

Interview

# Northern Syria: On democratic confederalism, Murray Bookchin, Abdullah Öcalan and the Rojava Revolution

Thursday 6 September 2018, by [BIEHL Janet](#), [HEINTZ Andy](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2018).

**From 1987 to 2000, Janet Biehl, together with her longtime companion Murray Bookchin, published and co-edited *Left Green Perspectives*. She compiled and edited the *Murray Bookchin Reader* (1997). After Bookchin's death in 2006, she wrote his biography: *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* (2015). A version of this interview will be featured in Andy Heintz's book *Dissidents of the International Left*.**

Realizing that longtime Kurdish solidarity activists in Germany had published a considerable literature, she has turned to translating some key German works into English: *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan* (2014) is a brief field study of democratic institutions in southeastern Turkey written by TATORT ("Crime Scene") Kurdistan, a solidarity group; and *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Northern Syria* (2016) is the first book-length field study of the Rojava Revolution, written by three activists, Michel Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga.

Biehl visited northeastern Syria herself in December 2014 and again in October 2015, after which she wrote several articles about her observations of the Rojava Revolution.

She is currently translating the three-volume memoir of Sakine Cansiz, legendary co-founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party and an iconic figure in the Kurdish women's movement, assassinated in 2013. Volume 1 appeared from Pluto Press in 2018 under the title *Sara: My Whole Life Was a Struggle*.

**Andy Heintz - After visiting Rojava, can you talk about differences between the libertarian municipalism Murray Bookchin advocated and the Rojava ideology of democratic confederalism?**

Janet Biehl - Democratic confederalism is the ideology developed by Abdullah Öcalan while in prison, based in part on Bookchin's libertarian municipalism, a model of bottom-up, face-to-face democracy. Bottom-up democracy made sense for the Kurdish movement because in the absence of an autonomous political system of their own, the Kurds have lived as a minority inside other nation-states, where the authoritarian system in power usually denied and persecuted them. Starting around 2000, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) discussed and debated the basis for a new paradigm. Giving up on the goal of achieving a Kurdish nation-state, they adopted democratic confederalism around 2005. Kurds in southeastern Turkey and northern Syria thereafter set out to implement it.

Bookchin began developing the program that would become libertarian municipalism as early as the

1950s, when he realized that the next socialist revolutions, post-Marxist ones, would have to be thoroughly democratic in nature, to avoid Marxist tyrannies and to include all citizens. Since the nation-state was bought and paid for by the wealthy and powerful, he rejected the sham “representative democracy” of legislatures, parliaments, and executives. Power, he thought, had to be taken from the hands of the capitalist nation state and put it in the hands of the people.

Instead, citizens should govern themselves through face-to-face democratic assemblies. He combed through history, especially but not limited to revolutionary history, looking for instances of such assemblies and found them most notably in the self-governing cities of ancient Athens, in the Parisian sectional assemblies of the French Revolution c.1793, and the town meetings of colonial New England.

Ideas of assembly democracy had long been rejected because of the defects of those systems: the democracy of ancient Athens excluded women, slaves, and non-Athenians; the Parisian assemblies were choked in the blood of guillotines; and the New England town meetings were not only patriarchal but fought savage wars against the local Native Americans. Bookchin’s proposal was to bring them up to date, making use of the advances of democratic thinking over the course of centuries. The new citizen democracies would not only exist outside and in opposition to the nation-state, they would include women and ethnic minorities, they would abhor slavery and indeed all hierarchy, they would gain popularity through popular mobilization and empowerment rather than guillotines, and they would distribute wealth among all community members. Bookchin’s innovation was to transform the human potentiality for democratic self-government into a concrete program, which was libertarian municipalism.

