

Syria: The Rojava Project

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***A Road Unforeseen* is an inspiring account of the autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, but it glosses over Rojava's contradictions.**

According to the back of Meredith Tax's [A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State](#), a "democratic society" with "women on the front lines as fierce warriors and leaders" is growing in the midst of Syria's destruction. This new society — Rojava — was founded by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian-Kurdish offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Rojava drew broad attention during the 2014 [defense of Kobanê](#). Tax's book is intended for readers seeking an introduction to the history of the Kurdish national movement and its heroic fight against ISIS in northern Syria. But though Tax convincingly argues that the Left should support the Kurdish liberation movement, *A Road Unforeseen* is marred by an uneven account of Kurdish history and willingness to gloss over the movement's missteps.

Two Visions

Tax focuses on two important political traditions in the Kurdish national movement: the PKK and the more conservative Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

In 1946, Mustafa Barzani founded the KDP in the only Kurdish state in modern history, the Republic of Mahabad, which survived for less than a year before being taken over by Iran. Barzani — who led armed struggles against both Iran and Iraq, faced exile after Mahabad's defeat, and then allied with before being betrayed by the United States in the Kurdish resistance to the Iraqi Baath regime — remains an important figure for many Kurds. His son, Massoud Barzani, is the KDP's current leader and president of Iraq's Kurdistan Region.

Tax presents the KDP as the PKK's foil: the former is traditionalist — as evidenced by the Barzani clan's continued role, the party's alliances with imperialist powers, and its traditional call for a conventional Kurdish nation-state — while the latter is revolutionary.

The PKK, in Tax's account, rejects both the traditional structures of Kurdish society and the modern nation-state, calling for full Kurdish liberation, especially for women. Originally founded as a Marxist-Leninist party, the PKK has directly organized and indirectly inspired a complex ecosystem of above- and underground political and social organizations in different countries, including Syria's PYD.

The KDP and PKK both claim to represent the Kurdish people and have become bitter rivals, violently competing for support for their respective visions of the future of Kurdish society.

Iraq's Kurdistan Region most closely approximates the KDP's vision; the vision of the "PKK-movement" is put into practice in the Kurdish regions in North Syria.

Tax explains that Rojava hopes to remain an autonomous region in a preserved Syrian state. There,

citizens would enjoy equal rights, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or religion. The economy would be organized to serve the whole community with an emphasis on cooperative ventures. An intricate network of elected councils would hold political power. In this way, the movement claims it is building “democracy without the state,” since its structure would supposedly eliminate the kind of coercion that gives most states their power. This model, following the party’s leader Abdullah Öcalan’s ideology, is called a [confederal democracy](#).

Shifting Alliances

The PYD shares its emphasis on women’s liberation with its parent organization, the PKK. Tax draws out this aspect of their politics, describing in detail how Sakine Cansiz — a PKK founding member who was arrested in 1979 — influenced both parties’ development.

After seizing power in the 1980 coup, the Turkish military brutally repressed both left and Kurdish movements. Cansiz courageously resisted torture in the infamous Diyarbakir jail and became an icon of the struggle.

From its foundation, the PKK viewed women’s organizations largely instrumentally. But as the PKK transitioned from a guerrilla group to a mass movement in the mid 1990s, this began to change. More and more women joined the party and claimed a place for themselves as activists and fighters.

Another step was the movement’s ideological evolution which sped up after Öcalan’s arrest by the Turkish state in 1999. While in prison, he developed a new ideology which renounces the violent seizure of power and the goal of a Kurdish nation-state.

Many supporters felt betrayed by this new orientation, but it gave women expanded opportunities for self-organization. In fact, the movement’s women’s wing is now one of the imprisoned leader’s strongest supporters.

Tax relies on Dutch anthropologist [Martin van Bruinessen](#)’s *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* to draw out the differences between the PKK and the KDP.

Van Bruinessen explained the KDP’s traditionalist character by examining the role tribes play in Kurdish society. Van Bruinessen argues that these tribes are not simply leftovers from a primordial past but creations of “the state, rather than a social and political formation preceding it.”

National governments have long engaged in divide-and-rule tactics to dominate the Kurdish minorities living within their respective borders. They supported traditional rulers, whose power was waning as society modernized, against newer and more radical challengers. With this historical approach to supposedly cultural traits, Tax avoids the trap that more superficial commentators fall into when they contrast Kurds and Arabs as homogeneous groups.

The PKK and the PYD, however, have managed to wrest a large segment of the population’s support away from tribal leaders. Unlike Barzani or Jalal Talabani — leader of the other main Kurdish party in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) — Öcalan does not come from a prominent clan.

The PKK’s popularity, especially in Turkish-occupied Kurdistan, in fact comes from the failure of this tribal system. The state’s brutal repression revealed many Kurdish leaders either as powerless or as collaborators. Radicalized Kurds threw their support behind the PKK.

