

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria:  
Background and Outcomes

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## Abstract

Everyday life in the Middle East is described by war and terror, from the Yemen's Civil war to that one in Syria. Across the region, civil societies and communities are under the attacks of fanatical groups like the Islamic State (IS) and the Taliban, as well as the oppressive reactionary governments such as in Iran and Turkey, limiting political life to barbarianism and fascism. Even in western countries, neoliberal and representative democracy is failing to maintain a genuine political life by giving ways to the rise of right-wing political forces. The current condition necessitates a new form of radical democratic politics. In the midst of this political disillusionment, the people of North and East Syria came together to form a new society based on direct democracy, ecology, and feminism under the principles of "Democratic Confederalism". The movement in North and East Syria, known as "Rojava's Revolution", despite its shortcomings, has been successful in creating a new durable alternative through both reappropriating of vital social relationships and producing revolutionary subjectivities. This study sheds light on the historical background of the Syrian Kurds and their connections to the Kurds in Turkey. The study, also explores the formation of the Kurdish liberation movement in Syrian Kurdistan and its connections to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) movement in Turkish Kurdistan. It examines theoretical and practical dimensions of the movement and the incorporation of women as essential contribution to its success.

## **Introduction**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire a new political order emerged in the Middle East (McDowall, 1996 a). That order paved a road to the colonization of this region by France and Britain, and eventually, to the rise of new nation states. Arbitrary border drawing by both European colonists and the newly- formed Turkish state divided Kurdistan (lands of the Kurds) between four nation states: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. The process of nation building, accompanied with Arab, Turkish, and Persian nationalism, resulted in the denial of Kurdish identity. Kurdish ambitions and aspirations to self-rule, and political and cultural representation, regardless of its political framework, was considered as a threat to national security by the aforementioned states (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019). Kurds, the largest stateless ethnic group in the world, have faced forced assimilation, genocide, and annihilation in their struggle to preserve their identity. In Iraq, during the Anfal (Spoils) military campaign, Kurds were subjected to chemical weapons, forced migration, and complete destruction of 300,000 of their villages (Human Rights Watch, 1993; McDowall, 1991b; Randal, 1998). In Syria, through the 1961 Hasaka census 120,000 Kurds, 20% of Syrian Kurds at that time (Human Rights Watch, 1996), were categorized as stateless (Fuccaro, 2003; McDowall, 1991b; Schmidinger, 2018). During the implementation of “Arab Belt” in the Jazira province in 1976, 60,000 Kurds were forced to leave their homes for Damascus, Turkey, and Lebanon (Human Rights Watch, 2009; McDowall, 1991 b). In Iran, following the revolution of 1979, Iran’s supreme leader Ruhollah Khomeini described the Kurds as “infidels” and declared war against them<sup>1</sup>. Today’s Kurdish life in Iran can be described by execution, imprisonment, and scrutinization of communities (Soleimani & Mohammadpour, 2019). In Turkey, Kurds are faced with systematic discrimination and

institutionalized racism (Bisikci, 2015). Being denigrated as “Mountain Turks” by the Turkish government, Kurds were denied of their own identity and were to be the subject of genocide: In the Kurdish-majority province of Dermis 60,000 Kurds and some Armenians were massacred in 1936-37. A Turkish soldier who took part in the genocide wrote:

Earlier today, we stormed the village of Yalan Dagi... We have brought tools with us and are waiting for orders to demolish the village... We... stopped by the shore of a river at 7 am. We... could not drink the river water because of the dead bodies that had contaminated it. We reached a village today. The soldiers looted homes...We could see the sheep and the dead bodies down the mountain. In the daytime, we are busy with beheadings... I no longer feel I am a human being.<sup>ii</sup> (Yousif K. Akim diary, 1938)

Kurdish identity has been shaped and sharpened by Kurds’ historical resistance against colonial and oppressive attitude of central governments, and that is precisely what fuels the democratic-oriented landscape of different movements in Kurdistan, most notably the unfolding movement in North and East Syria, i.e., Rojava’s Revolution.

Almost a century after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Syrian civil unrest in 2011 provided a unique opportunity for the forgotten Syrian Kurds to develop an egalitarian society based on radical and communal democracy, inspired by the notion of ‘Democratic Confederalism’, a term coined by the imprisoned Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019). Today’s civil war in Syria started as an inspiring social and political movement demanding equality, freedom, and social and economic justice. As President Bashar al-Assad, helped by the Iranian government<sup>iii</sup>, resisted and suppressed anti-government protests, also with the increased involvement of regional powers, the peaceful mobilization turned

into a militarized conflict forcing the movement not only to let go of its democratic characteristics but to adopt sectarian and Islamic agendas (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016). Meanwhile, Kurdish movement led by Democratic Union Party (YPD) decided to implement third-way politics: It would side neither with the Syrian government nor with the opposition, i.e., defending Kurdish civil society and not to wage war. In July 2012, as the fight between the Syrian government and Free Syrian Army (FSA) intensified, Syrian government redeployed its forces from Northern Syria to the country's Southern parts. The redeployment allowed PYD and its military wing-People's Defense Units (YPG) to control most of the Kurdish territory. As People and Women's Defense Units (YPG/J) safeguarded Rojava from various rebel groups, Movement for Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) started fostering a grass-roots communal based democracy leading to the declaration of independent Rojava with non-contiguous cantons of Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin (Schmidinger, 2018). However, the newly liberated territories-predominately Arab populated- from the Islamic State (ISIS) by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the increased participation of other ethnic groups in the Autonomous Administration led to the creation of Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in 2018, dropping the term 'Rojava' from the constitution (Rojava Information Center, 2020).

How were people in the North and East Syria able to build a lasting "political utopia in ISIS' backyard"<sup>iv</sup>? A short answer is: through Ocalan's framework of 'Democratic Confederalism' and 'Democratic Nation', engendered by his personal intellectual endurance, as well as four decades of PKK's resistance against Turkish colonial campaign in Turkish Kurdistan<sup>v</sup>. Democratic Confederalism is the result of Ocalan's criticism of PKK's abandoned paradigm of building a Kurdish nation state. According to Ocalan, nation state stands against diversity and consistently assimilates different identities in its effort to build a single national and cultural identity. Instead,

he offers an organic bottom up democracy based on feminism, and ecology. Ocalan argues that democratic confederalism can coexist within a state as long as the state does not interfere in the central matters of self-administration (Ocalan, 2011).

