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## RUPTURES AND RIPPLE EFFECTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

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# The ‘Rojava Revolution’ in Syrian Kurdistan: A Model of Development for the Middle East?

Can Cemgil and Clemens Hoffmann

**Abstract** As the civil war in Syria continues, in the territory of Rojava – in Kurdish, ‘the West’ – the northern Syrian Kurdish political movement is attempting to implement ‘libertarian municipalism’, based on the thoughts of United States (US) anarchist Murray Bookchin. Since the withdrawal of Syrian regime forces in 2012, the movement has consolidated significant territorial gains as a US ally in the anti-Islamic State (IS) struggle, while simultaneously securing Russian support. Viewed with suspicion by Turkey, Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, the geopolitical conditions of Rojava’s emergence are its greatest impediment. This article analyses Rojava’s model of rule and socioeconomic development, and its theory and practice in the context of the civil war, and regional Middle Eastern and wider global geopolitics. It reflects on Rojava’s place and meaning for contemporary geopolitics in the Middle East, and considers the territory’s prospects, discussing its transformative potential for an otherwise troubled region.

## 1 Introduction: locating Rojava among many alternatives

The current global financial, regional geopolitical and environmental crises, are all thought to coincide and express themselves in the most vicious forms in the contemporary Middle East. Historically, hydrocarbon developmentalism, rentierism, recurrent crises and conflict have characterised the region. Authoritarian militarist-bureaucratic rule through clientelist networks, fuelled by oil rents re-invested in arms purchases, has long characterised the whole region. This entrenched militarist authoritarianism is exacerbated by the effects of large top-down hydro-civilizational projects (irrigation, dam building), bloated bureaucracies, and neoliberal policies that have led to new forms of land appropriation and environmental degradation, all of which have contributed to the region’s problematic ‘development’ template.

Despite this declared regional specificity of the Middle East, alternative, critical concepts of development and governance are frequently conceived at the global and universal levels (e.g. Radcliffe 2015). They

start by developing alternative macro-policies that are subsequently implemented through national centralised governments, which turn them into local social realities. 'Sustainable development', but also more radical movements such as 'de-growth' (e.g. D'Alisa *et al.* 2014) and similar concepts, while offering to re-think the parameters of global growth and development, do so within established global macro-political settings where institutionally supported notions, notably those of the World Bank or International Monetary Fund, are located in – rather than on top of – a geopolitically fragmented system of nation states indispensable to the formulation and implementation of policy alternatives.

National, centralised states act as interlocutors of a globally formulated developmental 'consensus', as well as implementing it. Similarly, states are important fields of struggle, though alternatives are still developed within national confines. Looking at development in holistic and geographically expansive terms, and changing policies to reflect where power actually lies in the state, is certainly imperative. But there is also a more problematic element in this dominant strategy: by changing developmental notions, strategies and policies in the current universal structures, most alternatives also emulate and, thereby, reproduce, top-down approaches. Even 'participatory development' (e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001) depends on hierarchically organised national-territorial developmental states and the international organisations they form as the interlocutors.

This article will present and interrogate a yet more radical departure from the developmental mainstream, relating its abstract formulation to its lived practice in a peculiar geopolitical setting: that of a local, anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical and communitarian approach, as well as its current social practice in the northern Syrian Kurdish enclaves, or cantons, of Rojava. Based on the theories of Bookchin, a US thinker frequently labelled 'eco-anarchist', the Rojava model is a radical departure from the hierarchical global growth regime. This 'democratic confederalism' or 'libertarian municipalism', entails elements such as community-based, cooperative production and trade as social ecology, radical gender equality, and local forms of direct democratic political rule.

The following study is based on secondary research into the foundations and realities of Rojava, using personal accounts, reports, academic articles and journalistic sources. It will first set out the ideological and philosophical foundations of this revolutionary project in Bookchin's work, before elaborating on the historic and geopolitical conditions of its emergence. It will then provide an overview of the social structure and lived reality of this political and socioeconomic project. It will close by arguing that the very conditions of the project's emergence – the contemporary crisis-ridden geopolitical conjuncture – are at the same time the greatest threat to it, not so much externally but due to the potential internal contradictions of a militarised society.

## 2 From Bookchin to Öcalan: democratic confederalism and the Rojava 'revolution'

This alternative project of development and democracy owes its intellectual sources and political inspiration to Bookchin. It was Bookchin's social historical theory that inspired the intellectual and strategic transformation of the Kurdish Liberation Movement (KLM) after imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan read his work. Like Bookchin himself, Öcalan was disillusioned with the orthodox tradition of Marxist-Leninist party organisation and underwent a series of transformations even before he was imprisoned (Üstündağ 2016).

The PKK reflected these changes in a series of congresses in the 1990s and 2000s, and changed its orientation and strategies accordingly from a separatist-nationalist movement to a democratic autonomist and democratic confederalist movement (Güneş 2012). Akkaya, Jongerden and Şimşek (2015) described it as a transformation from rebellion to reconstruction. Surprisingly though, this intellectual and strategic transformation of the KLM did not materialise in Turkey, its birthplace, but in neighbouring Syria, following the outbreak of civil war in 2011. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian affiliate and sister organisation of the PKK, seized the opportunity to implement Bookchin's ideas in Rojava.

Bookchin's theoretical contribution to studies on ecology, development, freedom and citizenship, among other areas, consists of a diverse, sophisticated, yet at times incoherent and factually unsubstantiated (White 2008) body of ideas brought together in a series of volumes.<sup>1</sup> The central thread, however, is clear: disillusioned with vulgar versions of Marxism and what Bookchin calls 'lifestyle anarchism' (Bookchin 1995), he sets out to offer a sweeping social and ideological history that specifies 'hierarchy' almost as the source of all social, political and ecological evils. A concept broader than all other forms of domination, be they the contemporary state, class domination, or human domination over nature, hierarchy is also antecedent to these ills of society. Freedom, then, consists of overcoming these hierarchical relations and establishing relations based on 'equality of unequals', social complementarity, and access for everyone to an irreducible minimum of needs that they themselves define (Bookchin 1982).

