

# Impressions of Rojava: a report from the revolution

Sunday 28 December 2014, by [BIEHL Janet](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2014).

**In early December an international delegation visited Rojava's Cezire canton where they learned about the ongoing revolution, cooperation and tolerance.**

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From December 1 to 9, I had the privilege of visiting Rojava as part of a delegation of academics from Austria, Germany, Norway, Turkey, the UK, and the US. We assembled in Erbil, Iraq, on November 29 and spent the next day learning about the petrostate known as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), with its oil politics, patronage politics, feuding parties (KDP and PUK), and apparent aspirations to emulate Dubai. We soon had enough and on Monday morning were relieved to drive to the Tigris, where we crossed the border into Syria and entered Rojava, the majority-Kurdish autonomous region of northern Syria.

The Tigris river channel was narrow, but the society we encountered on the far shore could not have been more different from the KRG: the spirit of a social and political revolution was in the air. As we disembarked, we were greeted by the Asayis, or civilian security forces of the revolution. The Asayis reject the label police, since police serve the state whereas they serve society.

Over the next nine days, we would explore Rojava's revolutionary self-government in an old-fashioned state of total immersion (we had no internet access to distract us). Our delegation's two organizers — Dilar Dirik (a talented PhD student at Cambridge University) [[1](#)] and Devriş Çimen (head of Civaka Azad [[2](#)], the Kurdish Center for Public Information in Germany) — took us on an intensive tour of the various revolutionary institutions.

Rojava consists of three geographically non-contiguous cantons; we would see only the easternmost one, Cezire (or Jazira), due to the ongoing war with the Islamic State, which rages to the west, especially in Kobani. But everywhere we were welcomed warmly.

## **Rojava's Third Way**

At the outset, the deputy foreign minister, Amine Ossi, introduced us to the history of the revolution. The Syrian Ba'ath regime, a system of one-party rule, had long insisted that all Syrians were Arabs and attempted to "Arabize" the country's four million Kurds, suppressing their identity and stripping those who objected of their citizenship.

After Tunisian and Egyptian opposition groups mounted insurgencies during the Arab Spring in 2011, rebellious Syrians rose up too, initiating the civil war. In the summer of 2012, the regime's authority collapsed in Rojava, where the Kurds had little trouble persuading its officials to depart nonviolently.

Rojavans (I'll call them by that name because while they are mostly Kurds, they are also Arabs, Assyrians, Chechens, and others) then faced a choice of aligning themselves either with the regime that had persecuted them, or with the mostly Islamic militant opposition groups.

Rojava's Kurds being relatively secular, they refused both sides and decided instead to embark on a Third Way, based on the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned Kurdish leader who rethought the Kurdish issue, the nature of revolution, and an alternative modernity to the nation-state and capitalism.

Initially, under his leadership, Kurds had fought for a state, but several decades ago, again under his leadership, their goal began to change: they now reject the state as a source of oppression and instead strive for self-government, for popular democracy. Drawing eclectically from sources in history, philosophy, politics, and anthropology, Öcalan proposed 'Democratic Confederalism' as the name for the overarching program of bottom-up democracy, gender equality, ecology, and a cooperative economy. The implementation of those principles, in institutions not only of democratic self-government but also of economics, education, health and gender, is called Democratic Autonomy.

## **A Women's Revolution**

Under their Third Way, Rojava's three cantons declared Democratic Autonomy and formally established it in a "social contract" [3] (the non-statist term it uses instead of "constitution"). Under that program, they created a system of popular self-government, based in neighborhood commune assemblies (comprising several hundred households each), which anyone may attend, and with power rising from the bottom up through elected deputies to the city and cantonal levels.

When our delegation visited a Qamishlo neighborhood (Qamishlo being the largest city in the Cezire canton), we attended a meeting of a local people's council, where the electricity and matters relating to women, conflict resolution and families of martyrs were discussed. Men and women sat and participated together. Elsewhere in Qamishlo, we witnessed an assembly of women addressing problems particular to their gender.