The movement in North and East Syria, with all its shortcomings, has been successful in creating a new durable alternative through both reappropriating of vital social relationships and producing revolutionary subjectivities. Social spaces have been liberated from state's scrutiny and turned into spaces where new possibilities arise. Patriarchal and hierarchical structures were replaced with horizontal feminist-oriented ones. This study explores the formation of the Kurdish liberation movement in Syrian Kurdistan and its connections to Kurdish struggle in Turkish Kurdistan. It examines theoretical and practical dimensions of the movement, and its feminist and ecological aspects.

### **Syrian Kurdistan: A Historical Sketch on Demography, Geography, and Politics**

Prior to the conclusion of the First World War, France and Britain had agreed to strip most part of Anatolia and all Arab populated territories from Turkish control (McDowall, 1996; Vanly, C. 1992). The secretive Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 was to give France and Britain the right of "direct or indirect administration" over the designated "Blue" and "Red" areas, respectively. Following the occupation of Damascus by the Allied troops in October 1918 (Vanly, 1992), Faysal I, from the Hashemites dynasty was forced by the European powers to negotiate an agreement with France. Through this agreement Syria would recognize French privilege over administrative, military, and educational matters in Syria. In return, France would recognize

Lebanon and Syria's independence (Tejel, 2007). In March 1920, the Syrian parliament rejected the foreign powers and declared Syrian independence, leading to the imposed French mandate.

Acting on the Sykes-Picot Agreement, in April 1920, the victors of the War separated Lebanon and Palestine from Syria and granted France the mandate of Syria and Lebanon (Tejel, 2007; Vanly, 1992) which was concluded in August 1920 in the Treaty of Sevres (Schmidinger, 2018). According to the Sevres Treaty (Articles 62-64), the Kurdish territory of the Ottoman Empire was to become an autonomous region within the new republic of Turkey with the option of complete independence (Vanly, 1992). A series of developments between 1919 to 1921 took place in Anatolia which undermined Kurdish desire for achieving either autonomy or independence. In May 1919, the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal, organized the Kemalist movement against both the foreign powers and the Istanbul's authority (McDowall, 1996). Kemalist victory in Turkey, its increasing friendship with Bolsheviks and the lack of a credible Kurdish leadership led to yet another treaty-The Lausanne Peace Treaty of July 1923- which buried Kurdish question (Vanly, 1992). Through this treaty the border of French protectorate was relocated from the north further to the south, where the current Syrian-Turkish national border is located (Schmidinger, 2018). This border disregards the line of ethnic demarcation between Arabs and Kurds (Vanly, 1992), rather it follows the Baghdad railway line that connects Mosul in Iraq to Aleppo in Syria (Gunter, 2014). The border assigned three separated Kurdish regions of Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin to northern Syria (Vanly, 1992). These regions are all contiguous to the Turkish Kurdistan. Syrian Kurdistan, is thus the "waste product" of the colonial partitioning of the Middle East (Schmidinger, 2018), a division that not only divided Kurdish territory but also profoundly changed the political, socioeconomic, and demographic aspects of that part of Kurdistan.

The three noncontiguous regions of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira, stretching along the Turkish border from northwest to northeast of Syria, form Syrian Kurdistan. Kurds call this part of Kurdistan Rojava-where the sun sets; western Kurdistan. Afrin canton is located in the westmost part of Kurdistan, where Kurds had been living there for centuries (Vanly, 1992). This canton includes 8 towns and over 350 villages, its population estimated to be around 0.5 million in 2011 (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016). While Sunni Muslim Kurds constitute most of its population, Alevi and Yezidi Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs live there too. The canton of Kobani, separated from the other two cantons, is the smallest region in Rojava. The city of Kobani founded in 1892 during the Berlin-Baghdad railway as a company town. Kurdish tribes long lived there, also many Armenian and other ethnoreligious minorities, persecuted by Turkey, made Kobani their homes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kobani's population was about 300,000 in 2011. Jazira with a population of 1.4 million is the largest canton in Syrian Kurdistan. In comparison to Afrin and Kobani where Kurds are the majority, Jazira's population is ethnically more diverse; Arabs, Syriac, Armenian contribute to this diversity.

During the Ottoman Empire Kurdish population in Syria increased because of forced deportation of Kurdish tribes into Syria, as well as the deployment of Kurds in the military units to protect Mecca's pilgrimage route (Fuccaro, 2003). During the French mandate (1921-1946) many Kurds fled Turkish repression for Syria following the defeat of Shaikh Saïd's revolt in the early 1920s (Fuccaro, 2003; McDowall, 2004; Tejel, 2007). The most important socioeconomic change that affected Kurdish population came as the result of widespread process of sedentarization which was encouraged by the French Administration. Since the Administration was faced by economic and political constraints, a profitable plan was needed to justify its presence in the most northeastern part of Syria (Tejel, 2007). The newly established border had disrupted

the life style of Kurdish nomadic tribes in the province of Jazira, because they no longer could continue their seasonal migration. Thus, as part of French agricultural plan, nomadic tribes were sedentarized for agricultural purposes (Fuccaro, 2003). In addition to that, refugees from Turkey (Kurds, Arabs, and Christians) were welcomed by the French Administration to the less populous areas of Jazira so their labor could be used on Jazira's fertile land. In turn, it led to the demographic growth of minorities in Syria (Tejel, 2007). The agricultural development of the Jazira also led to the creation of new commercial centers to compensate for the loss of the traditional market places of the region which fell under the Turkish state. therefore, in the 1920s the French authorities established the towns of Hasaka and Qamishli which became the new commerce centers of the region. Most of the population of Nusaybin (in Turkey) crossed the border to resettled in Qamishli. It soon became more populous than Nusaybin itself (Schmidinger, 2018).

