MIDDLE EAST JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION 15 (2022) 385–403

brill.com/mjcc

'Rojava': Evolving Public Discourse of Kurdish Identity and Governance in Syria

Thomas McGee | ORCID: 0000-0001-9192-4169
University of Melbourne Law School, Melbourne, Australia
t.mcgee@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

The Syrian conflict has contributed to major debates in culture, media and politics around transitions linked to borders, ethnicity and identity. Against this backdrop, this article explores the use of 'Rojava', a keyword referring to Kurdish-majority areas in the country. It examines the term's changing meanings and usage against the evolving backdrop of the governance project led by Kurds since the post-2011 power vacuum in North(eastern) Syria. The article identifies how the term has been both operationalized and later abandoned and replaced by other nomenclature while highlighting the implications of these changes on public and political discourse. The term 'Rojava' traces its origins to the context of (pan-)Kurdish nationalism, with its literal meaning of 'western' (Kurdistan) implying a notion of trans-border Kurdish identity. From this point of departure, the author considers how it has been popularized in anarchist and Western solidarity circles as well as through international media in expressions such as the 'Rojava experiment' and 'Rojava Revolution'. The article unpacks how it has become shorthand in Western media for an ideology of women's liberation and leftist grassroots governance, as well as considering the term's less favorable reception in the Arab press, where the word 'Rojava' itself is treated as a foreign, and sometimes threatening, concept. Finally, the article presents how from 2016 the Kurdish-led authorities in this region of Syria sought to formally distance themselves from the term they had introduced. This change was due to realpolitik imperatives to re-brand their governance project under the 'Syrian Democratic' banner when incorporating non-Kurdish-majority territories (Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Menbij). In the context of its official abandonment, the term has nonetheless retained currency in the media as well as popular everyday contexts among Kurds on street level.

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2022 | DOI:10.1163/18739865-01504009
Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

Keywords

Kurdish movement – governance – Syrian Democratic – PYD – democratic confederalism – gender – revolution

1 Introduction

The use of the term 'Rojava' when referring to Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria grew in popularity in tandem with the retreat of Syrian state institutions during and in the aftermath of the 2011 Syrian uprising, which allowed for the emergence of a Kurdish self-rule project.[1] In 2014, when Kurds fought against the invading Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, Rojava quickly registered relevance as a keyword on the world stage. This heightened recognition contributed to transforming the meaning of Rojava from its strictly cartographic origins into a multivalent signifier. The term thus became symbolically associated with the progressive elements prevalent within the ideology promoted by the dominant Kurdish movement in Syria: namely ecology, women's liberation and the bottom-up governance model of 'democratic confederalism'.

This article traces the deployment of the term Rojava within public discourse on Syria, considering its little-known genealogy and later application by Kurdish-led authorities who have governed northern Syria over the last decade. It also studies responses to the term by different sections of the media, society and the international community, reflecting on how Rojava has transcended its original Kurdish context and been taken up within the Arabic media and various international interest groups.

By taking a broadly chronological approach, I examine the evolution of the keyword's use and reception by different stakeholders according to their demographic profile and political position. The analysis draws on the examination of Kurdish, international and Arabic media texts alongside key informant interviews conducted by the author to explore the term's use in cultural and political discourse during key moments within the Syrian conflict. Finally, against the backdrop of evolving realpolitik, I consider the endurance and legacy of Rojava as a keyword beyond its official abandonment by the very authorities who once promoted and popularized its use.

1 The keywords used to describe the events that took place in Syria since March 2011 deserve discussion in their own right and are beyond the scope of this contribution.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

2 'Rojava' as Cartography: Tracing Its History in (pan-)Kurdish Nationalism (Pre-2011)

The Kurdish term 'Rojava' literally means 'the west' or 'western'. Its origins are traced to the context of (pan-)Kurdish nationalism, whereby *Rojavayê Kurdistan* ('Western Kurdistan') implies a notion of trans-border Kurdish identity. In contemporary political discourse, the cardinal directions of North (Bakûr), South (Başûr), East (Rojhilat) and West (Rojava) refer to the Kurdish-inhabited areas in each of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, respectively (Kurdish Institute of Brussels undated). This has become a popular naming system among Kurds to describe the four parts of Greater Kurdistan, which were divided by colonial powers when they carved the region into its modern nation-states through the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement (McDowall, 2021: 131–162). That said, recent literature on Kurds in Syria tends to reference this convenient cartographical structure without sufficient reflection upon the complex historical and social associations carried by the term 'Rojava'.[2] Indeed, Rojava is not the only word used to describe Kurdish-inhabited areas in Syria, and its dominance in discourse is relatively recent. Before 2011, the term was scarcely known outside of Kurdish contexts.

Prior to the last decade, Kurds in Syria had struggled to receive recognition within the broader Kurdish movements that had instead subordinated them to the dynamics and interests of political parties in Iraq and Turkey (Lowe 2006: 4). As discussed below, multiple synonyms or variants were used throughout the last century prior to Rojava gaining increased acceptance in the post-2011 context. I trace these background developments—little discussed in the existing literature—in order to better understand the emergence of the term Rojava. However, tracking precise origins and evolving currency of particular terms within cultural, media and political circulation is challenging due to archival deficiencies and rich internal variation within the Kurdish field. There is often a discrepancy between the terminologies used in official party documents (e.g., manifestos), associated party-political discourse (including articles penned by individual members) and daily communications within the wider Kurdish cultural sphere. Furthermore, the development of the Kurdish movement in Syria within a multilingual context has meant that keywords have crossed, and been translated, between Kurdish and its main contact languages of Arabic and Turkish, leading to inconsistencies and ambiguities in meaning on the political and

2 A recent exception is (Lee 2020), which conceives of Rojava through the framework of state-building contrary to the Self Administration's own narrative.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

social levels.[3] Instead of delineating these terms according to clearly defined historical periods, below I sketch their rough lifespans and key shifts in nomenclature relating to the Kurdish regions of Syria, considering also the preferences of different Kurdish (nationalist) movements.

