

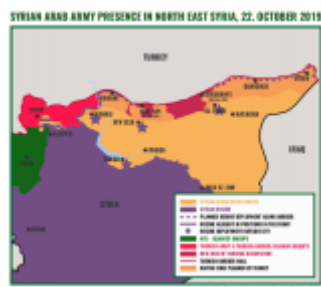
# Revolution and Counterrevolution in Rojava - Geopolitics, Öcalan's orientations, strategic issues

Wednesday 30 October 2019, by [OVEISY Fouâd](#) (Date first published: 27 October 2019).

As I write, the revolution in Rojava is under existential threat. This threat was aggravated by a controversial roller coaster of recent events. After a late Sunday night [phone conversation](#) between US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the White House released a [statement](#) on the withdrawal of the United States military from northeast Syria. The brief statement authorized, effectively, a colonial handover of northeast Syria to Turkey. On Wednesday morning of the following week, the Turkish Armed Forces and its jihadi [mercenaries](#) embarked on a campaign of killing, [bombing](#) and [looting](#) civilians, towns and villages in northeast Syria. Thursday evening, the governments of the United States and Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the Turkish invasion.

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By Saturday morning, 300,000 northeastern Syrian [civilians](#) had been displaced, at least 200 were killed, and countless more were wounded or missing. Finally, hours after news came of the fall of the border towns of Serê Kaniyê and Geri Spi on Sunday morning, Mazlum Abdi Kobanî, the commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in charge of the region's defenses, brokered the surrender of northeast Syria to Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in return for [saving his people](#) from

Turkey.<sup>1</sup> That night the SAA moved into the mainly Kurdish cities that were under siege and together, with the SDF, they defended the north for a few days before Mike Pence [brokered](#) a 'ceasefire' deal in Ankara on Thursday of the following week. The 120-hour ceasefire, which demanded that the SDF retreat 30 kilometers from the border with Turkey, was violated from the get-go through Turkish [chemical warfare](#).

Over the weekend the SDF changed its position again, retreated from the border as instructed and [resumed calls](#) for US to stay in Syria. In the meantime the SAA was spreading its forces throughout the region, while Turkey and its jihadi proxies were spreading across the border stretch. On Tuesday afternoon of 22 October 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Erdoğan agreed on a [permanent ceasefire](#) after an intense six-hour meeting. The deal protects north Syria's Kurds and borders but forebodes the end of the revolution in Rojava.

## **Carving Up Syria**

The Trump-Erdoğan phone call came after an agreement last month between the US-led Coalition in Syria and the Turkish government, over a proposed "[safe zone](#)" in northeast Syria. The agreement was meant to address Turkey's "security concerns." Some weeks after the agreement Erdoğan climbed the podium of the United Nations General Assembly, mimicked Benjamin Netanyahu by [holding up a map](#) of the proposed safe zone, and promised to resettle the three million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey in this zone. This was a map that pictured every revolutionary stronghold in Rojava and the millions of people already living there. Erdoğan also pledged [\\$27-billion](#) in funding for building settlement camps for the refugee-settlers, the majority of whom are not indigenous to Kurdish northeast Syria.

The foray of Erdoğan's armies against northeast Syria was a planned first step toward realizing this colonial vision. Nowadays, dictators announce their plans for demographic engineering and ethnic cleansing from the UN podium. Neoliberalism is mutating, late capitalism is shifting to a multipolar order, and revanchist actors such as Trump and Erdoğan secure transition strategies for their nation-states with generous pensions extracted from imperial intervention in the Middle East.

Here, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, commonly known as [Rojava](#), found itself evermore in a difficult situation. The Americans were withdrawing from Syria and the Left celebrated this with [fanfare](#), even though the Americans were not really withdrawing but simply [transferring their regional interests](#) to NATO's second largest army in Turkey. During the week of the Turkish Armed Forces' (TAF) incursion into Syria and before the SDF and al-Assad reached a deal, the US troops stationed in the north were moved to other bases in Syria to clear the way for Turkish colonization. Once the US foreign policy machine had fully reacted to the surprise of the SDF-al-Assad pact, US forces were slowly but surely redeployed to strategic parts of Syria and Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Painfully, until the SAA pushed out the remaining US troops in the northern cities of Manbij and Kobanî, the Americans [did not make way](#) for the Syrian army to come to the rescue of Rojava's civilians and defenders.

The [Russians endorsed](#) Turkey's occupation plans because the Turkish threat emboldened al-Assad to refuse [Rojava's main request](#) from Damascus, that is, a measure of local or federal autonomy within Syria that safeguards the gains of the revolution and prevents a return to the pre-war status quo in Syria. To provide an example, President Nazim al-Qudsi's 1963 decree No. 93 had stripped 120,000 Kurds of citizenship in Syria. By the onset of the Syrian revolution, the descendants of this group numbered more than [three hundred thousand](#), divided into the two extra-legal categories of *ajanib*, or foreigners, and *maktumin*, literally undocumented migrants in their own country.

The dangers to Rojava's mainly Kurdish inhabitants aside, the revolution itself had been under

serious attack. The once tactical cooperation with the United States, which back in 2014 provided air support for Rojava's legendary People and Women's Protection Units (the YPG and YPJ) to force the forces of the Islamic State (ISIS) out of Kobanî, had grown into a full-fledged strategic partnership in the "war against terror" in the months leading up to the Turkish invasion. This alliance had alienated a majority of the sanctimonious Western Left for both the right and wrong reasons. Critically, it had countered the revolution's feminist, ecological and democratic aims and gains, for the reasons that follow. From behind the scenes of appearing to support Rojava's war of position in Syria, the Americans had been wielding a corrosive war of manoeuvre.

Along with al-Assad, Iran, Turkey and Russia - the major state actors in Syria - the Americans also excluded Rojava from the UN-sponsored talks regarding Syria's constitution. Before their pact with al-Assad, the administration in Rojava controlled a third of all land in Syria, housed five million Kurds, Arabs, Syrians and Armenians, among other groups, and produced more than 60 per cent of the country's wealth. So Rojava took the exclusion [personally](#). The Sunni opposition groups included in the talks controlled a few towns and villages in Idlib. The other Kurdish party included in the talks, the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), controlled nothing in Syria. The ENKS is the sibling of the neoliberal Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the leading party in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Anybody could be a part of Syria's future, insofar as they did not toe the Leftist line. The US-led counterrevolution in Rojava was proving effective both ideologically and strategically.

## **The Revolution is Dead! Long Live the Revolution!**

I wrote this analysis during the weeks and months leading up to the Trump and Erdoğan phone call. What is now worded as a matter of fact was originally an interventionist thesis. It hypothesized about the predictability of the Turkish invasion of Rojava and the role of the US foreign policy in cultivating this threat as a means to containing the revolution in Rojava. The original title was going to be "Decolonizing Rojava" and the analysis concluded with four prescriptions for a second revolution in Rojava to decolonize it from American presence. Some of the prescriptions are still applicable.