Under the French mandate, early political developments in Syrian Kurdistan were the result of the tension between French authorities and the Arab population as well as the rise of Turkish nationalism affecting Kurds in Turkey (Tejel, 2007; Fuccaro, 2003). The French wanted to support minorities by forming autonomous regions based on religious demarcation, but the Sunni Muslim majority was pushing for a centralized Arab state. Unlike the Alawis and Druze, Kurds and the Aramaic speaking Christians of Jazira did not gain autonomy and their territory fell under the state of Aleppo (Schmidinger, 2018). Consequently, the first Kurdish demand for autonomy took place in May 1924 when Nuri Kandy, a Kurdish deputy in the Syrian parliament, submitted a memorandum to the French authorities. Nuri's demand, pursuing personal interests not those of Kurdish population, was rejected by the French authorities. In the early French mandate Kurdish tribes were fragmented in their political attitudes toward the mandate system. Some Kurdish tribes joined the Arab tribes advocating for a centralized Arab state, while others, affected by Islamic

propaganda, supported Kemalist against the French mandate (Tejel, 2007). However, being afraid of the rise of Arab nationalism, most Kurds supported the French mandate (Schmidinger, 2018). The settlement of Kurdish nationalists in Syria who fled Turkish oppression changed characters of Kurdish demand in Syria (Tejel, 2007). In 1927, a group of Kurdish intellectuals, influenced by the Armenian nationalist party of Dashnak (Fuccaro, 2003; Tejel, 2007), established Khoybun in Syria. Khoybun was a national organization and the political wing of a military movement in Turkish Kurdistan based around Mount Ararat. The goal of Khoybun was to generate a strong uprising against Turkish government by promoting Kurdish nationalism among the Kurdish tribes in Syria and Turkey. Khoybun was the first political association in Kurdistan that defined nationalism out of the contexts of tribes, kinship and family. Through guerilla ideology of Khoybun, Kurds were introduced to the language of modern nationalism (Fuccaro, 2003). In 1928, a second demand for Kurdish autonomy was submitted by the Khoybun League, demanding the establishment of a Kurdish military unit, promotion of the Kurdish language, and replacement of all functionaries in Kurdish areas with Kurd. The French authorities rejected these demands on the ground that Kurds did not constitute a unified religious minority (Tejel, 2007). With the failure of armed movement in Turkish Kurdistan in 1930, Syrian Kurds regarded armed struggle as a fruitless effort, hence favored cultural activities to promote Kurdayetiy-Kurdish way of life. For instance, the monthly journal Hawar (1932-1935) reflects resuscitation of Kurdish culture and language in Syrian Kurdistan. Hawar provided a symposium to discuss topics on Kurdish language, and culture. Through cultural activity Kurds were able to establish a relatively good relationship with the French authorities: Kurdish students were offered scholarships, Kurds were admitted to military schools, and a course in Kurdish language was offered at the Arab Institute for Higher Education in Damascus (Fuccaro, 2003).

Following the Franco-Syrian Treaty In 1936, series of changes took place which led to the integration of different regions under the control of central government. Consequently, the Treaty had negative impact on minorities in Syria. The Treaty was concluded between the National Bloc, represented Syrian nationalists, and the French authorities, whereby Syrian independency was foreshadowed. In addition, a context for the domination of Arab national politics was provided (Tejel, 2007; Fuccaro, 2003). Finally, in 1946 the last French troops left Syria. A pan-Arabist discourse was created in response to and under the influence of colonial politics (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016), resulted, in part, in Syrian participation in the Palestine War (1947-1949) and its defeat along with some other Arab states. In Syria, the defeat led to a long political instability; over twenty governments and four constitutions were changed from 1949 to 1956 (Yildiz, 2005). In 1958, the Syrian Republic (1930-1958), formed a union with the Egypt under the United Arab Republic (UAR) which was ended in 1961 when a military coup, with the support of Syrian elite, declared the Syrian Arab Republic (Wilgenburg, 2019). Secession from the UAR created a series of power struggles between the government and military whereby the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1963 and stayed in power ever since.

From this point onward, Arab nationalism became the cornerstone for nation-building in Syria and as a result the Kurds became the subjects of discriminatory policies and state violence. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria was established in 1957 to oppose the developing negative perception of the Kurds through Kurdish education and culture (Yildiz, 2005). Different political organizations and parties emerged out of this one party. Due to the limitations imposed by Syrian state politics and the geography of Syrian Kurdistan, which is not suitable for guerrilla warfare, these parties were not able to challenge the status quo. They were to protect Kurdish identity from the Ba'ath Party and Arab nationalism through cultural and educational activities. The modern

political institutions in coexistence with a traditional social network provided a context for Kurdish political parties to become mediators resolving local conflicts and executing cultural expression. In general, these political parties were able to protect civil society at the local level (Allsopp, 2014).

The Kurdish political development in northern impacted the Syrian government's attitude towards Syrian Kurds. The 1961 uprising of Iraqi Kurds for autonomy brought a greater degree of oppression to the Syrian Kurds, because Syrian government feared a similar uprising within its borders. The first massive oppressive measurement took place in 1962 when the Syrian government issued Legislative Decree No 93, by which a census had to be carried out in the province of Hassaka in northeastern Syria. The census was to determine who had the right to Syrian citizenship and who did not. Consequently, 120,000 Kurds were categorized as "foreigners" and their Syrian citizenship was revoked. In addition to the "foreigners" category, those who were absent during the census were categorized as "unregistered" (Human Rights Watch, 1996). Unlike "foreigners", "unregistered" were not issued any forms of identification, i.e., erased from the Syrian population, becoming 'the wretched of the earth'. Since both of these statuses are inherited, by 2011 around 300,000 stateless Kurds were living in Syria (Gunter, 2014) who were deprived of the rights to vote, own property, and legal marriage among others. A document, written by the head of interior security of Hasakah prior to the census, was published in 1963 that had described Kurds as a tumor in the body of Arab nation who had to be eradicated by implementation of vicious policies (Yildiz, 2005). As part of a comprehensive plan of forced assimilation, in 1967 the name Kurdistan was erased from the text books. A Decree was passed in 1977 by which the Kurdish-name places were changed to the Arabic ones. By 1989 Kurdish language was prohibited in the work places and children with Kurdish names were not to be registered (Vanly, 1992). The Ba'ath party used land reform policy to implement the Arab Belt in 1975. This policy allowed the Syrian

government to force out Kurdish families around the Syrian-Turkish border and the Syrian-Iraq border into the interior areas of Syria and replaced them with the Arab families who previously lost their lands and homes because of the construction of Tabqa's Dam (Yildiz, 2005).