One of the earliest terms to be used following the formation of separate states in Syria and Turkey during the 1920s was *binxet*. This literally translates as 'below the line', referencing the trainline, which effectively separated many Kurdish families on the Turkish-side (*serxet*—'above the line') from their relatives inside the newly formed state of Syria (Chyet 2003: 657; Ekici 2007: 115). On this basis, the term *Kurdistana Binxetê* ('Kurdistan below the line') has been used in reference to Kurdish inhabited areas within Syria. While rarely used in political discourse nowadays, the term *binxet* remains part of the popular culture for those living in border regions, especially among older generations (Aras 2020: 67). Indeed, prominent Kurdish academic and linguist Shahin Sorekli stated in 2012 his preference for this term because it emphasizes the constructed character of the boundary between Kurdish kin.[4] Unlike Rojava, however, the term *binxet* marks only one dividing line (to the north) and does not delineate a fully bounded territory. Nonetheless, the construct of Rojava has adopted the same *xet* to demarcate its boundary with Turkey.

From the 1950s, a distinct Syrian Kurdish political identity emerged through the influence of Kurds in Iraq, with the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDP-S) founded in 1957 as the first political party specifically for Kurds in Syria.[5] While the associated movement in Iraq (the original KDP) made territorial claims over 'Iraqi Kurdistan', KDP-S literature refrained from such framing in relation to Syria, instead referring to 'Kurdish regions of northern Syria' (Vanly 1968: 18). This was likely due to the fact that Kurds in Syria were significantly lesser in number than those in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, and had been subjected to 'divide and rule' policies by the Syrian government. It was only in the 1990s that several of the Kurdish parties in Syria (following schisms in the KDP-S) adopted the term 'Syrian Kurdistan' (Kurdistana Sûriyê) within their political agendas (Tejel 2009: 94–95).

In parallel to the influences of Kurdish parties in Iraq, from the mid-1980s, the Kurdish movement in Turkey, and particularly the Kurdistan Workers Party

3 This phenomenon is further complicated by the ways different terms have sometimes been rendered internationally, particularly in English and French.

4 Facebook post, 1 August 2012 (in Kurdish).

5 The KDP-S was initially called the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria, but shortly after its establishment, changed its name to the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria in order to distance itself from separatist associations (Allsopp & Van Wilgenburg, 2019: 49; Tejel, 2009: 86).

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

(*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), significantly shaped developments for Kurds in Syria.[6] Indeed, it is this political current that ultimately nurtured the Rojava project into existence over the last decade. The movement had popularized the term *Bakûrê Kurdistan* (Northern Kurdistan) to refer to Kurdish regions of Turkey, and by extension laying the basis for the four-directional naming system.[7] However, the PKK and its associated civil society movement initially referred to Kurdish regions of Syria with the rather dismissive term *Başûrê biçûk* (Small South). Also, the popular protest chant 'Bakûr, Başûr, Rojhilat; Apo Serokê Welat' (North, South, East, Apo[8] is the leader of the nation) omits mention of Rojava/Syrian Kurds altogether. While keeping the rhythm of the slogan, this reflects the historical disregard toward Kurds living inside Syria as the smallest part of the nation. An alternative term used by the movement was *Başûrê Rojavayê Kurdistan* (South West Kurdistan). While this term was felt by some to be more geographically accurate, its introduction underlines the contested status of Kurdish identity in northern Syria.

In recognition of its exclusion of Kurds in Syria from the pan-Kurdish discourse, much pro-Kurdish media linked to the PKK movement switched to using the term *Rojavayê Kurdistan* (western Kurdistan). For example, academic Seevan Saeed recalls that in the mid-1990s staff at MED TV (the first Kurdish satellite channel) were instructed to use the term *Rojavayê Kurdistan* instead of *Başûrê Biçûk*.[9] This change was precipitated by the movement's philosophical shift away from statist nationalist claims for an independent Kurdistan towards 'democratic confederalism' after Öcalan's imprisonment in 1999 (Jongerden, 2019). Within prison, Öcalan became influenced by libertarian socialist theorist Murray Bookchin and, following critical self-reflection, adopted a vision of bottom-up direct democracy, which would later be implemented in Rojava (Gerber and Brincat 2018).[10] Concomitant to these developments, individual

6 The PKK was founded in 1978 and undertook an armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984, recruiting many Kurds from Syria into its ranks.

7 This terminology has been referred to as 'the language of pan-Kurdism', which 'constructs Kurdistan as a unified territory and Kurds as one and homogenous nation' in opposition to 'the language of autonomist/regionalist movement', e.g., *Kurdistana Sûriyê*, which 'demands autonomy within the states where Kurds reside' (Sheyholislami 2011: 110).

8 Apo is the affectionate nickname for Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999. The omission of Rojava in the PKK's political discourse is perhaps unsurprising given that Öcalan, once exiled from Turkey, found sanctuary in Syria from 1979 to 1998.

9 Author interview with Seevan Saeed, 26 March 2021. See also (Saeed 2017).

10 The PKK wanted to avoid the use of the terms Iranian Kurdistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkish Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdistan.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

Kurdish activists in the diaspora worked to propagate use of the term Rojava. Jawad Mella in the U.K. for instance established the Western Kurdistan Association (*Komela Rojava Kurdistan*) in 1995,[11] and went on to establish Rojava Radio in 2006, and later Rojava TV station, to publish news on Western (Syrian) Kurdistan (Mella 2007: 68, 83).