Abolition of social hierarchy will also result in repairing the 'metabolic rift' (Foster 1999) that Marx declared 'irreparable' under capitalism (Marx 1981: 949). Marx attributed the separation of human beings from nature to the rise of capitalism, which resulted in soil exhaustion and the impossibility of bioregionalism (i.e. producing crops locally and sustainably for decentralised markets) in the context of expanding urban centres, industrial production and their ever-increasing demands on nature, and argued that this was an irreparable rift under capitalism. While in agreement, Bookchin saw capitalism only as one manifestation of domination, that is class domination, among others such as gerontocracy

and patriarchy, and accordingly believed that human domination of nature was the result of social domination in general and could be done away with only when social hierarchy was completely abolished.

While Bookchin is unwilling to suggest a determinate way to bring about this large-scale social and environmental change, he traces historically and proposes theoretically what he calls the 'legacies of freedom' that we inherited from 'organic societies', which knew no hierarchy and had an 'ecological sensibility' as well as an intuitive and practical knowledge of freedom (Bookchin 1982). Distinguishing between ancient Greek participatory democracy and Roman republicanism (Bookchin 1987: 43), Bookchin argues that the republican model with its representative system slides into a de-socialised elite rule, and creates professional rulers who govern, rather than administer (Bookchin 1982: 129) in an exclusive political space (Cemgil 2016). To socialise the political and to politicise the social (Üstündağ 2016), Bookchin argued for direct democracy starting at the most local level, building up a confederation of libertarian municipalities that are, just like members of 'organic societies', interdependent and cooperative. The representative state in its current form, 'absorbed' administrative social functions and made itself 'as indispensable as an organising *principle* for human consociation' (Bookchin 1982: 127), becoming a major source of domination (Cemgil 2016).

Direct democratic participation entails the social administration of production and need determination as its corollary. Social administration of production requires a localised, decentralised economy, scaled down to 'human dimensions' (Bookchin 1982: 344), with various libertarian municipalities cooperating if they decide to do so. While decentralisation enhances direct democratic participation it does not necessarily exclude the possibility of forms of local social hierarchy, and Bookchin is well aware of this. In any case, democratic processes might generate hierarchies as well. That is why he proposes a confederation of libertarian municipalities, in the final analysis, in the belief that a municipality that generated domination would be checked by others, besides internal democratic checks and balances (Biehl and Bookchin 1998: 108).

A democratised economy and polity also allow for the determination of needs of the community by the democratic processes of the community. Rather than being expressed in objective categories, those involved also determine needs. The democratisation and de-centralisation of social administrative functions that we now call economy, and scaling it down to human dimensions, would also reduce dependence on hydrocarbons through de-industrialisation, without dismissing the possibility of interdependent self-sufficiency.

Among Bookchin's primary aims in writing these numerous treatises on domination was the concern to offer a social ecology that re-constructs human–nature relations. Organic societies, for Bookchin, did not see nature an externality to be controlled. The emergence of institutionalised hierarchy and social domination, however, also resulted

in the emergence of the notion of dominating nature. The language of domination of nature became so strong with the advent of capitalism that even radical critics of capitalism, such as Marx, fell prey to its ideology at times. The mending of the metabolic rift requires a full-scale subjective as well as material transformation of relations, though.

Calls for bioregionalism, decentralisation or autarchy will not by themselves resolve the apocalyptic future that awaits us. Nor will anti-consumerism or de-industrialisation. A full-scale struggle against domination and hierarchy is needed and an ecological society can only be built on non-hierarchical relations. A self-sufficient interdependence within the democratic confederation of libertarian municipalities, usufructory or use-oriented property relations in municipalities, direct democratic policymaking in all areas of social life, as well as a subjective and material transformation in human–nature and human–human relations to erase hierarchy, are preconditions for such transition (Bookchin 1982).

Bookchin insists that if hierarchy and domination are the root causes of all social ills, then a genuine transformation into an ecological, libertarian society must take aim at all of their manifestations. Among primordial forms of domination is men's domination over women, which grew organically, according to Bookchin, but then became institutionalised into a perennial patriarchal domination. Building on Bookchin's social ecology, Biehl (1991) concurred that this primordial form of domination must be destroyed along with all others, and added that women must make use of their full potential by liberating themselves from the trap of the *oikos*; that is, their domestic roles. While these activities have naturally emerged in the form of childbearing and childrearing, women's domination by men originates from women being exclusively associated with these roles. For Biehl, rather than seeking an expanded *oikos* in the *polis*, women should actively engage in liberatory politics in the *polis* (1991: 154), for 'humanity... has greater potentialities than caring and nurturing' (1991: 26).

What most informed the KLM's view on women and their liberation, however, were Öcalan's writings. Öcalan set the liberation of women as the precondition of the liberation of society in general and the liberation of Kurds in particular. Drawing on Bookchin's social-historical account of patriarchal domination and hierarchy, Öcalan suggests that women have the capacity and will not only to participate in and revolutionise the democratic process, but also to create their own institutions to empower themselves. For this purpose, he proposed the notion of *Jîneoloji*, the science of woman and life, which aimed to provide an alternative view of social reality from the perspective of self definition and actualisation of woman in social life (Öcalan 2013).

Öcalan first familiarised himself with the work of Bookchin when he was serving a life sentence on the prison island of İmralı in Turkey. Bookchin's work so fascinated Öcalan that by 2005 he was steering the strategic orientation of the KLM towards democratic confederalism

(Jongerden and Akkaya 2013). Building on Bookchin's work, Öcalan saw capitalism, the nation state and patriarchy as the root causes of all social and ecological problems under conditions of capitalist modernity. A social revolution, for Öcalan, must do away with these three elements of capitalist modernity and replace them with democratic modernity.

