



Ethnic Kurdish Revolutionary Movement for the Formation of Democratic Confederalism in the Region of Rojava

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ABSTRACT

The ethnic Kurds play a critical role in the formation of the Democratic Confederalism government in the autonomous region of Rojava. For decades, they have faced oppression and disenfranchisement in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. However, the present article focuses on the Kurds of Syria, given that the formation of the current autonomous government of Rojava is in an area that used to be territorially under the authority of Syria. This article aims to explain the revolutionary movement of the Kurds and the conflicts they experienced until encountering the concept of democratic confederalism. Using a qualitative method, this article argues that the Kurdish ethnic revolutionary movement is an ideological movement that utilizes the concept of democratic confederalism as a response to systemic oppression by the state. The concept is derived from Abdullah Ocalan's anarchist ideology, inspired by Murray Bookchin. It promotes inclusivity and diversity in governance and adopted as a model of governance in Rojava which allows the active participation of various religious, ethnic, and minority groups in political, economic, democratic, and governmental processes.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic Kurds; Democratic Confederalism; Revolutionary Movement; Rojava

INTRODUCTION

The civil war that erupted in Syria in 2011 signaled the resurgence of a revolutionary political movement aimed at presenting an alternative paradigm to the prevailing authoritarian stalemate and sectarian political landscape that characterized Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. This movement was initiated by the ethnic Kurds, often referred to as the largest nation without a state ([Dirik, 2022](#)). The Democratic Unity Party (PYD) has emerged as a pivotal entity in this context, playing a crucial role in the establishment of a democratic confederalism government. This government is predicated on the principles of direct democracy, autonomy, ecological sustainability, and women's liberation. In principle, democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm that conceptualizes the potential for diverse and egalitarian social, political, economic, and cultural practices, unbound by the constraints of hierarchy or state centrality ([Gerber & Brincat, 2018](#); [Ocalan, 2011](#)). The practice's impetus can be traced to the Kurdish ethnic movement based in northern Syria, which controls a territory comprising three regions: Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira. Collectively referred to as Rojava (see Figure 1), this new territory employs a governance model that deviates from the conventional nation-state paradigm. These entities are often referred to as "post-state" entities, and they embody a bottom-up democratic autonomy that deviates from the traditional state concept or serves as an alternative to the concept of the Westphalian state ([Gunter, 2015](#)).



Figure 1. Map of Rojava region and Kurdistan

Source: [Jongerden \(2022\)](#)

A closer examination of the historical context reveals that the Kurdish ethnic struggle for independence began in the 19th century. During this period, an ethnic Kurdish rebellion was initiated by Sheikh Ubaidullah against the Ottoman Empire in Hakari province in 1880 ([Sihbudi, 1991](#)). However, the aspirations of the Kurdish ethnic struggle were impeded by the partition of the Kurdistan region into multiple state entities, namely Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The Kurdish community, which is divided and living under the authority of four states, has encountered various challenges in its development, including discrimination, criminalization, persecution, and a number of other human rights violations ([Baris, 2020](#)). Under Assad's authoritarian rule, the Syrian government has continued to oppress the Kurds on political and cultural grounds. This has included the Arabization and criminalization of the Kurds' expression of their own identity, culture, language, and interests ([Schmidinger, 2018](#)). The prevailing perception is that the Kurds represent a threat to the Arabs. Despite initiatives to integrate Kurdish culture into the Syrian identity, Arabization policies proved challenging and ultimately ineffective. Consequently, the revocation of citizenship and the policy designated as the "Arab Belt" was implemented with the objective of replacing the Kurdish population with a total of 332 villages, along with the confiscation of Kurdish farmers' agricultural land ([Jongerden, 2022](#)).

Kurdish historiography is replete with struggles for self-determination. However, the Kurds of Rojava have transitioned their independence movement from nationalism, tribalism, and capitalism to a social ecology movement predicated on gender equality, direct participation, and autonomous confederation ([Gerber & Brincat, 2018](#)). In terms of international law, the UN Charter stipulates self-determination as a principle that must be upheld and protected. This principle is further reinforced in the International Covenant on Human Rights, which stipulates that individuals have the right to self-determination in determining their political status. Notably, the Rojava Kurds have opted for a distinct approach in exercising this right compared to their Kurdish counterparts in Iraq. The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq exercised its right to self-determination by establishing a de facto Kurdish state. Since 1992, this state has conducted Presidential and National Assembly elections under the supervision of international human rights organizations. These elections have been recognized as the most democratic in the Middle East region, with unprecedented public participation ([Radpey, 2016](#)). Subsequent to this development, an autonomous Kurdish state with a parliamentary political system came into being and was constitutionally recognized by the Iraqi central government in 2005 ([Radpey, 2016](#)). In light of these facts, a clear contrast emerges between the orientation of the Kurds in Iraq and the Kurds in Rojava.