A key event in the pre-history of Rojava's emergence as a project on the ground was the 2003 establishment of the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) as a Syrian-specific party inspired by Öcalan's revised philosophy. In 2007, the KCK umbrella, to which the PYD belongs, developed a charter articulating a vision for Western Kurdistan.[12] Copies of this charter circulated discreetly among limited sections of the Kurdish community in Syria and were received as an aspirational blueprint for a new Kurdish-led project there. Significantly, the charter included the term Rojava in Latin Kurdish script alongside 'Western Kurdistan' in Arabic.[13] Meanwhile, the term Rojava remained almost unheard of beyond the Kurdish context until after 2011.

3 Crisis in Syria and the Rojava Project (2011–2014)

As 'Arab Spring' demonstrations spread across the Middle East, on 21 February 2011 a private Facebook group appeared in the name of 'Serhildana Rojava' (Rojava Uprising). According to Azad Deewanee, he and other non-party human rights activists initiated the group to 'make awareness of atrocities committed against Kurds and in anticipation of further human rights violations against them and other communities'.[14] At this time, many Kurds harbored both aspirations and apprehensions following the 2004 Kurdish uprising in Syria (*Serhildana Qamişlo*), which 're-awakened' Kurdish consciousness across the country (Gambill 2004) but ended in a brutal crackdown by the Syrian government. While many Kurds participated in anti-regime protests throughout

11 https://www.westernkurdistan.org.uk/about.html.

12 Author interview with Abdulsalam Ahmad, 25 March 2021. Ahmad, often considered a legislative architect of the self-rule project, participated in the drafting meeting for the charter in Gara, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

13 'Charter of the Kurdish Community Union in western Kurdistan: KCK Rojava' [Koma Civaka Kurd a Rojavayê Kurdistan KCK-Rojava] (April 2007) [in Arabic]. NB: the current standard title of the KCK is 'Koma Civakên Kurdistan' (Kurdistan Communities Union) to reflect the social plurality and the presence of non-Kurdish communities in regions considered to belong to Kurdistan.

14 Author interview, 3 April 2021: Deewanee added that Syrian Kurds exiled to KRI after the 2004 uprising had used the term Rojava at commemoration events from 2005 onwards.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

northern Syria in 2011, much of the political elite were slow and reluctant to mobilize (McGee 2012).

As the PYD, which had been more strategic than other parties,[15] increasingly asserted itself and built the vision for self-rule in northern Syria, adherence to the geographical cardinal direction paradigm of Kurdistan, including *Rojavayê Kurdistan*, was institutionally operationalized. This is evident in the name given to the PYD-formed People's Council of Western Kurdistan (*Meclîsa Gel A Rojavayê Kurdistan—MGRK*) in December 2011.[16] As confirmed by Abdulsalam Ahmed, who was MGRK's co-chair, *Rojavayê Kurdistan* was naturally chosen in the beginning as a name for the newly established self-rule project.[17] For their part, political rivals in the KDP-dominated Kurdish National Council (Encûmena Niştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê—ENKS) generally maintained the term *Kurdistana Sûriyê* (Syrian Kurdistan) in contrast to Rojava or *Rojavayê Kurdistan*, reflecting ideological disagreement between the parties, as discussed above.

Within Arabic-language discourse, the term Rojava did not immediately circulate as it had in Kurdish. The word itself would have been unfamiliar, or even threateningly foreign, to non-Kurds to the extent that the letter 'v' is absent within the standard Arabic alphabet. Moreover, the legacy of language prohibition in Syria had stigmatized Kurdish within popular consciousness (Human Rights Watch 2009: 11–12). Practices of obscuring Kurdish identity also played out on the political level, including after 2011. According to Salih Muslim, the former co-president of the PYD, Arabic media ignored demonstrations in Kurdish areas while spotlighting those taking place in other parts of the country (ANF 2011). This statement reflects the initial indifference and limited engagement of Arabic media towards developments in Kurdish regions of Syria generally, and the term Rojava specifically.

In 2012, unprecedented Arabic reporting about Kurdish regions of Syria was triggered by the diaspora group, YASA (Kurdish Center for Studies & Legal Consultancy) publishing a map of 'Syrian Kurdistan'. Indeed, the story went viral after being taken up by an influential news outlet, Al-Arabiya. Interestingly, this coverage was itself initiated by a Kurdish staffer from Syria (Akkash 2012). YASA later released a Draft Constitution for the Region of 'Rojava Kurdistan'.[18] Jian

15 Democratic Self-Rule in Western Kurdistan: Theoretical Principles (October 2011) [Arabic] by Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, TEV-DEM.

16 MGRK Declaration: https://www.kurdishinstitute.be/en/the-declaration-of-the-peoples-council-in-western-kurdistan/.

17 Author interview, 25 March 2021.

18 YASA Constitution (Arabic): https://4143a0e8-b9c8-4d39-a6e5-d51bd4f15874.filesusr.com/ugd/dbcbde_1da4ffb4ad774c7b9c841a06c59c1a35.pdf.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

Badrakhan, a legal consultant with YASA, confirmed that the change in terminology used in the constitution reflected changes on the ground in Syria, with Rojava becoming more accepted: 'in 2011, we were using the term [*Herêma*] *Kurdistana Sûriyê* [Kurdistan Region of Syria], but by the time of writing the constitution, the term *Rojava* had become more established. The eight people who worked on the constitution discussed exactly this point for hours. In the end, we all decided to adopt this term but insisted it be used alongside the word *Kurdistan*'.[19] For its part, Arabic media increasingly weaponized the literal translation of Western Kurdistan (*Gharb Kurdistan*) to reinforce popular suspicions of a Kurdish separatist project within Syria (Al-Jazeera 2013; Al-Arab 2013).