For example, over the weeks that followed that infamous phone call the Pentagon and [influential members](#) of the US Senate spoke against Trump's decision. They portrayed it as a decision made without [consultation](#) with anyone outside the White House. They staged a false contradiction between the 'rogue Trump' and the 'reliable establishment', as if the latter group did not stand by and witness the deteriorating situation in Rojava until al-Assad came around. The US media beats the [dramatic drums](#) of the "out of control Trump" not only to justify the pretences of the White House and the US foreign policy establishment, not only to batter Trump's polling numbers, but also to silence important questions about why Rojava found itself prey to Trump's whims in the first place.

Rojava finds itself in this difficult situation because the US foreign policy under both Trump and Barack Obama carried out a careful counterrevolution against the revolution in Rojava. The Americans exploited the SDF's strengths and weaknesses to accomplish this feat. Unlike Turkey's explicitly anti-Kurdish agenda, the US foreign policy had both geopolitical and ideological aims in Rojava. We might say that in surrendering Rojava to al-Assad and Turkey, the US has successfully eliminated the autonomy of the only Leftist administration in the Middle East. But the US is [not planning](#) to lose [key ground](#) in Syria to the Russians.

Already an arm of the US propaganda machine is burying Rojava under the image of an "abandoned," "betrayed" and ultimately defeated revolution. Another takes advantage of the elegies to [reduce](#) the SDF's future and legacy to an "anti-ISIS" instrument. The establishment's arm [repents](#)

the betrayal to emphasize Rojava's continued role in the "war on terror" and buy back the prestige needed to legitimate US stay in Syria. These tactics add up to a so-called [reverse course](#) strategy that aims to re-functionalize the revolutionary SDF as a proxy imperialist unit. It is evident that in its moment of peril Rojava is still prey to the enemy's plans.

The Rojava revolution was once the living example of how novel forms of Leftist organization can serve as strategies of retaking and reshaping power. Now, regardless of the revolution's fate and the hyenas and vultures gathering to feast on its corpse, the evidence of the force and cunning of yet another imperialist counterrevolution calls for disabusing Leftist strategy of its fetishization of organizational tactics. Strategizing the field of antagonisms remains the principal means of doing politics. To do this we must decolonize the dynamics of revolution and counterrevolution in Rojava from naive and insidious analysis and narratives that predominate the Leftist approach to this event. We must do this to avoid Rojava's mistakes in future struggles and to warm our desire for revolution with concrete memories from Rojava. Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.

## **America's "Bad Dialectic"**

The prevalent structural analysis on Rojava does not discuss the place and agency of Rojava's military organ, the SDF, in bringing about the geopolitical nightmare in which the region finds itself at the moment. This is an agency that extends to the place and function of the SDF's intellectual and military backbones in the YPG and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). And let us not pretend that there was no relationship between these entities, when the Turkish government [negotiated](#) with the SDF through [Abdullah Öcalan](#)'s prison cell. It is also disingenuous, the legal implications of this connection notwithstanding, to treat "the PKK" as a leper label. The PKK is a flawed organization with a flawed history, but it is a solid, resilient Leftist organization that has carried out effective resistance against NATO's second largest army for over four decades and shown remarkable aptitude for transformation. [Reports](#) coming out of Washington think tanks have called for precisely this distancing and dissociation of the SDF and PKK.

Structural analysis is necessary to understanding the rapidly [changing calculus](#) of the Syrian civil war, and also to delineating the place and character of different agents within this shifting calculus. To begin with, the concessions given by the SDF in the September US-Turkey "safe zone" agreement were scandalous. Revolutionary strongholds such as Kobani fell inside the zone's map. [Kobani](#) set the ideological and emotional heartbeat of the revolution in Rojava. From a [strategic perspective](#),<sup>3</sup> giving up a 30-kilometer deep stretch along the Rojava-Turkey border would provide the TAF with valuable strategic depth inside Syria.<sup>4</sup> Critically, as part of the implementation of this agreement, a 5-kilometre stretch of Rojava's border with Turkey was [cleared](#) of YPG fortifications such as tunnels and trenches. Turkey used this implementation phase also for scouting patrols and [reconnaissance](#) flights in Rojava.

Given this advantage, Turkey did not wait for the full implementation of the safe zone agreement. During the initial phase of the incursion into northern Syria, the TAF tried on multiple occasions to [capture](#) the international M4 highway that marks the southern boundary of the safe zone and separates Syria's Kurdish north and Arab south. Turkey is in control of the central strip of M4 at this time. The TAF's jihadi proxies simply walked right through abandoned YPG tunnels and fortifications, into Rojava. Turkey's [Howitzer](#) units targeted every hospital and garrison in Rojava with precision.

To add insult to injury, the US agent in negotiations over the safe zone, James F. Jeffrey, had been pushing a two-pronged strategy in north and west Syria. For example, there were revelations about a US "green light" to Turkey to send [stored](#) TOW anti-tank missiles to Syrian rebels in Idlib in west Syria,<sup>5</sup> which the rebels used to push back al-Assad's tanks from south Idlib. Turkey used the

ensuing power vacuum to fortify its hold over Idlib through extremist groups such as the Syrian National Army (SNA) and Al-Qaida affiliate [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS). Occupied Idlib has served as breeding ground for extremist TAF proxies in [future wars](#).

Taking advantage of its control over Idlib and al-Assad's desire for this province as a bargaining chip, Turkey [excluded](#) Rojava's political body, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), from the UN and Astana peace talks. Turkey's position also discouraged al-Assad's guarantor state, Russia, from mediating negotiations between the SDF and SAA over transition to peace in Syria. Jeffrey knew that the US double game in Syria leveraged Turkey's hostility against the SDF and consolidated, in turn, Rojava's reliance on American presence in Syria as the only means to ward off Turkish hostility.

Enforcing this mutual tension was part of the Americans' *bad dialectic* in Syria. It is common wisdom to say that the US has "no Syria strategy." This misunderstanding was partly due to negligence of [Obama's Shift to the Pacific](#), which deemphasized Middle East-centric US foreign policy but never ruled out containing of the access of Pacific and Eurasian powers (i.e. China and Russia) to Europe and north Africa through geopolitical jugulars such as Syria. Regardless, the American grand strategy in Syria was *attrition*: prolong the decade-long civil war for as long as possible by stoking tensions on all fronts, in order to stultify the potential of the smaller actors and to return Syria to the status quo of the same old big state actors.<sup>6</sup> Arming and transforming the SDF into an "anti-ISIS" instrument was the central tactic of this atrocious strategy, because it enabled the US to become a powerbroker in Syria with less than 1,000 American 'boots on the ground'.