Along with ethical and philosophical motivations, and his personal disillusionment with Marxist and nationalist positions, one could reasonably claim that Öcalan's adoption and adaption of Bookchin's perspective in the case of the KLM was partly due to long-term strategic considerations that in great part stem from the Kurds' social and geographical reality. Having been territorially dispersed among four states – Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran – the Kurds have been fighting these states in a bid to gain independence or autonomy in a federal system. If as nation states these four countries have been responsible for all the Kurds' suffering, reasoned Öcalan, why would the Kurds want to establish yet another source of domination? Democratic confederalism was the solution not only to the problems of Turkey's Kurds, but also a larger blueprint for a democratic Middle East, a region rife with conflict, suffering, oppression and poverty (Öcalan 2011).

### 3 History and conditions of possibility of the Rojava revolution

In the case of Syria, post-colonial statist development started with the Ba'athist regime and its socialist experiment during the 1950s, intermittently removing the old class of notables from power (Hourani 1981; Khoury 2003). With the opening, or *infitah*, of the 1970s, the elite composition changed and started to include the 'old bourgeoisie' again, without, however, fundamentally altering the conditions of a rentier economy, including all of its socio-political contradictions (Perthes 1991). None of these transformations created the potential for change or the conditions for Kurdish emancipation (Perthes 1995). It was not until the breakdown of the Syrian regime in 2011, first politically and then geopolitically, that such conditions arose. These have now established a considerable remit of action for the armed Kurdish movement in the north of the country.

Historically, the Syrian Kurds were hostile to the Ba'thist regime, having repeatedly experienced 'Arabisation' (Arab Belt policy) and marginalisation, which maintained the region's underdeveloped agricultural status. Agricultural production was kept artificially low yielding. It concentrated on producing staple food crops, especially wheat and beans, underutilising a fertile area that had been deliberately developed as a 'bread basket', using landless Kurds as cheap labour (Flach *et al.* 2015: 244). In the river valleys, especially along the Euphrates, the regime's hydro-civilisational mission included higher-yielding cultivation, settling Sunni Arabs where economic opportunities were higher.

The valleys are now mostly dominated by IS, providing it with food security and taxes. Although all land has been subject to large-scale reform and nationalisation since the Ba'athist socialist coup in 1963, the rural population in general and Kurdish landless workers in particular



**Territorial control in the Syrian civil war: situation on the ground June 2013**

Source Redrawn from original by Dilek Gürsoy.

have benefited very little from any of the developmental ambitions of the rent-seeking Syrian state (Perthes 1994). However, rich Kurdish landlords, similar to their counterparts in Turkey, were co-opted, becoming urbanised regime loyalists in the process.

Neoliberal reforms opened Syrian markets to cheap imports, which undercut local production and led to job losses and depressed wages. The overuse and degradation of land and water resources also caused rural poverty. The resulting rural–urban migration led to a swelling of Kurdish neighbourhoods in the larger cities. In Aleppo, in particular, rural migrants started working in low-skilled and poorly paid jobs in catering or construction, while property prices soared due to the inflow of capital. In reaction to the 2011 uprisings that followed these drastically deteriorated social conditions, Assad initially planned to implement political reforms, but could not in the face of the old Ba’athist militarist regime, which clearly preferred violence, fuelling the armed rebellion in return. After the structurally invested brutality of the regime escalated the conflict, the preceding neoliberal reforms, having generated the revolutionary potential in the first place, were frequently overlooked in favour of over-simplified conflict analysis through the prism of ‘social media’ (Howard and Hussain 2013) or ‘climate conflict’ (Werrel and Femia 2013).

Unsurprisingly, the Syrian Kurds were part of the uprising at an early stage, having already suffered large-scale killings during the so-called ‘Qamishli Revolts’ (Gambill 2004; Noi 2012: 18) in 2004. In an attempt

to limit the number of fronts it was engaged on, the regime successfully appeased the Kurds by granting them unprecedented citizenship rights. More importantly, having identified rebel groups that had formed around army defectors, the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), as the main enemy, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in 2012 withdrew from the Kurdish majority areas in the north.

This tactical retreat was based on the idea that a poorly equipped Kurdish force would be easily defeated and was thought to be tolerable as an interim placeholder, especially if kept in check by opposing groups, notably IS. Exploiting its own geopolitical momentum, IS went on to brutally occupy vast tracts of Kurdish majority areas in the north, reaching the limits of its expansion in Kobanê during October 2015. Over time, however, the fortunes of war changed, not only in favour of IS, but also the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and associated Women's Protection Units (YPJ). All warring insurgents were left with an array of weapons, some of them heavy. The Kurds even started to get air support from the US-led anti-IS coalition, whereas the SAA became overstretched, which motivated not only Iranian military support but also a last-minute Russian intervention in 2015 and, increasingly, direct Turkish military action against Syrian Kurdish forces and their allies in February 2016, using long-range artillery.

What appeared as a negotiated retreat by the regime also left the Syrian Kurds and their relations with other opposition forces in dire straits, exacerbating a long-standing distrust between the Kurdish and 'Arab', or Sunni population due to Ba'athist 'divide and rule' policies. The YPG's acceptance of a *de facto* ceasefire offer from the regime contributed to allegations that it has collaborated with the regime (Atassi 2014). Although Rojava is not a regime priority for the moment, it shows little willingness to accept *de facto* autonomy as an unintended consequence of a tactical retreat indefinitely, as frequent skirmishes between the YPG and the remaining regime forces around the SAA bases in al-Hasake and Qamishli make clear, as well as the barrel-bombing of YPG-held areas in Aleppo.