As the PYD developed the self-rule project into a more sophisticated governance system comprising three decentralized cantons (Afrin, Kobani and Jazeera), it officially omitted references to both Rojava and Kurdistan.[20] This change was calculated to mitigate anxieties among Arab observers about the emerging Kurdish self-rule project (e.g., Ḫaddam 2013), and counter fear-mongering in Syria's opposition-inclined media (e.g., Zaman Al-Wasil 2013). To this effect, official discourse of the cantons consistently stressed their status as an integral part of the Syrian geography.[21] Nonetheless, having already gained recognition among (Syrian) Kurds, the term *Rojavayê Kurdistan* continued in large part to function as the *de facto* term for the geographical regions governed by the self-rule project. This was bolstered by the PYD's own popular resistance narrative of the 'Rojava Revolution'. Known also as the '19th July Revolution' (*Şoreşa 19'ê Tîrmehê*) according to the date the PYD claimed Kobani as its first enclave of territory 'liberated' in northern Syria (PYD 2019), the anniversary of the 'Rojava Revolution' has become an annual celebration in the region and internationally.

During this early period, international agencies (e.g., Reuters, 2012) had given limited coverage to growing Kurdish influence in the region and engaged little with concepts such as 'Rojava'. Rare exceptions to this were reports penned by Kurdish journalists with international connections (e.g., Dicle 2013). Otherwise, when covered internationally, Rojava was often editorially framed as an

19 Author interview, 14 March 2021.

20 Subsequently, the names and structures of the self-rule project have changed several times over a relatively short period of time (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019:89). For a detailed timeline, see Rojava Information Center: https://rojavainformationcenter.com/background/rojava-timeline/

21 See the first Social Contract for the self-rule project in Afrin, Jazeera, and Kobani cantons (29 January 2014): https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/12/2014-Social-Contract-of-the-Autonomous-Regions-of-Afrin-Jazeera-and-Kobane.pdf.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

enigma, e.g., the 'unknown war' (VICE News 2014), rather than considering the everyday workings of its system of governance or driving ideological principles. However, this all suddenly changed in late 2014, after which the phrase 'Rojava Revolution' was taken up in international discourse through broader political associations. 'Rojava' itself became an ambivalent amalgam of geography, governance and politics.

4 Rojava Enters the World Stage: Keyword's New Symbolism (2014–2016)

The sudden IS (Islamic State) siege of the Kurdish town of Kobani in autumn 2014 generated unprecedented international media coverage of Kurds in northern Syria (Akin 2019). Reporting about fierce Kurdish resistance against ruthless extremists in the months to follow often framed Rojava as synonymous with the fight against terrorism, fundamentalist jihadism and fascism. As well as fostering *kurdayetî*, sentiments of pan-Kurdish solidarity (Gourlay 2018), these images were operationalized to strengthen the emerging Kurdish-U.S. military alliance to counter IS in Syria. Likewise, one U.S. author has commented that 'Rojava represents a secular, democratic, and feminist way forward in a region stereotyped by many as hopelessly backward' (Tax 2016: 317). This statement reflects the process of expanding the term Rojava from simply denoting a cartographical entity to a more ambiguous signifier with multiple symbolic associations.

The predominance of ideological associations is evident in endeavors to sketch out or 'imagine' Rojava's utopian potential. This has been celebrated in prominent international media reporting (Enzinna 2015; Court and Den Hond 2017) and (activist) academic undertakings (Dirik et al 2016). The constructions 'Rojava Revolution' (Aretaios 2015; Schmidinger 2018) and 'Rojava experiment' (Lowe 2016) have likewise both become popular tropes in commentary on developments for Kurds in Syria. As such, Rojava has evolved from its ethno-nationalist cartographical origins into an increasingly value-based and ideologically informed project. Indeed, one observer considers Rojava as 'a space to be shaped by PYD's political project, not a place' (Tejel 2020: 262), while others have described the 'dialectical vision of Rojava as *both* geographically-delimited "place" and political, internationalist "space"' (Gerber and Brincat 2018: 7; my italics). Below I unpack how the term Rojava has become shorthand in Western media for international anarchism and women's liberation.

In delivering the 'Rojava project' to a global audience, mainstream media popularized Rojava as a stand-alone term, converting it from a Kurdish adjec-

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

tive—in the compound phrase *Rojavayê Kurdistan* (western Kurdistan)—into an internationalized proper noun in its own right. This linguistic dismantling of the pan-Kurdish construction has allowed the term to assume new symbolic associations, primarily the progressive elements associated with the unique governance model implemented in northern Syria: communal democracy, cooperative economy, ecology and women's liberation (more on this below). Significantly, Rojava was even incorporated into local Kurdish and Arabic media as a stand-alone keyword, although in the latter it was often flanked with quotation marks, suggesting it to be doubly 'alien' due to its Kurdish identity and western military support (e.g., Mustafa 2015).

