has mostly been populated] and now there is also the task of dealing more with the Arab population [in other areas], where there might be a lot of fear for reparations [because of the oppression against Kurds in the past]. But now, for a revolution in the Middle East to be successful, the Arab population has to be won over. The Arab population has not been as aware of the thoughts of Abdullah Öcalan, and seeing now the successes and the works that are being done in the newly liberated areas [where a predominant Arab population is living] was very interesting for me.

So you were also in areas around Raqqa?

Yes, I also went to Raqqa, Tabqa, and other newly liberated areas, and it's very interesting for me to see this work in this perspective. It's still very, very difficult work. Of course, if you want to win, we have to win by convincing people. We have to understand Daesh is a political project. Of course, there is a fight with weapons but if you do not reach and win over the population, the population will say that you are like Assad, trying to control by force. But this, of course, is not the goal, and it is still a long process that is very interesting to understand.

When did you come first?

I came first in 2016. I was back in Italy for six months, then I decided to come back when the occupation in Efrîn started. I tried to come at that time, but there was this referendum of Barzani in Başur [Southern Kurdistan; to some known as North-Iraq] at that time. So, it was not possible to come until some comrades from here gave the green light for coming.

Then, I was in Rojava for one year. I had the chance to deeply understand both, the civil and military works. First, I took another ideological education for five months. After that, I was also working in society, and then I decided to join the military structures. I had the chance to go to a normal military unit, and then I joined YPG International for the rest of the time.

I went back to Italy, and then in October 2019, I came back here as a result of the Turkish invasion. I came too late for the invasion of Serêkaniyê, but when I arrived the situation in Til Temir was still unclear. I joined the structures of the youth, and it is very important that it's also understood in Europe that not only the military forces are defending this revolution, but that the whole population is involved. So, for example, the youth established youth tabûrs [youth battalions].

So, it's important that people know that it's a massive popular resistance here. It's not only the military forces that are part of the defense, but the youth and women's movement, the HPC (Hêzên Parastina Civakî - Civilian Defence Forces)¹⁹ – the civilian forces that are inside of the cities – take also part in it; they are all part of the defense, preparing the city for war, preparing positions, providing logistics, preparing the houses, their own homes for defense. This shows that it's really a popular defence; it's not just militia fighting against militia.

19 See Chapter on HPC-Jin and HPC (pp. 123-133)

So, it is not like it is often portrayed in media, is it?

Right, the YPG [Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – People's Protection Units] is really famous in media also because of the spectacularisation of the war in Syria against ISIS. This has also had positive effects, such as the spread of this aspect of the ideology of Rêber Apo [Abdullah Öcalan], namely that the people have to learn how to defend themselves. So, this self-defense is a tool against ‘degeneration’ like it happened in many revolutions in the past; after some time, many revolutions started to become much more centralised with the use of power [from the top-down] in the end, transforming into something else. But here, if you’re able to defend yourselves as a people, then it’s like a medicine against this. To have only an army creates a situation where some high commander of the army could decide to make a coup. Here, all the people know how to defend themselves and the revolution provides education to all the people. I think this is very important.

This sounds very good. Is there anything else you would like to add?

For me, the points I mentioned are really, really important because it’s usually only the YPG and YPJ [Women's Protection Units] that have become very famous, or the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces]. But when we look at SDF, we can ask ourselves who is actually part of it; so, all the different minorities also having their autonomy inside of the army.

There is, for example, the MFS [Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo - Syriac Military Council]. As Assyrian/Syriac Christians, they are part of the Syrian Democratic Forces but they have their autonomy; and inside the MFS, there are mixed units, and there is

also an all-female unit [as part of Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces, HSNB – Ḥaylawotho d'Sutoro d'Neshe d'Beth Nahrin²⁰].

A year ago, an Armenian Tabûr [Martyr Nubar Ozanyan Brigade] was also founded. These examples show that minorities are inside of SDF, but also with their own (decisional) autonomy, and all the minorities take also example from this model of having an autonomous female unit as part of the army.

It is also important to highlight the many Arab people inside the SDF. Because, in Italy, for example there's a lot of the times a complete opposite ethnic understanding, such as there are the bad Arabs on one side, who are Daesh, and on the other side, there are the Kurds. Like now, it very important to stress, most of the SDF are Arab people. Of course, in the beginning of the revolution, the vanguard was the Kurdish population, but a lot of Arab people joined YPG and SDF, after also discovering what Daesh really was.

It is important to understand that in the beginning of this revolution, for many people in Syria where the majority of the population are Sunni, ISIS/Daesh was seen as a revolutionary Sunni project against a regime that was seen as Shia [the Assad regime is usually known for being Alawite, but describes itself as secular]. Daesh took many cities without using a bullet and initially, parts of the population were happy and supported them. But very soon, the population discovered that this is not Islam; that this is a totally barbaric distortion of Islam. Already during the liberation and especially after many cities were liberated, a lot of Arabs, younger men and women, joined the YPG, SDF and made their own Tabûrs to fight against Daesh.

Thank you very much.

20 See Chapter on Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces (pp. 117-121)



Without Rêber Apo's ideology and philosophy, the women in Rojava would not have been able to organise themselves and lead this successful struggle

Jiyan Hamdo, Women's Food Cooperative 'Carcella' in Dêrik

Could you introduce yourself?

My name is Jiyan Hamdo. I am from the city of Dêrik, but my home was in Gîrê Reş, which is a village in the surrounding area of Dêrik. I have been in this cooperative for two years, but the project started before I arrived. This project has been established to ensure economic means of the people. Families and women who have economic difficulties can join the project.

How did this cooperative start?

Before this project, there was very little belief in women, that they could work or lead a project in our society. Since the beginning of the Rojava revolution, women took their place in the revolution and played a vanguard role in the YPJ and other institutions. Women proved themselves in their abilities. On the base of believing in the strength of women, everything in this cooperative has been built up by women. For instance, the administration, the work in the kitchen, the logistics, everything has been done by women because we believe that women can do all these parts of this work by themselves. They do not need anybody else.

Again, many people did not believe that women could build up a project like this. That is also why this project came into being, in order to also be an inspiration for other projects and for all women in society to self-organise and to self-administrate amongst themselves.

To get a better idea of the cooperative. Can you say something about decision-making processes, for example?

This project has been running for four years and is one of the most successful projects we have in Dêrîk. So far the decisions that have been taken are nothing like individual decisions. All of the members of this project come together to make decisions about whether something needs changing, for example. And the decisions, communicated through the rêveberê [administrative coordination], are also discussed with the women's office in the municipality.

What are the biggest challenges that a project like this has been facing?

In the beginning, it was really difficult. Like I said, it was completely accepted in society that women did not have the strength nor the rights to do it. The families of a lot of women working here did not accept that a woman should go to work. But in the end, these difficulties and challenges have led to big results because as a cooperative and as part of the women's movement, we want to discuss with the families. And after the success of building this project, many people could no longer hold the prejudice that women could not organise themselves. Furthermore, every woman who went back to her home after working here is also convincing their village that it is possible, speaking to other women and saying "look, I can work, and I am working, and there is no problem", and at the same time supporting the wider women's movement. This is why we say that this project has been really inspiring for many others. But of course it was a long road and there were many difficulties and discussions, and there has been a lot of prejudice and lack of faith in the abilities of women to work by themselves

and in a cooperative way. Right now it has become well-known and it is accepted, but it has been difficult and it was a big challenge.

Do you find that other women and women's groups are being inspired about starting their own cooperative or joining this project? Do you see more interest in women's self-organisation in contrast to how it was before the revolution?

You won't believe it, but every day there are women who come here and say they want to join this project. But the problem is we don't have the capacities. So, we tell them to go to Kongra Star, which is the general women's movement [confederation of women's organisations], and to talk to them. This project has been successful, which has made a big wave of a lot of people wanting to join or do something themselves. Once we have the means, believe me, in a few months, you will have ten projects self-administrated by women that will pop up in our society.

What is the essence of the revolution?

I think it is the search for humanity and freedom. And this is something that our people here have been longing for, and for a long time there was an organisation working towards this in our population. The Rojava revolution has been the incarnation of those principles. It is not just words like humanity and freedom; I see it practically in the comradeship that has been built and in the revolutionary personalities that we see struggle not only for our people but also for the whole world. This is what I would call the essence of the revolution, this continuous quest for humanity and freedom.

One last, half-humorous question, what is the secret to making such delicious food?

The secret is that we have, for instance, right now six people working in this kitchen in a really communal way, and there is no “you do this work”, or “I do this work”, or “you wash, I cook”. No, we make it with everybody and, of course, everyone brings a specificity from her village or her culture to make the food. And other friends, in a communal way, exchange and say “no, you should do it like that, you should do it like this,” and in the spirit of comradeship and diversity we learn from each other; this is how the food is so good.