The phenomenon of Kurdish democratic confederalism in Rojava is distinctive and worthy of further investigation. Its genesis from a mass movement contributes to the discourse on contemporary global issues by opening up the possibility of creating a new world order that opposes human domination over humans and human domination over nature. In addition to domination, the unequal distribution of power is also a target of the

current globalization system. In terms of the argument about the creation of a new world order, the Kurdish ethnic revolutionary movement in Rojava exemplifies such efforts based on the concept of political democracy. This is achieved through the implementation of direct democracy, economic democracy, democracy in the social sphere, and ecological democracy, as well as the formation of a democratic confederation as an alternative ([Fotopoulos, 2001](#)). Additionally, Gunter posited that the establishment of ethnic Kurdish control in the Rojava region has led to the formation of post-state entities that serve as an alternative to the Westphalian nation-state model ([Ascha & Machmudi, 2019](#)). Similarly, Bozarslan posited that the ethnic Kurds have demonstrated the constraints of the Westphalian nation-state model, which has long been regarded as an "ideal state" in modern times ([Ascha & Machmudi, 2019](#)).

This article argues that the Kurdish ethnic revolutionary movement is an ideological movement that utilizes the concept of democratic confederalism as a response to systemic oppression by the state. This concept comes from Abdullah Ocalan's anarchist ideology, inspired by the political ideas of Murray Bookchin, who is also a political scientist from the anarchist ideological spectrum. Democratic confederalism, in this context, functions not only as an ideology but also as an alternative form of governance, particularly in the context of the nation-state's inability to adequately represent and facilitate political participation by minority groups and ethnic differences. The Rojava government's approach, as outlined in this article, utilizes the framework of democratic confederalism to address the rights of minority groups, particularly the Kurds, who have faced exclusion due to the actions of oppressive nation-states. The Rojava government's adoption of democratic governance serves as a significant asset in accommodating minority groups, fostering stability within their territory, and illustrating the continued relevance of mass movements driven by ideological struggles in addressing contemporary global challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratic confederalism, conceptualized as an ideological framework, functions as a cognitive navigation for ethnic Kurds in Syria. Abdullah Ocalan elucidates democratic confederalism as a praxis of non-state political administration or democracy without a state ([Ocalan, 2011](#)). The practice of democratic confederalism in the autonomous government of Rojava has been categorized as analogous to the phenomenon of the emergence of the Islamic State, which is theoretically referred to as post-state entities that replace the concept of the Westphalia state ([Ascha & Machmudi, 2019](#); [Gunter, 2015](#)). However, a distinction can be made based on their contrasting ideologies, systems, and practices. Ocalan's democratic confederalism orientation, as a cognitive navigation, does not seek or attempt to achieve nationalist and static homogeneity ([Cemgil, 2016](#)). Rather, it is a dialectical social project that seeks a bottom-up system of self-administration by organizing power from coordinative local councils towards a much larger democratic confederation ([Cemgil, 2016](#)).

Ocalan's conceptualization of a confederation, as currently implemented in Rojava, is not without foundation. Rather, it is the result of an accumulation of historical readings and contemporary interpretations of local and global phenomena. The debate that Ocalan seeks to raise points to three sources of contemporary society's problems, which he categorizes into the nation-state, capitalism, and patriarchy ([Üstündağ, 2016](#)). These three aspects have been the subject of criticism and subsequently referenced by Ocalan as challenges associated with capitalist modernity. Ocalan asserts that these challenges can be addressed through the establishment of democratic autonomy. Ocalan's concept of confederation, therefore, entails the implementation of democratic principles through the medium of participatory governance at the level of decentralized local communities. However, as a governance model that is radical and not aligned with the mainstream, Ocalan's proposal has also drawn criticism from several scholars and observers. In his 2019 study, Kamran Matin proposed a critique of Ocalan's historical sociology, particularly with regard to the emergence and dissolution of the state ([Matin, 2019](#)). This critique draws upon the internalist and interactive nature of Sumerian civilization, which, as [Matin \(2019\)](#) argues, is implicitly influenced by the conditions of community diversity.

In an effort to interpret the history of the emergence and dissolution of the state, Matin considers Ocalan's historical sociology theory, which underlies his understanding of confederation, to be contradictory and inconsistent. According to [Matin \(2019\)](#), the internalist approach employed by Ocalan to elucidate the emergence of the state from the internal dynamics of society, such as surplus production and class, is incompatible with the subsequent analysis that utilizes an interactivist approach. This latter analysis emphasizes external influences in the form of conflicts between societies. In summary, Ocalan's acknowledgment of external pressures and the competitive dynamics among societies engenders a theoretical inconsistency within his framework. [Matin's \(2019\)](#) argument is fortified by the adoption of Kojin Karatani's assertion that the advent of the state is predicated on the heterogeneity of society and its capacity to engage with external societies.

In his study, Matin has assessed and positioned the Kurds as a closed entity and the sole actor in the governance of democratic confederalism. Matin's analysis suggests that he perceives deficiencies in Rojava's confederal practices, which he believes are susceptible to the adoption of covert Kurdish ethnocentrism. Consequently, Matin underscores the significance of multidisciplinary or diversity ([Matin, 2019](#)) in the endeavor to impede the emergence of Kurdish ethnic supremacy, which engenders a sense of superiority over other ethnic groups. However, Matin's critique suggests an attempt to fortify Ocalan's theoretical framework, thereby ensuring the resilience of the confederalist praxis. Conversely, Matin's ([2019](#)) examination and evaluation of the theoretical framework of democratic confederalism ([Ocalan, 2011](#)) has given rise to propositions that anticipate the emergence of Rojava as either a nation-state or a Kurdish national state.