Similarly, relations with the rest of the opposition are multifaceted. Cooperation with the self-declared FSA units from the so-called 'Euphrates Volcano' (Burkan al-Firat) coalition proved effective in and around Kobanê, whereas there is open hostility and military confrontation between the YPG and a variety of FSA-labelled forces north of Aleppo. It was in the context of the liberation of Kobanê from IS between October 2014 and January 2015, that the US-led anti-IS coalition developed strong military cooperation with the YPG and associated forces, whereby the YPG called in US airstrikes on military targets it identified on the ground. Having consolidated this successful cooperation over 2015, it led to an unprecedented campaign to recapture northern Syrian territory from IS. The most recent iteration was the US-sponsored formation of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015, which went on to occupy Tishrin Dam

in December 2015, with the active involvement of US special forces. The SDF is a multi-ethnic force under YPG leadership, which continues to repulse IS in areas where Kurds are not the majority population, to secure local support and to counter claims of Kurdish ethno-nationalist territorial expansionism (e.g. Amnesty International 2015a, 2015b).

Naturally, the geopolitical position of a new and in many ways revolutionary social formation in the complex environment of the Syrian civil war is difficult to summarise concisely. It ranges from open battle with IS, enmity towards Turkey, and ambiguous relations with the FSA and the regime, to a tactical alliance with the US and, more recently, Russia. After Turkey shot down a Russian military jet over an alleged airspace violation in October 2015, reports of Russian diplomatic and military support for Syrian Kurdish forces emerged (Idiz 2016).

The origins of the uprising itself have conditioned the more intricate regional geopolitics. From the start of the uprising in Der'aa in 2011, the Syrian opposition, with a strong support base among the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, cultivated relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Turkey, in particular, identified the Brotherhood as an ideal vehicle for its regional ambitions. The Alawite majority Syrian state class invited military support from its historic allies, Iran, Hezbollah and, to a lesser extent, Iraq.

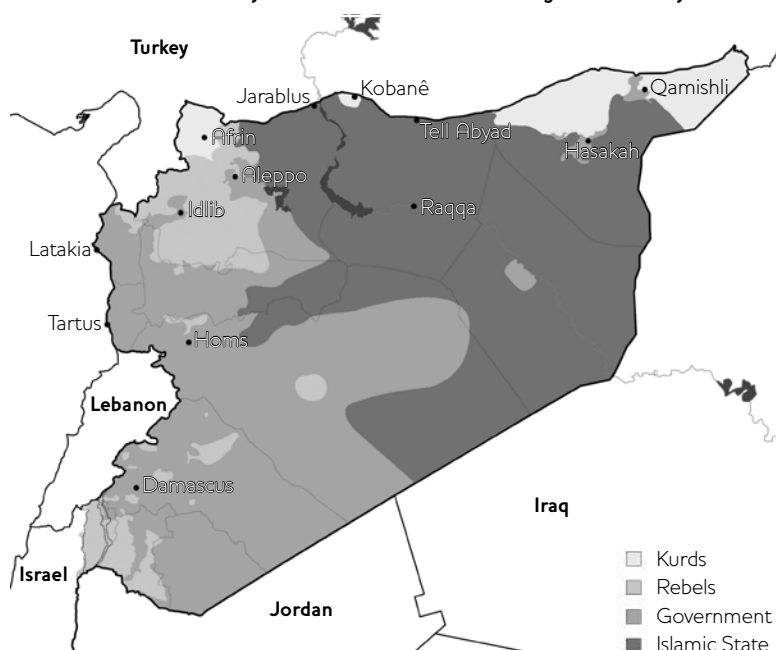
The wider regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is frequently couched in sectarian terms, also came to bear on the civil war. These rivalries are also embedded in global geopolitical relations, with Russia and China opposing regime change, whereas the West, and the US in particular, have clearly formulated Assad's departure as a policy goal, by force if need be. This also informs their support for those forces in the region and on the ground in Syria that share common goals.

A second defining regional element is Turkey and the northern Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)'s opposition to Rojava and its political and territorial-military consolidation. As opposed to the process of Kurdish quasi-state-building in northern Iraq (Natalie 2010), Rojava had vastly different socio-political conditions attached to its emergence. They also follow different political visions, reflecting deeper divisions in the Kurdish movement.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) dominate KRG-controlled northern Iraq, competing for trans-regional Kurdish leadership with the PKK (Natalie 2015: 148), which reflects not only geographical, but also political divisions between the revolutionary Marxist-anarchist ideology of the PKK,<sup>2</sup> following the political agenda of Öcalan and Bookchin, working towards socio-political transformation and the hierarchical-tribal developmental ambitions of the KRG.

Although some of these deeper, historical and political differences have been temporarily put aside during the joint struggle against IS (Gruber 2015), there are other core reasons for the different

## Territorial control in the Syrian civil war: situation on the ground January 2015

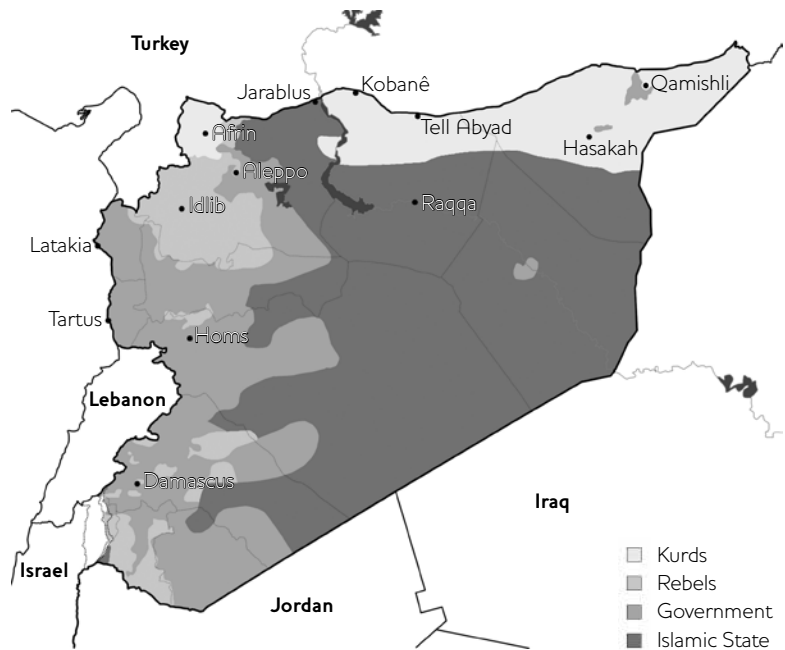


Source Redrawn from original by Dilek Gürsoy.