To manage affairs from the bottom up over broader areas, the citizens assemblies would form confederations. Bookchin derived this institutional idea from the history of Spanish anarchism, specifically the huge and militant anarcho-syndicalist trade union, the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), which was organized like a confederation. Bookchin proposed that assemblies send mandated delegates to the upper levels of the confederal structure, to ensure that power would continue to flow from the bottom up. Over time as the democratic confederations became more popular, with more and more participation, they could constitute a dual power to the nation state, and the bottom-up power would eventually replace the nation-state.

Murray was known as an anarchist for four decades, from 1960 to 2000, and he long tried to persuade the anarchist movement that democratic self-government of this kind was its natural politics. But he gained little ground and finally concluded that anarchism was individualist at its core. So he dropped the label in favor of communalism, on the principle that whereas anarchism pits the individual against the state, his project was to pit the community-in-confederation against the state.

Bookchin gained fans and loyal readers all over the world, but the broad movement he dreamed of never came into existence. He consoled himself, before his death in 2006, that if anyone was ever interested in the project of creating face-to-face democratic self-government, his program would be there in writing, available for their use.

It turned out that someone was very interested, and much sooner than Murray might have expected. After 1999, when Abdullah Öcalan was sentenced to solitary confinement by the Turkish state, he realized that the PKK needed a new formulation and scoured the works of social theorists east and west looking for sources of renewal. Bookchin’s major works had been translated into Turkish, and Öcalan thought Bookchin’s ideas were promising.

Around 2004, two organizers in Germany had the idea of facilitating a dialogue between Öcalan and

Bookchin through email, but it never really came about, as Bookchin was too sick and weary. But they did have a brief exchange in which Öcalan told Bookchin that he considered himself a good student of his and a social ecologist (another name for Bookchin's ideas). And when Bookchin died in 2006, the PKK wrote a tribute to him saluting him as a great social scientist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and avowing that they would create the first Bookchinite polity on earth.

As I mentioned, Öcalan reworked libertarian municipalism and his own ideas as well as ideas from other authors into democratic confederalism, and the proposal went to the Kurdish movement. Öcalan recommended to the PKK through his lawyers that they read Bookchin. Once the PKK accepted democratic confederalism in the early 2000s, Kurdish militants set about implementing it in the parts of southeastern Turkey and northern Syria where many Kurds live. In Syria, despite the brutality of the Assad regime, the people began building grassroots democratic institutions, committees and assemblies, illicitly.

In the summer of 2012, in the early stages of the Syrian civil war, the Assad regime essentially abandoned the Kurdish north to concentrate its troops to fight Islamist rebels in the south. The new democratic institutions sprang into the sunlight, proliferated, and became integral to the self-government of three regions or cantons in the north: Jazira, Kobane, and Afrin. This so-called MGRK system is a system of assemblies and communes and mandated delegates flowing up through various confederal tiers.

### **Can you talk about your visit to the cantons in northern Syria?**

I visited the Jazira canton in December 2014, when the revolution was still very much a work in progress. I was impressed by the enormous importance of public education, especially the institutions that Kurds call academies. People of all ages attend academies, dedicated to a wide range of fields including women (Jineoloji), language and literature, cooperatives, defense and internal security forces. All the academies, including the military ones, teach democratic confederalism in addition to their specific field.

One of the great changes Öcalan made in democratic confederalism is his emphasis on the liberation of women. Bookchin didn't single out the liberation of women—he was opposed to hierarchy of all kinds, including domination based on race, ethnicity, and sexual identity as well as gender, and the domination of man over nature. Öcalan, however, emphasized the importance of liberating women, and gender equality became a pillar of the Kurdish movement.

In fact, the three pillars of democratic confederalism are said to be democracy, gender equality, and ecology. In the Rojava I would add two more: ethnic-religious inclusivity, and a cooperative economy.

### **Did you see many similarities to municipal libertarianism in Rojava?**

I found a very strong commitment to the ideas of citizen democracy and to putting them into practice. But it's not a pure bottom-up democracy.