The 2014 'Battle of Kobani', and its mainstream media coverage, thus served as a catalyst for greater attention toward Rojava from sympathetic Western observers, including anarchists and leftist solidarity activists. For example, the late anarchist anthropologist David Graeber made a powerful call to the international Left to engage in support of the 'revolutionary Kurds' in Rojava through an op-ed in *The Guardian* (Graeber 2014). In early 2015, a delegation of interested international academics 'visited Rojava to learn about the revolution, gender liberation and democratic self-government' (ROAR Collective 2015). Research outputs from this visit sought to shift discourse away from what the Kurds were fighting against (IS) and instead focus on what they were fighting for—the 'revolutionary project of Rojava, based on democratic participation, gender emancipation, and multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and even multi-national accommodation' (University of Cambridge 2015). Interestingly, Janet Biehl's use of the English term 'Rojavans' reflects the shift to a more demographically pluralist concept by including 'Arabs, Assyrians, Chechens, and others' alongside Kurds (2014).[22]

The Kobani crisis also triggered what I refer to as the 'Anarcho-intervention in Rojava'. Growing awareness in anarchist and leftist circles about the 'Rojava Revolution' narrative resulted in the emergence of a Rojava Solidarity Movement as inter-networked groups sprang up around universities and through existing activist collectives to campaign and fund-raise in the name of Rojava.[23] Inspired by Rojava's guiding philosophy, international anarchists began to visit the region and provide volunteer support alongside the self-rule project. This culminated in the 2017 establishment of the Internationalist Commune of Rojava.[24] Anarchist ecologists within it then set up the 'Make Rojava Green

22 Within local discourse, 'the peoples of Rojava' featured in later official rhetoric. However, the Kurdish adjective 'Rojavayî' tends to refer exclusively to Kurdish individuals in Syria.
23 See Savran (2016) for background on this in the U.K. context.
24 See official website: https://internationalistcommune.com/join-the-revolution

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

Again' campaign to develop reforestation and renewable energy projects.[25] Given the outspoken solidarity from anarchist movements towards the Rojava project, it is perhaps curious to note that the self-rule project has refrained from framing itself as an anarchist or radical project, and that its protagonists rarely use such terms within their Kurdish or Arabic discourse. Nonetheless, international anarchists and western solidarity activists have had a significant impact on the popularization of Rojava and have remained wedded to the term even at moments when the instigators of the project have distanced themselves from it.

Across Western solidarity discourse, international media and the Kurdish movement, the term Rojava has become almost synonymous with the theme of women's liberation. The Kurdish female fighter has become a key pillar of Rojava's representation within Western media (Dean 2019), particularly when framed in opposition to IS's hypermasculinity. More widely, women of Rojava are portrayed as 'heroic' and 'exceptional' through their resistance to gendered and state oppression in the Middle East (Toivanen & Baser 2016; Tank 2017). The role of women has been a central component of the Kurdish self-rule project in Syria, with a 40% women quota and a female co-president for every governance structure (Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa 2016). Thus, women's liberation has been framed as an integral part of the 'Rojava Revolution', through which women are pioneers in the creation of new societies and lifestyles (Isik 2016). On a philosophical level, *Jineolojî* (the Kurdish 'study of women'), which is taught across the self-rule project, proposes an alternative epistemology of feminism in contrast to that of liberal feminism (Al-Ali & Käser 2020).[26] Simultaneously, the international media has fetishized Rojava's 'badass women' (Dirik 2014), appropriating and essentializing the images of female fighters within Orientalist discourses (Şimşek & Jongerden 2018) while neglecting the broader principles they are fighting to defend.

As presented above, the unprecedented international interest following the successful Kurdish defense of Kobani extended the meaning of Rojava beyond its existing cartographical reference and into the realm of new symbolic associations. The Western reception of the term has in turn been significantly taken up within the Syrian context, resulting in a largely expanded concept encompassing geographical, ideological and political notions. At this juncture, the leadership of the self-rule project found itself pragmatically negotiating between retention of the powerful symbolic recognition the term had

25 See official website: https://makerojavagreenagain.org.
26 See also https://jineoloji.org/en/.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

registered among Kurds as well as internationally and launching more inclusive nomenclature for its evolving military and governance project. In late 2015, as the Kurdish-led project turned towards expansion into predominantly Arab territories, its architects consequently established the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian Democratic Council as bodies embracing a multi-ethnic identity without exclusive Kurdish associations. However, in parallel, the Kurdish leadership also felt renewed confidence to (re-) assert the Rojava identity. Having received expanded international solidarity and secured strategic military support from the West, in March 2016 the authorities publicly announced the launch of a new supra-governance project under the provocative banner 'Democratic Federation of Rojava-Northern Syria'. The continued tension between celebrating the Rojava identity and the realpolitik imperatives to rebrand in order to promote Arab outreach and inclusion ultimately led to the term being dropped definitively from the official project title (as discussed below).

5 Territorial Expansion and Re-framing: Negotiating a 'Post-Rojava' Realpolitik in Northern Syria (since 2016)

Torn between the geopolitical interest in maintaining a Kurdish identity for Kurdish-majority areas on the one hand and new realities on the ground on the other, the self-rule authorities eventually embarked on a post-Rojava phase. In December 2016, the word Rojava was officially dropped from the title of the self-rule project as the new 'Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' was declared.[27] Hadiya Yousef, co-president of the Federation, told Al-Akhbar newspaper that 'Rojava as a word has no meaning if not followed by the word Kurdistan, and that does not fit the reality of the region. Therefore, we considered that Northern Syria is an inclusive term for all components' (Marʿi 2016). While this was obviously a calculated step toward gaining acceptance from non-Kurds, there was resistance from sections of the Kurdish community. The most immediate protest came when Kurdish journalist Gihad Darwish walked on stage and drew hearts around the word Rojava on the banner behind Constituent Assembly representatives of the new Federation (Fig. 1) (Kurdish Issue 2016).

