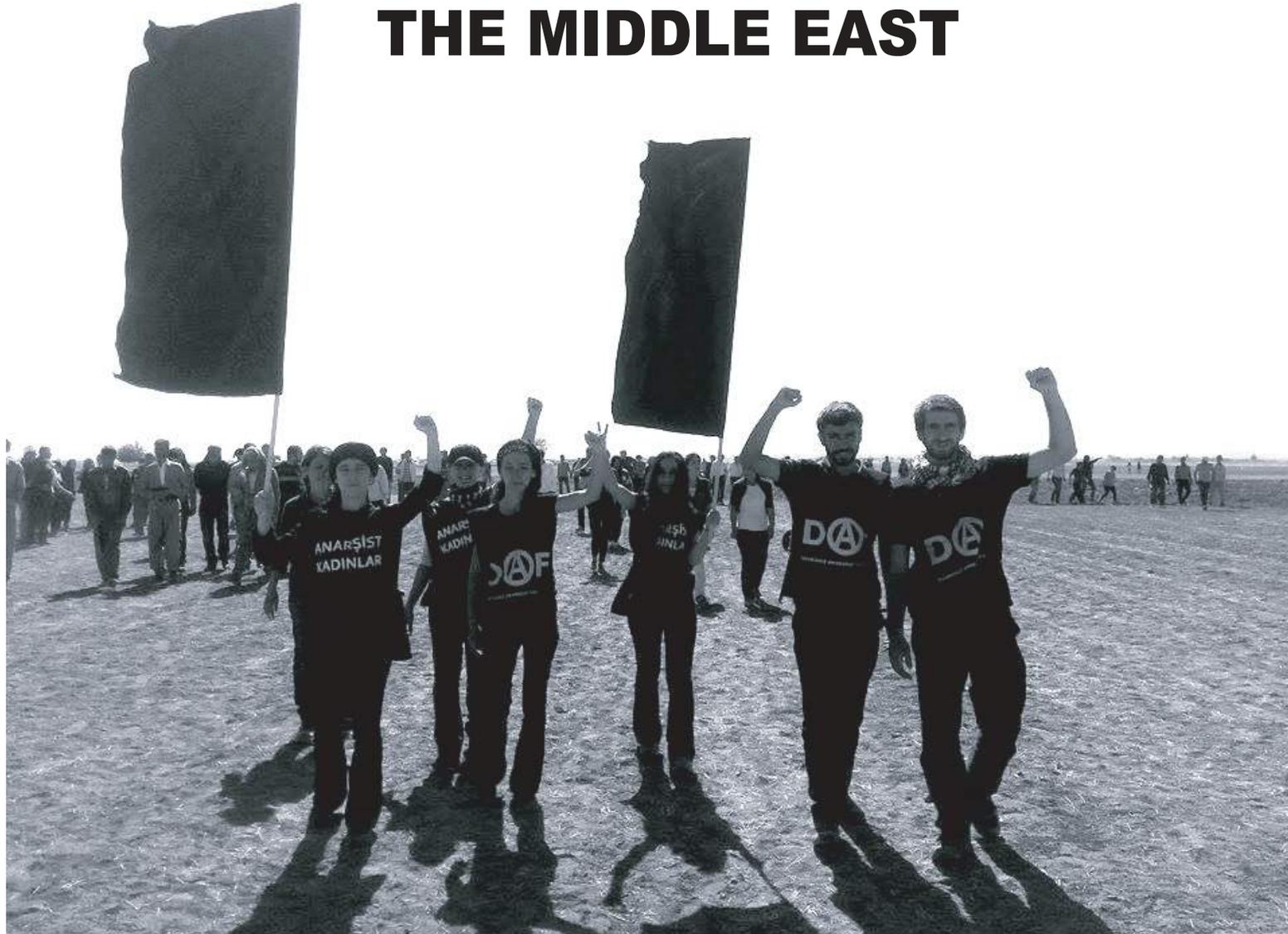


# ANARCHISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST



**The Rojava Revolution**

**WE STAND IN SOLIDARITY WITH  
FREEDOM FIGHTERS  
OF ROJAVA**



## **Solidarity With the Rojava Revolution**

The people of Rojava are engaged in one of the most liberatory social projects of our time. What began as an experiment in the wake of Assad's state forces has become a stateless aggregation of autonomous councils and collectives. What began as a struggle for national liberation has resulted in strong militias and defense forces, the members of which fully participate in the unique social and political life of their region. What started as a fight for Kurdish people has resulted in a regional home for a Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Arameans, Turks, Armenians, Yazidis, Chechens and other groups. What began as the hierarchical Marxist-Leninist political party, the PKK, has evolved into what its leader Abdullah Öcalan calls "Democratic Confederalism", a "system of a people without a State", inspired by the work of Murray Bookchin.