The US-SDF relation also served as an American instrument of steering Turkey's [shift to Russia](#), and this vicious cycle ultimately forced the SDF into a decisive war with Turkey. The Americans' options were always between sponsoring Rojava's reintegration into Syria at the expense of US interests (a nonstarter) and guaranteeing Rojava's independence from Syria (a nonstarter for Turkey). A face-off the US cultivated and milked because the TAF could better serve American interests in the region after it eliminated the SDF.

Elsewhere, [France](#) and the US had been pushing Rojava's main political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to start a project of "power-sharing" with the ENKS.<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Macron may have [warned Turkey](#) against invading Rojava in the meantime – threats amounting to nothing when Turkey's push finally came to shove – but he would have rather seen the ENKS in charge of the region. Since 2016, reports coming out of US think tanks have been advocating for "[making Rojava more like the KRG](#)."

## **The Case Against Rojava's US-centric Strategy**

To continue with this line of analysis would entail constructing yet another 'structural' analysis. It would entail ignoring the SDF's agency in bringing about the present political impasse in northeast Syria. The administration in Rojava always insisted on Syria's [territorial integrity](#), but similar to any other revolutionary enclave it valued autonomy and space for praxis.

The most commendable aspect of the Rojava project was always the utopian will to push the boundaries of the politically possible and create a revolutionary enclave in the midst of a war zone. But this was a will that was mixed with daredevilish brinkmanship and tinged with a desire to endure the revolutionary experiment under all circumstances. Recognizing this will and desire, the US counterrevolution protected Rojava's autonomy but only in order to erode its Leftist dimensions. Politically and economically besieged on all sides, Rojava's push for [KRG style](#)<sup>8</sup> autonomy under the auspices of the US Coalition only [isolated](#) the region further. The [Syrian](#), Russian, Iranian, and even Turkish strategies in Syria were all oriented against the US and US-backed forces in Syria. Political isolation warranted further militarization of the civilian body and economy, as well as centralization



and consolidation of strategic decision-making power in military organs connected to the US and its policy preferences in the Middle East, i.e. the SDF.

One alternative to US-sponsored autonomy was returning to al-Assad tyranny. Rojava's dream scenario was an Öcalan mediated peace process between the PKK and the TAF in Bakur (northern Kurdistan in Turkey) that would relieve Turkish pressure across the border on Rojava. The nightmare scenario was the Turkish occupation of Rojava. These were equally dreadful or impossible alternatives. A Leftist critique of Rojava that does not acknowledge either the difficulty of this situation or Rojava's struggles to retain its space and protect its revolution despite such challenges, only serves the forces of reaction. It is also impossible to erase the magnitude of Rojava revolution's achievements, just because it was led astray by the US foreign policy. Bracketing the revolution's tried and tested pluralism, [ecological concerns](#), and refreshingly [rehabilitative approach](#) to terrorist jurisprudence, the [women's revolution](#) in Rojava is enduring and epoch-making, in and of itself. A gender distribution ratio in government, local feminist courts, a social contract that women have played a central role in writing and executing, indigenous and autonomous communalism, all are part of the feminist program in Rojava.

All the same, it is the manner of defending a revolution that prefigures its mode of transition to post-revolutionary liberty and equality. We might ask if the SDF hierarchy acquiesced to a continued American presence in Rojava over other equally undesirable scenarios, such as sharing power with al-Assad. The American-manufactured political deadlock did provide the reasons the SDF needed to defend Rojava and stay in full control of the region. The SDF suffered from a crisis of legitimacy in northeast Syria, given its rapid southward expansion into the conservative and tribal central Arab Syria after 2016. The PKK and its headquarters in Qandil, the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), were under immense pressure to find new venue and legal sanction for their continued resistance in Turkey. The shifting landscape of [military technology](#) has made traditional guerrilla warfare nearly defunct, if not impossible.<sup>9</sup> The SDF, and by extension the PKK, upgraded their military and [counter-counterrevolutionary knowledge and arsenal](#) through the modern training provided by the US army. There were other important preferences for the reasons that follow later in this analysis.

The Americans were aware of such preferences and deepened the geopolitical deadlock by emboldening both the Turks and the SDF. The truckloads of American arms that entered Rojava every now and then, as a sign of the Americans' commitment to the SDF, amounted to little in reality when Turkey attacked Rojava with its American F-16s, [German Panther tanks](#), etc. Whereas the SDF's modern equipment and ammunition alarmed the TAF brass increasingly.

With respect to other geopolitical alternatives, as far as Damascus was concerned outright autonomy in Rojava was never an option. Al-Assad was wary of another resurgence from Syria's repressed Sunni majority, who kick-started the revolution and who live between the Damascus strongholds and Rojava. Giving autonomy to Rojava would have amounted to sanctioning another revolt by the Sunnis. However, al-Assad knew that maintaining Turkey's Kurdish problem on the border could deter Turkey from sponsoring future Sunni revolts, while keeping a leash on Rojava as it did on the PKK.<sup>10</sup> He also [knew](#) that Turkey aimed to resettle Arab Syrians in Rojava to rid itself of this Kurdish problem, and, with that, of Syria's geopolitical leverage over Turkey and NATO. Had the SDF negotiated with the SAA from a position of strength and not desperation, well before the Turkish assault, the prospect of retaining a local militia and political administration would have been a strong possibility.<sup>11</sup>

The false alternative to negotiation with al-Assad was the 'American leverage' theory propounded by many Syrian war pundits and proliferated by the US propaganda machine. This theory stressed the American presence in Rojava as necessary to achieving constitutional recognition of the Syrian Kurds by al-Assad and keeping Turkey out of Rojava. In practice, the Americans only discouraged

Rojava from negotiating a peace process with al-Assad.<sup>12</sup> There are revelations about Jeffery's role in [pressing](#) Mazlum Kobanî to not engage politically with the Syrian regime.<sup>13</sup> As for constitutional guarantees, they [would and could not protect](#) the revolution in Rojava against al-Assad, as he is capable of reneging on every democratic and legal commitment in a post-war Syria. In the meantime the US confined the SDF to being America's main ally in Syria in the "war against terror." The trouble was that any US ally, such as Turkey, could always lay claim to the SDF's place in this [empty signifier](#), and did.