27 NB: one reference to the term 'Rojava' was still included within the preamble of the Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, 29 December 2016: https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/12/2016-Social-Contract-of-the-Democratic-Federation-of-Northern-Syria.pdf

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

FIGURE 1 An image of journalist Gihad Darwish drawing hearts around the term Rojava during the second meeting to form the new Federation of Northern Syria in Rumeilan, 29 December 2016
REUTERS/ ALARM STOCK PHOTO. PRINTED WITH PERMISSION

Meanwhile, in contrast to the nuance reflected in other international media, dominant Arabic discourses have tended to demonize, alienate and reject the Rojava project by dwelling upon its Kurdish-ness. Narratives would variously stir fears about expansion of 'the Rojava map' (Enab Baladī 2016), and Rojava's growing economic power (Al-Arabi Al-Jadid 2016). This increased focus has foregrounded Rojava as an embodiment of a project of separatism, eliminating any positive implications for Rojava as a self-rule system. This shift became even more evident around the autumn 2017 Referendum for Independence in KRI as Rojava was increasingly represented as a parallel Kurdish project aspiring to separate itself from Syria (Aʿbdulġanī 2017) despite such claims never being made by the self-rule authorities.[28] It is worth mentioning that these representations defined Rojava in narrow ethno-political terms, obscuring any other associations of Rojava beyond its Kurdish-ness. More recently, when Turkey launched two successive military assaults on north and north-east Syria in 2018 and 2019, rushed analysis in Arabic media indicated 'the end of the Rojava dream' (Al-Arab 2019; Al-Rai 2019).

28 For more on the divergent political models of the KRI and Rojava, see (Radpey 2016).

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

Nonetheless, the word Rojava has remained prevalent in everyday conversations in the Kurdish street in northern Syria, as well as for those displaced from it (Bahram 2018). At the same time, the names of a number of non-governance organizations echo the popular insistence to keep the term alive within the public sphere. For example, Rojava University was inaugurated in November 2016, just as the term Rojava was being dropped from official usage within the governance system.[29] In a similar vein, the Rojava Information Center was established by a group of foreign volunteers working in northern Syria in December 2018 (Bellingreri 2019). According to one representative from the center, 'we chose to use Rojava in the name because it's what people are familiar with, and while we recognize that it is not entirely accurate to refer to the region of Self-Rule, Rojava refers to the political alternative implemented in this region', adding: 'we wanted to have a name that would also include those regions currently occupied by Turkish backed factions'.[30]

Beyond this, Rojava as a term retains powerful utility at moments when Syria's Kurds come under threat, be it from the Assad regime (Malik 2019), uncertain U.S. foreign policy (Negri 2019) or Turkish invasion (Bowman 2019). Local populations as well as international advocates and solidarity movements coalesced around a number of expressions that further mobilized the term. Indeed, alongside periodic calls to 'Defend Rojava' (e.g., The New York Review 2018), a campaign using the hashtag #RISEUP4ROJAVA was launched in spring 2019 as an 'internationalist campaign and platform'.[31] At these moments of crisis, many Kurds in northern Syria added the 'Save #Rojava' banner to their social media profile images, emphasizing the indivisibility of solidarity among Kurds. As such, despite the pragmatism of the PYD and self-rule authorities to distance themselves from the sensitivities relating to Kurdish territorial identity, over the last decade Rojava has become socially embedded as a powerfully emotive keyword.

6 Conclusion

Originating in (pan-)Kurdish nationalism and political cartography, since 2011 Rojava has developed new meanings and symbolic associations. Responding to the lack of critical reflection on the term Rojava, this article has traced the

29 See the Rojava University official website: https://www.rojavauni.com/en/home. As well as mainstream subjects, the university teaches programs in *Jineolojî*.

30 Author interview, 3 April 2021.

31 https://riseup4rojava.org/about-us/.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

historical nuances of its usage within Kurdish thought prior to 2011. It has further documented Rojava's place within the evolving self-rule project and its dramatic ascent on the world stage as a symbolic signifier through the Battle for Kobani. The term thus became almost synonymous with the imagery of women's liberation and the ideology of bottom-up democracy, facilitating the 'Anarcho-intervention in Rojava'. Meanwhile, Arabic media discourse has generally framed Rojava in narrow terms: as a threateningly alien concept. Navigating these tensions, the self-rule authorities have repeatedly dropped and re-introduced the term Rojava according to the evolving balance between pragmatism and symbolism.

This eventually culminated in the 'post-Rojava' phase, with the term dropped from official discourse. Despite the 'Self-Administration of North and East Syria' as the current iteration of the self-rule project (since 2018) making no reference to Rojava, the term has retained powerful currency in everyday Kurdish discourse. This also continues to be echoed by international interest groups. Rojava as a keyword, therefore, no doubt leaves an indelible imprint on both the Kurdish consciousness in Syria and conceptions of governance and identity within wider Syrian political culture.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Zozan Alloush for reviewing and providing feedback on the text. Additionally, the comments provided by Omar Sheikhmous were gratefully received. Finally, the author wishes to acknowledge the helpful comments of the two anonymous reviewers on an earlier version of the article.

References

Aʿbdulġanī, Amanī (2017). 'Rojava'.. yaḍaʿ Sūria aʿla tarīq al-taftīt ["Rojava".. leads to dissolution of Syria]. *Al-Masrī Al-Yaūm*. Accessed 29 March 2021: https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1196001.

Akkash, Jomaa (2012). 'Al-akrad yanšurūna ẖarīta mustaqbalīya lihudud iqlīmihim fī Sūrya' [Kurds publish future map of their region's borders in Syria]. Al-Arabiya. Accessed 30 December 2012: https://bit.ly/3up2drl

Akin, Salih (2019). Nomination toponymique et représentation discursive en situation de conflit : l'exemple de la ville de Kobanê. In Ali Reguigui, Julie Boissonneault, Leila Messaoudi, Hafida El Amrani and Hanane Ben Dahmane (eds.), *Langues en contexte*, pp. 103–123. Sudbury (Ontario): Université Laurentienne.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

Al-Ali, Nadje & Käser, Isabel (2020). Beyond Feminism? Jineolojî and the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement. *Politics & Gender*, 18(1): 1–32.