What we see in Rojava today is anarchism in practice.

Each Canton subscribes to a constitution that affirms a society free from authoritarianism and centralism, while allowing for pragmatic autonomy and pluralism. Councils are formed at the street, city, and regional levels. While each council functions differently in cohesion with local particularities, a few key similarities can be found throughout. Committees are self-organized, the councils mediate conflict on an individualized level, cooperatives strive for economic independence through local production.

The explicit intention of the Cantons is to remain decentralized and stateless, and to extend this practice beyond state borders where nascent councils have already usurped the state in dealing with day-to-day affairs.

We, in Rojava Solidarity NYC, express unwavering solidarity with the people of Rojava, the anarchist nature of this project, and with the revolutionary intentions behind it.

Now the people of Rojava and the extraordinary social project they have established finds themselves under the threat of violent extermination and repression. The reactionary forces of the Islamic State of the Levant are attacking on multiple fronts, engaging the People's Protection Units, regional militias, local people, and anarchist support units in the fight for their lives and the free territory they have built. Turkey's Erdogan, afraid of the Kurdish independence project, is squeezing the region from the North, blocking support and supplies.

Rojava Solidarity NYC has been formed to support the Cantons of Rojava in this dire time of need, to publicize this incredible social structure and the struggle it is engaged in, and to provide a forum where we can learn from the pragmatic anarchism in this region. We call on those in the radical left and beyond to do the same and to support the autonomous territory of Rojava.

Rojava Solidarity NYC

## Power and The Kurds

The Kurdish Question has never been a strictly regional affair. Since before World War I until today, powers stretched over the entire globe—from Australia to America—have been involved in this issue. From Iraq to Egypt, the Kurds have been used as pawns to leverage the players of the region. Just like in a game of chess, the Kurdish pawn is often sacrificed to gain a better position on the board. Over and over again, foreign powers intervene for a brief period of time, encouraging Kurdish rebellion just to withdraw support at crucial points and sacrificing the Kurds when they are no longer needed. Sometimes world powers support one Kurdish rebellion while simultaneously backing another regime's crackdown on Kurdish villages only a few hundred miles away across the border. Kurdish autonomy has been used as a functional and disposable tool for achieving other countries' agendas from the realignment of the region after WWI, the rise of Soviet power, through the Cold War and the spread of Nasserism, to George Bush Sr.'s New World Order. Kurdish autonomy has always been a means to end, never an end to itself, for the many states that have gotten involved over the years. Owing to their precarious position, the Kurds have been led to naively believe, decade after decade, that the world powers actually cared about their cause while they were being manipulated for someone else's momentary geopolitical advantage.

The Soviet Union's relationship to both its own 450,000 Kurds and the Kurds in Kurdistan was also marked mostly by state suspicion and repression. In the first years of the Soviet Union, Kurds, like many other minority groups, were forcibly displaced and a special regional government unit was set up to monitor them. This regional unit was reorganized several times and ultimately disbanded in 1930 when the Stalinist central government feared it had become too sympathetic to the Kurds. Under Stalin, tens of thousands of Kurds were deported from Azerbaijan and Armenia to Kazakhstan, while Kurds in Georgia became victims of the purges that followed the end of WWII. Through the 1960s, various measures were taken by the Soviet Regime to marginalize and oppress its Kurdish population. In the 1980s the PKK, the only Kurdish political party to partner with Kurds in the USSR, began collaboration with Kurds living in the Transcaucasia region and made serious inroads with the population there. By 1986, non-armed PKK support organizations had formed in the USSR, though they were technically illegal. According to Turkish press, there was even a PKK organization in Kazakhstan in 2004.