developmental trajectories. First, after the 1991 Iraq invasion a long process of Kurdish empowerment started with the help of no-fly zones and Western aid, culminating in creation of the KRG. Unlike Rojava, this did not happen in isolation and therefore bears the marks of more conventional pro-Western state-building (Soderberg and Phillips 2015), having been subjected to a much stronger involvement of the international community and its conventional vision of development, starting with the international humanitarian relief operations in the wake of the 1991 US-led invasion and the establishment of the no-fly zone.

This hierarchical, hydrocarbon- and, eventually, construction-dominated path under tribal authoritarian rule is at odds with the Rojava model, and has led to Rojava's isolation, while confirming Bookchin's assumptions about the socially corrosive effect of the oil economy in the KRG's case. There is also a 'Turkish embrace' of the KRG leadership and Turkey's insistence on a form of development in line with its anti-PKK geostrategic and commercial interests, which centre on exporting Turkish construction business.

However, the most formidable geopolitical obstacle is probably Turkey itself at its own current contradictory geopolitical conjuncture (Hoffmann and Cemgil 2016). Apart from a general opposition to any Kurdish bid for autonomy or outright independence in any of the neighbouring states, Turkey's own Kurdish peace process, which the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) initiated in 2013,

**Territorial control in the Syrian civil war: situation on the ground January 2016**

Source Redrawn from original by Dilek Gürsoy.

broke down in the wake of a series of bomb attacks on Kurdish party offices and rallies during the 2015 Turkish general election campaign. In particular, a suicide bomb attack on pro-Kurdish youth in the border town of Suruç on 20 July 2015, which killed 33 activists, led to the murder of two police officers, allegedly at the hands of a PKK youth organisation. These events initiated a renewed military campaign against the PKK in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, including intense urban clashes and the large-scale loss of civilian life.

In light of these Turkish domestic developments, initially favourable contacts between the Turkish government and the PYD quickly turned into hostile relations, in line with Turkey's domestic confrontation. After officially declaring both PYD and YPG 'terrorist organizations' in 2015, Turkey launched a military campaign in February 2016 in response to YPG's territorial advances in northern Aleppo province. In part because of domestic Syrian-Kurdish politics, the KRG has closed ranks with its long-standing ally, maintaining a *de facto* embargo over Rojava. Given that all regional US allies also oppose the territory, it has somewhat curtailed open US military support for YPG and SDF forces.

#### **4 Rojava's reality: a socialised polity and economy**

Rojava comprises three cantons as administrative units: Cizîrê in the east, Afrîn in the west and Kobanê in the middle. While Rojava takes theoretical and political inspiration from Bookchin's work, this is not a case of a 'to the letter application' of a theory, for much is determined

by the reality on the ground. During the initial phases of the Rojava revolution, first the FSA then IS controlled the territories between Cizîrê and Kobanê, and Kobanê and Afrîn. This territorial non-contiguity partly explains the separate organisation of these cantons.<sup>3</sup>

In line with the theories of, Bookchin and Öcalan, the Rojava Autonomous Administration (RAA) went through a barrage of institution-building to implement democratic self-administration and confederalism, a form of stateless democracy (Kolokotronis 2014), without directly confronting nation states militarily. This involved the establishment of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), an umbrella organisation composed of constituent groups in Rojava. However, the PYD is the prime mover and the socio-political force behind the movement. Despite wartime conditions, the PYD sought to establish direct democratic institutional mechanisms, especially at a local level, from neighbourhoods and streets to the larger bodies in the cantons.

This attempt to socialise governance and politicise social life generated working committees at local level that directly participated in decision making (Küçük and Özselçuk 2016). These institutions are crucially based on a co-chair system, with one male and one female filling all posts from the local to the confederation level. To ensure that no professional political and military elites emerge, key positions are rotated unless this poses an immediate risk. Furthermore, from neighbourhood to canton level, all-female parallel institutions are established so that the deep-seated patriarchal patterns do not disempower women, even in gender-equal settings, and women look for solutions to their own problems and needs themselves.

Besides gender-egalitarianism, the RAA pays utmost attention to representing ethnic and religious groups institutionally in the Rojava Constitution – called the Social Contract of the Rojava Cantons – and in assemblies and committees, as well as canton governments. The opening sentence of the Preamble of the Constitution reads: 'We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrîn, Cizîrê and Kobanê, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens, freely and solemnly declare and establish this Charter.'<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding this recognition of the multi-ethnic composition of Rojava's population, interethnic relations remain tense. Decades of hostility and mistrust among these different communities are not easily overcome, especially considering the Ba'athist regime's forced displacement of Kurds alongside other discriminatory practices that favoured Arabs.

The continuing transfer of social-administrative functions from the state to the society has ensured the spread and reach of the democratic process. The judicial system is a case in point. Inspired by Bookchin's abovementioned notion that justice is only a bad replacement for freedom, the Rojavans created justice and peace committees to act on behalf of neighbourhood assemblies – that is, the commune – to deliver

‘social justice’ (Ross 2015). That the neighbourhood assemblies and peace committees act in a capacity similar to courts of peace or first instance testifies to the expansion of the principles of direct democracy to what one would usually consider technical matters.