It is evident that the discourse under scrutiny deviates significantly from the anticipated subject matter. From the outset, Ocalan's political vision, as inherited by the

Rojava Kurds, did not result in the establishment of a Kurdish nation-state. The democratic confederalism that Ocalan defined as non-state political administration or democracy without a state was a practice that functioned as a critique of the centralized character of the state and its actual function as a tool of assimilation that did not free subjects from colonial stigma ([Knapp & Jongerden, 2016](#)). In essence, the coercive state subjugates the individual to such a degree that it systematically marginalizes minority groups from public spaces and fosters an elitist government and the concomitant practices of exclusivity.

In other literature, a study by [Dinc \(2020\)](#) reveals criticisms that refer to Kurds as *primus inter pares* by referring to Kurdish symbolism that is considered still dominant as well as Ocalan's personal cult in Rojava's political practices ([Dinc, 2020](#)). In the contemporary political landscape, there exist contentions pertaining to statelessness that advocate for the cultivation of a sense of tribal nationalism as a means of safeguarding rights. These contentions posit that the establishment of an independent nation-state through the use of violence is imperative. In the event that Rojava becomes part of this proposed scheme, the Kurdish social revolution within the ethical framework envisioned by the confederation may not yield substantial progress in the establishment of a new, more equitable global order. This observation highlights a conceptual lacuna in the examination of the phenomenon of Kurdish political movements.

However, it is crucial to comprehend Rojava's objectives, both in theory and in practice, which do not include the aspiration to establish an independent Kurdish nation-state or a national state. Democratic confederalism has diverged from antecedent grassroots democracy initiatives in that it incorporates all heterogeneous local communities within a given region, rather than exclusively focusing on the Kurdish population. It also does not undermine the Syrian national constitution ([Colasanti et al., 2018](#)). Therefore, Ocalan's practice of confederalism can be regarded as a method of liberating people from state power to govern themselves in the form of communes or decentralized political units.

This article further elaborates on [Hardt and Negri's \(2009\)](#) concept of revolutionary political movements to provide a more significant perspective on Kurdish identity in revolutionary political movements to the governance of Rojava. According to these authors, revolutionary politics must indeed start from identity, but it cannot finalize its identity or end with a single identity. Rather, it must strive and aim to erase itself ([Hardt & Negri, 2009](#)). Consequently, identity politics is an inevitable component of revolutionary movements, compelling them to operate and acquire knowledge through the lens of their identities. [Hardt and Negri \(2009\)](#) delineate the pivotal role of identity politics in revolutionary political movements, categorizing it into three primary components. First, they emphasize the imperative of elevating marginalized or subordinated identities to a position of visibility and acknowledgment. This concept, within the framework of traditional communist thought, is termed "expropriation of the expropriators." Secondly, the notion of halting the progression of identity politics is posited, a concept which Hardt and Negri acknowledge as being challenging and frequently unsuccessful due to its propensity

to engender a pronounced divide between "us" and "them" ([Hardt & Negri, 2009](#)). Thirdly, the function of identity rebellion must be organized in order to maintain its momentum and direct it towards the abolition of identity itself ([Hardt & Negri, 2009](#)).

By elaborating on the conceptual framework of identity politics in revolutionary movements as referred to by Hardt and Negri, this article provides a different perspective from previous articles. [Hardt and Negri \(2009\)](#) demonstrates that the trajectory of the Kurdish revolutionary political movement must also be understood as a process of identity destruction. Despite the richness of the aforementioned studies and literature in terms of description, none of them perceive Rojava's governance practices as a manifestation of a mass movement that offers an alternative governance model to the weaknesses of the state and even allows it to become a counter-discourse to the nation-state. Consequently, this study is of notable significance as it endeavors to establish a correlation between the practice of local autonomy and international relations theory, a field that is increasingly embracing non-state entity forms.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method with the objective of attaining a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomena, events, or situations pertaining to the topic under investigation. The data collection technique employed in this study is based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature. Explanations deriving from texts are used to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The data collected is secondary in nature, derived from a range of sources including books, e-books, scientific articles, theses, official documents, reports, and online news, as well as other documents that support an in-depth and holistic understanding. The data is then subjected to content analysis in order to ascertain the relevance between one data point and another, thus enabling the author to produce findings and conclusions based on their own efforts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Emergence of Democratic Confederalism as Resistance Ideology

The oppression, discrimination, and mistreatment that the ethnic Kurds have experienced for decades were subsequently responded to in the form of revolutionary resistance using weapons by a group of ethnic Kurds residing in Turkey. The movement was organized through the formation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978, which then initiated a rebellion against the Turkish government ([Colella, 2017](#)). The movement was initiated by Abdullah Ocalan, who also served as the leader of the PKK, promoting and establishing Marxist-Leninist ideas as an ideological foundation in the hope of establishing a Socialist Kurdistan state. However, Ocalan and the PKK's pursuit of independence and the restoration of the rights of ethnic Kurds in Turkey through the use of violent tactics, including bombings, kidnappings, and acts of terror, led to their designation as terrorists by

the Turkish government, the United States, and numerous other countries during the 1980s ([The Kurdish Project, 2015](#)).