For the most part the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation, has not been involved directly with Kurdish Independence since the 1940s, when it supported an autonomous Kurdish state in Iran. Despite the PKK's early communist roots, the Soviet Union never supported it because of the USSR's ties with Syria and Turkey. Today the Russian Federation is reluctant to actively support Kurdish independence in Kurdistan because of its own restive minorities, including the Russian Kurds. At various times the PKK has sought support for training

bases, weapons, resources, and a place for exiles from other communist regimes, including Cuba, Angola, Vietnam and others, but not a one of those countries was interested in supporting their communist cousins in such a complicated geopolitical area without backing from the USSR. Some socialist countries did bring up UN resolutions, and most of the Soviet sphere voted for measures in support of Kurdish autonomy in Kurdistan. Russia, along with UN Security Council member China, has also refused to designate the PKK or any other Kurdish political groups as terrorist organizations.

Western governments and organizations such as NATO have been involved in one side or another of the Kurdish questions since the early 19th century at the dawn of the Kurdish autonomy movement. The French and the British foreign offices have used various regional Kurds and their dreams of autonomy as proxies to secure their mandates in the Middle East and to thwart each other. During particular crises, for example immediately following World War I and World War II, shadowy diplomats were shuttling between Paris or London to Kurdish shepherd villages, bringing a little aid and vague promises of support if the Kurds supported their particular political machinations. European powers did not limit their role to just the territory of Kurdistan either, and also used their home countries to get involved in the Kurdish Question. Countries like Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands for a while allowed militant Kurdish training bases to operate on their soil but would raid and shut them down depending on the geopolitical winds of the time. Greece supplied Kurds in Turkey and housed exiled PKK officials in order to punish Turkey for their 1974 invasion of Cyprus, but after coming to agreement on trade with Turkey they kicked the PKK out and stopped all aid. France even tried to use Kurds to slow Algerian independence, despite the fact that there were no Kurds in Algeria, by implying they may give them territory in a French-owned Algeria.

The US was late to the show of manipulating the Kurds' desire for freedom. During the Cold War the US mostly found itself siding with the Shah of Iran and using CIA personnel and resources to help both repress the Kurds in Iran and foment Kurdish rebellions in Iraq. The US stuck to covert operations, and thus little was known until recently about US involvement in the Kurdish Question. During the first Gulf War, when Iraq occupied the oil-rich emirate of Kuwait in August 1990, Saddam Hussein became America's enemy number one. Yet from 1987 until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US said nothing. At times, the US even supported Iraq in the UN, when Saddam Hussein was gassing tens of thousands of Kurds and bombing whole Kurdish towns and villages. But at the beginning of the First Gulf War, George Bush Sr. publicly declared Kurds are the US's "natural allies" and suggested they should revolt against the Baghdad regime. Of course, Bush Sr. knew that the Kurds had already been fighting the Ba'athist regime in a bloody, fifteen-year, on-again off-again civil war.

After the war, the US put in place an ineffective no fly zone, which apparently did not include helicopters, to "protect the Kurds." Thousands of Kurds and other civilians in northern Iraq were killed by Saddam's military while US planes flew overhead doing nothing. During the second Gulf War, the US

asked again for the peshmerga (the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan) to help rid the country of the Ba'athist regime. This time, the Kurds decided to focus on securing the north for themselves and on creating an army that could defend itself—they'd learned their lesson from the first Gulf War. Today the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) exists not because the US protected the Kurds, but because they took US and coalition aid and resources to prepare their own defense. The KRG also pursued its own diplomatic strategy with the fledgling and factious National Iraqi Congress.

Many other countries, from China to Australia, have interfered in the Kurdish Question, ultimately thwarting the Kurdish dream of freedom across a unified Kurdistan. Today almost all countries in the West have designated Kurdish militant groups as terrorists while at the same time trying to enlist their help in the war against the Islamic State and other Jihadist groups. It seems the Kurds have lost some of their naivete and have learned that being temporary sacrificial pawns for the West will not aid their cause in the long run. The lesson of the second Gulf War and the recent Syrian civil war is that the Kurds must rely on their own forces to have any hope of securing autonomy and justice for their people.