So, there is no separation, for instance, with one person washing the dishes all the time, and one person cooking?

No. There are two people who are responsible to make the dishes, but other people also join their work. So, there are two people who, for instance, prepare the meals for the day, but in collaboration with the others. There is no task which is “you are only washing the dishes”. Of course, you have the responsibility to wash the dishes but you also join in with the cooking in order to reproduce the cooking skills.

Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I want to say something in general for the revolution. It is a fact that this cooperative and the practical philosophy behind it, come from the very inspiring philosophy of Rêber Apo, Abdullah Öcalan, who is not only inspiring in his writings, but also in his behaviour. It is really inspiring to see a person giving himself fully and unconditionally to the people’s struggle. His example showed that this revolution was possible, because all the people that joined

gave themselves fully until the end for the ideal. It is on this basis that we say for our project, but also for the revolution of Rojava, if we come together and if we bring our works together in this period, the revolution in Rojava can never fail, and will succeed to reach our freedom and the freedom of Abdullah Öcalan.

I say this as a person of Rojava, but I should also say something as a women in Rojava. Before this revolution happened, and until now in some places, the woman existed in the four walls of the house. Without Rêber Apo's ideology and philosophy, the women in Rojava would not have been able to organise themselves and lead this successful struggle.



The most important thing is to never cut yourself off from your population

Member of Union of Cooperatives

Can you explain differences you see from the time before the revolution and after?

There are fundamental differences between the system of the Syrian Regime and the system of the Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria. The Regime's system before was just working for one nation, and the population living in this region was exposed to immense exploitation. Today, when we look at the changes since the beginning of the revolution here, we can, for example, see that peasants are able to build cooperatives themselves, too. People who didn't know how to read and write have the opportunity to learn reading and writing now. And the situation of women has radically changed in comparison to how it was before, when women were mainly confined to being at home. Today, women go to school, get an education, and build their own cooperative, as well. These are some of the differences between the two systems. Before it was focused on one state, one nation, and today it is the opposite; we are encouraging and cultivating the differences between peoples and the different cultures of our nation.

When it comes to our works on cooperatives, we are also carefully studying the experiences in Brazil and also of cooperatives in Europe, where we can see a lot of times a bourgeois understanding of production and cooperation, connected to the problem of individualism of one person, for example, joining a cooperative. Whereas here, we are really trying to involve the whole family in a village in the communal works, strengthening communal life in general. It is not just one member, but the whole village that

participates. Everyone joins according to their ability, so it is not that everybody can take a shovel and begin to dig, but somebody will dig, somebody will make the accounting and another person will do something else, so that every person can find their place in this revolution. We are here at a site in Tirbespî with several cooperatives, and even though on a small scale, these cooperatives constitute a crucial part of this revolution.

We can see that 5,000 years ago, during the neolithic revolution, there was equality and not the view of seeing one's own work or task as separated from others' work. For example, you had hunters, young men who used to hunt, while mothers used to bring together the hunt, collect fruits, and do agriculture. One's role was never separated from other roles in society. Of course, people used their skills, but they also had a much more communal way of working. Each person had a task but everybody was working together and seeing others as necessary to their own work. It was not like, "this is my work and that is your work, and it has nothing to do with one another;" of course, we have our different tasks, but they are connected to and in harmony with one another.

Why are cooperatives important here?

The economic aspect of a cooperative is not the main goal here. The main goal is more about how we work and engage with one another, not just in the cooperative, but in life in general; working and living more communally. We also saw some really good cooperatives in Catalonia, where economy as such is actually a kind of excuse for us to come together. When we say that there is a difference between the bourgeois cooperative and our cooperatives, it is really about the main goal. The main goal here is not to make money and to focus on profit, but to build a different, more communal life.

We have to acknowledge also the reality that our people, the people of this region, are really poor, understanding that there poverty is a result of someone else's wealth. Most of the lands here belonged to the Syrian secret service or big landlords. So, when the revolution took place, the people went to cultivate those liberated lands together without any pressure, attempting not to reproduce the injustices from before. Our work is to help people in this respect, too, but people decide for themselves who is doing what. We can give advice and say, for instance, you need an accountant or somebody like that. But in the end, the people decide by themselves, with all the difficulties that this sometimes entails. This is how they will also learn to live together and to unite amongst themselves. It is not something that should come from outside or from us. For example, if you have a Christian, a Muslim, and an Êzidî working together they are also creating a feeling of love, and positive emotions amongst each other by working on an equal footing together, and this is how you create unity.

Can you tell us more about the cooperatives here in Tirbespî, and your work?

Here at this place in Tirbespî, we currently have four agricultural cooperatives, one cooperative for cows, and one for mattresses that we call *Metîl arabiyê*. The cow cooperative and one of the agricultural cooperatives are mixed, two agricultural cooperatives and the mattress cooperatives are women-only²¹, and the fourth agricultural cooperative is for the families of martyrs. There are between approximately five and fifteen people in each cooperative, depending on the work and means of the cooperative, and in most of the cooperatives, there is a mix of Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs.

21 See next Chapter on the Women's Cooperative (pp. 171-172)

The cooperatives are currently administering themselves autonomously. Our work, as members of the Union of Cooperatives, is to support and coordinate between the cooperatives. For instance, if you want to open a cooperative but you don't have the funds for it, we will provide the funds which you will reimburse to the cooperative but without any interest. It's more like capital to help to start the project. If there are problems with the cooperatives, then we are here to help, too. For example, if one cooperative is selling things at a higher price than others, we can discuss with the people involved and overcome the problem of competition between the cooperatives or anything like that. We also meet with the cooperatives and see what is needed from us, if anything at all. But all the internal stuff within the cooperative is dealt with by them. We only intervene when it's necessary, and we always try to intervene as little as possible with the work of the cooperatives.

Have you been in contact with other cooperatives somehow, studying also what you see from afar?

There were some groups coming here, but we don't have much interaction with other cooperatives. Of course, on the general level of the Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria, these discussions are taking place. But, for instance, one delegation came here from Europe and we discussed the similarities and differences between our cooperatives. They said that the positive role of women here is very different compared to the cooperatives they have in Europe, in the sense that there is much more participation here.

But we also look at historical examples, such as from the Soviet Union, where cooperatives were built up very fast, with a focus on production, turning them in a way into centralised companies

where the cooperative elements of building a communal life that we stress were no longer really present. Emphasis was put on economic production, whereas here we are really focussing on the human dimension, on building a communal life, on self-sufficiency, and people's choice to decide what they want to plant, which was not the case in the Soviet Union.

That is an interesting point that we see in many examples around the world; cooperatives turn into capitalist companies over time. How can that be avoided in, say, 20-30 years here?

We have to analyse how we are working. If you look at how empires fall, if you think about the Austrian Empire or the Persian Empire (of course, we are talking about cooperatives but to illustrate the problem), empires are doomed to fail cause they are cut off from their population. The most important thing is to never cut yourself off from your population. Once this begins to happen, you are lost. How do you avoid this? You have to renew yourself continuously. Water that flows continuously is always clean. Water that stays in the same place and doesn't renew itself begins to rot and becomes polluted. How do we renew ourselves? Through practice and education. It is not the case that someone gets an education and then goes for the rest of one's life into practice; no, education continues with practice. So, as long as you don't cut yourself off from your population and continue educating yourself and others, you will always have this system of discussing your experience, and deciding together what step to take next. With your population, you are continuously renewing yourself, and you are able to fight stagnation and avoid the road that leads to capitalism.

Thank you very much!



This work and cooperative means autonomy for us. Now we can come freely, and more autonomously together and do our works

Women's Cooperative, tailoring mattresses, in Tirbespî

Could you tell us about how the cooperative started?

We are four tailors, and we had a dream of having a project that could also give us an income, so we could work and live from this work. We gathered a small amount of money and bought the sewing machine. But we needed more to acquire materials for our work. Then we went to the union of cooperatives and they gave us 1,500,000 [Syrian pounds] in capital to be able to acquire materials and to be able to continue our work. So, we worked and the good thing was that the union of cooperatives did not put any pressure on us to pay back the sum that they gave to us. We were still committed to paying it back through our work, and today there is just 250,000 [Syrian pounds] left to be paid back, and we are doing good. We are also really happy and thankful for the union of cooperatives.

How do you work together?

There is a division of tasks. There are some people who go and take measurements, for example; some of us work on closing holes, and on cutting and sewing the sponges for the mattresses etc. Before it was really difficult for a woman in this region to do what we are doing in the way we are doing it together right now. We are able to do our work as women together, have our own income, and take care of our children.

What does this work and cooperative mean to you?

This work and cooperative means independence for us. Now, we can come freely and more independently together, and do our works. And it would have been really difficult for us to start with if we had not had the support of the union of cooperatives.