### **From the Political Developments in the Early 2000s to the Rojava's Revolution**

From the late 1990s the Kurdish nationalism in Syria was greatly influenced by political developments in both Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan. After the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad, who had been educated in Europe, took power. With the new president in power, some of the limitations on civil society were lifted, political prisoners were released, and a new cultural and political activism took place. This short-lived period which is known as "Damascene Spring" ended when a new wave of oppression took place (Schmidinger, 2018). The PKK's armed struggle against Turkey, the no-fly zone establishment over Iraqi Kurdistan, and the formation of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq elevated Kurdish nationalism in Syria. Through the new forms of communication technologies such as satellite television, Syrian Kurds remotely witnessed the fall of Saddam Hussein which fostered a new hope among Syrian Kurds to find a solution to their oppression (Allospp & Wilgenburg, 2019). Between 2004 and 2005 series of protests took place in Syrian Kurdistan that provided a revolutionary context for the emergence of the new forms of activisms and organizations. On March 2004 in the city of Qamishli, a soccer match between two teams, a team from the Kurdish host-town of Qamishli and a visiting team from the Arab city of Hama, led to a riot where police killed a couple of young Kurds. The riot reached other Kurdish areas in Hama, Aleppo, and Damascus. Consequently, Numbers of governmental structures were destroyed by protesters, and the statues of Hafiz al-Assad were brought down. In return, the Syrian security forces killed over 35 protestors and arrested around 2000 of them. The second day of riot continued when the public participated in

the funeral ceremony of those who were killed the previous day. While the protests were harshly suppressed by the government, they, nevertheless, formed a solidarity among the Syrian Kurds and marked a turning point in their self-awareness (Gunter, 2014). Through these protests underground independent youth groups emerged who were seeking revolutionary means and armed struggle to stand against the Syrian government. Apart from PYD, the other Kurdish political parties canceled Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebration in 2004 which demonstrated these parties' disability in offering new strategies that could lead to social mobilization. In 2005, Kurdish youth, who were disappointed at how political parties had reacted to the protests, founded Kurdish Youth Movement (TCK) and the Liberation Movement of Kurdistan. By 2008 both of these organizations were infiltrated by the secret services, but after the revolution in Syria in 2011 they were reemerged (Schmidinger, 2018).

The establishment of PYD in 2003 divided Kurdish political filed in two main campaigns: PYD and its affiliated organizations, and the Syrian Kurdish political parties of 1957. With the outbreak of civil war in Syria, as both sides strived to gain legitimacy among the Syrian Kurds, this division became more noticeable. Consequently, political rivalry among Syrian Kurds led to the establishment of two umbrella organizations in late 2011, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK) (Allsopp, 2017). These two alliances are different in their ideology and strategy. KNC, supported by Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, comprised of nearly twenty parties that can, generally, be defined by Kurdish nationalist principles, though, their goals are varied from self-determination to minority rights. PCWK, supported by PKK, comprised of myriad of civil and military organizations, including PYD, advocates for the establishment of autonomous administrations in Syria through a specific political platform called democratic confederalism. In July 2012 the two groups, mediated by Masoud Barzani-the former

president of Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, met in Erbil and founded Kurdish Supreme Committee to jointly govern Rojava. Though both groups had equal representation within the committee, PYD maintained a higher authority. Accusing PYD for being authoritarian<sup>vi</sup>, the KNC retracted from the agreement leaving covert disputes among the Kurds in Syria. According to Human Rights Watch, serious human rights abuses took place between 2011 to 2014 in the PYD-controlled areas including harassment and arbitrary arrest of PYD's Kurdish political rivals. HRW asserted that Rojava's constitutional law, introduced in 2014 and revised in 2016, upheld some important human rights standards such as banning the use of death penalty, however the HRW's reports indicated the violation of due process by PYD-run courts (2014).

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Kurds supported the wider Syrian uprising and demanded the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime. Similar to other Syrian cities, the early demonstrations in Kurdish areas were organized by small youth groups who called themselves Tansiqiya (coordinating committee). These youth groups formed themselves independently from the Kurdish political parties (Schmidinger, 2018). By July 2012, the militant attitude of the regime toward the protestors, the involvement of regional and international states, the development of non-state political and military organizations, and their attempts to gain regional and international supports created a precarious condition forcing the revolution not only to abandon its grassroots democratic characteristics, but also to foster a condition where fanatical militia groups such as Jabhat-al-Nusra, and ISIS could grow (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019). In the Kurdish areas, however, revolution took a different path. A year after the uprising, rather than following strategies imposed by foreign powers, Kurdish political groups had organized themselves distinctively from the Syrian opposition movement. The PYD and its affiliated organization-the Movement for Democratic Society (Tev-Dem)- initiated the establishment of Autonomous Rojava

Administration and remained the main political force within it. The PYD's relationship with the PKK is crucial to understand PYD's organizational and military capabilities. The PYD either directly founded by PKK in 2003, or by the Syrian Kurds who were under the influence of PKK. PYD also is connected to PKK through the Union Communities of Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK). The KCK is an executive body presenting itself as a political, social, and non-military organization that provides guidelines for different organizations across Kurdistan based on Ocalan's confederation model (Kaya & Lowe, 2017). During its long presence (1978-1998) in Syria, PKK had recruited many Syrian Kurds in its fight against Turkey who returned to Syria in 2011 and built, at least helped to build, military forces such as YPG and YPJ. These armed forces liberated some Kurdish cities from Al-Nusra front in 2013, repelled ISIS attack on the city of Kobani in the early 2015, and later became the backbone of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in its fight against ISIS<sup>vii</sup>. Being persecuted by the Syrian government in the early 2000s, many ranking members of the PYD had left Syria for the PKK's headquarter in Mount Qandil in Northern Iraq who returned to Syria in 2011 to utilized PKK's ideological narrative and strategy to mobilize the public and to start building political and social structures mirroring those of the PKK's. PYD established the youth, educational, language, and women's organizations following the different elements of the PKK's models in Turkey (Kaya & Lowe, 2017).