Al-Arab (25 September 2013) āqlīm kurdistān mustaqil … khatwa kubrā naḥū taqsīm sūriyyā [Independent Kurdistan Region … A Major Step Towards the Division of Syria]: https://bit.ly/2VkywvE

Al-Arab (2019). Ittīfaq Rūsya wa Turkīya yunhī ḥilm Rojava [Russia-Turkey agreement ends Rojava dream]. Accessed 29 March 2021:https://bit.ly/3cIInS5.

Al-Arabi Al-Jadid (2016). al-fidralīya taltahim ṯarawat al-sūrīīn. 'Rojava' tastaḥwiḏ a'la al-naft wa al-ġitḏā [Federalism devours Syrians' resources. "Rojava" controls over oil and food]. Accessed 31 March 2021: https://bit.ly/3fvWETK.

Al-Jazeera (2013) hal yasʿā ākrād sūriyyā naḥū āl-ānfisāl? [Do Syria's Kurds seek separation?]: https://bit.ly/3h8oS74

Allsopp, Harriet & Wilgenburg, Wladimir van (2019). *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Al-Rai (2019). Ittīfaq Rūsī-Turkī yubadid ḥilm akrad Sūrya [Russian-Turkish agreement disperse the dream of Syrian Kurds]. Accessed 24 March 2021: http://alrai.com/article/10507198

ANF (2011). Interview with Salih Muhammad, president of PYD. *ANF News*. Accessed 28 March 2021: https://anfenglish.com/features/interview-with-salih-muhammad-president-of-pyd-4472.

Aras, Ramazan (2020). *The Wall: The Making and Unmaking of the Turkish-Syrian Border*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Aretaios, Evangelos (2015). *The Rojava revolution*. Open Democracy: www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/rojava-revolution. 15 March 2015.

Bahram, Haqqi (2018). Kurdish Guests or Syrian Refugees?: Negotiating Displacement, Identity and Belonging in the Kurdistan Region. MA dissertation, Linköping University.

Bellingreri, Marta (2019). Rojava Information Center, a media bridge to the world outside. Al-Monitor. 24 December 2019: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/syria-rojava-information-center-journalists-report-conflict.html.

Biehl, Janet (2014). Impressions of Rojava: a report from the revolution. *ROAR Magazine*. 16 December 2014: https://roarmag.org/essays/janet-biehl-report-rojava/.

Bowman, Bryan (2019). Rojava, Lost? Turkish Offensive Threatens to Destroy a Radical Democratic Experiment. The Globe Post. 23 October: https://theglobepost.com/2019/10/23/rojava-revolution-turkey/.

Chyet, Michael (2003). *Kurdish-English Dictionary*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Court, Mireille and Chris Den Hond (2017). L'expérience libertaire du Rojava à l'épreuve de la guerre: Une utopie

au cœur du chaos syrien. September: https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2017/09/COURT/57879

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

Dean, Valentina (2019). Kurdish Female Fighters: the Western Depiction of YPJ Combatants in Rojava. Glocalism Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation 1: 1–29.

Dicle, Amed (2013) The Final Stage: Rojava. *Jadaliyya*. 7 September 2013: https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/29479

Dirik, Dilar (2014). 'Badass' Kurdish women. *Al-Jazeera*. Accessed 30 March 2021: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/29/western-fascination-with-badass-kurdish-women.

Dirik, Dilar; David Levi Strauss; Michael Taussig and Peter Lamborn Wilson (eds.) (2016). *To Dare Imagining: Rojava Revolution. Brooklyn*: Autonomedia.

Ekici, Deniz (2007). *Kurmanji Kurdish Reader* Hyattsville: Dunwoody Press.

Enzinna, Wes (2015). *A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard At a college in Kurdish Syria, Rojava tries to train its future leaders*. The New York Times: www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/magazine/a-dream-of-utopia-in-hell.html. 24 November 2015.

Gambil, Gary C. (2004). 'The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria' *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin* 6(4). Accessed 30 March 2021: https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0404_s1.htm. April 2004.

Gerber, Damian and Shannon Brincat (2018). When Öcalan met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Political Theory of Democratic Confederalism, *Geopolitics*: 1–25.

Graeber, David (2014). Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria? The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis 8 October 2014.

Gourlay, William (2018). Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma. *Middle East Critique*, 27(1): 25–42.

Ḫaddam, Munzir (2013). al-īdara al-ḏatiya al-intiqalīya fī 'ġarb Kurdistan' [Interim self administration in 'West Kurdistan']. Al-Aḫbar. Accessed 1 April 2021: https://al-akhbar.com/Opinion/61815

Enab Baladī (2016). Wifqa ḫarītat 'al-īdara al-ḏatīya': Idlib wa Ḥalab ḍimn 'Rojava' [According to the 'Self-Administration's' map: Idlib and Aleppo are within 'Rojava']. Accessed 20 March 2021: https://enabbaladi.net/archives/64280.

Isik, Ruken (2016). How women are building a new society in Rojava. *Green Left Weekly* (1092). Accessed 30 March 2021: https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/women-struggle-new-society-rojava.

Jongerden, Joost (2019). Learning from defeat: Development and contestation of the "new paradigm" within Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). *Kurdish Studies*, 7(1): 72–92.