How are order placements going? Are you becoming well-known around town?

Yes, our cooperative is really well-known in Tirbespî because the union of cooperatives helped us a lot by advertising our cooperative. We are taking it step by step, and it is growing slowly but surely. But a lot of people don't have money, especially in this economic situation. So, I would say the problem has more to do with people's ability to pay than the placements we receive. Production and placements are going well and we are well-known, but its more of a question of means, and a lot of people don't have the means to pay.

Thank you very much!



Our self-organisation is also building up society, and all the people are responsible for one another.

Member of Village Commune and Agricultural Cooperative

Could you talk about the commune and the cooperative here?

The building of communes has started since the beginning of the revolution. Communes have been built in villages, but also in cities, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. Different committees deal with the daily life of the village or of the commune. Within the commune, we have different committees, such as health committees, dispute resolution committees, or agricultural committees. And this is how we are organising ourselves with respect to daily questions concerning, for example, bread, water, and electricity.

As for the cooperative, it was built in 2018. It is a mixed cooperative of women and men. Mostly herbs and wheat have been planted at this cooperative. Most of the tasks are divided between all the villagers. It is true that we are a cooperative but the whole village participates in it. For example, the cultivation, the planting, and the cleaning is done communally. Since the whole village participates in the cooperative, there are twenty-five families working in this cooperative.

What does it mean to work in a cooperative? What is different to how it was before?

We are working in a systematic way, which wasn't the case before. There are different committees in the cooperative, there is the accounting committee, for how much we are planting and how much we are receiving. There is the committee responsible for organising the seeds, bringing them here and storing them. We

coordinate what we are planting. And we are, of course, in cooperation with the 'Union of Cooperatives' in Tirbespî, for instance, when it comes to acquiring seeds.

So building this cooperative has also been a way to unify the village and to structure the work?

Of course, this is the case. Now we speak together, we decide together what we will plant, whether something is good or bad, and what season we will plant, in a communal way. Before everybody used to produce what they wanted, so there was a lot of unnecessary effort for no good reason. Also, if you work only on your land, you need to bring your tractor each time, whereas nowadays we coordinate and plan and cultivate together and we also organise assemblies to discuss how each season went and what we could improve. The committee takes into consideration these assemblies, as does the 'Union of Cooperatives' in Tirbespî, and decisions are made for the next season. The thing I want to underline is that everybody in this region is taking part.

It sounds like you have increased production through systematising.

Of course, production is good but more importantly the division of labour is much better because everybody is working in the village. We decide together what each family needs, we divide what we produce between all the families and sell the rest. When we sell it, the money is put in a communal fund. We see what is needed for the whole village; for example, some of it we use to repair our

tractor immediately, and another part we keep for needs families have at a later stage.²²

How is the money distributed? Is it just evenly distributed per head? Or is it according to your role in the production process?

Right now it is divided per family here. If you have a family of ten or a family of three you receive the same amount.

Self-organisation is a beautiful and difficult thing. What challenges are you facing?

It is difficult for me to say what is difficult because compared to the situation before it is much easier to work now, so I would say that we have no problem. To give you an example of the difference between life then and communal life now; if you had a problem with electricity for your house you had to go to the electrician and ask how much it would cost. Since the commune and the cooperative have been built, there is a committee for the electricity of the village that can take money from the communal fund and fix it, regardless of who you are or whether or not you have money. If you have a problem in the village, you can go to the committee and the problem will be fixed, such as the electricity, for example. In this way everybody benefits. It is also building up society, and all the people are responsible for one another.

22 “The income of a cooperation are distributed as follows: 5% go to the union of cooperatives, 25% will go to the funds of this cooperative that can be used to expand and develop further cooperative activities and the remaining 70% will be open for the assembly to decide, typically it will be distributed among the members.” (Heval Zinar 2020)*

*Heval Zinar. 2020. "Revolution And Cooperatives: Thoughts About My Time With The Economic Committee In Rojava". *Internationalistcommune.com*. <https://internationalistcommune.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Revolution-and-Cooperatives-1.pdf>., last access: 4th February 2021.

What, for you, is the essence of the Rojava revolution and the resistance that is happening here?

I would say there are two things: first, we are living on our own lands, which was something that was not possible before; and secondly, we are doing it as the Kurds. Before, in this region, I could not even say 'I am a Kurd,' I could not even speak my language. Today, I am living from my land and I am living my Kurdish identity, which was something impossible under the Ba'ath regime. Our identity was completely denied and even criminalised. There is also the equality and unity of the different peoples of this region. Today, I am saying I am a Kurd, but that does not mean that I am oppressing the Syriac or the Arab. We Kurds, Arabs, and Syriac can live together in a trustworthy and united way.

All those things that have been achieved in this revolution, the Turkish attacks are trying to destroy. This is really one of the greatest and dirtiest oppressions we are living under. We hope that Europe and the rest of the world will be able to put pressure on them to stop this invasion. Not one bullet has been fired from Rojava to Turkey. After Efrîn, they massacred our people, drove them out of their homes, using criminal groups like Daesh (ISIS). And Turkey continues to use Daesh and other jihadist gangs in Serêkaniye, and Girê Spî; cities, which have been plundered, the people massacred and displaced. We condemn this invasion and we will resist because this is our land and these are our people.

We have to put our hands together, not to leave each other and fight together. Turkey goes even so far as to cut the heads of our children. What have these children done? What have the old people done? The Turkish state is involved in all of these dirty activities.

But the essence of the revolution will not be destroyed. This revolution is a dream considering where we have come from. Today, you have Armenians, Circassians, Yazidis, Syriacs, Assyrians, Kurds, Arabs etc.; all of those people, living a mosaic of equality. We, as Kurds, especially have been oppressed for 100 years, and throughout this time we have been completely separated from our families in the different parts of Kurdistan, which is today still the case in many parts of Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria. We have faced a lot of oppression, which is maybe why this revolution is a dream for us.

Before, especially in this Al-Hasakah region – as the Regime used to call it – we had no factories, no lands; we had really nothing. Even when we had ideas or visions of what we could have built, there was no authorisation given to do so. And this is reflected in individuals, too, as my example shows: I had studied until my baccalaureate, but I was not allowed to receive my diploma because I was from here and I was a Kurd, which meant not having a ‘legal’ identity. I wanted to continue my studies, but was not allowed to do so, and hence, I had to continue my work as a shepherd. This is one of the small realities of this country before the revolution.

We thank you a lot.

Thank you very much!



Our goal is that all people can preserve and defend their culture, not just in Rojava, but also in the whole of Kurdistan, and perhaps in the whole world

Member of TEV-ÇAND [Movement for Democratic Culture and Art] Centre in Kobanê

Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. Can you talk about this studio and about why they are filming here today?

When we start talking about this studio, it is important to go back a bit. Before, we didn't have all this equipment. At the beginning, we were recording on tape [cassette]. But then many pieces of music were on the same tape, it became complicated. Today, we are working on tracks and because of this, we prepare the music, we produce it, and artists are coming for singing and for music video recording, for example, as you can see here today.

What's your work here?

My work is practically to put the music together, to mix the tracks, and also to find the people. For example, if you need the sound of an instrument, I will find the artist that can play the piece on guitar or other instruments, and then I put it together.

The studio is situated in an arts and cultural centre, can you tell us about this place in the context of the revolution?

I have to say that our revolution started before the Rojava revolution. Already before, we used to fight for our rights, and we used to preserve our culture. When the Regime was here, we were working in secret, and our group [Koma Botan] used to exist before, but of course it was secret. At that time, Koma Botan had

many parts, you had the dancing group, you had the music group, and you had the singing group.

So, we were working on this cultural revolution before, but after the revolution started, other people started doing the same. We, as Kurds always fought for culture, but with the revolution Arab people joined, too, and a cultural centre was built at this place in 2013. On that base, we wanted to defend our culture, but not just our culture. Our goal was to make it possible for all the people to be able to live their culture and to protect it. In our movement, there is the word 'democratic' to indicate this orientation, that we are not just preserving the Kurdish culture, but we want to give the tools and to help fight for all people that are living on this earth, so that they are able to defend their culture, too.

So, before the Rojava revolution, we didn't have so many opportunities. We used to rent a house to carry out our activities, and we didn't have a lot of means. And then after the 19th July revolution [anniversary of the Rojava revolution], we got this place.

Before this centre was built, art was seen as something shameful in our society. Not a lot of people wanted their children to be artists, or even to practise an art as an occupation. But today, after some years, most of the children that you will find in Kobanê know how to play an instrument. But not just an instrument, they also get into the music culture, they know what notes are, they know the styles of playing; they understand the music culture.