The PKK-PYD relationship has helped the Administration of North and East Syria, at least in part, to establish and maintain a relatively stable political and economic autonomous region. However, the 11,000 men and women who died in the process of defending their utopia<sup>viii</sup> is the main reason for the stability of this region. Both the PYD and the autonomous geographic region that it governs are of a great strategic importance for the PKK. First, the PKK, with the help of PYD, has the opportunity to put its ideology in practice and gain governing experience. Second,

the PKK hopes that in the post war Syria PYD will become a de jure governing party providing the PKK with diplomatic means. Third, an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria means that the PKK can maintain its connections with the Kurds in Turkey. The fact that the PKK is recognized as a terrorist group by both the United States and the European Union, PYD has downplayed its cooperation with the PKK and presents itself as a party that originated in Syria and represents Syrian Kurds to gain international support and reduce Turkey's animosity toward Syrian Kurds. Turkey, however, considers the PYD and its armed force YPG as terrorist groups and an offshoot of the PKK. On January 2018 Turkish troops, accompanied by militias of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) attacked the Kurdish Afrin enclave in northwestern Syria and seized the entire city of Afrin by the end of March<sup>ix</sup>, leading to killing of hundreds of civilians and displacement of 140,000 people (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The Turkish-backed militia groups employed looting and destruction of property, rape, murder, and torture. These practices are continuing to this day<sup>x</sup>. In October 2019, Turkish invasion of northern Syria, with the US government's approval<sup>xi</sup>, destroyed many villages and displaced 300,000 people. Turkey seems to be determined in its attempt to eradicate the democratic experiment of northeastern Syria-the main loss that goes beyond the immediate human costs<sup>xii</sup>. Abandoned by the US government, the administration of northeastern Syria had to strike a deal with the Syrian government to protect its people from NATO's second largest army-Turkey, jeopardizing its autonomy. Under the current circumstances, it is unclear whether or not the administration will be able to stay loyal to its democratic and revolutionary values.

### **PKK's Struggle: A Road to Radical Democracy**

A group of young Kurdish activists came together in Fis village in southeast Turkey and founded Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1987 (Marcus, 2007). Under the influence of the

liberation movements in the 1970s and the revolutionary left in Turkey, PKK was established as a Marxist-Leninist party and sat its struggle in terms of anti-colonialism that had to conduct guerilla warfare against central government to form an independent Kurdish state as a means of self-determination. The organizational structure of the PKK was a classical communist party with a general secretary, executive committee, and a congress as its decision-making body (Jongerden, 2017). Abdullah Ocalan, one of the founders of the PKK, was the general secretary until the time of his arrest in Nairobi, Kenya in 1999. Now, imprisoned in the Imrali Island, is considered to be the symbolic leader of the Kurdish liberation movement, and in Antoni Negri's (2019) words "an Antoni Gramsci for his own country" (2020).

Following the military coup on 12 September, 1980 in Turkey, PKK members were forced to leave Turkey for Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine where the formation phase of the PKK with the help of Syrian government and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) was fostered (Marcus, 2007). Those PKK members who couldn't escape were arrested and sent to notorious Diyarbakir prison where they organized a hunger strike to protest the dehumanizing condition of the prison. Some prisoners hanged themselves against the horrifying forms of abuse and torture who became the symbols of resistance in the PKK's struggle (Gunes, 2017). In August 1984 PKK started its armed struggle and announced the formation of Kurdistan Liberation Unit (Hezen Rizgariya Kurdistan, HRK). In response, the government increased its military personnel in southeast Turkey and paid local Kurds to form village guards to block the PKK from achieving its, not well-thought, objectivities of starting a revolution and overthrowing the government (Gunes, 2017). Subsequently, in its third congress in 1986 in Damascus, PKK approved some radical and controversial policies such as 'forced taxation of civilians', and 'forced military conscription' leading to kidnapping and killing of Kurdish civilians by the PKK militants in the

following year. Those PKK members who had opposed these decisions either detained or assassinated by the PKK (Marcus, 2007). In his prison writings, Ocalan criticizes PKK's 'political proxies' as had been 'marked by gangs' between 1987 and 1988 (2011). In the early 1990s, utilizing mass media and information network PKK was able to mobilize Kurds in Syria, Turkey, and Europe and increase the scope and dept of its guerrilla campaign. On October 1998, Turkey and Syria reached an agreement which had devastating consequences for the PKK: PKK was expelled from Syria and its leader, Ocalan, was arrested a year later in 1999.

For the PKK, the early 2000s was the period of 'impasse and reconstruction' (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011). From prison, Ocalan announced that PKK no longer continues its struggle to build an independent Kurdish state, but instead it would struggle for a democratic Turkey where Kurds and Turks can live in harmony. Subsequently, he ordered PKK forces to give up the armed struggle and asked some of the PKK's senior members to turn themselves in to Turkey. In its 7<sup>th</sup> congress in January 2000, PKK approved Ocalan's new solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey leading to internal intention and split within the party (Marcus, 2007). Despite Ocalan's 'political capitulation' and subsequent anomie within PKK members, PKK maintained its political hold by reinforcing Ocalan's new ideology using daily newspaper and its satellite tv-station. In addition, the victory of People's Democratic Party (HADEP) in Turkey's local election in April 1999 helped PKK to stay relevant to politics in Turkey because the party was made up of PKK's sympathizers, also the voters considered HADEP as the PKK's legal representative. Since the Turkish government refused to take any consequential reforms to solve the Kurdish issue, Ocalan ended the ceasefire in July 2004 to assert that PKK was still relevance (Marcus, 2007).

The PKK formed its current political and ideological approach to radical/direct democracy based on Ocalan's criticism of the party's 'theoretical starting point' when it was founded,

socialism understanding of the state ('dictatorship of proletariat') that could only be established by the use of violence (armed struggle). According to Ocalan (2011), PKK's 'concept of state' and its 'approach to violence' were the essential reasons for its errors in the ideology and action. To avoid these errors, the PKK's new struggle, as Ocalan asserts is not to overthrow a regime or build a new state but rather to transform a given state into a 'non-state political administration' called 'democratic confederalism'. In this new approach, the rights are to be obtained by democratic struggle and a legitimate self-defense is allowed when the struggle is blocked or denied. Armed struggle to build a Kurdish state costs bloodshed, even if such a goal is feasible and achieved the state politics, according to Ocalan, will not result in freedom and equality (2017). Hence states are founded on power that strive, in an exploitative form, to homogenize various social identities under a single national identity, if any resistance the 'oppressive state apparatuses' will be employed, i.e. states are centralism-oriented political entities and they use force to maintain themselves. Consequently, force and scrutiny spread into the fabric of society and decay social, cultural and political spaces; they are utilizing positive sciences and masculinity to oppress the environment and women. As appose to state which is an arbitrary political system, democratic confederalism is based on historical experience of society and people, therefore social subjects and society remain relevance to its politics (Ocalan, 2011). Democratic confederalism is a bottom-up political formation for self-administration where 'society can govern itself' and different 'social and cultural identities' can express themselves in local councils and meetings. These councils strive to 'unity in diversity'. In other words, a council or a commune is not considered to be a separate entity, but through the interaction of its members one extends itself to another (Jongerden, 2017). To Ocalan (2017), democratic confederalism is achievable through democratic society and democratic politics, i.e. to free spaces from the state violence by giving opportunity to the various