Knapp, Michael; Flach, Anja; & Ayboğa, Ercan (2016). *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*. London: Pluto Press.

Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 'Kurdistan The Land of the Kurds': https://www.kurdishinstitute.be/en/who-are-the-kurds

Kurdish Issue (2016) A Kurdish man protests exclusion of 'Rojava' from newly estab-

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

lished Federation of Northern Syria. 30 December 2016: https://kurdishissue.wordpress.com/2016/12/30/rojava-2/

Lee, Sean (2020). The Evolution of Rojava: Tensions between Democratic Confederalism and State-Building in Northern Syria. In Gurses, Mehmet, David Romano, Michael M. Gunter. *The Kurds in the Middle East: Enduring problems and new dynamics*, pp. 81–97.

Lowe, Robert (2006). *The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered* Chatham House [Briefing Paper].

Lowe, Robert (2016). Rojava at 4: Examining the Experiment in Western Kurdistan (Workshop Proceedings: London School of Economics Middle East Centre, August 2016).

Malik, Kenan (2019). Syria's Kurds dreamt of a 'Rojava revolution'. Assad will snuff this out. The Guardian 27 October: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/27/syria-kurds-dreamt-of-rojava-revolution-assad-will-snuff-this-out

Marʿi, Ayham (2016). al-akrad yatamasakūna bi 'al-mašrūʿ al-fidiralī' … bila 'Rojava' [Kurds hold to the 'federal project' … without 'Rojava']. *Al-Akhbar*. Accessed 31 March 2021: https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/234686.

McDowall, David (2021). *A Modern History of the Kurds* [Fourth Edition]. New York: I.B. Tauris.

McGee, Thomas (2012). Syria's Kurds: part of the revolution? *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/26/syrias-kurds-part-of-revolution. 26 April 2012.

Mella, Jawad (2007). Western Kurdistan: Which is Occupied by Syria. London: Western Kurdistan Association.

Mustafa, Zain (2015). 'Rojava' Kurdistan Sūrya … al-kašif aʿnha baʿda taḥsīniha min 'al-ḥasad' ['Rojava' Syrian Kurdistan … Unveiled after protection from 'evil']. *Shaam Network*. Accessed 22 February 2021: https://bit.ly/2PnqCPe.

Negri, Alberto (2019). Rojava's democracy project dashed by America's betrayal. Il manifesto. 11 October: https://global.ilmanifesto.it/rojavas-democracy-project-dashed-by-americas-betrayal/

PYD (2019). 7mîn salvegera Şoreşa Rojava 19'ê Tîrmeha. Accessed 28 March 2021: https://pydrojava.org/kurdi/7min-salvegera-soresa-rojava-19e-tirmeha

Radpey, Loqman (2016). Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: A new Model of Statehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 17(3): pp. 468–488.

Reuters (2012). Analysis: Syrian Kurds sense freedom, power struggle awaits. 31 August 2021: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-kurds-idUSBRE87U0KV20120831

ROAR [Reflections on a Revolution] Collective (2015). Joint statement of the academic

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access

delegation to Rojava. *ROAR Magazine*: https://roarmag.org/essays/statement-academic-delegation-rojava. 15 January 2015.

Saeed, Seevan (2017). *Kurdish Politics in Turkey: From the PKK to the KCK*. Routledge.

Savran, Yagmur (2016). The Rojava revolution and British solidarity. *Anarchist Studies*, 24(1): pp. 7–12.

Schmidinger, Thomas (2018). Rojava Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds. London: Pluto Press.

Sheyholislami, Jaffer (2011). *Kurdish Identity, Discourse and New Media*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Şimşek, Bahar & Jongerden, Joost (2018). Gender Revolution in Rojava: The Voices beyond Tabloid Geopolitics. *Geopolitics* 1–23, doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1531283.

Tank, Pinar (2017). Kurdish Women in Rojava: From Resistance to Reconstruction. *Die Welt des Islams*, 57(3–4): 404–428.

Tax, Meredith (2016). A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State. New York: Bellevue Literary Press.

Tejel, Jordi (2009). *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*. London and New York: Routledge.

Tejel, Jordi (2020). The Complex and Dynamic Relationship of Syria's Kurds with Syrian Borders: Continuities and Changes. In Matthieu Cimino (ed.), *Syria: Borders, Boundaries, and the State*, pp. 243–267. Cham (Switzerland): Palgrave Macmillan.

The New York Review (2018). A Call to Defend Rojava: An Open Letter. New York Review of Books. 23 April: https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/04/23/a-call-to-defend-rojava/

Toivanen, Mari & Baser, Bahar (2016). Gender in the Representations of an Armed Conflict: Female Kurdish Combatants in French and British Media. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 9(3): 294–314.

University of Cambridge (2015) Can the Revolution in Kurdish Syria succeed? https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/can-the-revolution-in-kurdish-syria-succeed. 2 February 2015.

Vanly, Ismet Chériff (1968). *The persecution of the Kurdish people by the Baath dictatorship in Syria* Amsterdam: Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Kurdish People.

VICE News (2014) Rojava: Syria's Unknown War: https://www.vice.com/en/article/9kj7be/rojava-syrias-unknown-war. 18 June 2014.

Zaman Al-Wasil (2013). Taḥarukat murība li PYD: Idara mu'aqata wa dastrūr ǧadīd wa barlaman ẖas li 'ġarb Kurdistan' [Suspicious moves by the PYD: Interim administration, new constitution and separate parliament for 'Western Kurdistan']. *Zaman Al-Wasil*. Accessed 5 April 2021: https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/39652.

Downloaded from Brill.com01/20/2023 03:58:01AM
via free access