Cases that these committees cannot resolve are referred to people’s houses or women’s houses, whose function is to address the needs of the local population in areas ranging from economic coordination to domestic violence. The high overall rate of case resolution by committees, houses and assemblies indicates the penetration of this practice among the population. More serious criminal offences, such as murder, on the other hand, are referred to more institutionalised courts.<sup>5</sup> Despite these institutional advances over the Ba’athist Mukhabarat (security intelligence)-led justice system, the RAA has faced criticism for prolonged detentions and unfair trials (AI 2015a, 2015b).

Another state function that has been transferred to society is defence and security, both internal and external. Responsible for external defence, the YPJ and YPG act as a people’s self-defence force rather than specialised military units detached from society. Their members were initially recruited from the local population on a voluntary basis, and they received basic training from more experienced armed members. In response to the more forceful IS threat since 2014, the YPJ and YPG have become increasingly institutionalised, and even introduced conscription.

Asayîş, or Internal Security, is responsible for internal policing and is also composed of voluntary elements who report directly to neighbourhood assemblies. External and internal security organs are not only staffed by the people themselves, but also report to their democratic bodies unmediated by a representative state, which serves to ‘unmake’ the state (Üstündağ 2016) that, according to Bookchin, detaches these security institutions from their social functions and from society.

Although militarisation may not usually be considered an emancipatory act, this unmaking breaks the monopoly of a de-socialised state over means of legitimate violence, creating the conditions of a re-socialised and democratised defences. This ensures that security forces are not placed over and above the members of the society as bearers of authority; rather, the compassionate and close relations between YPJ and YPG troops and the larger population demonstrates the socialised nature of security (Üstündağ 2016).

Socialisation of defence, however, has not been a smooth process. Amnesty International (AI) strongly criticised the YPJ and YPG for razing the houses of people they suspected of having helped IS and forcibly displacing them (AI 2015a), and the Asayîş for arbitrary detentions (AI 2015b). The RAA countered that IS was operating in its territory, and although it acknowledged wrongdoing by Kurdish forces, these were isolated and had to be placed in the context of war against IS (AI 2015a).

The YPJ, as an all-female army, has also served to emancipate women in an otherwise extremely conservative society where patriarchy is still a strong undercurrent in social life, despite the huge steps the KLM has taken in Turkey and Syria. As paradoxical as this may sound, and despite contrasting experiences in the US military and elsewhere (D'Amico 1996), crucial differences exist between the YPJ and the other instances of women taking part in war-making. First, the most obvious reason is that by joining the YPJ (or PKK in Turkey), women free themselves from patriarchal bonds and get control over their own lives. The alternative for most would be to get married at a relatively early age and suffer patriarchal domination for the rest of their lives.

Since the 1990s, when the KLM in Turkey saw the emergence of a strong Kurdish Women's Movement that challenged and even transformed the KLM from within, Kurdish women increasingly came to play important roles in public life, especially through the legal and illegal organisations in the KLM, such as the pro-Kurdish, left-wing People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey, the PKK, and the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), as well as affiliated non-governmental organisations in Turkey.

Now this can be seen in Syria, as well, through ideological and political education. Second, unlike the cases of the Israeli, US, Canadian or French militaries, where women serve alongside men, in the case of the YPJ they are organised as a separate force with female commanders. Where patriarchy is still a strong force in society, even the presence of men in the same organisation with women may hinder the uncovering of the full potential of women. Third, and in a more direct policing capacity, the YPJ fights directly for women's rights; in the words of commander Nesrîn Abdalla:

Until now, armies were created exclusively by men with patriarchal thinking, so they had only two tasks: to defend and win power. But we are an army of women... We do this not just to protect ourselves, but also to change the way of thinking in the army, not only to gain power, but to change society, to develop it... we had to organize ourselves properly in order to deal with the feudal thinking (Sputnik 2016).

Along with the state, the market is seen as a major source of hierarchical social domination (Cemgil 2016). Concurrent with the transfer of state functions to democratic self-administration bodies, socially reproductive functions are also transferred to society to ensure democratic control over the economy. This 'social economy', in turn, is further democratised through decentralisation and cooperative production, avoiding Soviet-style centralisation and state planning. As with the emergence of the overall political project, geopolitical conditions determine the nature of socioeconomic transformation.

Although the KRG-imposed embargo, political and economic isolation are major constraints for the political economy of Rojava, which lead



to shortages of goods – especially of medicines – and increase prices, they can also be seen as an opportunity, facilitating the transfer towards local, sustainable production. The decentralised assembly structures are geared to react to the conditions of the embargo and relative isolation, maintaining food security, public services and other basic needs using local, municipal governance structures, generating what can be called ‘economic communalism’ through cooperatives. The assemblies’ economy commissions deal with all issues relating to production, and exist alongside commissions for women, politics, defence, occupation, education at all levels of the democratic self-administration (Biehl 2015; Ayboğa 2014b). Nonetheless, the necessities of a war economy have compromised the development of this social economy.

Although ‘development’ has partially been adopted as a discourse, overarching ‘goals’ such as subsistence, autonomy, locality and sustainability remain core pillars of Rojava’s social economy, with cooperatives at the centre of this localised, ‘subsistence-plus-x’ production, (Biehl 2015). Not entirely anti-market, price caps are nevertheless imposed as an important tool to avoid food speculation and maintain subsistence (Yeğin 2015). The declared aim of this democratic economy is to keep surpluses within local communities, maintaining the long-term ecological sustainability of production and democratised access to resources over short-term exhaustion of resources for investor profit.

For the time being, the socialisation of land has been circumvented to avoid any form of hierarchical enforcement as a practice. Despite this, there is a general ideological tendency towards the socialisation of land, not least due to historically low Kurdish land ownership in the region. Land, water and energy are seen as public goods, which assembly-led municipalities manage and control (Flach *et al.* 2015: 258). Historical circumstances have prevented a strong social contradiction, because the expropriation and transformation of Syrian state land, which accounts for around 80 per cent of arable land in Rojava, allows for plenty of scope for transformation towards cooperative structures after the regime’s departure made this land available. This not only follows ideology, but also the need for crop transformation and diversification away from the large, quasi-colonial, Ba’athist monoculture and monocrop production.