identities to practice their sociopolitical desires, and in turn to become the political forces within these spaces, and it is a path towards people's sovereignty. The two fundamental principles of democratic politics maintain people's sovereignty: the right to assemble, and decision-making (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011).

Democratic confederalism is only one aspect of the PKK's new ideology. In order for it to be democratically functional and productive the state need to be transformed into what Ocalan calls 'democratic republic' where democracy is disassociated from nationalism; decoupling power and state from nation (Jongerden, 2017). The idea of democratic republic is still based on state-form entity, however the 'statist tendencies' such as single language, and religion are renounced and the citizenship in a democratic republic is not defined in terms of ethnicity but in terms of 'civil republic' and 'civil right' (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011). Democratic republic proposes a radical reform of the judicial and political procedure of a nation-state for it to be democratically capable to oversee and coordinate democratic confederalism. It is an 'administrative net' that is strive to prevent monopoly of power, formation of privilege group, and protect the democratic social structures (Ocalan, 2017). In the PKK's new ideology, the democratic confederalism and democratic republic are connected by democratic autonomy. It is what defines the relationship between people, in this case Kurds, and the state in which they live in. In the Turkish context, democratic autonomy was proposed as a democratic solution to Kurdish question (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011). Due to this ideological change, the PKK and its affiliated organizations have been restructured under Associations of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), a social democratic organization presented as an alternative to the nation-state. The main objective of KCK is to expand radical democracy and work towards situation where different geopolitical parts of Kurdistan will form democratic political unities with the states, they are part of.

PKK's ideological shift impacted the Kurdish legal party organization in Turkey. The pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) was established in 2005 which in both 2007 and 2009 local elections recorded a significant victory, allowing the party to voice its political project more openly. DTP's project was 'project for democratic autonomy', very close to Ocalan's concept of democratic confederalism, if not identical. Under the influence of Ocalan's ideas, a new organization was formed in 2007 named Democratic Society Congress, presenting itself as a grass-roots organization under which people assemble themselves to directly negotiate with the Turkish government, a very close approach to Ocalan's ideas (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2011). In addition, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H) was founded in 2013 to implement democratic autonomy through grass-roots and local governing structures in southeastern Turkey which was ended when the fragile peace talk between PKK and Turkey was collapsed.

### **Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria: Radical Democracy in Practice**

The democratic autonomy, inspired by Ocalan, was first implemented in Turkey's Kurdistan (Bakur; Northern Kurdistan) in 2005-6 through organizing the so-called "free citizens councils". By 2008-09 councils and communes were built in different cities in southeast Turkey and their roles were promoted by the support of pro-Kurdish Peace and Democratic Party (BDP) (Tatort Kurdistan, 2013). This new approach to the Kurdish issue in Turkey had changed the nature of the struggle from a volatile to a civil one. However, the Turkish state started to criminalize this grass-roots democratic struggle from July 2015, and to suppress the movement the government deployed army and police forces in southeastern Kurdish cities resulting in massive destructions.

As the report by UN Human Rights Office (2017) suggested that government's security operations 'affected more than 30 Kurdish towns and cities and displaced up to half a million people of Kurdish origin. The report added that "in early 2016 up to 189 men, women, and children were trap in basements and killed by fire, induced by shelling". Currently, the Kurdish communities in southeast Turkey are suffering from various form of state violence and oppression. A recent report by Human Rights Watch indicates that Turkish authorities has arrested 23 democratically elected Kurdish mayors, as well as hundreds of civilian in retaliation of grass-root mobilization in that region (2020).

The current governance system, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, began to grow in July 2012 when the PYD step into the governance void, following the withdrawal of Syrian government personnel and army from northern Syria. In a short historical period, the form of governance, its name, and practical implementation have changed several times: Democratic Self-Rule Administration of Rojava in January 2014 which was governing the three major Kurdish areas of Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin; Democratic Federation of Rojava-Northern Syria in March 2016; finally, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria was established in September 2018 (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019). The system of governance in north and east Syria has evolved in response to the rapid developments in that region such as liberation of new territories from ISIS, formation of political and military alliances with other ethnoreligious groups, and the need for international support.

The political system in north and east Syria is made up of three major structures: The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (2018); the Syrian Democratic Council (2015); Movement for a Democratic Society (2011). The three bodies work together to ensure that radical democracy is practiced in its full scope; society governs itself by forming assemblies where

different identities can directly make decisions reflecting their lives and experiences. In addition, they strive to ensure that political, cultural, and social affairs are implemented in accord to the guidelines provided by the Social Contract. Some of these guidelines are the universal democratic principles of mutual coexistence, free and democratic elections, ecological democratic society, freedom of women and gender equality, public ownership of wealth and natural resources, and quota requirements for women and ethnoreligious minorities (Social Contract of the Democratic Federalism of Northern Syria, 2018).