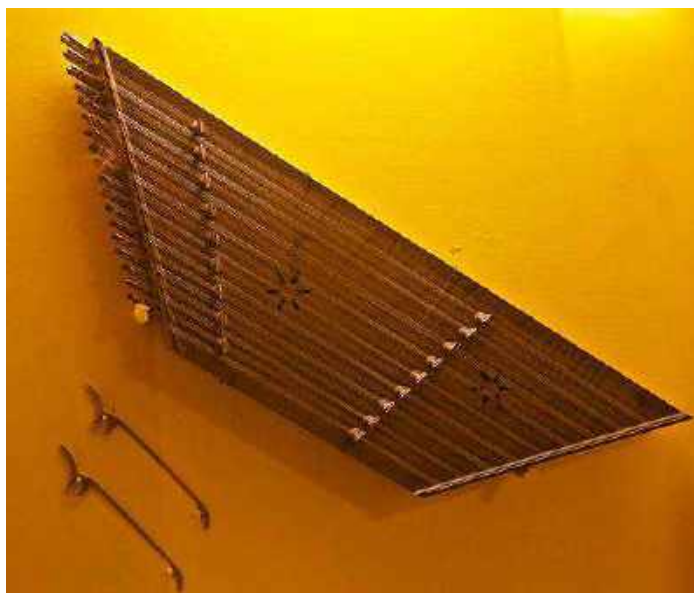
They start to get engaged with the culture, basically?

Yes. In this centre we have many parts, or let's say departments/sections; we have a dancing section, a theatre, a library, a music section with instruments, and also a music academy. Hundreds of people receive education in this centre.

There are right now programmes which we started for children between 6 and 10 years old to learn two instruments [*keman* (violin), and *santur*], and we started with 10 children in the hope that this number will get bigger. It is a project that may take like 10 years in order to really master those instruments, because these are really local instruments.

Could you explain more about *Santur*?

Santur is an instrument from East Kurdistan, that is somewhere between a piano and a xylophone, where you hit the notes. There is just one here at the moment, I will show it to you. It is not such a common instrument. (*Shows the Santur*)



Picture of a Santur

It's got strings, doesn't it? I've never seen that before.

Yes. This is an instrument that in Rojava [Western Kurdistan] is not really used. It's more used in Rojhelat [Eastern Kurdistan].

So, you are combining culture from all of Kurdistan?

Not just Kurdish culture of course, but also the whole region's culture. Like here you have a lot of Arab people living, too; it's not just Kurdish people. We are trying to do this with the whole population living here. It is also important, also in the context of the attacks by the Turkish state. If you look at what happened in Efrîn, for example, you will see that what the occupiers tried to do first was to dissolve and to eliminate the culture of the people. So, defending the culture is important, and we are combining elements of all Kurdistan, but also of all the region.

Can you tell us about some of the projects you are working on at the moment? I'd be interested to hear about some of the projects.

The last thing that I have been working on are two songs. For one of the songs, we will shoot a video clip later. It's a song about the resistance of a city in Rojava. It's with 13 artists singing, and everyone also with their solo parts. The song is about ten minutes. We are also doing festivals, as we don't want our children to lose their culture. We want them to preserve their culture against the capitalist attacks that are trying all the time to homogenise all kinds of cultures, dissolving local cultures.

And the 13 singers, are they all locals from Kobanê?

Yes, they are all from Kobanê.

And what genre is it?

It's like classical Kurdish music. So, the music is made by local people from Kobanê, but the lyrics are written by an artist from Efrîn.

You talked briefly before about organising, and the movement. Can you go into that a bit more?

TEV-ÇAND is the Movement for Democratic Culture and Art. We are an artistic and cultural movement in order to preserve the culture of the people, and our goal is that all people can preserve and defend their culture, not just in Rojava, but also in the whole of Kurdistan, and perhaps in the whole world. So, this is not the work of one person but it has to be a movement. We are making cultural and artistic resistance against attacks that are waged on art and culture. And, we should also not forget about the special place of Kobanê, as a city that has become a symbol for resistance. We take this idea of protecting culture and art as something really important, inspired by the philosophy of Heval Apo [Abdullah Öcalan].

For instance, we don't accept official Arabesque style of music. When I say we don't accept official Arabesque style of music, it does not mean that we go around, and forbid people to practise it. People can do it by themselves, but not in our structures, because we consider this as an attack on our cultural background. And this is why we are here - it is part of our defense of regional culture.

If we, for example, look at artists like Müslüm Gürses and İbrahim Tatlıses, they take something from a culture and turn it [usually for commercialising, capitalist purposes] into something far away from where it originated. Music is culture. Similarly, if you, for example, wear something that you call Kurdish clothes but that are not Kurdish clothes, you turn it into something else. When we say Arabesque we are not talking about Arab culture or Turkish culture. It has this name, but it's not that meaning. It's more about turning and changing the culture in a way that is far away from

where it originated, and using it for other purposes than for what purposes it had formerly been practised.

Thank you very much.



Cinema here is a revolution in itself. It is a revolution inside the revolution

Heval Gule, Heval Nadia, Heval Hogir, Komîna Film a Rojava

What is Komîna Film?

Heval Hogir: Komîna Film is a place to make movies. It was founded in 2015 to address the need to have these things in Rojava. In the beginning, we started by screening movies, not to produce them. We can say that in Syria, in general, the situation of cinema had not been very good since the 70s. There was not so much production anymore, and the culture of the cinema was completely dead in society. Even rooms for screenings were instead used for weddings and celebrations. So before making movies, our work was to screen movies in order to build up a culture of cinema.

In the beginning, we started screening movies in the Arts and Culture centres, then in villages, then also in the cities, where we used to close the street and put on a public screening. This was to create an environment for cinema, for every city to have a culture of cinema, also working on creating the wish to go to the cinema. After that we began educations, sharing our knowledge about how to produce movies: How to write movies, how to shoot movies.

Why is it called Komîna Film? Because in many art forms, you can be an individual, like, one person can play one instrument alone, in theatre you can have one person playing a role, painting a picture one can do by oneself etc. But when it comes to cinema, it is not like that. You need a lot of people to make movies, and sometimes we need between 100 to 200 people to make one. This was the decision behind naming us Komîna Film, which in Kurdish also means 'group'.

For Rojava and the Kurds before this revolution, many people did not know that Kurds existed. Until now a lot of people don't know that there are Kurds. After this revolution, they may know their political representative [Abdullah Öcalan], but they don't know our society. Right now, there are some friends who are going to Calcutta for a film festival where the movie 'Ji bo Azadiyê' will be screened, which is on the resistance of the cities in Bakur, in Northern Kurdistan. Cinema is also a tool to let people know about our culture and who we are. Today, the people of Calcutta are more familiar with our culture, with our language, and with our forms of expressions.

The question is not just about making movies on this revolution, it is to make movies made by the people who are in this revolution. A lot of people from outside of Rojava have come to make movies in Rojava but there are a lot of things you are not able to express or represent. So, the role of Komîna Film was to be a part of this revolution and to also be able to give an expression of this revolution from within to the world.

Just to clarify, for somebody that might not know anything about the way society is structured here, what is the difference between a film commune and a production company?

The difference between the commune and, let's say, a cinema production company is that the cinema production company is usually following a market purpose to make profit, with an individual or a small group possessing it, where people do the work for money. While the commune is not just a place to make movies. It is an opportunity. You have also other places that are linked to the commune, where we work and live. For instance, the Academy *Şehid Yekta Herekol*, which is where we are having a communal life together, eating together, providing education with

teachers where people can, for example, become movie makers. This is also our objective in Komîna Film. And someone who comes here is not forced to work with Komîna Film, it is not that you come to Komîna Films then we give you an education and then you are here. Once you've finished your education you can also practise your art by yourself or elsewhere. But it is of course different, when you go, for example, to most cinema production companies, where you have to sign deals, following expectations that might not be yours, selling the rights to your movies etc.

Komîna Film is also working for society, creating a culture of cinema in our society; a society which was deprived of these things for a long time. And it's not just for our people here, there's a lot of people who come from outside if they need an education or if they need to make their movies, we will help them without strings attached. It is not like we are saying "by coming to Komîna Films, you have to produce a movie for us" or anything like that. Everybody is welcome to come and discuss, to get an education, to produce things. We don't practise this as work but as art. What is important for me in cinema is the art, not to produce works following the logic of profit.

What came first for you, your love for cinema or your participation in the revolution?