The PKK, which has been designated a terrorist organization, resulted in the arrest and death sentence handed down by the Turkish government to its leader, Ocalan, in 1998 ([Colella, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, the death sentence was subsequently commuted to life imprisonment as a consequence of a policy shift, namely the abolition of the death penalty by the Turkish government ([Colella, 2017](#)). While incarcerated, Ocalan engaged with a range of intellectual texts, including works by Michel Foucault and Benedict Anderson. At some point, Ocalan read and studied books by Murray Bookchin, who later introduced him to the ideology of anarchism and the concept of confederalism ([Enzinna, 2015](#)). Indeed, prior to Bookchin's passing in 2006, Ocalan's legal counsel facilitated communication between him and Bookchin via written correspondence ([Baher, 2020](#)). The objective of Ocalan's correspondence with Bookchin was to align Anarchist ideology with the context of the PKK movement, thereby facilitating the realization of democratic confederalism. As a consequence of this interaction, Ocalan underwent a significant shift in his ideological and political orientation, moving away from Marxism-Leninism and towards Anarchism, also known as Libertarian Socialism.

In response to the Turkish government's implementation of a policy to ban the PKK in Turkey, members, and sympathizers of the PKK chose to migrate to the Rojava region. There, they sought to establish a free society that would prioritize sustainability, pluralism, self-defense, and women's liberation, inspired by the ideology and ideas espoused by Ocalan ([Enzinna, 2015](#)). As a consequence of this incident, ethnic Kurds who had migrated from Turkey then united with ethnic Kurds in Syria to establish the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003 ([Samuel, 2014](#)). The PYD espouses a similar ideological and conceptual framework as the PKK. Indeed, Ocalan advised them to familiarise themselves with Bookchin's ideas, which he regarded as a crucial foundation for their revolutionary endeavor in Rojava. In 2005, Ocalan issued a declaration of democratic confederalism, which highlighted that the PKK's primary objective had shifted from resisting the Turkish government to establishing city assemblies and a form of stateless democracy ([Colella, 2017](#)). Therefore, the relationship between the Turkish Kurds (PKK) and the Syrian Kurds (PYD) is not only based on ethnicity, but also strengthened by the ideological ties they both inherited from Ocalan.

The ideological spectrum of the PKK, which formerly embraced a Marxist-Leninist orientation to establish an independent Kurdish state, underwent a significant transformation. Ocalan's arrest signified a pivotal moment in his engagement with Bookchin's theoretical framework, which subsequently served as a catalyst for the transformation of the Kurdish movement ([Knapp & Jongerden, 2016](#)). As previously stated, Ocalan came into contact with Bookchin's political thought ([Enzinna, 2015](#)) and even communicated with him ([Baher, 2020](#)). During his incarceration, Ocalan had read and captured key aspects of Bookchin's thought ([Gerber & Brincat, 2018](#)). In his theory, Bookchin

highlighted the ecological crisis that arises from the social pathology of the practice of political colonization by hierarchy, patriarchy, capitalism, and the nation-state ([Gerber & Brincat, 2018](#)). Therefore, communalism became Bookchin's proposal as well as a political goal that he thought could be realized through the decentralization of social organizations with the implementation of direct democracy ([Gerber & Brincat, 2018](#); [Hosseini, 2016](#)). This clearly takes a different form and challenges the practice of political organizing as it is done within the framework of the nation-state.

Understanding this, Ocalan shifted the PKK's attention from the formation of a Kurdish state to the practice of communalism or what Bookchin also called democratic municipalism. Ocalan's concept of democratic confederalism clearly shows how Bookchin's political theory inspired him. In the context of Bookchin's decentralization of social organization, Ocalan emphasizes democratic autonomy that refers to the status of the people to determine their own future ([Knapp & Jongerden, 2016](#)). The self-determination works and is facilitated in a democratic confederation system or an independent system that is bottom-up ([Knapp & Jongerden, 2016](#)). It is implemented through the formation of autonomous cantons, regional, direct democracy, and is operationalized based on a confederal structure by popular delegates that can be revoked at any time and supervised by citizen militias and the army ([Gerber & Brincat, 2018](#)). The PYD, which is the PKK's ideological sibling and also inherited the concept, found momentum to put it into practice and succeeded in forming the Rojava autonomous government in northern Syria.

Bookchin's proposed assembly and confederalism represent a viable alternative solution for all nations and ethnic minorities in the Kurdistan region ([Ocalan, 2011](#)). Although the concept of confederalism has been explored by prominent figures in European thought, including Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin, since the 19th century, none have delved into the subject with the same depth as Murray Bookchin ([Baher, 2020](#)). Bookchin's strength lies in his capacity to elucidate the causal relationship between confederalism and issues of social ecology and decentralization. These concepts are inextricably linked and form the foundation of a libertarian city assembly system. City assemblies serve as the foundation for confederalism, which represents an alternative to the inability of nation-states to achieve a classless society ([Baher, 2020](#)). In this regard, democratic confederalism can be defined as the practice of democracy without a state, wherein people live democratically, ecologically, and without gender discrimination ([Ocalan, 2011](#)).