Perhaps it was in view of such realities that [Öcalan recently called](#), from İmralı, for a return to "the method of expression" he declared in his "Newroz 2013 statement," that is, a return to "intelligence, political and cultural power instead of tools of physical violence." He must have realized that his brainchild was caught up in a bad American dialectic that aggravated Turkish hostility and hardened the SDF's stance. Strictly structural analysis erases, above all, the role that Öcalan's dual frameworks of [Democratic Confederation](#) and [Democratic Autonomy](#)<sup>14</sup> had played and needed to continue play in Rojava, in order to ensure a safe transition to a post-war Syria in Rojava and to facilitate a transition that deepened the democratic gains and aims of Rojava. The transformation of the SDF's agency from a revolutionary self-defence force to an "anti-ISIS" instrument was simultaneous with the sidelining of Öcalan's intellectual influence over Rojava.

## **Old Versus New Apo**

In a regional scene teeming with petit-imperialist projects, such as Turkey's "[Neo-Ottomanism](#)" and Iran's "[Shiite Crescent](#)," Öcalan's hybrid framework aims to *dissolve* the so-called Kurdish Question.

As the PKK's leader, Öcalan's politics in the decades prior to the experiment in Rojava were generally aimed at, first, the recognition of the Kurdish identity in the Middle East, and, second, establishing a Kurdish nation-state by decolonizing Turkey's Kurdish areas. Throughout this early period, Öcalan's theoretical thought followed the general rubric of the *recognition* framework of national liberation.<sup>15</sup> This framework was the traditional engine of the postcolonial liberation movements of the twentieth century and drew its ideological and strategic sensibility, and hence political legitimacy, from a host of historical and concrete coordinates of the time, one of which was the empire *versus* colony divisions of the era.

At the back end of learning from his own mistakes in over four decades of resisting Turkish colonialism and militarism, Öcalan came to realize that as a postcolonial movement in a postcolonial region, the Kurdish resistance movement could not wage a war for international recognition against recently postcolonial states. Kurdistan is divided into four parts in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, along the imperialist lines of two post-WWI [treaties](#). Here, a resistance movement in one Kurdish colony is always perceived as rebellion against four state enemies – and by extension, against the regional interests of the former colonizers of these states. In this interwoven context a Kurdish war of liberation in one colony is treated as a regional war with international dimensions. The size and number of these wars and enemies often dwarf the strategic capacities of Kurdish liberation movements.

This strategic deficit is further exacerbated, Öcalan understood, because Kurdish liberation projects find no ideological allies either inside or outside their state enemies. The Kurds' four state enemies wield a monopoly over the production of the postcolonial discourse within their territories. Moreover these states mobilize and refashion, as testament to their own national sovereignty, genuine anti-imperialist sentiments in the region. The Islamic Republic's motto of "Neither East Nor West," the Ba'athist ideologies in both Iraq and Syria, and later on, Turkey's Neo-Ottomanism, appropriate 'anti-imperialism' as official postcolonial states discourses. This is a discourse that attracts the ideological sympathy of Leftist/postcolonial intellectuals, parties, and media of the Middle East and

the world. Critically, this international sympathy produces a political recognition of postcolonial state sovereignty as an end to itself. But such recognition often comes at the expense of [misrecognizing](#) – as ‘imperialist’ vehicles for destabilizing national and postcolonial independence – genuine minoritarian movements within these postcolonies. The epitome of over-identification with this paranoia is [Edward Said’s denial](#) of Saddam Hussein’s chemical genocide of 182,000 Iraqi Kurds.

Against this distorted backdrop, Öcalan understood that a radical change in the Middle Eastern politics of assigning meaning to land was a matter of strategic necessity. Insofar as Middle Eastern minorities frame their politics in the language of the territorial state – that is, insofar as ‘nation-state’ functions as the aim *and* means to the emancipatory strategies of the Middle Eastern stateless – they will produce their political strategies in reaction to the norms of the state. They will conduct their politics on the state’s legal terrain and resign to a juridical imbalance of power that favors state sovereignty. Knowing this, state actors do not recognize the legitimacy of statist minoritarian liberation movements as *a matter of strategic necessity*, a right to refusal recognized by the international state system. The Americans refused to include Rojava in the UN peace talks in order to deny it this recognition.

To address this deficit of power and legitimacy, Öcalan’s [late theories](#) shift from the earlier recognition mindset to the *redistributive* frameworks of Democratic Confederalism and Autonomy. This [shift](#) reinvests the melancholy of stateless movements in a desire for equalitarian *reformations* of power. Here, power and legitimacy come not through recognition by the international state system but through living in common and [away from the state](#). Not just a model for economic and political redistribution, Öcalan’s hybrid framework also redistributes the sensibility of persistent ideological complexes, such as the colonial land question, in order to open up the terrain of new emancipatory struggles.<sup>16</sup>

## **Öcalan’s Counter-Imperialism**

Implementation of Öcalan’s framework in Rojava gave the Syrian Kurds, in actual practice, immediate and strategic advantages in the Syrian civil war. Working within the stateless bounds of Democratic Autonomy, the Syrian Kurds were not ideologically and strategically mandated to seek independence from the Syrian ‘Arab’ Republic as ‘Kurds’. They [saved themselves](#) from Bashar al-Assad’s butcheries throughout the civil war.<sup>17</sup> The Syrian Kurds’ Democratic Confederalist approach to sharing power made them [attractive](#) to the region’s other minorities, and this ideological attraction bolstered the SDF-SDC’s popular mandate in times of economic crisis and blockade. Importantly, power sharing inoculated these minorities against the overtures of the region’s other sectarian actors in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, and helped keep Rojava internally peaceful for the most part.

The Rojava revolution survived and thrived years into the Syrian civil war’s onset in no small part because of the implementation of Öcalan’s framework. Its innovations caught the Middle Eastern and international actors off-guard in the early stages of the conflict, and this gap in reaction bought time and space for the insurrection in Rojava to grow roots and spread when the rest of Syria was going up in flames. Democratic Confederalism and Autonomy were effective – and more than novelties or luxuries – because they equipped Rojava’s Kurdish resistance movement with a strategic and ideological arsenal not (yet) co-opted by the region’s nation-states.

A revolution requires a political strategy capable of transforming the status quo balances of power and manoeuvre. And it must do this not just through exploiting the immanent [contradictions](#) of the imperial playing field (oh, such a Marxist-realist cliché). Revolution *proper* forces imperialist actors to react to a political field that is organized and prefigured according to the strengths and



necessities of Leftist struggle.

Critically, on an international stage whose strategic and ideological imaginary is under daily attack by neoliberalism and late capitalism, Öcalan's hybrid framework offers a counter-imperialist cultural programme that attracts [internationalist sympathies](#). Democratic Confederalism and Autonomy are antithetical to the patriarchy, environmental degradation, capitalist economy, and racial segregation that constitute the foundations of our permanent and global state of emergency. More than a utopian culture, this framework also immunizes the [imaginary](#) of the Rojava revolution against the return of the bad habits found in abundance in other parts of Kurdistan – especially in the PKK's formerly chauvinist, militarist, and nationalist tendencies. Revolution *proper* requires a political ideology capable of surmounting the status quo's hold on the possibilities of a common future.