So, my situation is perhaps a bit different to the other friends. I didn't live in Rojava. I was in Damascus. Since my childhood I liked acting, and I was also working there as an actor and also designing sets. When I came to Rojava, it was because I was searching for the right place to live and to work, and I found it here, also in this movement. But in the beginning I didn't work in cinema, I came to work in society. But then the friends said they were going to open a committee or institution for cinema and I said

“OK, I want to join in.” I had one month of education, and then I had the opportunity to stay for one year in the Academy *Şehid Yekta Herekol*. I arrived in this work through my love for cinema, but I had come to Rojava before out of love for the revolution. After my one year of education, I really liked acting at first, but I developed a love for film making, too. In general, I like to diversify the work. To understand how a movie is made, you have to experience all the work and be able to have a clear perspective on that.

So how is work divided in the commune?

Heval Nadia: Let’s speak a bit more about the academy to explain this. At the end of your education in the academy, you have to go and practise. Let’s say the education is consisting of twelve people, not that many, and everybody has to write a scenario, then the whole team has to produce it. So for each movie scenario that has been written, you have the friends taking different roles. For one movie, they will be the ones writing the scenario, for other movies they will be producing, for others they do the editing etc. So, at the education they are able to get a deeper practical insight into all the different works.

So in the group of 12, each one will try a different role whilst working on these shorter films?

Heval Nadia: Yes. So in all the different movies, each student should have at least been once a camera operator, the one writing the scenario one time, another time producing etc. And after that, when they go on to work in the commune, they are able to multi-task. But of course, as Heval Hogir said, it is also the question of will and the love for the work. For instance, at the beginning he was an actor, and then he liked to be a camera operator. So, we

take different places and develop our skills. And, for example, if someone is really good at editing, that person will produce the work, not doubt about it. But it depends what you enjoy doing and what you want to develop in yourself. Then you will be able to do this work and you will never feel that you are stuck.

Heval Hogir: I want to emphasise that at the end of the day, we are still working altogether, despite everyone having their specialisation. If I see something wrong with the set design, for example, I will also help out fixing it. You have this kind of interactive dynamic between the different works. Also, when it comes to acting, we, as members of Komîna Film, are also playing as actors. While most of us have a specialisation, we are doing what is needed. At the end of the day, our work involves all aspects that are needed in making a movie. And apart from us acting at times, most of our other actors are not professional actors either, but are people coming from our society. People who are receiving an education and putting it into practice.

What is the role of cinema in this revolution?

Heval Nadia: For me, I would not have known so many people and so many good friends, but also so many places if there had not been cinema work. What I learned in the commune was really useful because we are living in a region where there is so much war, so much resistance, and it's really important that the people from here who witnessed and lived through those things could express it. So, it is really important for expressing what life is like in the revolution. We also successfully participated in international festivals for the past years. People from here go around the world to present our movies. This is really important for the revolution because it is presenting the revolution beyond borders. It also has a

big influence outside. For my latest project I can say that I'm currently doing a movie on the women's village [Jinwar] and why the women's village has been built in Rojava. I'm doing this movie in Komîna Film as a woman and as a member of the commune. This will have its impact inside our society and also internationally.

Heval Gule: It needed an insurrection and revolution to be able to to make the work we are making today, to build up the commune and to work in it. So of course, when we saw this opportunity we said we need to do something for this revolution. Two things are really important: to let the revolution be known through this work, and change people's opinions of cinema. Before, people knew the cinema through the eyes of the Syrian Regime, as something not good. You could screen a movie in some places occasionally, but it wasn't really accepted by society. Public screenings in streets were also very new and not really accepted before; but we wanted to show real cinema as something that shouldn't be forbidden. For me, and when I saw the cinema of the Regime I didn't like cinema, which had an initial impact on me. But after I learned more about it, I really liked it, and I liked to show these things to people. To give you an idea of how people saw cinema here, we can give the example of the cinema in Amûdê which burned around 60 years ago.²³ So, we wanted to change this by going into society, showing screenings in villages, and also screening for kids to change their mentality. Cinema should never again be seen as a bad place that should apparently be burned. I think the revolution made the work

23 See for some more background, for example: <https://anfenglish.com/rojava-northern-syria/amude-cinema-massacre-to-be-remembered-at-kobane-film-festival-30791>

of cinema possible, and the cinema made people aware of the revolution.

Heval Nadia: Before, all things were forbidden for Kurds. Making a movie about Kurds in their language was something unthinkable. So, to make a movie on the revolution in Kurdish language is a really big step we made. There were some movies before, but they weren't in Kurdish, and the film makers could only hint at things, being really careful in their works. But now, we can express ourselves in our language, and this is a really important result that has come out of the revolution when we look at cinema, which is also part of the revolution.

Heval Gule: Cinema here is a revolution in itself. It is a revolution inside the revolution. For instance, in Serêkaniyê the fighting is still ongoing, and the war in Serêkaniyê may end some day, but in cinema it can continue to live and be shown. For example, a movie on World War II is able to show what happened at that time, like a witness. There are, for example, the Lumière brothers who, through their movies, were able to show how society was living at that time, how they dressed, what their interactions were like etc. Cinema is able to portray the identity of society. Through cinema, a person can say "it's me, it's my culture, this is what I want to show." It is as important as language. Identity is not language. Language is usually very important, but a lot of movies without sound could illustrate the culture or the identity of the people, sometimes better than with language. In 2011, we could have filmed much more of what was happening in the time of the beginning of this revolution and we could have made many more movies, but unfortunately this didn't happen. People couldn't do it, there were barely any means, and things could not be realised.

Cinema can really move things, it can make the revolution live for 100 years, it can prevent things from being forgotten or erased. For me, I give the example of a Soviet sniper called Vasily, whose story and that of the Soviet resistance I got to know through film. And I think that all homelands, all people are able to express themselves through cinema. But it is also really important that people in this revolution make movies themselves because the ones watching the movie will then understand what is important to the people living here, how to best express society here; which is different when somebody else from outside comes and makes a movie on the revolution without taking into account what's important to the people here. Cinema is also the expression of the people.

When you joined the film commune, especially as women, what was the reaction of your family? Were there any difficulties?

Heval Gule: My family had no problem and even encouraged me, but a lot of people in society said it wasn't real work, saying "what kind of work is film making?" Good work takes time, and to make a good movie takes more than one week, or one month, so my response to society was to let the work speak for itself and show them our movies. But regarding family, there wasn't pressure.

Heval Nadia: For me, it was a bit different. If I had gone to university, there would not be a problem, even if it meant being further away from my family. But I was leaving for movies, and it was something new that they did not know about. So, it was really difficult for my family and they did not want to let me go. My mother even completely forbade me to go. So, I took my bag and left against their will. They asked me to come back and I told them

I would not come back until I finished my work, which was four months of education and then four months of work, so eight months in total. It was the first time that I had been away from my family for such a long time. I would say to them “I’m with our movement, and I’m doing my work and I am happy. I will not come back before I finish my work.” The response of society was similar to what Heval Gule was saying, that it was seen as unnecessary, that it didn’t make sense.

So when I returned once I had finished, I spoke with people to bring them closer to cinema , showing them what my work is and why it is important. To begin with I showed them two movies that I had dubbed in Kurdish, and by watching them they became much more interested.

Step by step I would show them movies, and [they would say] “no, we don’t want to see movies that you did not produce, show us the movie that you are part of.” At the time my uncle also asked, “hey, why is Nadia making movies?”, so I told him “come one day and I’ll write a scenario for you, and you will produce it.” My family would also always ask then “when will your movies come out? When can we see them?” and things like that. They are really interested now, but the road to this has been really long. But as we say: Berxwedan jiyane – Resistance is life!

Heval Hogir: Unfortunately, all of our dubbing work was done in Serêkaniyê, and all of this equipment is now in the hands of Turkish mercenaries, as a result of the recent invasion.

Could you list your past production and what you're currently working on?²⁴

So, on the films. The first one was a documentary called '*Zarok in Em*' which means 'We are the Children'. There are also three documentaries called '*Cîroka Bajarên Wêranbûyî / Stories of Destroyed Cities*', telling the stories of the city of Cizîrê, the city of Kobanê, and the city of Şengal; three documentaries finished in one movie. There is also what we spoke about earlier, short movies by 12 students that have also been produced. There are three documentary that have been made: one on the work of the Academy *Şehid Yekta Herekol*; then on the city and battle of Tirbespî, the other on Şengal. Then there is a documentary that was called '*Darên bitenê*' which means 'The Lonely Trees' which is a mix between poems and music called 'Dengbêj' in Kurdish. There is also one film called '*Mal / Home*' about Raqqa. There is also a project on 'Dengbêj' in Şengal that is being edited at the moment, and the name of the project is 'Dengbêjiya Şengalê'.

There was also collaboration with Komîna Çiya on making movies together. There is - the movie we were talking about earlier, that is right now screened in the festival of Calcutta, the movie is called '*Ji bo Azadizê / The end will be spectacular*' about the resistance in Amed; the film was shot in Kobanê, and it has also been selected for the festival in Rotterdam. There is also the documentary that Heval Nadia is preparing on *Jinwar*, the women's village.