In light of the preceding arguments put forth by Ocalan and Baher, it becomes evident that the very concept of the nation-state, in practice, gives rise to the formation of distinct social classes and serves to reinforce the dominant position of the majority group within society. This, in turn, results in the marginalization and oppression of minority groups. It would be erroneous to assume that the phenomenon of Kurdish ethnicity is applicable in general to other ethnicities in other parts of the world. However, based on the analysis of this phenomenon, can elucidate the circumstances experienced by the Kurds as a minority

group. In light of the above, the revolutionary movement spearheaded by ethnic Kurds espousing Ocalan's ideas in the establishment of democratic confederalism in Rojava can be regarded as an ideological movement that has emerged as a consequence of the inability of the state to resolve the issue of ethnic diversity in the region. In light of the aforementioned explanations, it becomes evident that the convergence of the Kurdish ethnic revolutionary movement and the concept of democratic confederalism originated from Abdullah Ocalan, who studied and developed the ideas of anarchism, drawing inspiration from Murray Bookchin, an eminent anarchist thinker. Therefore, the parallels between Ocalan's concept of democratic confederalism and Bookchin's political theory are not merely coincidental. A clear causal relationship has been demonstrated in both cases. In fact, Ocalan also acknowledges that his worldview has taken the same form as Bookchin's ([Gerber & Brincat, 2018](#)). Indeed, it must be recognized that Ocalan's encounter with Bookchin's ideas became an important event that marked the rise of a new political movement of the Kurdish resistance movement.

The Movement Against the Assad Regime in Syria

Hafez al-Assad, who has ruled Syria since the 1970s, has not accorded any priority to the promotion and protection of human rights during his tenure. In 1973, Syrian security forces apprehended 12 Kurds and several party leaders who had submitted a memorandum to Hafez protesting the deplorable living conditions of ethnic Kurds who had been stripped of their citizenship ([El Haq, 2021](#)). The tense relationship between the Syrian government and ethnic Kurds has intensified since the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, who was then succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, as president of Syria. Despite Bashar al-Assad's pledge to prioritize human rights for the government, akin to the previous regime, the new administration continues to navigate a complex relationship with the ethnic Kurds in Syria.

The protracted journey of Syrian Kurdish ethnic resistance culminated in the formation of the PYD in 2003, a development that was facilitated by the PKK. The ethnic Kurdish struggle for liberation from foreign domination throughout the Kurdistan region is becoming increasingly unified in its objectives. Following a change in leadership in 2000, another Kurdish uprising occurred in 2004 in the city of Qamishli. The incident was precipitated by a soccer match in which Arab supporters incited the Kurds by displaying posters featuring the image of Saddam Hussein, which was perceived as a derogatory representation of the Kurds ([Samuel, 2014](#)). The unrest was an inevitable consequence of the situation and soon became a political issue, characterized by the burning of Ba'ath party offices while anti-Assad slogans were shouted. The incident resulted in the deaths of 36 people and the detention of thousands of ethnic Kurds by the Syrian government ([Tejel, 2009](#)).

In the aftermath of the incident, the PYD came to the conclusion that the ethnic Kurdish movement could no longer pursue a peaceful course of action. The PYD came to view the necessity of providing the ethnic Kurds with a means of self-defense.

Consequently, the PYD established the People's Defense Units (YPG) with the objective of safeguarding the Kurdish population from assaults perpetrated by government military forces and other reactionary militias ([Samuel, 2014](#)). Following the uprising in 2004, the US invasion of Iraq ([El Haq, 2021](#)) further exacerbated the already strained relations between the Syrian government and the country's ethnic Kurds. The Syrian government's opposition to the invasion was in stark contrast to the Syrian ethnic Kurds, who were in coalition with the ethnic Kurds in Iraq. The two Kurdish ethnic groups supported and welcomed the arrival of US military forces, which was perceived as a threat and contributed to the weakening of Assad's position in Syria. Consequently, tensions between the Syrian government and ethnic Kurds persisted until the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011.

The wave of protests by pro-democracy groups that originated in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 was swiftly met with demonstrations by other pro-democracy groups in numerous Arab countries. The overthrow of government regimes known as the Arab Spring was similarly inevitable in Syria, which resulted in a war between the government and the Syrian Liberation Army (FSA) as well as the fundamentalist militia Al-Nusra Front, which became the opposition in 2011 ([Samuel, 2014](#)). The demonstrations that commenced in the city of Deraa subsequently proliferated throughout the country, demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad from power. In response, the government resorted to the use of military force, a tactic that has been met with significant criticism from human rights organizations. The United Nations estimates that approximately 306,887 civilians have been killed as a consequence of the protracted conflict in Syria ([BBC News, 2023](#)).

While ethnic Kurds participated in the protest movement against the Assad regime, their political stance diverged from that of other opposition groups. The PYD and YPG did not align themselves with either the government or opposition groups and instead pursued an alternative path to Kurdish independence. This involved the liberation of Kurdish towns and villages that had previously been under the control and intervention of the government, the FSA, and the fundamentalist militia Al-Nusra Front. The weakening of the Assad regime in the northeastern region of the country due to the ongoing war resulted in a power vacuum in several cities. This presented an opportunity for the PYD and YPG to liberate these cities. The PYD's political stance amidst the wave of protests shows affirmation of their consistency with Ocalan's ideology and teachings. Although involved in the protests, the PYD did not show any intention or tendency to take over government power as contested by other sectarian and opposition groups. The PYD and YPG opted for territorial liberation to build an alternative political community through self-governance distinct from the nation-state framework.

In a similar vein, Ocalan's political vision, outlined in the manifesto of democratic confederalism, vehemently critiques the notion of the nation-state, perceiving it as a historical construct ([Ocalan, 2011](#)). The centralized nature of the state and its role as a tool of assimilation have not succeeded in liberating people from the colonial stigma that restrains them; rather, these factors have further subjugated individuals ([Knapp & Jongerden, 2016](#)).