Parallel structures continue to coexist, nonetheless, with private companies, cooperatives and assemblies all cooperating in the production process. Just as the national state and local autonomy are meant to co-exist peacefully, so too are capitalist and cooperative production: ‘Private capital/property is not forbidden but it is put to work for the communes/cooperatives’ (Yılmaz 2014), complementing one another. Private landowners and refinery owners charge commercial rates and the assemblies have no ambition to expropriate those holdings, trying to integrate them into the current war economy instead. A question remains over potential post-war collectivisation, however. Hence, the model is not ‘anti-private property’, but puts private property to communal use, bringing together democratic

self rule in democratic assemblies with company owners and members of the relevant commissions (Biehl 2015).

Many large landowners were co-opted into the social and war economy, rather than confronted. Conversely, their production is not export- and world market-oriented but meets local demand in line with the requirements of the assemblies. This, then, also constitutes a major difference compared to the Turkish-Kurdish regions, where Kurdish feudal lords were co-opted into a regime of 'pacification through export-oriented industrial agriculture' in southeastern Turkey, which was not ecological, and did not provide secure employment or, from a 2016 perspective, peace. In Rojava, 30 per cent of agricultural profits from cooperatives go to the assemblies for the maintenance of public goods, while 70 per cent remain with the producing cooperatives, frequently made up of the families of fallen fighters (Flach *et al.* 2015: 258). Individual families can only get access to land in exceptional cases, avoiding the formation of landed vested interests.

While advantageous in terms of social transformation, specific challenges emerged from being a peripheral, primary commodity producer, with little to no processing capacities, located in non-Kurdish majority areas not under the control of Rojava, further west in the country. Wheat could not be turned into flour, crude into diesel and so on. Some of these issues have been addressed; for example, by building mills (Flach *et al.* 2015). Currently, however, around 70 per cent of production goes into the war effort, making long-term planning and the transition to a peaceful society difficult. Neither crops nor ownership transformation are complete, despite the transformation having begun with the emergence of Rojava in 2012; for example, by supplying seeds to newly formed cooperatives. In this sense, the model gets closest to what Bookchin hoped any future ecological society would have: a use-based or quasi-usufructory property regime.

Ideologically, as well as practically, the imperative for all production is Rojava's food security, or better yet, food sovereignty. This requires, first and foremost, rapid diversification and, at a later stage, crop rotation mechanisms as part of ecological agriculture. Under the Ba'athist regime production was purposively kept low value and dependent on industrial means, leaving most surplus value-adding processing to areas with stronger loyalties to the regime in the south and west.

Agricultural production is regionally specific throughout the cantons, which presents challenges to complete self-sufficiency. Whereas Cizîrê was historically forced to specialise in food staples, Kobanê und Afrîn cultivated mostly olives and fruit. The latter two have indeed achieved high levels of self-sufficiency, but in the fertile Cizîrê region, artificially developed as a Syrian bread basket, parts of the former state lands have been turned over to vegetable production for the local market. Food production beyond subsistence levels, such as animal husbandry, is still underdeveloped and dependence on imports persists, which allows importers to monopolise the market (Sulaiman 2015).

Other non-agricultural elements include craft (important for reconstruction), commerce and manufacturing, organised in associations similar to guilds. This, typically, includes soap and olive oil production, construction, textiles, shoes, marble quarrying, and hospitality. Manufacturing remains decentralised, maintaining rural and semi-urban livelihoods, as well as their non-industrial character. Unlike localised subsistence agriculture, these sectors are most likely to develop an interest in ending their isolation, because imports and exports are high risk and require payment of large bribes to enemy forces.

Although much of Bookchin's work is dedicated to questions of urbanity and ecology, property development has not taken on a central role in Rojava's economy so far, though rebuilding, especially in Kobanê, has been considerable. The sector has started to evolve in response to the demand for living space in the relatively peaceful Kurdish areas, and increasing migration by non-Kurdish urban middle classes, especially from Aleppo into Afrîn (Yilmaz 2014). The resulting price hikes were offset by a construction boom, partially a consequence of lifting regime constraints on building height. An increase of two storeys can now be done at relatively low cost and cooperatively. However, a lack of available finance restricts construction.

Given that all borders of Rojava are in effect sealed, the *de facto* embargo also encompasses access to financial markets and institutions. This also means, however, that foreign direct investment cannot disrupt local organic and social ecological development. Aid and donations from outside, partly from international solidarity networks,<sup>6</sup> but also from wealthy Kurdish landowners in Turkey, still reach Rojava. Low-level finance is nevertheless needed and village banks have developed, but finance capital and interest charges are strictly banned, leaving Rojava as a primitive cash economy.

Despite the focus on local subsistence-level production, energy resources remain a central, if potentially controversial resource in Rojava. Originally, the Syrian Kurdish areas around Cizîrê accounted for 50–60 per cent of petroleum production; however, as with wheat production, refineries in other parts of the country carried out processing. Like water, Rojava considers all oil to be a public good. Cooperatives have been founded for local diesel production, which is important for heating, transport, electricity production, and not least military purposes.

It suffers, however, from the primitive methods used to refine the crude, which in turn reduces the life spans of engines and generators. The demand for spare parts is difficult to meet in an isolated economy. Although the Syrian Kurds have taken the greater portion of oil wells from IS in eastern Rojava, the inability to refine oil in large quantities, let alone to market it internationally, has led to environmental problems with oil spills (*Russia Today* 2016). In the meantime, discussions on the future of oil exploitation continue inside and outside of Rojava's self-governing structures. The discussion around potential oil exports and revenue distribution, remains abstract as long as the realities of the

embargo persist. Developing a hydro-carbon economy would also be in direct contradiction with Bookchin's social ecological thinking.