## **The Rojava (Counter)Revolution**

There are both internal and external limits to Öcalan's hybrid framework, and the Americans were aware of these limitations. Öcalan's frameworks were designed for a gradual transformation of life and politics in Syria and the Middle East, over many decades. Specifically, their approach to self-defence was never designed to be expansionist and aggressive.

The territorial logic of war on ISIS, and the logistical necessities imposed on Rojava's politics by territoriality, undermined the framework's capacity for countering the centralizing tendencies of the state. Waging war follows necessities that are not always amenable to normative practices of decentralization, and this is especially true in an industrially underdeveloped area such as Rojava. Fighting against ISIS, while enduring a Turkish-imposed commercial and humanitarian [blockade](#), led to the centralization of Rojava's decision-making in the SDF and US Centcom, particularly aspects of Rojava's political economy that pertained to its foreign policy. Öcalan's stateless state theory fell short in the battlefield of counterrevolution because its Dual Power mindset had not a practicable concept of state building in periods of violent antagonism.

Rojava's grand strategic options were always limited to two alternatives, the first being the defensive route of a local administration that directs its resources and state building project toward defending Rojava's cantons of Afrin, Kobanî, and Jazira. This option would entail shoring up internal hegemony in Rojava through cultural, economic and political growth. External security could come through de-escalation and coalition-building measures in the region. The feasible path to the growth and spread of the revolution would come, via this option and in line with Öcalan's vision, through gradual ideological infiltration of the neighboring states and their Leftist blocks.

The second route, the one actually taken, diverted Rojava's resources and state building project toward a military offensive for territorial accumulation. This option secured internal hegemony by providing security, and external security through engaging and appeasing the interests of foreign and regional actors. This option's aggression increased and diversified the perceived threat of the SDF in the eyes of states actors, especially from the perspectives of Turkey and Iran with large Kurdish populations that sympathize with Rojava's sister parties in the PKK and Free Life Party (PJAK). After an initial phase of expansion in Syria, this route also limited the expansion of the revolution to existing state borders. The increasing role of the US in Rojava heightened the hostility of the surrounding nation-states' Leftist blocks and reduced the perception of the revolution in Rojava to a "Kurdish-led" project for independence.

As Mazlum Kobanî already [professed](#) in 2017 with respect to the mounting Turkish threat, the US spearheaded this reversal of Rojava's framework and fortunes:

“The main reason that our relations with Turkey broke down is not the PKK. That is an excuse. The main reason is the strategic relationship that developed between us and the United States. This aggravated Turkey’s phobias, its fears.”

Of course, the necessities of the actual situation in Rojava were never so clear-cut but rather full of perils and contradictions. The election of Donald Trump to the office of US president massively wrecked and altered the strategic calculus of every single actor in the Syrian civil war. Increased attacks on Rojava by ISIS and [other jihadi forces](#) hampered the possibility of a strictly defensive project. ISIS was and is no spectre or excuse for war but a real enemy of all Middle Eastern people.<sup>18</sup>

These circumstances notwithstanding, as of 2016 and after ISIS had been driven out of the traditional boundaries of Rojava (here as in *western Kurdistan*), the formation of the US-sponsored SDF heralded the beginning of a proactive and offensive era of Rojava’s grand strategy, one that culminated in the battles for Arab majority Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor in 2017.<sup>19</sup> The formation of this force was due, in part, to revelations about Turkey’s role in [sponsoring the rise of ISIS](#) as a proxy for weakening and eliminating the Kurdish populations in northern Iraq and Syria. Until then the US had sponsored an openly [anti-Kurdish Syrian opposition](#) and was in no rush to change course. After the Russians entered the scene of the Syrian civil war, however, the US could no longer afford to back a losing side.

The SDF’s own plan was to eliminate ISIS in its entirety in order to eliminate the Turkish sponsorship of ISIS. If Turkey was to attack Rojava’s northern border and ISIS resurged from the south, the consequences would be catastrophic. ISIS control over the oil-rich Deir ez-Zor province also bankrolled the group’s armies in Iraq and Syria. But the necessities of this offensive entailed the consolidation of power in Rojava in the hands of the majority Kurdish-Leftist backbone of the SDF, the YPG, which Turkey deems “terrorists.”

Turkey exploited this pretext for containing “Kurdish domination” in northern Syria and executed a multi-step containment strategy that led up to the occupation and [ethnic cleansing of the Afrin](#) canton last year, the safe zone concessions over the summer, and now outright invasion.<sup>20</sup> However, already by 2018, necessities of the SDF’s southward expansion had redirected strategic concerns away from the defense of Afrin. By the time of the 2019 invasion, the SDF was by its own admission stretched “too thinly” to defend north Syria, with most of its logistical capacities deployed to battling ISIS in the middle Euphrates river valley (MERV).

The US backing of the SDF also worked to decentralize decision-making in this organ in a manner consistent, in appearance, with Öcalan’s theories. The formation of the SDF was synonymous with a systematic and celebrated inclusion of Arab, Armenian and Syriac forces, among others, in the mainly Kurdish YPG. Local military councils were set up all over northeast Syria to localize the areas’ defence forces, in what appeared to be a second revolution in Rojava. But that did not stop the US from recruiting this pluralisation against the revolution. It is increasingly clear that the US foreign policy establishment’s “reverse course” strategy is based on either recruiting the Leftist-Kurdish backbone of the SDF (in the YPG) or abandoning them to Turkish slaughter. Certain Arab [military councils](#) of the SDF and the [Revolutionary Commando Army](#) that the US has been training in al-Tanf will take over as America’s boots on the ground.<sup>21</sup> “War against ISIS” in these former ISIS strongholds will serve as smokescreen for containing Iranian-backed militias stationed just south of the MERV.<sup>23</sup> This is the same YPG/YPJ that [carried out](#), a decade prior to the onset of the Syrian and Rojava revolutions, the underground work to educate the urban and rural Kurdish Syrians on the tenets of Democratic Confederalism and Autonomy. Such has been the cunning of history and US foreign policy.

The centrality of the “war on terror” reduced the Leftist dimensions of the revolution in Rojava. It is only understandable that the [traumas](#) and sacrifices of battles against ISIS and Turkey’s jihadi proxies have congealed, in Rojava’s popular imaginary, into a collective drive to prevent such catastrophes in the future. The war against Islamic fundamentalism has claimed 11,000 martyrs among the men and woman of the SDF, YPG, and the YPJ, a huge toll on the human and self-defence resources of a region the size of Denmark. But this is also an anxiety that reinforced the mandate of the SDF to protect the region by all means necessary, as well as the US coalitions’ narrative to “defeat terror.”