Developments in Syria follow a similar trajectory. Tax explains that the PYD was founded in 2003 after the Syrian state ended its alliance with the PKK. Starting in the early eighties, the regime

allowed the PKK to launch attacks against Turkey from northern Syria. As [Harriet Allsop](#) writes, it saw the PKK “as a balance to the leverage over Syria that Turkey possessed through its control over the Euphrates water flow.”

The PKK’s war against the Turkish state made it popular among Syrian Kurds, seven and ten thousand of whom died or went missing during the fight, according to Allsop. The PKK came to dominate Syrian-Kurdish politics and, as Thomas Schmidinger explains, functioned as a parallel state in what it called Little Kurdistan. In return for this safe haven, the party stayed out of Syrian politics.

The PKK’s relative freedom set it apart from other Syrian-Kurdish parties, which, unfortunately, Tax largely leaves out of her narrative. These groups found themselves at a political impasse thanks to implicit limits set down by the Arab-chauvinist Baath regime. Officially illegal, Kurdish parties could only organize cultural and social activities for their supporters. If they called for a Kurdish state or directly criticized the regime’s racism, Syrian security forces would crack down without mercy.

Over time, several of the Syrian-Kurdish parties developed a kind of working relationship with the Baath regime that mixed varying degrees of hostility and cooperation. In the years before the revolution, leaders of some of these groups had unofficial but regular contact with state security forces.

As Allsop documents, the PKK’s indirect cooperation with the Baath regime and its focus on Turkey started to hurt its appeal, especially after a 1996 interview in which Öcalan suggested that most Syrian Kurds were in fact from Turkey and that they would benefit from returning there. The Baath regime had once used similar arguments to take away tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds’ citizenship.

In 1998, Turkey threatened Syria with war if it continued to give shelter to the PKK, and the party was expelled. Turkish agents arrested Öcalan a few months later, and the movement’s main bases moved to northern Iraq. The PYD picked up most of the PKK’s Syrian-Kurdish support when it was organized a few years later.

New Dynamics

Since Tax is most interested in the PKK’s current development and, to a lesser extent, in the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan, much of this political history is omitted from *A Road Unforeseen*. This is unfortunate because it helps us fit the Rojava project into the Syrian revolution’s context.

For example, while Tax highlights how essential the PYD has been in organizing the Rojava project, she fails to discuss how — had it not built on decades of organizing and cadre training — the party would not have been able to seize the opportunity presented by the 2011 uprising.

Further, Tax can’t account for the persistent rumors of collaboration between the PYD and Assad. One of the most damning accusations is that the party made a secret agreement with the regime just as the initially peaceful uprising armed itself and became an armed insurrection.

In April 2011, Salih Muslim — the most prominent PYD leader — returned to Syria. Allsop explains that critics of the PYD claim this return was part of an agreement with Assad that also included the Syrian government’s mostly nonviolent withdrawal from Rojava in July 2012. In return, the PYD promised not to join with the rebels and attack Assad from the north.

Although the PYD denies this — stating that the regime simply decided not to waste more resources fighting for the region and pointing to its subsequent clashes with Syrian forces — there are good reasons to be suspicious of the party’s relationship with Assad.

First, Salih Muslim served as deputy of the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCC), which initially called for a dialogue with Assad. The Syrian National Council and the Local Coordination Councils rejected the NCC as window dressing, a “loyal opposition” that makes the Assad regime look willing to reform. Whatever the case, *A Road Unforeseen* avoids this discussion.

Second, and more importantly, Tax’s interpretation of Kurdish politics as a duality between the KPD’s Barzani-style traditionalists, on the one hand, and PKK’s revolutionaries on the other doesn’t account for new dynamics that emerged after 2004.

Tax writes that, in 2004, the “PYD was involved in organizing the first major uprising of Syrian Kurds,” the Qamishli uprising. Here, she overstates the party’s role: it would be more correct to say that no party organized this spontaneous protest against anti-Kurdish violence and oppression. Granted, the PYD played an important role supporting the protests after they started, as did some of the other more militant Syrian-Kurdish groups such as the Yekîti (Unity) party. But after the uprising was put down, new groups, critical of both the PYD and the Syrian state, formed.

One, the Kurdish Youth Movement, which largely consisted of teenagers, tried to launch the first armed resistance against the Baath regime. They accused the PYD of working with the state.

The Kurdish Future Movement, also founded after Qamishli, likewise rejects the PYD for its alleged collaboration. This group crossed one of the regime’s red lines by working with Arab opposition forces. From the beginning of the revolution, it has called for nothing less than the government’s fall. In July 2011, the movement’s figurehead Mashaal Tammo [declared](#) dialogue impossible: “You simply cannot speak with a regime that kills its own population.”