But right now, we are focusing on starting again education. For two years we could not open the Academy *Şehid Yekta Herekol*, because of the security issues resulting from the war. And what we

24 You can follow the works of Komîna Film a Rojava, for example, here:
- https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsn_WYoA_6hG8Mr3RsG1gaA/videos
- <https://vimeo.com/user124727395>

are continuing is to make ‘*Cinema gerok*’, which means to make a tour in the different villages, to make screenings, especially for children. Our last experience was really good, like there were 200 children joining each production, more or less. We also made, like Heval Nadia was saying, two dubbings – the voice – for two movies; one of Charlie Chaplin, namely *The Kid*, and the was *Spirit*; the latter is like an animation movie on a Mustang, on a wild horse. The movie has been translated and dubbed into Kurdish.

And there is also a co-production with a Catalan friend called Alba Sotorra [who also directed the movie *Commander Arian*], making a movie on the women in Daesh.

Thanks you very much!



We know that we have to show the reality of war from here to European countries, too; to people who support Turkey. They have to know the price we are paying for those policies.

Ferhad Zagros, Youth Media

Could you please introduce yourself?

My name is Ferhad. I'm from Heseke. I'm doing media work and journalism. I do this work as a member of the Revolutionary Youth and whenever there is a social event like a demonstration or an education, we cover it as the media committee of the youth. As part of the youth movement, we also take part in other activities, such as taekwondo, general and language education.

Where do you publish the reports you do?

In the media of the youth movement. For example, on Nûce Ciwan (website of the youth), and we are also on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media pages.

Why is it important to do media work for the youth movement here in Heseke?

We have to report on everything that has an impact on the society of Heseke, to show the right and wrong things that are happening in our society. This is why it's really important as the youth movement to play our role. Whenever there is an event or something else happening in Heseke, our people in Rojava have to know. The children, the parents, and all of society have to be able to access that media.

What brought you to the youth movement?

In the beginning, of course, it was to be part of defending society and our revolution. As part of the Revolutionary Youth, we are also part of defending society militarily. But I decided to join the media committee of the youth, too. It was important to me to join this media committee and not other media outlets because of the Revolutionary Youth's form of organising within society and our approach of being close to society. Other media committees are not as close to the people and do not cover what we cover, being more focused on other topics, whereas we look at everything that is happening in society.

Do you share the tasks within the committee?

My role is mainly to take videos and photos, but of course there are friends who are responsible for the editing, the sharing, or the production, and each person has their own task, while we learn from one another.

There is a lot of other media outlets? What is the power of yours, of reporting here in Heseke on the ground?

The main thing is that we are active in all cities. You now have media committees in Qamişlo, in Amûdê, in Heseke etc., and the difference between us and other media is that we have the advantage of proximity. I'm not working in another city or sending a team, we are here as members from and working with society. And even if there are a lot of other videos that are published, our advantage is that we are a local news publication group. This is how we are able to have an impact on society, by being from the local society ourselves, too.

What are the difficulties in working in the media here in the city?

In my work, it is difficult to see comrades fall, to go and film when they die. And also to see and film our populations from Efrîn and Serêkaniyê, who have been forced to flee their homes. To see all this misery is difficult for me as a member of the committee. I am working on a project right now, a kind of video, on refugees from Serêkaniyê. Not just in the camps, but here in the city, too. Of course, we are going to Waşokani camp, too, but a lot of schools in Hesekê are currently being used as shelters for refugees, as well.

You see and hear a lot of difficult things, how do you find the strength to power through and continue your work?

Of course, it is difficult to see friends falling, but this revolution gives also a lot of strength. We know that we have to show the reality of war from here to European countries, too; to people who support Turkey. They have to know the price we are paying for those policies. And we also have to show the truth about our enemy, so that it changes one day. This is what motivates me and gives me the strength to continue.

Thank you very much!



People will have evidence through witnesses of this revolution. This is why I think it is important to write stories since sometimes they are more important than History

Fatma Ahmed, Writer, Theatre and Movie Director

Can you please introduce yourself?

My name is Fatma Ahmed. I'm from Serêkaniyê and I'm a writer, but I also do different works in the area of Arts and Culture. During the last years, I used to work in Serêkaniyê, but after what had happened in Serêkaniyê, I joined the work in the city of Heseke.

Please tell us about your work?

First, I want to say that I am a woman, and that I am a writer. At the beginning, when I started to do arts and cultural works I did not write. I started writing after the revolution took place. When the revolution started also in Serêkaniyê, the influence of this revolution was huge on me. After the revolution had made its impact, I started to write theatre pieces, inspired by the revolution. It's important to say that the revolution is not just a matter of weapons or fighting, but that there is also the cultural and artistic aspect of it. So, in the beginning I just started to write, it took me some time to understand how the process and production works. Then there was also a festival of short stories, where I won the first prize. I continued writing short stories and theatre pieces, and after a while I also liked to make short movies. I mainly wrote them, but also produced them. But what I really like in my work is to write. I would like to highlight that theatre is very important. It has a very big influence and impact onto society. In theatre, you can express the mood and

the reality of how society lives; you can show, for example, the problems existing in a society through theatre.

It is also important in relation to my work to speak about the general situation of arts and culture in Rojava. We should not forget that as Kurds our language, our culture, our songs were forbidden. So, after this revolution, the situation changed completely and the people of Rojava were able once again to find their culture, their language, their dances, their musical instruments, their songs, their theatre. In short, the various forms of expressing ourselves were re-discovered through the revolution.

Moreover, with regards to my work, too, we must speak about the role of women in arts and culture.

For example, there are dances where women and men will join, but there are also autonomous dances led and done just by women, as well as there is mixed theatre. But there is also women-only theatre. As women, as artists, and as writers, to be able to express ourselves, to self-educate ourselves, and to have this autonomous artistic and cultural practice is really important, because then women can work on it and the art and culture produced is shaped by certain specificities of women's experiences and expressions.

Maybe you can speak about the piece you are working on at the moment?

The subject of the piece I'm writing on right now is about homeland. There is a small girl that asks her father for three coloured dresses, namely green, red, and yellow, which are the colours of Kurdistan and Rojava. Her father promises that he will bring them to her, but he must go away. Whilst he's away she's awaiting him, but instead the Islamist gangs come and tell her she must go with them. She refuses and says she must wait for her father. They tell her he will not come, and she should not wait for the dresses, they

will not come. She continues to refuse, her will to stay is strong and she keeps her faith that the coloured dresses will come. This story then represents the will and the faith of the people in the success of the revolution through a family story.

The name of the piece is “Wê bavê min bê” (“My father will come back”). The story of this piece is also inspired by the events of Serêkaniyê, where the gangs cut the road and tried to force the people of Serêkaniyê to surrender, but the people kept their faith that this road would be open again.

Why is it important for you to express this story of the invasion, as well as the revolution through art and theatre?

Let me start to answer this question by sharing parts of one of the stories I wrote about another little girl: A little girl was on the balcony of her home, she said to her mother, “I don't want to go on the balcony anymore, because there are a lot of things happening there.” A discussion ensues with the mother and child, and in the end her mother asks her: “But why are you not going to the balcony, please explain why you aren't going to the balcony?” So the girl takes her mother to the balcony, and explains that she wanted to see the children running, playing, and living, and says: “The children should not die, but run, play, and laugh.”

Like I said at the beginning of the interview, everyone has their role in the revolution. Soldiers fight, artists make art, there are different expressions, and different ways to join the revolution. My way of living this revolution is through my art; this is how I contribute to it. When it comes to writing stories, it's important to know that culture is language and that language is also culture. In the end, the history of the people are their stories, all the little stories expressing our pain, our joy, all the moments we lived through, the things we see, and the things we want to express; and this is what

will remain, especially after the revolution. Through all the stories, we immortalise these moments. People will have evidence through witnesses of this revolution. This is why I think it is important to write stories since sometimes they are more important than History [with a big 'H', (as the study of and the writing of the past)].

Before the revolution, was there (a) theatre, (b) was it accessible, and (c) were you involved in it, or going to theatre?

I did not previously work in theatre at all, but my father was an actor and a writer. The teacher of my father, and my father have been very inspiring people for me. Concerning accessibility, when we talk about Kurdish theatre it was completely forbidden. The only place where theatre in Kurdish could be expressed was at the Newroz celebration. This in itself was a real adventure, to be able to make rehearsals and to prepare the productions. It happened in houses, in a low voice, because the neighbours mustn't hear it as it was forbidden and dangerous. I used to watch my father and his teacher, whose name is Mohammed Rasul. And as I said before, through Mohammed Rasul's good work, I was also inspired me a lot. At the beginning of the revolution, while some developments in arts and culture existed, we did not have an education on it yet in the way it is available now. So, I educated myself through the internet, I read a lot of books and pieces, and I went to see a lot of theatre plays.