In January 2014, the three cantons were in a precarious state. The Turkish state had placed them under a political and economic embargo, in which most of the rest of the world also seemed to participate. Few goods could get in or out. Moreover, the three cantons were seeking international recognition from other states. They were trying to show the world Syria could be a peaceful, inclusive, democratic, humane place. But in vain—the legitimacy of the three cantons or the MGRK system got no takers, no recognition.

So the cantons all adopted a second tier of government, one more like a normal state, in hopes that the international community would take them seriously and recognize Rojava. Each canton created a democratic autonomy administration (DAA), which consists of more traditional executive, legislative and judicial bodies. Unfortunately, international recognition was still not forthcoming—the addition of the DAAs made no difference. But the DAAs co-exist alongside the MGRK system today, dividing up power between them somehow, in ways I'm not competent to talk about. I don't want to give the false impression that this is a pure stateless society—let alone an anarchist society—because the DAAs are more like traditional state institutions. Their existence may be necessary given the precariousness of the whole experiment, I don't know.

On my second visit to Rojava, in October 2015, the people were actively talking about how to keep power flowing from the bottom up. Ideas flow from the bottom, but these ideas are processed, considered and discussed by a legislative council and an executive council in each canton. Everyone seemed aware of the danger that a tiered system of self-government could transform into a conduit for top-down rule, as happened with the Soviets (councils) in the Russian Revolution. But people's consciousness seemed to be very strong. They are very educated, and they know their revolutionary history. I found it very inspiring that they were taking this question seriously. I hope one day to return and see how they answered it.

**Critics of the Rojava model like Robin Yassin-Kassab worry that the local democratic councils that were set up by majority Arab populations, before they were destroyed by the Islamic State or Assad, will not be able to voluntarily restart those councils since their lands were liberated by the SDF? Do you think the SDF will be willing to let these populations adopt their own form of self-government if this is what they choose to do?**

I'm sorry, I don't know what the thinking here is, and least of all can I predict what the SDF will do. I can tell you that when I was in Rojava (which has since been renamed the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria, or DFNS), the YPG-YPJ were only interested in defending themselves from attacks by the Islamic State, al Nusra and other Salafi jihadist groups that were being propagated by Turkey to destroy the Rojava experiment. But as they began liberating villages outside the three cantons, the SDF made an alteration: if people in a city or town wanted to be liberated from the Islamic State, then the YPG-YPJ under the aegis of the SDF would help them out. This happened in Raqqa and in Manbij. Manbij is a mostly Arab population that had been suffering mightily under the Islamic State for a few years before the SDF liberated it. The population has adopted the institutions of the original three cantons, and today there is a Manbij military council and assemblies and local women are knocking on doors to tell women who are victims of patriarchy that there are places they can go. They no longer have to suffer in silence at home.

**Robin's worry was that the Arab-majority populations living in the areas the Rojava Kurds had liberated from the Islamic State would not be able to form their own local democratic councils that differed from the democratic confederalism supported by the SDF.**

Again, I am not privy to SDF thinking on this topic and can only speak to what I know. Yassin-Kassab has written a great deal about local committees, and I don't see a contradiction between those and the model being practiced in Rojava, I would think they could be harmonized. It would seem to me that the SDF would be more interested in aligning with these groups than opposing them. Also, the SDF is not solely Kurdish: In the Cizire canton, Kurds are not the majority population. They are outnumbered by other groups, including Arabs. From what I've read, many Arab villages were glad to be liberated, as in the corridor between Jazira and Kobane. That corridor has been integrated into the system, and there is now a female co-mayor in that area.

**What have you observed about the relationship between the Rojava revolution and the**

## **Assad regime?**

There has never been a complete severance of relations between Rojava and the regime, and parts of northern Syria are still under regime control. The regime still controls the airport and a section of Qamishli. Very ill people can be flown to Damascus for treatment in the hospitals. A year or two ago there was a clash between the YPJ-YPG and the Assad regime in Al-Hasakah, but this has been rare. There are still a lot of question marks about the nature of the relationship between Rojava and Damascus.