The Autonomous Administration, also referred to as the Administration, is the political structure that implements the idea of 'Democratic Confederalism' through communes and councils in seven regions of north and east Syria (Jazira, Hasakah, Euphrates, Afrin, Manjib, Tabqa, Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor), with the exceptions of Afrin region and some areas of Euphrates and Jazira regions being under Turkish occupation (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019). The political spine of this Administration is the bottom-up decision-making process which starts with communes of different levels, from neighborhoods to regions. Communes provide mechanism for people's direct participation in democracy. Through different committees (e.g., education, economy, family, youth, conflict resolution), communes can make decisions in regard to local economic activities, local self-defense, health, women, and youth affairs (Rojava Information Center, 2019). In addition to communes, councils are the second most important political units of the Administration. Councils are representative bodies and elected by people directly. While people only elect 60% of the council the other 40% is reserved for quotas that only guarantee the equal participation of women and minority groups, but also eradicate the historical oppression of these groups. Each commune has co-chairs of male and female to reinforce gender equality. The councils and communes are at the forefronts of struggle for democracy, materializing Ocalan's vision of

democratic politics where politics and social life are coupled and social spaces are democratically politicized (Ocalan, 2017). The regions are the largest geographic territories of the administration. According to the Social Contract chapter 3, Article 53 & 54, regions are autonomous units that can “organize and administer their internal affairs according to the principles of democratic self-administration” (2016). The Autonomous Administration is the highest administrative unit. The Administration, with its three general bodies (General, Executive, and Justice councils) ensures the harmony between the seven autonomous regions.

The second major structure of the political system is the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). The SDC is a political assembly representing civil organizations and political parties in north and east Syria. It is a counterpart part to the Autonomous Administration, but involved with more executive and administrative functions. The SDC also conducts the diplomatic affairs with Syrian government, as well as the regional, and international powers. In addition, it negotiates with the Syrian government to adopt the democratic confederalism as a form of governance, and as a democratic solution to the civil war in Syria. The SDC operates through four offices (Public Relations, Women, Youth, and Organizations), and three political bodies (the General Conference, the Executive Council, and the Political Council). Political parties, unions, civil organizations, and other components of society in north and east Syria have representatives in the aforementioned offices and political bodies (Rojava Information Center, 2019).

The Movement for Democratic Society (Tev-Dem) is the third major structure. It functions as a counterpower to the Autonomous Administration by organizing people outside the Administration through unions and civil institutions. In that sense, it is a state that works against formation of state; it strives against centralized administration and the formation of class society, i.e., Tev-Dem keeps people at the center of politics (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019). All of these

organizations are connected by their members. for example, an engineer can participate in her neighborhood commune and at the same time be elected by people to a council. In addition, she can participate in engineer unions that connects her to Tev-Dem. She also can become a member of a party and run for office through her party and become her party's representative within the SDC.

### **Women of Northern Syria: “A Revolution Within Revolution”**

In the recent antigovernment movements in the Middle East and North Africa, commonly known as the Arab Spring, women had a strong presence<sup>xiii</sup> and played a fundamental role in changing the regime or government in their countries. Besides, not only did they not achieve what was intended, equality and freedom, but they were also further marginalized and their sociopolitical condition had gotten worse possibly because of the war (e.g. Syria, Yemen), or perhaps the seizure of power by a more oppressive government (e.g. Egypt) (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016). In Tunisia, however, Ben Ali's regime (1987-2011) was replaced with a democratic government, leading to a higher degree of freedom and participation of women (Marks, 2013). In Northern Syria women are experiencing a much higher degree of participation in radical engagement. Since the beginning of crisis in Syria, women have not only been the vanguards of the revolution, but also their struggle has been central to the revolution itself. Consequently, the freedom of women, in this revolution, is not postponed to some unknown future to be dealt with, but rather, as Ocalan argues: “the level of women's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society (Ocalan, 2017).

In order to understand why gender equity is the core of revolution in northern Syria, we have to, again, return to Ocalan's idea and PKK's new ideology. In his critics of patriarchy, statist and class-based society, and capitalism, Ocalan concludes that history of civilization is the history

of women's enslavement and this enslavement has to be brought up to our consciousness by waging struggle against patriarchy. In addition, he argues, the struggle over power in the relationship between men and women had led to inequality, despotism, and fascism. Therefore, by 'shattering the web of relationship around women', genuine freedom, equality, and democracy can be attained (Ocalan, 2017). Ocalan doesn't suggest a return to the Neolithic matriarchal society, but he believes that in order to transform Kurdish society into a democratic one the Kurdish liberation movement must prioritize women's struggle over class and nation struggle, because the 'extent of this transformation is determined by the extent of transformation attained by women' (2017). Also, two ideological institutions, family and marriage, are of great importance in Ocalan's idea. Family, by giving power to the men and neglecting the women's unlimited labor, perpetuates intrinsically oppressive patriarchal statist society; marriage limits women's access to social, political, intellectual, and economic arenas through the process of "Housewifisation". Within the PKK, women have played a decisive role since its foundation in 1978. For instance, Sakine Cansiz<sup>xiv</sup>, one of the co-founders of the PKK who spent years in prison where she organized protests and later when she joined PKK's armed struggle. Cansiz started women's movement within the organization, encouraging many young women across the Kurdistan to join the struggle; by the end of 1993, women constituted one third of the PKK's guerilla fighters (Marcus, 2007). Following Ocalan's idea, PKK has reorganized its political structure whereby women have autonomously organized themselves through associations and congresses (e.g. Kurdish women's Press Associations). In addition, since the early 2000s the PKK bases in northern Iraq have turned into sites of education where issues on gender and ecology are discussed. The PYD, PKK's sister party in Syria, has followed Ocalan's idea by placing gender issue at the heart of its revolutionary

project as well as organizing its political structure based on universal democratic feminist principles (Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019).

For women in the Middle East, particularly Kurdish women, to be able to wage their struggle towards formation of a democratic and ecological society, some sort of emancipatory knowledge and education is needed, a movement based on “Jîneolojî”. The first part of the word Jîneolojî comes from the Kurdish word Jîn; women, and the second part from the Greek word Logos; signifying reason, science. Therefore, Jîneolojî is the science of women. Ocalan developed the word and ideas about the concept Jîneolojî as a social and political project. Jîneolojî is developed based on the Kurdish women, but it is not a science bound to a specific culture or identity. To develop an autonomous system of knowledge from the women’s stand point, Jîneolojî takes the exclusion of women’s perspective in conventional science as its starting point. Also, it is a branch of knowledge that is being propagated in the midst of the society to remind social actors of their force and capacity and to encourage them to materialize this capacity to administer themselves (Exo, 2020). According to Ocalan, Jîneolojî provides a radical framework to reconcile women to the political arena which in turn it makes other forms of freedom possible because politics would no longer be something distant and superordinate that is managed by men, state, and military (2017).