A Road Unforeseen unfortunately downplays Tammo, describing him as “an activist who wanted the Kurds to stay in the Syrian National Council.” This leaves out Tammo’s important role in Kurdish politics. After his murder in October 2011, fifty thousand people in Qamishli attended his funeral; other large demonstrations took place in Aleppo, Latakia, and Hasaka.

Tax writes that accusations that the PYD was involved in Tammo’s assassination have been proven false, citing documents published by Saudi news channel Al-Arabiya that show the Assad regime ordered the hit.

Unfortunately, things are not so clear. Shortly before his death, Tammo claimed that the regime and the PYD jointly planned an attempt on his life, seeing him as a common enemy. The PYD first blamed Tammo’s death on the Turkish government, then later on the Assad regime. The Kurdish Future Movement, greatly weakened by its leader’s death, still holds PYD responsible.

Tax describes these accusations as part of an “anti-Rojava narrative” circulating among “Western governments and NGOs.” But the PKK’s history of connivance with the Baathist state, as sketched above, has made many people — Arabs, as well as Kurds — distrustful. Further, recent instances of [PYD-sanctioned political repression](#) are not so easily waved aside. There have been multiple [protests against](#) the party in Rojava. To its credit, the Rojava administration has apologized for these abuses and tried to make amends.

Critical Solidarity

A Road Unforeseen, while clearly sympathetic to the Syrian revolution, doesn’t spend much time considering how Rojava’s fate is intertwined with it. Clearly, if the Assad regime weren’t otherwise occupied, it wouldn’t tolerate the creation of an autonomous region, especially one that grants Kurds a dominant role.

The ongoing war across Syria often goes unmentioned in the PYD's narrative. In January 2016, PYD representative Zuhair Kobani sought to prove Rojava's superiority by citing the region's relatively low rate of civilian casualties when compared to rebel-controlled areas. But this difference has less to do with Rojava and more to do with Assad whose forces have focused their violence elsewhere.

Assad has made it clear that he doesn't want Kurdish self-determination. If he ever eradicates the revolution, the barrel bombs would fall on Rojava next.

One of the Syrian Revolution's tragedies has been the division and even fighting between the country's oppressed groups, especially the anti-Assad forces and the Kurds.

Many opposition leaders oppose Kurdish self-determination and have made baldly [racist statements](#). In 2013, when Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and other Islamists attacked Kurdish areas, large parts of the opposition remained silent. This reminded many Kurds of their silence following the Qamishli uprising.

For its part, the PYD's ambiguous position toward the regime and its dismissal of the opposition has antagonized many rebels. In a 2013 interview, Salih Muslim called the SNC-associated groups tools of American imperialism. A particularly low point came with the [de facto](#) alliance between YPG forces and Assad in the siege of Aleppo. Muslim's [remarks](#) praising Russian intervention caused more anger. But the Syrian opposition's refusal to support Kurdish self-determination is the real foundation of this tragedy.

The PYD project remains ambiguous. On the one hand, Rojava's ethnic and religious pluralism has made the region a relatively safe area for minorities. It has also achieved democratic gains for the oppressed Kurds. PYD supporters have started to present Rojava as an alternative for the whole country, region, and sometimes the world. The PKK's ideology is no longer strictly nationalist.

But for Öcalan — who remains the movement's unquestioned ideological and political leader — it is not just that the Kurdish movement is building a new kind of democracy. He believes it represents the rebirth of specific Kurdish characteristics: the Kurds, he argues, are democracy's chosen people.

This makes the movement's internationalism ambiguous. In a discussion of what she calls "the Syrian opposition's rancor" toward the PYD, Tax quotes Muslim as saying, "Our problems are not problems of power. The ruling powers in Damascus come and go. For us Kurds, this isn't so important. What is important is that we Kurds assert our existence."

The book ends with several open questions regarding Rojava. Tax points to the contradiction between a "top-down . . . organization like the PKK" and the "bottom-up grassroots democratic politics of communes and councils." She also worries that there won't be much room in "the Rojava-to-come" to question Öcalan's ideology.

We should add more questions: How does the PKK function internally? How does the Rojava administration propose to deal with class divisions or regional differences that cannot be negotiated away? How can it reconcile the idea that "society should rule itself" with those who make decisions counter to the movement's emancipatory goals?

Tax refers self-critically to her own experience of "revolutionary tourism in China in 1973 at the height of the Cultural Revolution, too credulous to question what I was looking at half the time." She now urges the Left to take a more sober view.

Still, *A Road Unforeseen* convincingly shows that in Rojava "people are trying to do something, and women are at the center." This attempt, and the Syrian revolution that made it possible, deserves

our attention and our solidarity.

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