Are there any theatre writers you particularly enjoy, or see yourself in line of reference with?

It's important to understand different realities. For instance, other artists speak about their people, but not many of my people have been able to express themselves. For example, Shakespeare has no problems to speak about his society. That is why when I write, I

want to write about my society where I am living. Of course, I read a lot of the so-called classics, but they didn't really inspire me, because it is not what I wanted to express in my works. I wanted to write about the pain, the work, and the life of my people. I like to speak about the Kurdish people that could not express themselves for a long time. This is what I really want to do, to talk about the pain and the stories of the Kurdish people.

For the piece you are working on now, how many people are in the theatre company or production? Is it a big or a small set up?

There is a theatre group here now. In Serêkaniyê, my group was the group of Şehîd Marwan. In every city there is a group. Mine is a mixed group of men and women, made up of seven actors. I used to write and produce, but here I have just written the piece. The teacher of my father is the producer/director. I feel very honoured to be working with him, as I admired him when I was younger; before, I was just a child looking up to him, given that he is also a very well-known teacher. Before I was doing work inspired by his work, but now I am working alongside him.

Are the writings printed, or distributed at all? Also, where can you see the films?

There is a short movie that you can find on the facebook page: Çand û huner a Waşokani. And there are some movies I made with a writer who is based in Germany but the producing took place in Serêkaniyê's Arts and Culture centre, where you could find most of the works.

Concerning the writings, I could have told you before Serêkaniyê fell, but right now it is too painful to tell you where you can find these writings. There is no book, I wanted to make one, or at least

a gathering of the texts to be used maybe in theatre, but we did not get to that...and then Serêkaniyê fell and is since occupied.

(She tries to find pictures of some of the writings, she then shows pictures of her mother and father; her father is currently in Germany)

I am the only one of my family here, all the rest of my family migrated.

(Showing another photo) This is when I won the first prize for a story in a writing competition.

Are you still writing for Newroz?

Of course, Newroz is a big celebration for Kurds, and of course others and I myself continue to prepare for every Newroz; theatre and dances, we put all our effort into this day, because if you want to say something to the people, this is the day when you can speak to all the Kurdish people. This is a day when all the Kurdish people come together, even if they are angry, or poor, or have no time. It's a very special day that we never miss, especially for dancing, theatre, and writings. Usually three months before Newroz we begin to prepare for the presentations and performances.

Thank you very much!



We do music to have a positive impact on society, and to contribute to social and human changes in a society that was dominated and oppressed by Daesh/ISIS

Serdar Sherif, Singer, Teacher, Artist

Can you start by introducing yourself and your work, please?

My name is Serdar Sherif. I am from Kobanê, and I was spending most time in Kobanê and in Aleppo. Our house was in Hadad, in Aleppo, but I studied business administration in Damascus. I also study music and have a diploma in Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

I founded a project called '1,000 People', and I'm working in the Arts and Culture Centre in Raqqa. This project is also in collaboration with UNICEF, and we work with children that got injured during the war, especially by mines. In 2014, at an event in Damascus, I was the only one singing in Kurdish, next to some Arabic songs, as well, and also wearing Kurdish clothes.

In 2017 then, I got kidnapped²⁵ in Damascus because of my involvement in continuous calls for peace.

What happened after the kidnapping?

After the kidnapping, they told me to leave Syria. For five days, I got really badly hit and tortured, and I had problems with my memory after that. So after I came back to Aleppo, I continued with a programme on tourism in Syria. After the torture, I had to

25 In the interview, it does not become clear who kidnapped Serdar. It is a common practice that gangs [so-called Çete] kill, or kidnap people involved with the Autonomous Self-Administration of North-East Syria, asking for ransom, for example. Çete can oppose or be part of the Syrian Regime.

have treatment and also therapy for my memory. My kidnapping led to me having the feeling of wanting to work even more on peace. I participated in a lot of talks in Lebanon, and in Syria on that subject, and I have also been writing in the newspaper *Al-Salam*, and also in the newspaper *Berçav*, which is based in Hewlêr (Erbil), Southern Kurdistan.

Can you tell us about your work in music, and about what kind of music you are making here?

After my kidnapping, I was in Aleppo, and there was a woman friend – who was also working for UNICEF – who said that I have to continue, I cannot surrender and be intimidated by them cause this is exactly what they want; so, she motivated me to continue with my works. And I continued to perform at different events, always in Kurdish clothes, continuing also my works in music at all times here. After that, I was thinking of going to France with the skills that I have learned to also continue the works there, but also to get post-traumatic experience treatment, cause the kidnapping continued having an impact on me and. For example, whenever my stress level rose, I used to faint.

I then went back to Rojava, to Kobanê, and saw my father who told me to go to see the comrades from here to discuss the situation with them. The comrades spoke to me and said that they would really like me to be able to continue doing my work in music and continue making my art, asking me to come to the Youth Centre, and the Art and Culture Centre. And in this context I then also came up with the project ‘1,000 People’.

Also, when I started working with the friends, I talked to them about going to Raqqa. I wanted to be in Raqqa, because this is a place where it had been attempted to completely erase music. Under ISIS/Daesh rule, you could not sing, music was forbidden,

so the children also did not sing. Especially after my kidnapping, I saw even the greater importance and responsibility of doing this work. When I started, you could, of course, still feel the influence ISIS had onto the population; people were saying: ‘Music? No, we are not interested in that.’ This was especially noticeable, when I introduced my art, my music, which the people didn’t really accept. But then I began to sing songs in Arabic, especially songs by Fairuz, also giving the children here the opportunity to grow up with music. This could, for instance, be done with Arabic music by someone like Fairuz, who is Lebanese, and one of the most famous singers in the Middle East.

Besides my activities in music, I used to work also a lot with international organisations like UNDP, UNICEF when I was in Aleppo, whether for translation or something else; so, in the context of these works I also learned and gained experience to psychologically support others. And here in Raqqa, I came across all those children who grew up amongst ISIS. So, I immediately thought, it would be good to combine the skills I have: psychologically supporting the children with music. And since I’ve been here, there have been at least 160 children that I have been able to work with and give support to.

I can imagine that children growing up under Daesh rule experienced horrible things and came across a lot of difficulties. What differences do you see in them compared to other children?

There are a lot of differences between children here and other children. Here, it is in a way like the children’s mind, and all their critical thought had completely been killed off, and their thoughts are all ‘dark’; there are no bright thoughts at all.

I get asked a lot by the children when we have music lessons whether I pray, whether I am a Muslim. And even though I am a Muslim Kurd, I am being told 'No, here you are not a Muslim. Here you are Jewish, Christian, Yazidi.' And while it is true that Kurds were Yazidis for a long time, a lot of us have become Muslims, coming also from Bakur. There was also an incident when I went to the house of one of the children I teach music to, where the parents said: 'Do you want to make non-believers out of our children? Why are you teaching those things; this is blasphemy.' To many here, I am a non-believer [Kafir]. And behind my back, there's this indirect pressure of people wanting me to leave, but nobody says it face-to-face.

But it is a necessity that we do not get distracted by this and that we continue our works and contribute to this revolution. How do we do it here? After all, there are a lot of children here that got injured as a result of war. So at our concerts, we also frequently collect money, to buy prostheses for children, like artificial legs or artificial arms. Of course, we are not able to cover the fees all by ourselves cause it is really expensive, but given our means we are contributing in the best way we can.

Are the kids, needing prostheses also coming to your music lessons as students in the Arts and Culture Centre?

No, up until now it hasn't been possible, but it is planned in the future to have it in the Arts and Culture Centre. But right now, we are thinking of a temporary solution. Comrades have a house here, where we are thinking of setting up lessons for the children first. All the money me and friends have left, we also put into setting up the house in a way in which it will then also be possible to build up a music group with the children.

Apart from this, works that we cannot take care of here and other problems we see, we write articles about and publish them. So, I also write articles about the wider issues in order to raise awareness and to find solutions for the children in the long run.

Do you see any changes in the children, once they start coming to lessons?

Yes, a lot of children change but there are difficulties. At the beginning, all the children were always wearing black, for example, and then I started to think ‘these things should change, and with some creativity we can do that, so that the thinking changes as well’. From the events where I participated and was singing, as I was telling before, I got my inspiration of having a different aesthetic. So we discussed with friends and decided to found a group, having all same, but more colourful clothes. When it comes to changes more generally, we can see more changes in young women, but when it comes to young boys, we really notice that Daesh has had a big influence on them. A lot of boys say that the time of Daesh was good, more peaceful and life in general was better than right now. But this does not apply to all the boys, of course, but in young girls we see less of a lasting impact Daesh had on them.