## **Should people see this relationship as a short-term alliance similar to the one between the United States and the Soviet Union in World War II?**

As far as I know, the alliance is tactical. I haven't seen any signs that the people have had to bend because of the revolution's relationship with the Assad regime, but I could be wrong.

## **Do you see any window of opportunity that would allow for an alliance between the FSA and the Rojava Revolution?**

FSA groups participated with Turkey in the invasion of Afrin and participate in its occupation even as we speak, in violation of all international norms. Along with Turkish forces they are looting and massacring and constructing a system that resembles IS more than anything democratic or liberatory.

## **What do you think is behind Turkey's attack on Afrin? What are the long term-goals behind this invasion?**

Erdoğan fears Kurds in his own country, and he denies them basic language and cultural rights. The Turkish state has denied Kurdish identity for decades, along with that of other ethnic minorities. The Turkish state seems to fear the prospect of non-Turkish ethnic autonomy in or near Turkey.

Yet the DNFS only wants to live in peace with Turkey and would like it to stop supporting jihadists that operate against it. It's a peaceful system that represents democracy, gender equality, progressive values and human rights. In contrast, Turkey is an autocracy that represents the suppression of human rights and dissent, and traditional gender roles. The two governing systems couldn't be more opposite. Erdogan's intent was always to overturn the democracy and even, in his neo-Ottomanist program, to expand the borders of Turkey into Syria. Perhaps he sees Afrin as the weak link of the DFNS. Invading a foreign country is a war crime, and the world should be decrying it. Look what happened when Putin grabbed Crimea and stirred up trouble in Ukraine—Russia was subjected to international sanctions. Erdogan did the very same thing with Afrin, and the world is unfortunately all but silent.

## **Do you think the U.S. government will stand with the Rojava Kurds because of the help they have provided in severely weakening the Islamic State, or will it decide not to take any action against Turkey because it is a NATO ally?**

I can't predict what they will do. Trump says he is going to pull out of Syria altogether, but the administration is chaotic, and lack of any clear U.S. goals in Syria makes it difficult to foresee.

## **What is your response to some of the alleged human rights violations by supporters of the Rojava Revolution reported by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International?**

The first thing you should know is that in January 2014 the three cantons adopted a social contract that starts out with a statement in support of ethnic and religious inclusivity. It names all the

different groups in Rojava. It says there are three official languages there—Kurdish, Arabic, and Aramaic. Then the contract goes on to endorse just about every human rights declaration and treaty. What other place does that? It's a remarkable document.

When I was at the YPG and YPJ trainings, the message I kept hearing was "There will be no revenge taking." I heard this message given at the YPG-YPJ academies and the Asayis (internal security) academy that I visited. The Kurds were long ruled by others who persecuted them, and that some might desire payback is normal. In fact, given the historical repression of the Kurds in Syria, it's possible that someone goes rogue and engages in unwarranted violence, as happened for example in Amude sometime ago. But the Rojava system is trying to prevent payback from happening, considering it far more important for them to model ethnic and religious inclusivity, and they seem to bend over backwards to be inclusive. Based on what I saw when I was in there, going rogue would be an exception rather than systemic, and a contradiction of the project's *raison d'être*.

As to Human Rights Watch, you must be referring to its June 2014 report *Under Kurdish Rule*. I would refer you to the democratic self-administration's response. [1] They denied some accusations, admitted some mistakes, and "call[ed] on [HRW] to visit the two cantons mentioned for further investigations so that we together may be able to improve the situation." That unusual response shows the high-mindedness of the project.

The Amnesty International (AI) report is something else again. *We Had Nowhere Else to Go—Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria*, published in October 2015 [2], claimed that the previous summer, after the YPG/YPJ and others liberated Tal Abyad and other areas and expelled IS, the YPG committed "forced displacement, home demolitions and confiscation of civilian property." AI researchers visited 14 towns and villages and interviewed local villagers, who allegedly told them they had been subjected to "forced displacement" and their houses were "demolished." The report included satellite images as evidence of the damage. AI accused the YPG of preventing people from returning to their home villages; of destroying houses belonging to residents accused of IS sympathies; and even razing a village. AI said it amounted to a coordinated "campaign of collective punishment" against Arab villages.