## From Red Star to Ishtar's Star

While the PKK was not founded by die-hard communists, it soon became a classic Maoist national liberation struggle party complete with an unquestioned charismatic “father of the people”, Abdullah Öcalan, a.k.a Apo. There was little to differentiate the PKK from the dozens of Mao-inspired militant liberation groups of the late 1970s and 1980s.

The PKK weren't the only committed Marxists in Kurdistan— a number of other smaller groups existed, some claiming to be Leninists, Trotskyites, or even Titoists. But the peasant-based insurrectionary philosophy of Maoism, as espoused by the polit-bureau and the leadership of the PKK, was by far the most popular and militarily effective means of resisting oppression.

The PKK's flamboyant embrace of communism garnered some support from the calcified old Left parties of Western Europe, but it failed to produce much in the way of real solidarity. While certain Maoist ideas appealed to Kurds eager to rid themselves of authoritarian state repression, those same ideas alienated a lot of potential, more liberal, supporters. Thus, the PKK's struggles were largely ignored and sometimes condemned by possible sympathizers in and outside the region. The emphasis on centralization in Maoist communism also alienated many of the social leaders inside Kurdistan. The Kurds traditionally have been socially and politically organized by loosely connected tribes and have supported tribal leaders who had distinguished themselves in some way other than heredity. Periodically, Kurds formed large, temporary confederations of tribes to mount uprisings and military actions. Political parties have never gained the monopoly on political organizing that they have in many other parts of the world—it wasn't uncommon for a Kurd to be part of a few political parties and switch between them based on how successful they were. Despite these cultural obstacles, the PKK championed hardline communism until well after the fall of the Soviet regime.

For the PKK, the crisis in their communist faith didn't occur until 1999 when their leader Öcalan was arrested in Nairobi by the MIT (Turkish military intelligence), flown back to Turkey, and incarcerated on a prison island upon which he was the only inmate. The Turkish media showed a humiliated Öcalan, “the Terrorist of Turkey,” harmless and in chains. With their leader captured and no obvious successor, the PKK's central committee was thrown into crisis. The increasingly militant tactics of bombings, roadside ambushes, and suicide bombers were not working, and the rise of Jihadi attacks in the Middle East and the West made the PKK seem just like another Islamic terrorist organization despite its communist ideology. This, combined with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia, led to a period of ideological soul-searching for the PKK and its leader.

Thousands of miles away, on January 1, 1994 (five years before Öcalan's capture) a new type of liberation struggle kicked off in the forgotten mountain jungles of Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas, with their red star flag and their black masks, burst onto the world stage and quickly inspired the progressive Left around

the world. A small Mayan liberation struggle had risen from the Lacandon Jungle of Southern Mexico and declared themselves autonomous. These politically savvy revolutionaries created a new type of leftist insurrectionary political configuration they called Zapatismo. Zapatismo situated itself as a mode of liberation and leftist struggle that rejected hierarchy, party control, and aspirations to create a State apparatus. The architects of this new configuration had spent years in hardline Marxist guerrilla organizations in Mexico before rejecting that model of struggle and seeking a new approach.

Öcalan and the other leaders in the central committee of the PKK were familiar with the rapid rise and success of the Zapatistas. A year before his arrest, Öcalan had spoken to PKK party leaders about Zapatismo at a two-day conference. And in his first months of imprisonment, Apo had a “crisis of faith” regarding doctrinaire Marxist ideology and its ability to free the Kurds. Öcalan, who spent much of his life espousing a hardline Stalinist doctrine, started to reject Marxism-Leninism in favor of direct democracy. He had concluded that Marxism was authoritarian, dogmatic, and unable to creatively reflect the real problems facing the Kurdish resistance. In prison, Apo started reading anarchist and post-Marxist works including Emma Goldman, Foucault, Wallerstein, Braudel, and Murray Bookchin. Öcalan was particularly impressed with Bookchin’s anarchist philosophy of ecological municipalism, going so far as to demand that all PKK leaders read Bookchin. From inside prison, Öcalan absorbed Bookchin’s ideas (most notably Bookchin’s Civilization Narratives) and wrote his own book based on these ideas, *The Roots of Civilization* (2001). It was Bookchin’s *Ecology of Freedom* (1985), however, which Öcalan made required reading for all PKK militants. It went on to influence the ideas found in Rojava.