## **The Blanquist PKK**

The SDF needed this mandate, and so did the PKK. In Rojava, the SDF and its political wing the SDC (and before that, the YPG-PYD tandem) never enjoyed overwhelming popularity and political hegemony. This was mainly because, though indigenous to the area, these parties and units were never allowed to operate as official Kurdish parties in Syria before the revolution. Despite the SDF’s increasing ideological sway over the many populations of Rojava, some Syrian Kurds remained conservative and trusting of the ENKS’s neoliberal agenda. The Arab backbones of the SDF were in significant instances tribal and their allegiance to the SDF was geared around tactical alliances made possible by continued American presence in Rojava.<sup>24</sup> As for the important members of the Syriac and Armenian communities, they constitute the traditional bourgeoisie of the Rojava region, and their interests were subject to the maintenance of their class interests. The war against ISIS and Rojava’s American-centric strategy enabled the SDF-SDC to maintain political hegemony among these desperate forces and factions.

In Turkey, [cracks](#) in a common strategy between the PKK and its political wing in the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) surfaced after the breakdown of the peace process in 2013 and the PKK’s failed [urban trench warfare](#) in 2015. The HDP blames the PKK for alienating the conservative and bourgeoisie Kurdish electorate blocks from parliamentary politics, which erodes the HDP’s support base and its chances of making the 10 per cent baseline vote required for entering the Turkish parliament as a party. The PKK is aware that without its armed activities, the HDP will not [last very long](#) in Turkey’s militarized democracy. Minoritarian parliamentary politics in a racist and religious country has a ceiling that is not always recognized by the HDP. Continued guerrilla warfare in southeast Turkey enables the PKK to influence the HDP’s reformist tendencies and the Turkish state’s hostile stance with respect to the HDP.

The SDF and PKK had in common a crisis of hegemony and the need to produce and maintain this hegemony through the mechanisms of militarism. As Friedrich Engels points out in his remarks on [\*The Program of the Blanquist Fugitives from the Paris Commune\*](#):

“From Blanqui’s assumption, that any revolution may be made by the outbreak of a small revolutionary minority, follows of itself the necessity of a dictatorship after the success of the venture.”

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, the YPG-PYD tandem was able to monopolize politics in Rojava as the party of insurrection against the Syrian state. But it was through their continued cooperation with the Americans against ISIS, under the SDF-SDC banner, that they were able to [establish](#) themselves as the official state (of Rojava) party and to endure as powerbrokers in north and east Syria after it had become obvious, already in 2016, that the Syrian revolution was failing and al-Assad was here to stay.

Class analysis of the internal dynamics of vanguard parties is indispensable to a structural analysis of post-revolutionary conflicts. Studies of the Soviet relations of production readily demonstrate, *pace* [Mészáros](#) and Castoriadis, that in post-revolutionary societies the degree of development of the capitalist mode of production is not the *necessary* precondition of the rule of capital or its lack thereof. Though determined in part by pre-revolutionary economy, it is the manner of organization and distribution of post-revolutionary social relations that prefigures the rule of capital.

Subordination of economic and ideological re/production to hierarchized and centralized political priorities regenerates, inside post-capitalist parties and institutions, a bourgeois political class.<sup>25</sup> A division of power that favours the bourgeoisified vanguard ‘trickles down’ to the economic and ideological spheres as, for example, subjugation of cooperative agricultural production to sustaining war economy or lack of public funding for cultural productions critical of this war economy.<sup>26</sup>

As I write, a Senate-sponsored “reverse course” offer is still on the table for the Kurdish leadership of the SDF. It envisions Kurdish leadership of the “anti-ISIS” operations in Arab majority areas of the MERV. The US foreign policy establishment refers to this plan as the “Kurdish statelet” project or put differently, KRG 2.0 on Arab land. It means working actively against the interests of hostile actors such as Iran and entails more reliance on US protection in an even more hostile regional climate. The situation in Syria is too fluid to speculate on such a possibility, but the [pelting](#) with potatoes, tomatoes and stones that the departing US troops enjoyed at the hands of Rojava’s people points to a divide between the choices of the SDF’s brass and the region’s popular sentiments.

But we must cease the premature elegies. The leaders and personnel of the Rojava revolution are still alive and around, they continue to fight and negotiate. The SDF-SDC may yet turn Rojava into Turkey’s Vietnam. The resistance is not over because United States left; it began well before the Americans came. The civil society in Rojava must grow stronger, more active, and be present everywhere, now that the military route and leadership is incapacitated. It is time for a new phase of the revolution, with resisting the Syrian state and struggling for democracy as the primary aim. It is time for Rojava to stand on its own feet, even if it has to go underground again. A resilient praxis of dual power is the way forward for saving the revolution.

## Decolonizing Rojava

There were serious disjunctions between democratizing and “[Bookchinizing](#)” life inside Rojava and the [Marxist-realist approach](#) of the SDF-PKK to what might be called Rojava’s foreign policy. The US and other actors in Syria milked the bad dialectic between Rojava’s domestic and foreign and political relations. Turkey, Russia, al-Assad, and Iran all partook of the atrocious approach of forcing Rojava into difficult situations, where its hierarchy was forced to prioritize and centralize power to defend Rojava. Enforcing this bad dialectic is the latest instance of a [classic counterrevolutionary trick](#) devised by the American architect of the Cold War era.

The myriad challenges to the revolution in Rojava also provide a glimpse into the intertwined nature of the ‘Kurdish Question’ in the Middle East. They offer insight into the PKK’s priorities in the region. The international character of the Kurdish Question calls for a hierarchy of interests in the party’s dealings with the region’s states and, to that extent, subordination of the Kurdish resistance movements in Iran, Iraq, and even Syria to the exigencies of politics in Turkey. For example, had the PKK not given in to the Turkish state’s urge to break the historic ceasefire pact in 2015, Rojava would have faced less hostility from the TAF today. Had Rojava helped the anti-Kurdish Sunni opposition eliminate al-Assad in 2015, when he was weak, the revolution in Rojava would not have faced the double sword of al-Assad and the TAF later. The PKK’s understandable hostility to Syria’s Turkish-backed opposition is to blame for Rojava’s choice in 2015.<sup>27</sup>

These destructive dynamics reveal an “inter-Kurdish hierarchy” that may be deemed a colonization

of the greater Kurdistan by the interests of the most populous and strategic part of Kurdistan in Bakur. To rid the Kurdish resistance movement of its “Bakur hegemony” is the first of the four strategies of decolonizing revolutions in Rojava and Kurdistan that I prescribe here.