Gender is of special importance to this project in human emancipation. We quickly realized that the Rojava Revolution is fundamentally a women's revolution. This part of the world is traditionally home to extreme patriarchal oppression: to be born female is to be at risk for violent abuse, childhood marriage, honor killings, polygamy, and more.

But today the women of Rojava have shaken off that tradition and participate fully in public life: at every level of politics and society. Institutional leadership consists not of one position but two, one male and one female official — for the sake of gender equality and also to keep power from concentrating into one person's hands.

Representatives of Yekitiya Star, the umbrella organization for women's groups, explained that women are essential to democracy — they even defined the antagonist of women's freedom, strikingly, not as patriarchy but as the nation-state and capitalist modernity. The women's revolution aims to free everyone. Women are to this revolution what the proletariat was to Marxist-Leninist

revolutions of the past century. It has profoundly transformed not only women's status but every aspect of society.

Even the traditionally male-dominated strands of society, like the military, have been profoundly transformed. The people's protection units (YPG) have been joined by the YPJ — or women's protection units — whose images by now have become world famous. Together, the YPG and the YPJ are defending society against the jihadist forces of ISIS and Al-Nusra with Kalashnikovs and, perhaps equally formidably, a fierce intellectual and emotional commitment not only to their community's survival but to its political ideas and aspirations too.

When we visited a meeting of the YPJ, we were told that the fighters' education consists not only of training in practical matters like weapons but also in Democratic Autonomy. "We are fighting for our ideas," they emphasized at every turn. Two of the women who met with us had been injured in battle. One sat with an IV bag, another with a metal crutch — both were wincing in pain but had the fortitude and self-discipline to participate in our session.

## **Cooperation and Education**

Rojavans fight for the survival of their community but above all, as the YPJ told us, for their ideas. They even put the successful implementation of democracy above ethnicity. Their social agreement affirms the inclusion of ethnic minorities (Arabs, Chechens, Assyrians) and religions (Muslims, Christians, Yezidis), and Democratic Autonomy in practice seems to bend over backwards to include minorities, without imposing it on others against their will, leaving the door open to all.

When our delegation asked a group of Assyrians to tell us their challenges with Democratic Autonomy, they said they had none. In nine days we could not possibly have scoured Rojava for all problems, and our interlocutors candidly admitted that Rojava is hardly above criticism, but as far as I could see, Rojava at the very least aspires to model tolerance and pluralism in a part of the world that has seen far too much fanaticism and repression — and to whatever extent it succeeds, it deserves commendation.

Rojava's economic model "is the same as its political model," an economics adviser in Derik told us: to create a "community economy," building cooperatives in all sectors and educating the people in the idea. The adviser expressed satisfaction that even though 70 percent of Rojava's resources must go to the war effort, the economy still manages to meet everyone's basic needs.

They strive for self-sufficiency, because they must: the crucial fact is that Rojava exists under an embargo. It can neither export to nor import from its immediate neighbor to the north, Turkey, which would like to see the whole Kurdish project disappear.

Even the KRG, under control of their ethnic kin but economically beholden to Turkey, observes the embargo, although more cross-border KRG-Rojava trade is occurring now in the wake of political developments. But the country still lacks resources. That does not dampen their spirit: "If there is only bread, then we all have a share," the adviser told us.

We visited an economics academy and economic cooperatives: a sewing cooperative in Derik, making uniforms for the defense forces; a cooperative greenhouse, growing cucumbers and tomatoes; a dairy cooperative in Rimelan, where a new shed was under construction.

The Kurdish areas are the most fertile parts of Syria, home to its abundant wheat supply, but the Ba'ath regime had deliberately refrained from industrializing the area, a source of raw materials.

Hence wheat was cultivated but could not be milled into flour. We visited a mill, newly constructed since the revolution, improvised from local materials. It now provides flour for the bread consumed in Cezire, whose residents get three loaves a day.