In 2004, Öcalan tried to arrange a meeting with Bookchin through his lawyers, describing himself as Bookchin’s “student” and eager to adapt Bookchin’s ideas to the Kurdish question. In particular, Öcalan wanted to discuss his newest manuscript, *In Defense of People* (2004), which he had hoped would change the discourse of the Kurdish struggle. Unfortunately for Öcalan, the 83-year-old Bookchin was too ill to accept the request and sent back a message of support instead. Murray Bookchin died of congested heart failure two years later, in 2006. A PKK congress held later that year hailed the American thinker as “one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century,” and vowed that “Bookchin’s thesis on the state, power, and hierarchy will be implemented and realized through our struggle... We will put this promise into practice, this as the first society that establishes a tangible democratic confederalism.” Five years later, in 2011, the Syrian civil war gave the Kurds a chance to try to make good on their promise.

The Syrian civil war began as part of the general uprisings in spring 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East that the West dubbed the “Arab Spring.” Kurds from a variety of political backgrounds joined students, Islamists, workers, political dissents, and others in calling for the end of the repression of the Assad dictatorship. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, however, had learned the lessons of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt and quickly sent in troops to crush the growing democratic movement. By autumn, the mostly peaceful protests that had taken place in



the spring had morphed into a full-on armed insurrection against the Assad regime.

When the protests first began, Assad’s government finally granted citizenship to an estimated 200,000 stateless Kurds in an effort to neutralize potential Kurdish opposition. By the beginning of 2012, when over 50% of the country was controlled by rebel groups and Islamic militias, and Assad’s forces were spread thin, the regime decided to pull all military and government officials out of the Kurdish regions in the north, in effect handing the region over to the Kurds and Yezedis living there. Opposition groups, most prominently the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD), created a number of coalition superstructures to administer the region. There was tension between PYD and parties aligned with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, however, and at one time there were even two competing coalitions: the PYD-backed National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) and the KRG-aligned Kurdish National Council (KNC). In early 2012, when it looked like the tension between the two groups might result in armed conflict, the President of the KRG Massoud Barzani and leaders of the PKK brought the two groups together to form a new coalition called the Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC) made up of over fifteen political parties and hundreds of community councils. Within months of forming, the SKC changed its name to the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM) and added non-Kurdish groups, political parties, and organizations to the coalition. The TEV-DEM created an interim governing body for the Rojava region.

The TEV-DEM's program was heavily influenced by the PYD's ideas of "democratic confederalism," which the PKK had adopted as their official platform in a people's congress on May 17th, 2005. According to the platform, and subsequent documents and proclamations from Rojava, "democratic confederalism of Rojava is not a State system, it is the democratic system of a people without a State... It takes its power from the people and adopts to reach self-sufficiency in every field, including economy." In Rojava, Democratic Confederalist ideology has three main planks: libertarian municipalism, radical pluralism, and social ecology. The TEV-DEM have been implementing this new social vision on a massive scale in Rojava since early 2012. The PKK has attempted (and succeeded to some degree) to implement democratic confederalism in scattered villages in Turkey along the Iraq border since 2009, experiments that served as an inspiration for much of the Rojava revolution. This vision, in both Turkey and in Rojava, draws heavily from contemporary anarchist, feminist, and ecological thought.

## Democracy and Decentralization

How do you base a government on anarchism? Rojava is not the first, and hopefully won't be the last, experiment in creating a new form of a decentralized non-state government without hierarchy. In the past two years, two-and-half million people in Rojava have been participating in this new form of governance, a governance related to that of the Spanish Revolution (1936), the Zapatistas (1994), the Argentinian Neighborhood Assembly Movement (2001-2003), and Murray Bookchin's libertarian municipalism. Despite some similarities to these past experiments and ideas, what is being implemented in war-torn Rojava is unique—and it's extremely ambitious. It's no hyperbole to say that this revolution in northern Syria is historic, especially for anarchists.