Nevertheless, there is a lot of violence amongst children, also amongst siblings, in terms of hitting each other, and even in some cases killings amongst them happen. So, it has been very difficult to change things and get a good dynamic going. There are also parents who do not allow their children to come here. For example, recently some parents did not allow their daughter to come here, but two days ago, she still arrived at the centre here, with poison in her hand, saying, “if you don’t teach me, I will kill myself. I want to practise my music and my art.” Then I said that her parents do

not allow and accept it. But we have to find a way; her voice is really good, as well, and we will work with her, also working on resolving the situation with her parents.

Besides all this work, I have also been making and editing some videos with songs as educational material for children, on what is happening here, the impacts of war on population, and how society is dealing with all hardships. For example, we recently made a video on the ongoing war in Efrîn and the ongoing resistance and everyday life, including the life of children in Şehba – where everyday bombings still continue though –, which has also a lot of positive influence on the children.

Can you say a bit more about the ‘1,000 people’ project?

The project ‘1000 people’ is an art, and music project. We know that Daesh twisted the minds of people, and with this project we want to contribute to ‘cleaning the dirt’ that Daesh has left in people’s heads. The project is a combination of psychological, humanitarian, and musical support. Of course, I’m an artist and I really like music, but our goal is not to do music for its own end. The goal in this project is a social and human one. This is the main focus. We do music to have a positive impact on society, and to contribute to social and human changes in a society that was dominated and oppressed by Daesh/ISIS.

Thank you very much. Is there anything else that’s important to you, that you want to add?

I would like to say that it’s been now about one year that I have been in Raqqa. What is really important to me and actually all of us is that our voice and messages arrive everywhere. Which message? The message of what we are fighting for, namely for freedom, peace, and humanity. This is something that has always

motivated me in my art, but also in my life. Especially, after the experience of my kidnapping, that I told you about before. In this interview, I also want to call upon the British, Germans American, the Arab peoples, and everyone around the world to rise up, and to raise their voices for peace, for freedom, and for humanity that we have built up, continue building up, and defending here. Here, in Rojava, we have now freedom, but what we are working on is not only limited to the regions of Rojava. It is important that this freedom and peace spreads to all of Syria and beyond.

But there is of course the issues of war and the current situation. Before, I was not afraid of speaking for peace and freedom, and also performing at events, but the situation is changing due to the occupation in some parts of Rojava. I cannot say that I am sleeping without fear; I am definitely afraid of what might happen. We have seen what happened to Hevrîn Xelef, who was a strong voice for peace, and who was brutally murdered on the motorway close to Girê Spî.²⁶ No matter what I do, I am not moving like before. I am taking care of every step I take, which is difficult. Now, for example, I cannot easily go to Lebanon or other places. We need to protect and defend ourselves; otherwise we will get killed. And that is why it is really important that we do not only continue having freedom in Rojava but also in all of Syria. This is also what we try to contribute to do in our daily lives, also with the artistic works I am involved in, and the calls for peace I am making when performing at events.

But because of my performances, and also the participation in other activities – such as big demonstrations and events, where I

26 For more on Hevrîn Xelef, see, for example: <https://anfenglish.com/features/havrin-khalaf-a-life-dedicated-to-women-s-revolution-38472>

also gave speeches – it is not only the Syrian regime that has an interest in killing me, but also the Turkish state.



In this revolution, we learn two things in particular: comradeship and equality, and especially comradeship and equality between women and men.

Aziz Abe, Taekwondo fighter and teacher

Thank you for taking the time to speak to us. Can you tell us about yourself and your involvement in Taekwondo?

My name is Aziz Abe, I am 33 years old, and I am from Heseke. I am an internationalist and I have had an international approach since my childhood. I used to be interested in sports and would practise it, but I could not pursue sports freely until this revolution. On that basis, these two things – revolutionary life and sport – are interlinked.

The revolution allowed us as youth in Rojava to be able to practise our sport in a much wider frame with a lot of international competition for the youth of Rojava. Through our work, we have successfully competed in Beirut, Amman, Egypt, Iran, South Korea, Thailand, in Saudi Arabia, in Turkey, Iraq and in many other countries. We have succeeded in organising ourselves as youth because of this revolution. Without this revolution, we would not have been able to practise our work all around the world. And just this ability to practise our sports freely without any constraints gave us a lot of strength. It was also very special for me and two women comrades to join the World Taekwondo Championships in the city of Muju in South Korea.

I've heard Taekwondo is booming right now here, especially women's Taekwondo. Is this true?

Before the revolution, Taekwondo was not a sport practised in Rojava, not because there was not the will, but because the Regime did not want something good to come out of Rojava. So it was practised more in Aleppo, Damascus, and other cities in Syria where there were [Taekwondo] centres, but not in Rojava. They did not want those developments happening in Rojava. After the revolution, centres were built from Dêrik over Hesekê to Minbic. There are four centres in Minbic alone that provide access to Taekwondo. To give you an example, right at this minute there are at least 3,000 people in Rojava practising Taekwondo, and in a serious way. In 2014, the Committee for Sport and Youth of the Autonomous Administration was established as well as the Committee of Taekwondo. We are approaching Taekwondo as a revolutionary duty, not just as a sport. We are putting our effort into it like we do with political work. This made it possible for us to win over 26 international medals for Rojava, most recently at the Beirut Open in Lebanon where three medals were won by three women from the youth of Rojava.

Are there parallels between martial arts, or practising Taekwondo specifically, and the revolution?

In this revolution, we learn two things in particular: comradeship and equality, and especially comradeship and equality between women and men. Equality and comradeship are essential to building a team, and especially a Taekwondo team. Considering gender equality and gender comradeship, what team would it be without women? It would not be a nice team. And I want to underline and to remind everyone that this revolution, the Rojava revolution, is the woman's revolution. We can see that equality and

comradeship amongst genders, and women being represented not only in all social sphere, but also taking a leading role, as central aspects of this revolution, which is also reflected in our way of practising sport or organising our centres. Before the revolution, it was completely impossible and madness to say, “yes, a woman could go to compete in Amman, or could go to compete in Beirut, or in Korea,” but since the beginning of this revolution, we have been able to do that, and today women are organising themselves by themselves. They are also giving education to women on how to practise Taekwondo. To give you an example, in this centre, I am also one of the responsables, but the main responsible and representative is a woman, which before the revolution was completely unthinkable. The main responsible position changes every two years, and another woman will then take over that role.

Do you find that, for women practising martial art, it has a positive influence on their behaviour and life?

It has a positive influence on the whole society. We value and work on strong personalities a lot. Being a strong person is something valuable, something good. Before the revolution, women could not work or practise sport for themselves; she was always linked to a man in everything she did. She had to always be useful to a man and wasn't seen as a human being in her own right. In our Taekwondo organisation, we can see that women train and compete and fight by themselves, for themselves, and maybe sometimes in collaboration with, but usually autonomously from men.

When women join Taekwondo and develop themselves, it also has an impact on society. Every autonomy they gain in sport or every strength they develop is not separated from society because autonomy also creates strong personalities, it creates ability not

just physically but mentally in one's attitude, in believing in oneself, in organising oneself with other women. So three women who won medals at the Beirut Open went by themselves, they were from this school but they made the decision to go there. It wasn't us saying we should send three women. They succeeded, and won this competition, and we see this and these women as proof and the result of this school and of this revolution. This is what we work on. Of course, this work has been done for years and it is not something that happened from one day to another, it was a long process of work to be able to reach this point, where there are young women and also young men from Rojava going to compete internationally.

We also see the advantage and quality in practising Taekwondo, so that she can defend not only herself but society. When we speak about defending oneself and society we are not only talking about physical defence, and here we can see the definition of Taekwondo: *tae* means arms, *kwan* means legs, and *do* means 'the spirit'. So when we say that they are able to defend themselves, we are not saying that they are going to fight against the enemy using martial arts, but that it creates an attitude, a self-confidence, a belief that you can defend yourself which is really important for all of our social lives, and is not just limited to sport.

Thank you very much. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I have said it already, but I really want to clarify this point. When it comes to sports in Rojava, Taekwondo has become a symbol of development in Rojava. It is important to see how it developed through all the difficulties we have gone through in Rojava, how this sport became much more popular, and how many more people are able to live their passion freely. It is a place where this sport

did not exist before, and even when it sporadically did women were excluded. Such a short time has passed from the point when women had zero strength, from the point of view of society, to the point where they are participating in and winning international competitions. So in terms of development, we can see the revolution in Rojava, but also Taekwondo, as an example for all the Middle East, especially in terms of women's empowerment and as a sign of how society is changing, and how women and the youth are taking a leading role. This achievement of the youth of Rojava can be an example for the Middle East, and maybe for the whole world.

