

Kurdistan in Syria: Democratic Autonomy in Rojava

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In the past 33 years, the Kurdish freedom struggle, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, have not only reacted to social changes but shaped them and proposed further steps in the direction of a liberated society.

Significantly, the PKK conceives the Kurdish question as an issue not of nation or ethnicity but of the liberation of society, of both sexes, and of all people. Öcalan's book *Sociology of Freedom* is a kind of a road map for the liberation of Rojava and the entire Middle East, highlighting in detail steps toward freedom.

During our journeys through Rojava, we met many people who had close relationships to Öcalan and to others who have decisively participated in the PKK's history. This ongoing contact has engendered a transformation in the region's otherwise feudalistic social terrain. The women especially emphasized this connection—they have known about Kurdish women's liberation ideology for more than twenty years and have been trying to implement it. Thanks to all the close interconnections within the Kurdish freedom movement, many people [from Rojava] joined the PKK and fought for it in North Kurdistan. So it is a mistake to see the PKK as strictly a North Kurdish phenomenon; this movement also belonged and belongs to tens of thousands of activists from Rojava.

Öcalan's 1999 arrest, followed by the Assad regime's intensified repression, gave rise to a period of reorganization in Rojava. After the regime's 2004 massacre of Kurds in the city of Qamişlo and the subsequent uprising, this reorganization began to gain momentum, to the point of creating armed self-defense units. The leftist Party of Democratic Unity (PYD) had already been founded and quickly became a strong regional political force. Meanwhile new paradigms emerged from the Kurdish freedom movement and especially from Öcalan, inspired by the work of the libertarian theorist Murray Bookchin, whose model of democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy became a touchstone for the reorientation. Öcalan developed a critique of the history of actually existing socialist states and of national liberation movements, including the PKK itself. As an alternative to conceptions of revolution that strive for an armed uprising and seizure of power, he outlined a plan for a "democratic, ecological, gender-liberated society." He introduced the concept of an "ethical and political society" that would be self-managed and would situate itself outside the lifeless, homogenous consumer society of capitalism.

Even before the rebellions in Syria began, the Kurds of Rojava had already created the first councils and committees and thereby began to institute a radical democratic organization of most of the region's population. Starting on June 19, 2012, the cities of Kobanê, Afrîn, Dêrik, and many other places were one by one freed from regime control; the strength of the reorganization then revealed itself. Military bases were reconfigured, and the vastly outnumbered regime troops were offered the option of withdrawal. Only in Dêrik did the situation lead to a struggle, with a few casualties. But even here, as people in Dêrik told us, the new self-organization prevented violent attacks and acts of

destruction and revenge.

Self-Defense and the “Third Way”

As we considered this phase and the politics of the Kurdish movement in Rojava, we also observed the implementation of another paradigm of Democratic Confederalism: self-defense and the primacy of nonviolent solutions. The Kurdish movement and especially the PYD were organized before the Syrian revolution began resisting the Assad regime. At that time they saw it as a matter of democratic transformation; a militarization of the conflict was to be avoided. But with the outbreak of war, Islamization, and the heteronomy of the Syrian revolt, the Kurdish movement in Rojava decided to go a third way: it would side neither with the regime nor with the opposition. It would defend itself, but it would not wage war. The movement has remained this politics up to the present [July 2014]. Thus in Qamişlo, in the quarters that were inhabited by regime supporters, regime military units were still tolerated. The same was true for the airport. The goal was and is always to reach a political, democratic solution for all of Syria.

The Commune as the Center of Society

“The creation of an operational level where all kinds of social and political groups, religious communities, or intellectual tendencies can express themselves directly in all local decision-making processes can also be called participative democracy.”

— Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London, 2011), p. 26.

Democratic Confederalism has as its goal the autonomy of society: in other words, instead of the state governing society, a politicized society manages itself. As against capitalist modernity, it proposes democratic modernity. In Rojava, to make this system possible, the center of the social system became the commune. The commune, the self-management of the streets, would emerge as the hub of the society.