At the core of this social experiment are the variety of "local councils" that encourage maximum participation by the people of Rojava. The Kurdish people have a long history of local assemblies based on tribal and familial allegiances. These semi-formal assemblies have been an important practice of social organizing for Kurds for hundreds of years, so it is no surprise that the face-to-face assemblies soon became the backbone of their new government. In Rojava, neighborhood assemblies make up the largest number of councils. Every person (including teenagers) can participate in an assembly near where they live. In addition to these neighborhood assemblies, there are councils based on workplaces, civic organizations, religious organizations, political parties, and other affinity-based councils (e.g. Youth). People often are part of a number of local councils depending on their life circumstances. These councils can be as small as a couple dozen people or they can have hundreds of participants. But regardless of size, they operate similarly. The councils work on a direct democracy model, meaning that anyone at the council may speak, suggest topics to be decided upon, and vote on proposals (though many councils use consensus for their decision-

making). It is unclear how membership is determined in these councils, but we know that the opposition movement councils prior to 2012 had no fixed membership and anyone showing up at assembly could fully participate. It is also unclear how often these councils meet and who determines when they meet. It is known that the neighborhood assemblies in the Efrin Canton meet weekly, as does one of the hospital workers' councils. These local councils make up the indivisible unit of Rojava democracy. Larger bodies (e.g. Supreme Council of the Rojava cantons) are populated with representatives from these local councils. All decisions from these "upper councils" must be formally adopted by the local councils to be binding for their constituents. This is very different from the federalist tradition, in which the federation supersedes local control. In August 2014, for example, a regional council decided that local security forces could carry weapons while patrolling a city, but three local assemblies did not approve this decision, so in those local assembly areas security must refrain from carrying weapons. The role of the "upper councils" is currently limited to coordination between the myriad of local councils while all power is still held locally. Representatives to the "upper councils" rotate frequently, with a maximum term set by the "upper council," but local councils often create their own guidelines for more frequent rotation of their representatives. The goal of the Rojava council system is to maximize local power and to decentralize while achieving a certain necessary degree of regional coordination and information-sharing.

The remaining government above the upper council level seems similar to a council parliamentary system with rotating representatives, an executive branch composed of canton co-presidents, and an independent judiciary. All governmental power emanates from the councils, and the councils retain local autonomy, thus forming a confederation. The confederation is made up of three autonomous cantons that have their own ministries and militias. There is no federal government in the Rojava canton system. Voluntary association and mutual aid are key concepts for the confederation, as these ideas protect local autonomy. Voluntary association leads to radical decentralization, severely limiting any organizational structures above the primary decision-makers of the local councils. All bodies beyond the local councils must have proportional representation of the ethnic communities in the canton and at least 40% gender balance (this includes all ministries). Most ministries have co-ministers with one male and one female minister, with the exception of the Women's Minister. Most decisions by the Supreme Council need support of 2/3 of the delegates from the upper councils. Any canton retains autonomy from Supreme Council decisions and may override them in their own People's Assembly (the largest upper council of any region) while still being part of the confederation. This bottom-up decentralization seeks to preserve the maximum level of autonomy for local people while encouraging maximum political participation.

Both internal and external security for the cantons is administered by each canton's People's Assembly. The local security, which are equivalent to police, are called Asayish (security in Kurdish). The Asayish are elected by local councils and serve a specific term determined by the local council and the canton's People's

Assembly. The Asayish have also their own assembly (but not one that can send representatives to the People's Assembly), in which they elect officers and make other decisions. In addition to the Asayish, there are people's self-defense militias to provide security from outside threats (e.g. currently the Islamic State, but this could also include regional and state government forces). These militias elect their own officers but are directly responsible to the canton's People's Assembly. Both the Asayish and the people's self-defense militias have two organizations: one a female-only group and the other co-ed. Militias that are providing mutual aid in another canton (Asayish are for the most part forbidden to work in other cantons) must follow that canton's People's Assembly but can retain their own commanders and units. In times of peace, the cantons do not maintain standing militia service.

Rojava's relationship with the Syrian state is yet to be tested. The Rojava Canton Confederation is not set up as a state. It draws instead on the idea of dual power, an idea first outlined by the French anarchist Proudhon. The KCC described dual power as "a strategy of achieving a libertarian socialist economy and political and social autonomy by means of incrementally establishing and then networking institutions of direct participatory democracy" to contest the existing authority of state-capitalism. Rojava currently has set out a path of co-existence with whatever state arises from the Syrian civil war and to the current alignment of neighboring states (namely Turkey, Iraq, and Iran) that encompass Kurdistan. People in Rojava would maintain their Syrian citizenship and participate in the Syrian state so long as it doesn't directly contradict the Rojava principles. This uneasy co-existence is the reason the cantons have explicitly forbidden national flags, have not created a new currency, a foreign ministry, or national passports and identity papers, and why they do not have a standing army. It is unclear if the people of Rojava plan to maintain this relationship with the state or what would happen in conflictual situations.