Even prior to the start of revolution in northern Syria in 2012, Kurdish women, inspired by Ocalan’s ideas, had started grass-roots organizing and political works through an umbrella organization for women’s movement in Rojava which was known as Yekitiya Star (Star Union) in 2004. In 2016, in response to the geographic gain of revolution it adopted a new Star Congress, to include non-Kurdish women. Once the revolution began, some of the Syrian Kurdish women, who had previously joined the PKK’s struggle against Turkey, returned to Rojava and brought back

theoretical and practical experiences, as well as their fighting and organizational skills (Knapp). Consequently, the PKK female veterans, played a pivotal role in initiating and sustaining the women's revolution in northern Syria by providing military and ideological training to the local women. Also, the members of Star Congress helped women to actively engage with the revolution by going to the houses offering education about the agenda of revolution and training on the subject of councils and communes. Women are able to establish their own houses, courts, military, and civil police units, education and research centers as well as their independent media, press association, and newspapers. These avenues and opportunities give women not only a democratic platform to write their own history and voice their struggle, but to explore the reality of their lives and fulfill their sense of agency (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016). Besides their engagement in reshaping civil society, women have played a crucial role in the frontline of the fight against Islamic State (IS) in both defending Kurdish enclaves in Rojava<sup>xv</sup>, and liberating Arab-populated cities such as Tabqa and IS' self-claimed capital city of Raqqa<sup>xvi</sup>.

To further ensure gender equality in decision making, the principle of co-presidency and 40% quota for women and ethnic minorities are practiced in all level of organizations within the Autonomous Administration (Social Contract, Article 54.3). Along with their participation in the mixed-gender organizations, explained in the previous section, women organized their own exclusive autonomous parallel organizations through communes and councils on the basis of democratic confederalism. Star Congress, women's highest political structure, is organized based on 'the ecological democratic paradigm that believes in women's freedom' to build a free and democratic Rojava, Syria, and Middle East "by promoting women's freedom and the concept of democratic nation<sup>xvii</sup>". Another form of grass-roots organization is the "Women's House" which exists throughout the north and east Syria, providing women with spaces where domestic problems

such as divorce, marriage, and violence can be discussed and resolved (Rojava Information Center, 2020). In contrast to the neighboring countries like Iran (Amnesty international, 2011; 2015) and Turkey (Human Rights Watch, 2018) where polygamy, underage and forced marriage are perpetuated through anti-women's laws of marriage, women of north and east Syria waged their revolutionary labor, and enforced "Women's Law" in 2014, eradicating barbaric, anti-women practices in their region.

## **Conclusion**

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup>, French and Britain colonizers with the help of newly formed states, divided Kurdish territory between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Since then, Kurds have strived and struggled to preserve their identity and gain political recognition within the countries they live. Their struggle whether to attain minority rights utilizing civil resistance, or to build their own nation-state employing armed struggle, was often responded with violence and terror by the central governments, leading to forced assimilation, genocide, and annihilation. While Kurdish politics in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey developed in response to their relationship with the central governments, to a great extent independent from one another, political development in Syrian Kurdistan was heavily influenced by Kurdish politics in Turkey and Iraq. In addition to that, because of their small population and the topography of their land, they weren't be able to pose a serious threat to the Syrian government. Also, the rise of anti-colonialism sentiments in Syria in the mid 1930s, as well as the rapid development of Arab nationalism resulted from Israeli-Palestine conflict in the late 1940s, had negatively impacted Kurds in Syria-many were forcedly moved out of their homes and thousands stripped of their right to Syrian citizenship.

The PKK movement in Turkey's Kurdistan and its presence in Syria had greatly influenced the political developments among Syrian Kurds. Many Syrian Kurds, men and women, joined PKK's guerilla force from the early 80s in its struggle against Turkish government, who for the first time gained ideological and military training. In the early 2000s, influenced by PKK's ideological shift and structural reorganization, Syrian Kurds founded Democratic Union Party

(PYD) to mobilized Kurds against the government. Following Ocalan's notion of 'democratic confederalism', Syrian Kurds started grass-roots political organizations and women associations that echoed those of in Turkey's Kurdistan. Despite the fact that these organizations suffered from the Ba'ath regime's oppression in the late 2000s, they became the stem cells for the Rojava's Revolution in 2012. The Syrian civil unrest in early 2011 provided Syrian Kurds with an opportunity to form their own autonomous government with the PYD as its De facto governing party.

Building on the already-established political organizations, PYD and its affiliated organization Tev-Dem started to mobilize people through communes and councils and take over the key governmental positions in north and east Syria. The autonomous demonstration of Rojava was declared in 2014 which included three Kurdish enclaves of Kobani, Afrin, Jazira. In respond to the demographic diversity and geographic gain, the administration reorganized itself under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, omitting the word Rojava. Through communes, councils, women and ecological associations and Unions, people in north and east Syria have transformed society from a statist class-based one to an egalitarian feminist ecological one, where different identities are able to autonomously assemble themselves and participate in decision making process. While in its neighboring states life is plunged in darkness, Rojava reminds us of a new political life that is achievable through waging democratic struggle. Those who struggle are the livings.

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- <sup>xii</sup> See Kenan Malik 10/27/20: Syria's Kurds dreamt of a 'Revolution'. Assad will snuff this out. (online) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/27/syria-kurds-dreamt-of-rojava-revolution-assad-will-snuff-this-out> (last accessed 04/20/20).
- <sup>xiii</sup> See Mehrezia Labidi 03/23/2012: Tunisian's women are the heart of its revolution (online) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/23/tunisia-women-revolution> (last accessed 05/10/20).
- <sup>xiv</sup> See Constanze Letsch 01/10/2013: Sakina Cansiz: 'a legend among PKK members' (online) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/10/sakine-cansiz-pkk-kurdish-activist> (last accessed 05/12/20).
- <sup>xv</sup> See Mona Mahmood 01/30/2015: 'We are so proud' -the women who died defending Kobani against ISIS (online) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/30/kurdish-women-died-kobani-isis-syria> (last accessed 05/12/20).
- <sup>xvi</sup> See Richard Hall 03/23/2019: Isis caliphate defeated: How did it happen and do they still pose a threat? (online) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-defeated-caliphate-islamic-state-syria-a8836541.html> (last accessed 05/12/20).
- <sup>xvii</sup> See Kongra Star: (online) <https://eng.kongra-star.org/something-else/> (last accessed 05/14/20).