Decision making in the communes requires that quotas be met—that is, in order to make a decision, here and in all councils in Rojava, at least 40 percent of those who participate in the discussions must be women. In the communes, current issues of administration, energy, and food supply, as well as social problems like patriarchal violence, family conflicts, and much else, are discussed and if possible resolved. The communes have commissions that address all social questions, everything from the organization of defense to justice to infrastructure to youth to the economy and the construction of individual cooperatives—such as bakeries, clothing production, and agricultural projects. The ecology commissions concern themselves with urban sanitation as well as specifically ecological problems. At the forefront is the imperative to strengthen the social position of women: committees for women’s economy help women develop economic independence.

The commune, as the *mala gel* (people’s house), lends support in all questions; it is simultaneously an institution of support and a kind of court. Central to its processes is the ideal of agreement and compensation; for general offenses, the causes of an infraction are investigated and overcome, and the victim is protected. For patriarchal violence and all attacks that affect women, the *mala jinan* (women’s house) is in charge; it is attached to the women’s council, a parallel structure to the commune’s mixed-gender council.

As we ourselves could see, meanwhile, people of the most diverse identities take part in the communes, especially Arabs and Assyrians. The *mala jinan* likewise works to solve social problems and is responsible for implementing the goals of women’s liberation. As much as possible, the councils prefer to vote by consensus. The communes send their representatives to their respective district

councils and city councils, and the structure continues into the general council of Rojava.

Democratic Autonomy and the Nation-State

“Peaceful coexistence between the nation-state and democratic confederalism is possible, as long as the nation-state doesn’t interfere with central matters of self-administration. All such interventions would call for the self-defense of the civil society.”

— Abdullah Öcalan, Democratic Confederalism, p. 32.

Democratic Confederalism is a form of self-management and thus stands in contrast to the model of the state. It is an attempt at permanent social revolution, as is reflected in every facet of the social structure. Overcoming the nation-state is seen as a long-term goal. The state will be overcome when Democratic Confederalism in practice assumes all structures into its self-organization and self-management. In that society neither statist nor territorial boundaries will play a role.

Indeed, by virtue of the self-management of society, Democratic Confederalism renders the state and the nation-state redundant. In this social model the commune, the council, and the society are integrated, with the commune as the political center. In outward form the region of Rojava has chosen to follow the Swiss cantonal model, structuring itself in terms of the cantons’ far-reaching regional autonomy. Ideally the canton arises from the cooperation of the autonomous political councils. While the nation-state is based on social homogenization through the construction of identity and its reflexively coercive implementation, Democratic Confederalism is based on social diversity. Over the course of world history, the nation-state has been compromised by bloodshed.

In this region, typically only the Arabizing politics of Syria and the Turkicizing politics of Turkey were discussed. But Syria is home to Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Sunni Kurds, Assyrian Christians, Chaldeans, Yezidi Kurds, Armenians, Aramaeans, Chechens, Turkmen, and many other cultural, religious or ethnic groups. All these social groups should achieve representation through the council system with its corresponding quotas.

The commune, as the structure of self-management that directly binds to the neighborhood, must therefore be the center of political self-management. In order to raise the level of social organization, it provides educational forums for members of the commune, on topics like democratic self-determination and rights, women’s liberation, the history of Syria, the history of Kurdistan, the Kurdish language, and many other social issues.

On our journey in the region, we saw that the success in implementation varies from region to region. In many areas Arab councils and especially the Assyrians work very closely together with the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM). Central positions are allocated to three or four co-chairpersons, who correspond to the social groups of the region.

The Highest Council, or Parliamentary Democracy?

While in many areas the Kurdish population already has decades of experience with the Kurdish movement’s concepts of women’s liberation and social freedom, here too there are of course also divergences. Some wish to organize in classical parties rather than in councils.

This problem has been solved in Rojava through a dual structure. On one hand a parliament is chosen, to which free elections under international supervision are to take place as soon as possible. This parliament forms a parallel structure to the councils; it forms a transitional government, in which all political and social groups are represented, while the council system forms a kind of parallel parliament. The structuring and rules of this collaboration are at the moment under

discussion.