Second, I call for decolonizing Rojava from all American presence and residue, for all the reasons outlined above. To provide a further example: Could the ecological revolution in Rojava have the US Army, the [biggest global environmental polluter](#), as its partner in making Rojava and the Middle East green again?

Third is decolonizing the Western media’s attitude toward Rojava. Importantly, the Left should take the news, analysis, and social media space on and around Rojava and its legacy away from Washington’s think tanks, journalists, and cyber rooms.<sup>28</sup> A prerequisite of this strategy is decolonizing the Western Left’s puerile attitude toward the realities of subaltern struggles in the Middle East. [Retrograde critiques](#) bash Rojava’s cooperation with the US in Syria but do this without offering workable alternatives against the threat of Turkey and ISIS. Their ‘radical’ critique always entailed a choice for Rojava’s people between dying and dying.

Finally, I call on the PKK-KCK tandem to decolonize its strategic mindset from the Soviet-realist strategic imaginary. If Rojava or the Kurdish resistance movements that will surely follow are to become truly Leftist nations and Kurdish post-states – true in the sense that Machievalli and [Althusser](#) ascribe to enduring projects of Leftist-state building – their foreign policy must shed its reactive and defensive guise, impose its will on the situation in Syria, and dictate its own necessities in the Middle East. But such a proactive approach does not require an offensive war of manoeuvre in Syria and the Middle East, either in the name of survival or as a war on terror. Rather, it entails returning to the groundbreaking capacities of Öcalan’s dual-power framework of Democratic Confederalism and Autonomy, by way of theorizing and redeveloping these capacities for sustained, effective, and democratic self-defence against capitalist and imperialist counterrevolution. •

## Fouâd Oveysy

### Endnotes

1. The details of the pact were not made clear but, according to statements by northeast Syria [officials](#), it was a military and political pact that protects Syria’s borders, transfers the management of northeast Syria’s natural resources to Damascus and leaves intact, for now, the Leftist administration in northeast Syria. The “political details” were to be negotiated after joint SDF-SAA operations have removed Turkey from the occupied provinces of [Afrin](#) and Idlib.
2. After the deal, some troops were moved to the [al-Tanf](#) base in western Syria, just north of Jordan and right under the belly of al-Assad held areas. Some US troops would [remain in Syria](#) by the strategic Tishreen Dam. The US air force also bombed SAA forces approaching the [al-Bukamal](#) border crossing with Iraq. Retaining bases in al-Tanf and al-Bukamal allows the US to shut the “[Iran highway](#)” to Israel from opposite sides. The Tishrin dam regulates Syria’s water. Al-Bukamali is the southernmost point of the oil rich Deir ez Zorr province. The forces [moved to Iraq](#) will intervene from across the border to provide ground and close air support for those in Syria.
3. If the idea behind this deal was to turn it into some sort of de facto recognition of a border between Rojava and Turkey – and by that measure a de facto recognition of Rojava by Turkey, as the SDF hopes -- the Russian endorsed exclusion of the city of Qamishli (where al-Assad maintains an airbase) from this zone tarnishes the solidity and stability of such a prospect.
4. The safe zone places Turkey within striking distance of two key intersections along the M4 highway leading to Raqqa and Deir ez-Zur respectively. Through this zone Turkey could control major roads connecting Kobane, Qamishli, and Hasakah.



5. 5. Only a single progressive faction, of about 2,000 members, may be considered part of the genuine, former Syrian opposition forces. It is rumored that this group, the National Front for Liberation (NLF), has also [joined forces](#) with the Turkish-backed (SNA). The majority of rebels that controls the province of Idlib are members of the powerful al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).
6. 6. Few countries in the world have both the military and financial clout to engage a decade long war. Iran's economy is capsizing and it had to cease giving handouts to Damascus; Turkey fares not better.
7. 7. The ENKS leader Ibrahim Biro held a [meeting](#) with the US State Department officials in Washington regarding the proposed safe zone, while the ENKS brass and the Turkish intelligence (MİT) met up in Syria to discuss cooperation plans. ENKS's Rôj peshmerga units might even take advantage of YPG withdrawal from the safe zone to infiltrate these areas politically and militarily and bolster the US Coalition's hold over internal dynamics in Rojava.
8. 8. Insofar as KRG as a model is concerned, the region could serve (its crony capitalism bracketed) as a model for Rojava of a Kurdish administration that coexists with the central government of a Middle Eastern nation state while providing a modicum of additional economic and cultural growth for its citizens. But a quick glimpse at the KRG's political and military ventures *vis-à-vis* the Iraqi government and the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilizations Forces (PMU) demonstrates, readily, either US betrayal or US lack of support at every constitutional and critical conjuncture facing the KRG.
9. 9. Some blame the fall of the canton of Afrin on the relentless unmanned Turkish drones that struck terror in the heart of the men's and women's self-defense units protecting this enclave, drones made by a company owned by none other than Erdoğan himself.
10. 10. Before its 1998 expulsion from Syria, the PKK used Syria as a base to attack Turkey. In return, the PKK did not involve itself with the Kurdish question in Syria.
11. 11. The prospect of retaining local autonomy in Rojava in a reunited Syria was always a more workable long-term alternative than agreeing on a "safe zone" with Turkey through US mediation. From the standpoint of international law, reconciliation with al-Assad could have eliminated the threat of Turkey's territorial aggression, but no agreement with Turkey would have rid Rojava of its al-Assad problem. Despite al-Assad's bloody and chemical military history, the depleted Syrian Arab Army (SAA) was a lesser military threat to Rojava's autonomy than the TAF. Whereas Turkey would do to Rojava's revolutionaries only what it does to their brothers and sisters [in Turkey](#). Rojava could have even dared Damascus to test the limits of the SDF's military councils in combat, if al-Assad got greedy for totalitarianism in post-war Syria. An agreement with al-Assad would have made for no revolutionary highlights, but evidently in an imaginary ranking of evils the al-Assad regime falls well below an objective estimation of the United States' malevolence.
12. 12. 'American leverage' was also a serious threat. Even the KCK's call in August, for [negotiations](#) between Rojava and al-Assad, risked triggering a US-sanctioned invasion of Rojava by Turkey. Over the years, the SDF allowed the US Coalition to set up bases in Rojava without receiving political recognition in return. Now, as witnessed by the American's refusal to leave Kobani and Syria at large, no military or political force in the world from the Left or Right can retake the 21 bastions of American occupation of Rojava – certainly not a US-dependant SDF. Such is the weight of US military and prestige around the world that the SDF's 100,000 defence forces were taken hostage by the 1,000 or so US personnel in Rojava.
13. 13 "The policy was to isolate the regime and they used the SDF as a pawn with no cover from Trump," anonymous sources in US think tanks now whisper.
14. 14. Öcalan's hybrid framework of Democratic Confederalism and Democratic Autonomy offers, through the first component, non-hierarchical tools for self-determination, organization, and self-defence *inside* Rojava, and through the second, a roadmap for de-territorializing the Middle East by way of the withering away of the state and nation-state borders. The practice of

Democratic Confederalism democratizes Rojava's *internal* politics by redistributing power among the region's groups and minorities, while Democratic Autonomy enables a democratic confederalist government, such as the one in Rojava, to coexist with state actors such as the Syrian regime as in a parallel state within a larger state. As hybrid instances of [Dual Power](#), Democratic Confederalism and Autonomy do not challenge state power directly but rather, as alternative providers of politics and governance, they work to reduce people's reliance on centralized states and thus erode and eventually replace state structures from inside. The Black Panthers in the United States and the Hezbollah in Lebanon based their power on similar initiatives.