The discussion on how to implement the 'social economy' and its 'social ecological' foundations is in full swing. It has partly been realised in the form of cooperatives built on old state land, diversified production in Rojava, socialised oil profits and, in turn, increasing levels of autonomy in line with the ideological foundations outlined above and in reaction to the geopolitical realities of the KRG-imposed embargo. Much of the social economy remains characterised by the necessities of the war effort though. For example, military commanders, rather than assemblies, take some decisions to meet short-term needs of units engaged in fighting. Not only does this consume ecological resources, but the situation also allows 'old' structures to survive and may jeopardise the project of social transformation.

### **5 Conclusion and outlook for Rojava**

The constraints Rojava must contend with range from the embargo and open Turkish aggression to the internal contradictions of potential hydrocarbon development. The geopolitical conditions of Rojava's emergence are the defining contradiction this conclusion focuses on. The territory's role in the anti-IS coalition and, subsequently, the fallout from the confrontation between Russia and Turkey worked in the northern Syrian Kurds' favour. However, this success itself, Rojava's more prominent geopolitical role, and the continuation of a strong militarist element in its social experiment, which arose out of necessity and ambition, could constitute a severe limitation to the territory's success.

First, internally, even if a peace and accommodation of Syrian Kurdish autonomy were reached, demobilising and transforming a society that has gained not only its freedom from domination through military means, but which has also transformed itself under the catalytic conditions of hierarchical militarism itself, will be major tasks. A central contradiction in the project is that the main target of this attempted social transformation, hierarchy, is also deeply wedded to the condition of its emergence through a necessary militarisation under conditions of armed struggle. This is a general problem, but also one that affects other core aims of the project, namely women's emancipation and social ecology, which are wedded to the militarised processes of state formation.

Whereas women's emancipation hinges on their participation in the armed struggle as a viable alternative to the continuation of patriarchy, the relationship between radical democracy and ecology, well developed in Bookchin's theory, may be compromised by some of the more conventional dynamics of state formation and development. In particular, the promise of oil wealth beyond local consumption, generating cash flows through exports, remains a potential breaking point, socially as well as ecologically. Reports of current oil spills to maintain infrastructure are worrying signs in this regard. Even less radical steps, such as organic farming, in the form of crop rotation and

sustainable seed policies, are compromised, in this case by the practice of domestic (petro)chemical fertiliser production in the name of self-sufficiency, or food sovereignty at times of war.

If Rojava's assemblies are serious and wish to avoid not only the environmentally but also socially destructive effects of hydrocarbon exploitation, use and rent-extraction, they will have to leave considerable wealth in the ground to avoid the very hierarchies they aim to destroy. During the current armed conflict, however, a hydrocarbon-based war economy and mass food production are imperative. Those necessities of a society fighting an existential threat coincide, if not clash, with the delicate task of generating a new social project. In sum, the main condition that would allow Rojava to emerge (i.e. the geopolitical conjuncture), is also potentially its most severe limitation, not so much externally or territorially, but in terms of the process of its own social genesis.

Despite these potential breaking points, it is notable that this transformation is happening in a region where there is little hope. Conventional diplomacy or even military interventionism appear to be incapable of overcoming a structural crisis in the Middle East and its inter-state, post-First World War order. The conflict lines have become more than complex, leaving observers puzzled and policymakers contending with impossible choices. The socio-political experiment of the Syrian Kurds and its practical implications have mapped out the potential for transformation, if only in abstract terms. The social reality of being elevated from landless agricultural workers to a military force that the US and Russia support at the same time is nevertheless specific and historically conditioned. In other words, the fertile ground for Bookchin and Öcalan's ideas, namely the absence of vested interests and historically grown power structures in the Kurdish regions, is the result of years of deliberate under-development by various Ba'athist regimes.

These social conditions cannot be expected to exist in the same form elsewhere. Partly for this reason, we are sceptical about the 'model' character of the Rojava revolution and the potential for direct emulation elsewhere, although some of the progressive thinking on democratic self-governance, ethnic inclusiveness, feminism and social ecology could provide positive contributions to the discussions about the future of Syria and the Middle East at large. Given the continued tendencies towards ethnic homogenisation and hierarchical authoritarianism elsewhere in Syria and the wider region, the survival of Rojava nevertheless provides therefore a glimmer of hope for victims of the political breakdown of the modern Middle East.

### Notes

- 1 In particular, see Bookchin (1982, 1986, 1987).
- 2 The PKK is one of many regional Kurdish parties committed to the radical democratic objective of establishing democratic confederalism in Kurdistan. It is organised under the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), an umbrella organisation that

- brings together the PKK in Turkey, PYD in Syria, Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) in Iran, and Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PCDK) in Iraq, as well as numerous civil-society organisations.
- 3 It must be noted that when Tall Abyad (Girê Spî in Kurdish) was liberated from IS and became an administrative unit of Kobanê, Cizîrê and Kobanê cantons became territorially contiguous, though Afrîn remains isolated to the west of Kobanê, with IS- and Jabhat al-Nusrah-controlled territories lying between. The SDF has been conducting operations from Afrîn in a push to remove Al-Nusrah elements in-between.
  - 4 For a full English translation of the Constitution of the RAA see Çiviroğlu (2014).
  - 5 A comprehensive description of the Rojavan justice system can be found in Ercan Ayboğa (2014a).
  - 6 Given the highly effective embargo regime, conventional donor communities do not provide aid. Private anarchist, left-wing, but also liberal-humanitarian organisations provide financial and sometimes also direct physical help with the reconstruction effort. For example, see Plan C [www.weareplanc.org/blog/rojava-solidarity-cluster-opening-statement/](http://www.weareplanc.org/blog/rojava-solidarity-cluster-opening-statement/).

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