Throughout the years, the Arab ethnic group's citizenship and nationality relations, which have imposed Arabist ideology on the Syrian government, have resulted in an autocratic power structure characterized by oppressive control. While this shift may be perceived as a stride toward state stability, it must be noted that it comes at the cost of diminished representation and participation, as evidenced by the imposition of restrictions on minority groups ([Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019](#)). However, this is the reality of the coercive characteristics of the state, which does have its own destructive power.

From these political and governance practices, Ocalan's analysis then distinguishes two models of understanding of the most influential political and governance practices, namely between the Athenian and Roman models. The Athenian or Hellenistic model is integrated by Ocalan into the concept of democratic confederalism because it represents communal political practices that represent the nature of active citizenship ([Cemgil, 2016](#)). Meanwhile, the Roman model that Ocalan rejected represented the practice of centrality and statism that tended to end in the exclusivity of elitist governance ([Cemgil, 2016](#)). However, in the political and governance practices of both models, it is the Roman model that emerges as the dominant form in contemporary societies ([Knapp & Jongerden, 2016](#)). Thus, Ocalan's analysis that shapes his political vision is the basis for explaining the PYD's ideological motives against Assad's exclusionary authoritarian political and governance practices and the Arabization policies imposed on minorities. Thus, democratic confederalism is not only an ideology of resistance to oppressive state power structures. Rather, it provides a practical framework for the Kurdish political movement in exposing the true nature of the political regime operating within the nation-state system.

Therefore, liberating territories or cities is a rational choice of the PYD to start the agenda of establishing autonomous government based on Ocalan's concept of democratic confederalism. The city of Kobani, which is predominantly inhabited by ethnic Kurds, was swiftly captured by the PYD and YPG in 2012 ([Paskalis, 2021](#)). Additionally, the ethnic Kurds reclaimed agricultural lands that had been appropriated by the government through force. The liberation of Kobani was followed by the liberation of Jazira and Afrin, which subsequently became known as the Rojava region. In the course of 2012, amidst the ongoing conflict in Syria, the PYD and YPG succeeded in liberating a number of additional cities, including Amude, Derik, and Qamishli ([El Haq, 2021](#)). As posited by Leezenberg, cited by [Paskalis \(2021\)](#), the peaceful transition of power in the Rojava region is likely attributable to the establishment of an accord between the Syrian government and the PYD. Leezenberg's argument is based on the notable fact that the YPG's involvement in combating the ISIS group represents an adversarial stance towards the Syrian government ([Paskalis, 2021](#)). Conversely, the relationship between the Syrian government and the Kurdish ethnic group was still characterized by significant tensions at that time. This suggests the existence of an agreement between the two parties. However, Leezenberg's argument lacks sufficient evidence to substantiate this claim. The author's perspective aligns more closely with Jongerden's viewpoint, which views the transition process as an attempt by the Syrian

government to prevent ethnic Kurds from becoming embroiled in conflict with the government, which could further exacerbate domestic conditions ([Jongerden, 2019](#)).

In 2013, the PYD and YPG, which continued to espouse the gender equality principles of Ocalan's ideology, which incorporated feminism into its teachings, established the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), an all-female militia. Moreover, there are security forces designated as Asayish, who are specifically trained and equipped to address the issue of rape and sexual violence ([Enzinna, 2015](#)). The involvement of the YPJ in the Kurdish ethnic struggle is also a noteworthy phenomenon. The active participation of women in this struggle challenges the deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural norms and traditional gender roles that are pervasive in Middle Eastern society. Additionally, there are numerous female academics in Rojava who are engaged in the dissemination of knowledge pertaining to the science of women, or Jineology, as it is referred to by Ocalan ([Miley, 2020](#)). Subsequent to this, the efforts of the PYD, in conjunction with the YPG and YPJ, evolved into a far-reaching movement, uniting individuals from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in the pursuit of revolutionary agendas.

Differences in the Orientation of the Resistance Movement among Ethnic Kurds

It is important to acknowledge that among the ethnic Kurdish population, there are variations in the orientation of the struggles they engage in. Consequently, in the Kurdish ethnic struggle, the PYD is not the sole actor involved in the dynamics of the revolutionary struggle, as evidenced by the involvement of the YPG and YPJ. In the context of the Kurdish ethnic movement in Syria, the relationships between external actors are characterized by a high degree of complexity, with each actor influencing the orientations of the resistance movement in a reciprocal manner. As previously stated, the PYD, which is ideologically aligned with the Turkish PKK, is oriented towards systemic change rather than the overthrow of the Assad regime and the reform of the Syrian government structure. The PYD favors a more radical transformation of the political foundation that is at the root of Kurdish ethnic oppression, namely the establishment of more democratic institutions without the influence of a centralized and hierarchical state apparatus.

This perspective differs from those held by numerous other Kurdish groups and political parties. One such group is the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which was established in 2011 ([Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019](#)). The organization, under the influence of Massoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), advocates for ethnic Syrian Kurds to assume control of the Assad regime in Syria, emulating the KRG's actions in Iraq. The PYD and KNC are the two principal forces that exert control over northern Syria. In 2012, they collaborated to establish the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC), with the objective of administering and safeguarding the territories inhabited by ethnic Kurds in northern Syria ([Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019](#)).