15. 15. As formulated by the likes of Franz Fanon.
16. 16. I am not assigning my own readings to Öcalan's theories because he is rather forceful with the manner of translation of his own theories into practice. In the weeks leading up to the runoff between the Atatürk-founded Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, and the candidate nominated by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Öcalan was quick to chastise the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) supporters in Istanbul for their jubilant show of support for the latter. Öcalan warned them against abandoning the "third way" politics of the Kurdish resistance movement, and though his quips earned him massive backlash from the same movement, it did not go unnoticed that Öcalan was warning the movement against the complacency of restricting its political options to the heavily guarded confines of the so-called Turkish liberal democracy. Of course, only a few weeks later the same system illegally ousted scores of elected HDP representatives from office to replace them with the state-appointed kayyums. Öcalan insists that the Kurdish resistance movement must define and shape its own political options and paths.
17. 17. I bracket the shrewd strategic intentions and realpolitik behind this decision to highlight the strategic ideological imaginary that Öcalan's model lends to such decision-making.
18. 18. I can neither render nor emphasize the terror of ISIS adequately enough. *Children of Fire*, a play about the Kurdish women fighters of the PKK, documents the experiences of a Rojava guerrilla who travels to [Shingal](#) as part of a 50-strong all women unit to liberate the city, where ISIS is committing genocide against the region's native Yezidis. There, in a nearby village, she finds a traumatized Yezidi woman observing a wild dog that is tearing her child apart, a child killed and abandoned by ISIS.
19. 19. The US announced the formation the 100,000 strong SDF "border force" in 2016, as an "all Syrian" entity created to arm the YPG by way of bypassing congressional anti-terror laws against arming PKK-related militia.
20. 20. The Russians offered to 'save' the canton's population in return for their total surrender to al-Assad's forces, but this offer was rejected by the YPG at the expense of opening the canton to the TAF's onslaught, a rejection due likely to US pressure on the SDF.
21. 21. The SDF's 60% Arab Sunni majority abhors al-Assad and Iran. Their military councils in Raqqa, Deir ez Zor, and Tabqa refused to partake of the SDF-Assad deal.
22. 22. The [practicability](#) of the "Arab SDF" plan is still debated, but it relies on the Sunni Arab tribes' understandable hostility against al-Assad and Iran, and the SDF's largely Arab [ethnic makeup](#) if cleansed of the YPG. Turkey considers the YPG "terrorists" while the SDF is a force recognized and funded by the US Congress and the Pentagon. Portrayed as just another [empty](#) Trump promise by the media, this plan is the product of [careful planning](#) by Trump's State Department to indulge Turkey's 'concerns' about the YPG as well as the Iran hawks' own agenda against the spread of Iranian influence in Syria. Trump's [fabled](#) sanctions against Turkey complete this puzzle by making sure that Erdoğan behaves and carries out his ethnic cleansing of the Kurds and YPG "with a human face."
23. 23. Ironically, during the implementation phase of the safe zone the SDF's twitter account [celebrated](#) - as a way of signaling Rojava's commitment to the US plan - the removal of "YPG fortifications" from the Rojava-Turkish border.

24. 24. These forces took advantage of their alliance to carve out a measure of autonomy within the SDF structure, as opposed to returning to life under al-Assad autarchy.
25. 25. This is especially true in unevenly developed societies subject to the necessities of development.
26. 26. An extensive study of these relations in Rojava is not possible here and now, but two examples will shed some light on the emerging dynamics of capital in this post-revolutionary enclave. First, the highly disputed issue of oil production in the Arab south of Rojava, namely in Deir ez-Zur. Here, wide ranging and [ambivalent reports](#) indicate a complex of dynamics, which include but are not limited to the following: tribal Arab sense of ownership of oil resources in central Syria; SDF attempts to curb the smuggling and sale of these resources to al-Assad by tribesmen; periodic clashes between the SDF's local military councils and tribal forces affiliated with ISIS, who use revenues from smuggling oil to fund ISIS activities in the region; and finally, sporadic civilian protests in these areas against the SDF's heavy-handed handling of the smugglers and ISIS affiliates. The SDF's political and economic presence in the Arab south of Rojava is tensely fraught with priorities of defending the region against ISIS and al-Assad hostility. These are tensions that reinvigorate economic and ideological divides between Syria's Arabs and Kurds. The second example may be illustrated with the help of the first: the question of the free press in Rojava. It was only after Arab media outlets from outside Rojava publicized news of the tensions in Deir ez-Zur that the SDF-related press reported on these dynamics and offered some explanations. Authorities explained that Turkish and jihadi media [pick and harvest](#) such news toward further destabilizing the region, hence, the enforced lack of reporting of the tribal Deir ez-Zur's dissatisfaction with SDF policies. Of course, Turkish and jihadi media then take advantage of this excuse to highlight the SDF's less democratic manners and to stir up sectarian forces and clashes.
27. 27. For example, the opposition Syria's National Councils (SNC)'s unabashedly anti-Kurdish alliance with Turkey has been both a cause and consequence of the YPG-PYD's tacit ceasefire agreement with al-Assad throughout the civil war. But the dynamic between the PYD and SNC could have been made less complex without the hegemony of Bakur and the PKK in the YPG's strategic mindset.
28. 28. They minimize the discourse on Rojava's revolutionary achievements to highlight the SDF's role as an anti-ISIS instrument. They do this also to produce a discourse that dissociates the PKK and SDF. This is a discourse that aims to isolate and confine, clandestinely, the Kurdish questions in Bakur, Rojava, Rojhilat (Iran) and Bashur (Iraq) to the bounds of the predominant nation-state system, and so to stultify the borderless ambitions and capacities of the Democratic Confederalist framework and practice.

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## P.S.

- Socialist Project. October 27, 2019:  
<https://socialistproject.ca/2019/10/revolution-and-counterrevolution-in-rojava/>

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