The YPG immediately rejected the report, calling it "arbitrary, biased and unprofessional," as well as "dangerous, unethical and unworthy," containing "flagrant fallacies that put the credibility of the report and Amnesty International at stake." It wrote a line-by-line rebuttal. [3] Unfortunately the Peace in Kurdistan link I remember from three years ago is currently inactive, but quotes from the response are available here. Here are some of the main points in the YPG's rebuttal and those of others:

**Destruction.** Villagers told AI that the YPG/YPJ had deliberately razed the village of Husseiniya in Hassakeh. AI's report included satellite images that supposedly corroborated that that nearly 94 percent of the village had been destroyed: out of 225 buildings in a village in June 2014, only 14 were left a year later. The interviewees said the buildings were destroyed by the YPG/YPJ. But the pictures do not show how or by whom the houses were destroyed. But the fact that they were destroyed between June 2014 and June 2015 means that it was not the YPG but IS that destroyed them. The summer of 2015 was the date of liberation from IS. In other words, so fallacious was the AI report that its own satellite evidence contradicted the witnesses' testimonies.

**Threats to burn villagers alive.** The AI report conveyed allegations that the YPG / YPJ even threatened to burn residents alive if they did not leave their homes. But it did not provide evidence beyond the above-mentioned satellite photos showing destruction.

**Forced displacements.** The AI report alleged that its interviewees had fled the YPG, but given the

time frame, they clearly left to flee IS and the fighting. During the brutal occupation, the IS planted mines and other explosives, and they were still there after the liberation. AI failed to take into consideration that “successive terrorist organizations in the region pursued a war strategy of planting improvised explosive devices and mines, using car and suicide bombs and booby-trapping houses.” Moreover, the report authors “ignore[d] what Daesh (IS) terrorists and others ... did during their defeats in terms of demolition, burning and destruction.”

The YPG/YPJ admitted in the AI report (the section where they were permitted to respond) that when they had information about collaborations between residents and IS, they urged them to leave their homes. Such evacuations were obviously necessary, given wartime conditions, on security grounds. But they denied deliberately destroying houses, let alone entire villages, simply because some of the inhabitants might bear them ill will.

Nonetheless, AI went on to generalize from the witnesses’ statements, accusing the YPG of coordinating expulsion campaigns and committing cruel, ruthless, and systematic war crimes. It failed to mention that the YPG/YPJ fought to liberate those villages in alliance with Arab units. (They would soon afterward combine to form the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF.) By the summer of 2015, a common Kurdish/Arab offensive had liberated 1,500 Arab villages from IS. This alliance “removed all doubt,” said the YPG, that it would want to force the displacement of any particular ethnic group. As I said, one of the overarching goals of the Rojava project is to model ethnic and religious peace, amity, and coexistence. Given that aspiration, it would not even make sense at all for the YPG to persecute specific ethnic groups.

Nor is peaceful coexistence a mere aspiration: after the AI report was issued, the Ruspis Assembly of Arab Tribes in Cizire Canton, joined by representatives of the Syriac community, strongly condemned it, saying it was “grounded ... on sources that want to eliminate the love and co-existence among all social circles of the region and replace it with enmity.” [4] They groups underlined that “the Arab, Kurdish, Christian and Yazidi peoples in our region have been living together in peace and mutual trust for centuries. They share each other’s sorrow and joy, and everyone has their rights.” They stressed that if AI really aimed to learn about ethnic relations in Rojava, its researchers should have talked to a wider spectrum of people. The village demolition was caused not by YPG-YPJ forces but by ISIS gangs. “It is known by everyone that ISIS gangs blow up houses and lands and lay mines while fleeing an area. This is a reality that has been witnessed in many regions of Syria and Iraq.” The assembly even went so far as to call AI’s interviewees “fictional characters.”