Nevertheless, the alliance between the KSC was short-lived. The PYD opted to withdraw from the KNC, which resulted in the dissolution of the KSC in 2013. These events



demonstrate the existence of divergent views and orientations between the two Kurdish ethnic groups, each pursuing a distinct agenda in their struggle. The PYD subsequently established a new coalition with several groups perceived to share a similar vision. This coalition, designated as the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), encompassed not only ethnic Kurds, as was the case in the previous coalition ([Firman, 2016](#)).

Following the establishment of TEV-DEM, the PYD proceeded to announce the completion of a constitutional framework for the autonomous region of ethnic Kurds in Syria. Subsequently, a referendum was conducted to ascertain the approval of this constitutional document. The city of Qamishli was designated as the inaugural de facto capital of the PYD government ([Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019](#)). Despite the widespread criticism of the PYD and TEV-DEM's actions, the following year saw the declaration of the Afrin, Jazira, and Efrat regions as cantons with autonomous status under the interim constitution agreed upon by the PYD and TEV-DEM ([Allsopp & Wilgenburg, 2019](#)).

The Rojava Government and the Expansion of Democratic Autonomy

As documented by Aretaios in his travel report on the Rojava region, the declaration of the three autonomous regions in 2014 resulted in a lack of geographical contiguity among these regions ([Aretaios, 2015](#)). Nevertheless, the PYD is the political entity that exercises control over all three regions. Rojava's organizing model is based on two main pillars: direct democracy as the basis of the communalist system and urban management. Direct democracy is the foundation of the communalist system, wherein citizens participate directly and actively in decision-making and urban management ([Aretaios, 2015](#)). The second pillar is the rejection of the structure and philosophy of the nation-state. Consequently, a variety of ethnic and religious groups, including Christians, Yezidis, Arabs, Turkmen, Chechens, Armenians, and others, can coexist with the Kurdish ethnic majority ([Aretaios, 2015](#)).

The declaration of the autonomous region of Rojava has given rise to a variety of reactions. Turkey is among the countries most adversely affected by the establishment of Rojava. As indicated in the report published by the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), the developments in Rojava are likely to elicit a response from other ethnic Kurds residing in Turkey. This is perceived as a potential threat to the Turkish government. Consequently, several armed groups, whose activities are funded and supported by the Turkish government, have been engaged in destabilizing actions in regions with a significant Kurdish population ([File, 2014](#)).

The PYD in Rojava continues to promote democratic confederalism and to reject the nation-state, thereby pursuing the democratic vision of a society without a state that was first articulated by Ocalan. The Rojava experiment posits that the nation-state is no longer a prerequisite for practicing democracy, and thus, the nation-state is no longer a necessary construct ([Aretaios, 2015](#)). The social contract then outlines the ideals to be realized in the Rojava region with a model of democratic confederalism. These include the guarantee of

justice, democracy, and the rights of all citizens without exception. This is explicitly stated in the opening paragraph of the Constitution, or the Charter of the Social Contract, as it is more commonly known:

We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens, freely and solemnly declare and establish this Charter, which has been drafted according to the principles of Democratic Autonomy ([Charter of the Social Contract, 2014a](#))

In essence, the Rojava constitution delineates the parameters of its autonomous region, as outlined in Article 3, Paragraph B:

The Autonomous Regions is composed of the three cantons of Afrin, Jazirah and Kobane, forming an integral part of the Syrian territory. The administrative centres of each Canton are: Afrin city, Canton of Afrin; Qamishli city, Canton of Jazira; Kobane city, Canton of Kobane ([Charter of the Social Contract, 2014b](#))

In accordance with Article 4, the government structure is divided into five parts: 1. Legislative Assembly; 2. Executive Councils; 3. High Commission of Elections; 4. Supreme Constitutional Courts; 5. Municipal/Provincial Councils" ([Charter of the Social Contract, 2014c](#)). The Constitution also regulates the organization and governance of the government, as set forth in Article 8, which states that:

All Cantons in the Autonomous Regions are founded upon the principle of local self-government. Cantons may freely elect their representatives and the representative bodies and may pursue their rights insofar as it does not contravene the articles of the Charter ([Charter of the Social Contract, 2014d](#))

The system of governance in Rojava is based on the Athenian model of direct democracy ([Firman, 2016](#)). Local communities, from the village level upwards, organize self-government to the greatest extent possible, while eschewing the centralized model of a central government. As a consequence of this model, the state becomes less relevant, with governance occurring through communal councils. The autonomous region of Rojava is not a Kurdish state in the traditional sense, but rather a government comprising a diverse array of ethnic and religious groups. Each group plays a distinct role in the practice of democracy and governance ([Aretaios, 2015](#)). To facilitate the implementation of its constitution, the region has established committees at the street, neighborhood, district, and city levels. These committees convene every week to discuss the specific challenges and needs of their respective areas.

In contrast to the discriminatory policies enacted by previous governments that prohibited the use of the Kurdish language in public spaces, the constitution of Rojava guarantees the right of all ethnic groups to maintain and preserve their cultural heritage. Furthermore, it ensures the safety and security of all ethnic groups in public spaces. This is evident in Article 9, which states: “The official languages of the Canton of Jazirah are Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac. All communities have the right to teach and be taught in their native language” ([Charter of the Social Contract, 2014e](#)).