Similarly, Cezire was Syria's major source of petroleum, with several thousand oil rigs, mostly in the Rimelan area. But the Ba'ath regime ensured that Rojava had no refineries, forcing the oil to be transported to refineries elsewhere in Syria. But since the revolution, Rojavans have improvised two new oil refineries, which are used mainly to provide diesel for the generators that power the canton. The local oil industry, if such it can be called, produces only enough for local needs, nothing more.

## **A DIY Revolution**

The level of improvisation was striking throughout the canton. The more we traveled through Rojava, the more I marveled at the do-it-yourself nature of the revolution, its reliance on local ingenuity and the scarce materials at hand. But it was not until we visited the various academies — the women's academy in Rimelan and the Mesopotamian Academy in Qamishlo — that I realized that it is integral to the system as a whole.

The education system in Rojava is non-traditional, rejecting ideas of hierarchy, power and hegemony. Instead of following a teacher-student hierarchy, students teach each other and learn from each other's experience. Students learn what is useful, in practical matters; they "search for meaning," as we were told, in intellectual matters. They do not memorize; they learn to think for themselves and make decisions, to become the subjects of their own lives. They learn to be empowered and to participate in Democratic Autonomy.

Images of Abdullah Öcalan are everywhere, which to Western eyes might suggest something Orwellian: indoctrination, knee-jerk belief. But to interpret those images that way would be to miss the situation entirely. "No one will give you your rights," someone quoted Öcalan to us, "you will have to struggle to obtain them."

And to carry out that struggle, Rojavans know they must educate both themselves and society. Öcalan taught them Democratic Confederalism as a set of principles. Their role has been to figure out how to implement it, in Democratic Autonomy, and thereby to empower themselves.

The Kurds have historically had few friends. They were ignored by the Treaty of Lausanne that divided up the Middle East after World War I. For most of the past century, they suffered as minorities in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. Their language and culture have been suppressed, their identities denied, their human rights overruled.

They are on the wrong side of NATO, where Turkey is permitted to call the shots on Kurdish matters. They have long been outsiders. That experience has been brutal, involving torture, exile and war. But it has also given them strength and independence of mind. Öcalan taught them how to reset the terms of their existence in a way that gave them dignity and self-respect.

This do-it-yourself revolution by an educated populace is embargoed by their neighbors and gets along by the skin of its teeth. It is nonetheless an endeavor that pushes the human prospect forward. In the wake of the twentieth century, many people have come to the worst conclusions about human nature, but in the twenty-first, Rojavans are setting a new standard for what human beings are capable of. In a world fast losing hope, they shine as a beacon.

Anyone with a bit of faith in humanity should wish the Rojavans well with their revolution and do

what they can to help it succeed. They should demand that their governments stop allowing Turkey to define a rejectionist international policy toward the Kurds and toward Democratic Autonomy. They should demand an end to the embargo against Rojava.

*The members of the delegation in which I participated (even though I am not an academic) did their work well. Sympathetic to the revolution, they nonetheless asked challenging questions, about Rojava's economic outlook, about the handling of ethnicity and nationalism, and more. The Rojavans we met, accustomed to grappling with hard questions, responded thoughtfully and even welcomed critique. Readers interested in learning more about the Rojava Revolution may look forward to forthcoming writings by the other delegation members: Welat (Oktay) Ay, Rebecca Coles, Antonia Davidovic, Eirik Eiglad, David Graeber, Thomas Jeffrey Miley, Johanna Riha, Nazan Üstündag, and Christian Zimmer. As for me, I have much more to say than this short article allows and plan to write a further work, one that incorporates drawings I made during the trip.*

**Janet Biehl**

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## **P.S.**

\* On December 16, 2014. Roarmag:  
<http://roarmag.org/2014/12/janet-biehl-report-rojava/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://vimeo.com/107639261>

[2] <http://civaka-azad.org>

[3] <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/resources/rojava/charter-of-the-social-contract/>