Closing the Gap

Mamosta Abdulsalam, of TEV-DEM in Heseke, has explained the system of communes in Heseke. "There was a gap between the councils and the people—that's why we developed the commune system," says Mamosta Abdul. "There are 16 district councils here. On each council there are 15 to 30 people. About 50 houses form a commune. The communes are numerous—in each district there are about 10-30 communes with 15-30 persons each. The Mifte district in Heseke has 29 communes, while the neighboring district has 11 communes. Each district forms about 20 communes per 1,000 people. The 16 district councils are formed from the communes. One hundred and one people sit on Heseke's city council. In addition the PYD has five representatives, as do five other parties. Families of the Fallen have five, Yekitiya Star has five, the Revolutionary Youth have five, and the Liberals have five. The district councils normally meet every two months. Twenty-one people are elected as the coordination. The leadership meetings take place once a month and as needed in special cases. Always at least 40 percent of the representatives are women and at least 40 percent are men. Decisions are made according to consensus principle. Care is taken that one person doesn't dominate the proceedings. The co-chairs are elected. Members of the commune nominate them and then elect them."

Women's Work

At the beginning of our stay in Rojava, Sirin Ibrahim Ömer, a 45-year-old woman from the district of Hileli in Qamişlo, reported to us on women's work in her commune.

"We are 60 active women in our commune. Once a week we do educational work—we read books together and then discuss them. Twice a month we visit other women and explain the tasks of the revolution. Many are much influenced by the logic of the state—they don't see themselves as people who can manage their own affairs. They have many children, and there are many arguments at home. The children are outside on the street and play instead of going to school. We're concerned about that. If a family has no income, we have a committee for that, to provide the basic foodstuffs.

The peace committee talks with the families. If there is violence in a family, the woman can get help from the Asayiş. In Hileli meanwhile it's socially disapproved for a man to hit his wife—that's all but come to a stop. In other districts it's still present in places. Here it was usual for the television to be on 24 hours in an apartment, with Turkish broadcasts in Arabic language—that was a big problem. But when the energy suddenly went off, so did the TVs, and people's minds were cleared to do something else.

Many women are married off very young, even as children, so that there will be no extramarital pregnancies. Now they see that education is good for them, that they can have a better life.

Once a week we go out and collect a little money—it's a symbolic way to help. We distribute the weekly newspaper (Rohahi) —it's very cheap, so everyone can read it. It appears in Arabic and Kurdish. When we all get together now, our topics are not gossip and chitchat as before, but political developments and the women's organization. We know it all here in the district.

In many districts there are also so-called women's houses. They aren't women's safe houses like in Germany, but houses where women can get together and educate one another and talk about their problems. They frequently offer classes in computers, language, and sewing.

The most important work of the women's houses is however to provide assistance against social sexism. "The women come to us, when they have a problem. Not only the Kurdish women but also

the Arab women," says a representative of the women's houses, Serê Kaniyê.

We witnessed such an inquiry. Two older Arab women arrived and asked the women at the women's house for help. "Through the commune system we know every family," says Serê Kaniyê, "we know every family's economic situation, and we know who hits his wife and his children. We go directly there and speak with those affected, until it gets to a solution." She agrees on a date with the two women, to find a solution for their problem.

Conflict Resolution

The commune is a place not only of self-organization but also of social conflict resolution. It concerns itself with social problems in the districts, support of poorer members of the commune, and the just distribution of fuel, bread, and foodstuffs. Meetings of the commune handle not only conflicts, the usual neighborhood fights, but also violence against children, and resolution is attempted. In Dêrik we attended a meeting of representatives of a commune: they were discussing the case of a family that had tied up a child. This behavior was now monitored and controlled. If the misbehavior continues, the children will be taken to a protected place.

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P.S.

* TATORT Kurdistan. 10.10.2014:

<http://new-compass.net/articles/revolution-rojava>

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