The economic model established in Rojava is a social economy model based on a network of assemblies and cooperatives, with the objective of meeting people's needs in an affordable and independent manner ([Colella, 2017](#)). The cooperative movement has played a pivotal role in the economic revival of Rojava, with its presence growing in various sectors, including small industry, construction, and trade, across the countryside. Membership in cooperatives is voluntary and collectively managed with the objective of developing collective labor. Cooperative property is also collectively owned in the form of shares, with the number of shares ranging from one to five. The size of a person's share does not affect their decision-making power in the management of the cooperative, as each person has one vote. Consequently, the management or policy is still determined democratically ([Co-Operation in Mesopotamia, 2016](#)).

During the period when the Rojava region was under Syrian rule, it functioned as a primary source of food for the central government. Additionally, the region is endowed with natural resources, including oil, which are conducive to agricultural production and contribute to the region's economic stability. However, the Assad regime prohibited local communities from cultivating the raw resources that were already available in nature. The centrally planned economy resulted in the establishment of monoculture in agriculture and the dissolution of industry, thereby disrupting the production chain of the local economy ([Co-Operation in Mesopotamia, 2016](#)). Nevertheless, women in Rojava have assumed a significant role in the development of the economy through the establishment of cooperatives at various levels. The cooperatives produce a diverse range of handcrafted goods. Despite being sold seasonally, the products are priced low, resulting in high market demand. Furthermore, the cooperative produces textiles, catering, milk, and agricultural products, albeit on a limited scale. Despite the prevailing optimism regarding the struggle, there are also individuals who express skepticism about their capacity to develop economically under these circumstances.

Despite its democratic governance, Rojava faces significant challenges. External challenges can be observed in the form of tensions with Turkey, which have persisted since the declaration of the autonomous region of Rojava. These tensions have ultimately led Turkey to impose an embargo on the autonomous region. In light of these circumstances, the pursuit of economic self-sufficiency has become a paramount objective for the Kurdish population in Rojava, along with other communities, in order to ensure their basic survival. Furthermore, the embargo has contributed to the exacerbation of the lack of supply of basic

necessities, including water and electricity. This situation is a consequence of the control exerted by the Daesh militant group over the majority of regions that possess dams, which serve as sources of water and electricity.

The economic life of Rojava is regulated by the Charter of the Social Contract, as outlined in Article 42, which states that:

The economical system in the provinces shall be directed at providing general welfare and in particular granting funding to science and technology. It shall be aimed at guaranteeing the daily needs of people and to ensure a dignified life. Monopoly is prohibited by law. Labor rights and sustainable development are guaranteed ([Charter of the Social Contract, 2014f](#)).

In an article published on this topic, Dr. Ahmad Yousef, the Minister of the Economy of Afrin, which is one of the three cantons in the autonomous region of Rojava, posited that historical evidence indicates that the economy evolved from a means of meeting societal needs to a system designed to maximize group wealth. Accordingly, an economy cannot be considered economic if it is not social. In other words, any economy that does not aim to achieve the social welfare of all members of society cannot be defined as an economy, but rather as a sophisticated mechanism for financial, intellectual, and cultural plunder ([Co-Operation in Mesopotamia, 2016](#)). This theoretical explanation has served as the foundation for the formulation of economic and social policies in Rojava.

In addition to meeting the basic needs of the population, the economy of Rojava is also oriented towards the funding of its armed forces. Despite its de facto status, Rojava continues to engage in armed conflict with a number of fundamentalist groups and countries that seek to abolish the region's autonomy. Nevertheless, the Economic Development Institute has been established with the objective of coordinating economic activity. Xelil Kobane, a member of Rojava's executive board, delineated the institute's operational scope, which encompasses six principal domains: trade, services, construction, agriculture, industry, and fuel ([Co-Operation in Mesopotamia, 2016](#)). Additionally, Xelil elucidated the agency's pivotal objective of modernizing agriculture and industry. It is also vested with the authority to regulate import-export trade and issue trade licenses to individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

The lengthy history of the Kurdish ethnic revolutionary struggle against discrimination, oppression, and injustice serves as a crucial historical document that illustrates the continued relevance of ideology-based mass movements in the contemporary era. This is evident in the convergence of the Syrian Kurds and Abdullah Ocalan's anarchist ideas, which became the foundational principles of the PYD movement. This movement aimed to

establish an autonomous government that would not be constrained by the limitations of the nation-state model.

Despite the disparate orientations of struggle within the ethnic Kurdish population, the consistency of the PYD, YPG, YPJ, and TEV-DEM in adhering to Öcalan's ideology is a phenomenon that represents the struggle to achieve diversity in political participation. In a departure from traditional forms of governance, democratic confederalism offers a novel avenue for diverse social groups to exercise self-determination through the establishment of autonomous governance structures. This represents a significant departure from the prevailing nation-state model, which is predicated on centralized administration.

The Rojava revolution has transcended this concept with the Post-State Entities model proposed by Gunter, which has supplanted the nation-state model inherited from Westphalia. The Rojava revolution has been compared to the Spanish Civil War. However, the Spanish revolution ultimately resulted in a tragic outcome, and there are other historical examples that suggest that, in the absence of external support, revolutionary movements like the one in Rojava will either fail or result in mass killings. It remains to be seen how far the Rojava revolution will progress in light of its achievements to date.

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