Sadly, AI’s report was not the first to attempt to smear the Kurdish/Rojava project, nor is it likely to be the last. Already in the summer of 2015, while the Tal Abyad liberation was under way, the Turkish state was deliberately circulating false rumors that the PYD was deporting Arab and Turkmen residents and not allowing them to return. A committee was formed to investigate the claims and set out to interview civilians. The result, according to a participant: “Arab and Turkmen civilians stated that YPG had not pressured them in any way.” They said “they could return to their lands whenever they wanted, and YPJ/YPG forces were in Girê Spî [Tal Abyad] only for the establishment of security and democracy in the town.” After the interviews, but before the committee could issue its report, the committee members were summoned to Istanbul for a meeting. Somehow that meeting reversed the committee’s conclusion, and the report it eventually issued claimed, contrary to its own evidence, that the YPG had indeed deported Arab and Turkmen civilians. According to one participant, the Istanbul meeting had mandated the committee “to portray the YPG as an occupying and terrorist force.” [5] This is what the DFNS is up against.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) also denied rumors of “ethnic cleansing” and a representative said of the alleged expulsions, “inhabitants are being asked to not go back to their

villages immediately because of mine danger. In some villages, like in Dogan or Al Bajela, the inhabitants were prevented from returning to the villages for a longer period because IS fighters were still expected to be in the villages.”[6]

Evacuations are indeed part of war, based on military necessity. In Kobane, for example, in advance of the 2014 IS occupation, the YPG/YPJ evacuated the city and hundreds of villages, to ensure the safety of the inhabitants. Afterward similar rumors arose. A journalist who visited Rojava in June 2015, after Kobane was liberated from IS, reported that PYD officials attributed border closings to returnees “to security concerns, saying that IS militants could easily mingle among the refugees crossing the border.” A real concern, since “this is how IS jihadis recently managed to attack Tell Abyad and Kobani. ... On June 25, IS militants who had infiltrated Kobani killed 300 Kurdish civilians in the worst mass murder in northern Syria to date.” But then, the closures were not drawn ethnically: “it is not only Arabs and Turkmen who are not allowed to cross back into Syria. The same goes for the large number of Kurdish refugees waiting at the border. Some had fled Tell Abyad because of the fighting between IS and the YPG, while others had migrated from other cities in Syria after IS had invaded them. They said they had been forced to enter Turkey because the roads in northern Syria were blocked. It seems that the PYD is not discriminating against any particular ethnicity in its closure of the border. Arab and Turkmen refugees on the Turkish side of the border said that they had not been forced to flee, but had run away because of the clashes between IS and the YPG.... non-Kurdish residents do not seem to be overly concerned about who and which ethnic group rules the region at the moment. They are merely happy to have survived IS.”[7]

People living in countries at peace may easily forget that avoiding evacuations in wartime is surely difficult if not impossible. And it is possible and perhaps even likely that when evacuations take place, the rights of individuals may be violated. The forces involved have to take steps to minimize those violations, and all allegations must be examined impartially, weighed against military necessity.

Robin Yassin Kassab once asked for slack for the groups he supports, given that “human beings aren’t perfect.” The late Kurdish journalist/activist Memed Aksoy endorsed this plea and asked for the same respect for the Rojava project: “we are all humans and not perfect, similarly the Kurds, PYD officials, SDF/YPG fighters and those who dream of freedom and a progressive system in Rojava are also human.” [8] The diverse peoples of Northern Syria dare to aspire to democracy, ethnic and religious diversity, cooperation, gender equality, justice, and freedom in the toughest of neighborhoods. They are surrounded by malicious enemies who wish to destroy not only their project but Kurdish ethnicity itself, including the Turkish state, which has waged a genocidal war against Kurdish identity for decades. Fairness demands that we not lose sight of that reality.

## References

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