Rojava is neither a state nor a pure anarchist society. It is an ambitious social experiment that has rejected the seduction of state power and nationalism and has instead embraced autonomy, direct democracy, and decentralization to create a freer society for people in Rojava. The Rojava principles have borrowed from anarchism, social ecology, and feminism in an attempt to chart a societal vision that emphasizes accountability and independence for a radically pluralistic community. It is unclear whether this experiment will move towards greater decentralization of the kind Bookchin suggests and the Zapatistas have implemented or if it will become more centralized and federal as, happened after both the Russian and Spanish revolutions. What is happening right now is a historic departure from traditional national-liberation struggle and should be of great interest to anti-authoritarians everywhere.

*This excerpt was taken from the book A Small Key Can Open A Large Door. The proceeds from the sale of this book pay for shipping radical texts to The Mesopotamian Academy in Rojava and the People's Library in Kobane. It is available at [www.combustionbooks.org](http://www.combustionbooks.org).*



## Principles of Democratic Confederalism

1. The right of self-determination of the peoples includes the right to a state of their own. However, the foundation of a state does not increase the freedom of a people. The system of the United Nations that is based on nation-states has remained inefficient. Meanwhile, nation-states have become serious obstacles for any social development. Democratic confederalism is the contrasting paradigm of the oppressed people.

2. Democratic confederalism is a non-state social paradigm. It is not controlled by a state. At the same time, democratic confederalism is the cultural organizational blueprint of a democratic nation.

3. Democratic confederalism is based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For limited space of time they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic power of decision rests with the local grass-roots institutions.

4. In the Middle East, democracy cannot be imposed by the capitalist system and its imperial powers which only damage democracy. The propagation of grass-roots democracy is elementary. It is the only approach that can cope with diverse ethnical groups, religions, and class differences. It also goes together well with the traditional confederate structure of the society.

5. Democratic confederalism in Kurdistan is an anti-nationalist movement as well. It aims at realizing the right of self-defence of the peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning the existing political borders. Its goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nationstate. The movement intends to establish federal structures in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq that are open for all Kurds and at the same time form an umbrella confederation for all four parts of Kurdistan.

*This excerpt was taken from the book Democratic Confederalism by the jailed leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. This text marks a shift in his thinking to a stateless society, led by the people who participate in it.*

## Conflict Resolution

The commune is a place not only of self-organization but also of social conflict resolution. It concerns itself with social problems in the districts, support of poorer members of the commune, and the just distribution of fuel, bread, and foodstuffs. Meetings of the commune handle not only conflicts, the usual neighborhood fights, but also violence against children, and resolution is attempted. In Dêrik we attended a meeting of representatives of a commune: they were discussing the case of a family that had tied up a child. This behavior was now monitored and controlled. If the misbehavior continues, the children will be taken to a protected place.

This stateless system has given rise to creative self-administration. In the cantons of Efrin, Kobane, and Cizire (formally northern Syria) and in cities in Northern Kurdistan (also Southern Turkey), the formations and solutions to day-to-day problems are as various as the people who populate these areas. There are no overarching rules for how these councils and communes work. Rather, each region has adapted functions that make sense for their unique conditions. Conflict resolution in each area takes on a different character, depending on the people involved and the problems they face. So rather than describe a system, here you can read first hand accounts of councilors and descriptions of visitors to the communes.

### 1 Alternative Justice: a legal committee in Gewer

In resolving conflicts, they try to find a consensual solution... The legal committees try to clamp down on this destructive cycle and seek to mediate a peaceful solution between parties even in cases of murder. When a murder is committed, the perpetrator is punished with a heavy material fine and put on probation. He is also obligated, with the help of a psychologist or other professional, to work on changing the way he thinks about the crime and on taking seriously his punishment. Something similar goes on for those who commit other crimes.

After this punishment process comes the attempt to socially reintegrate the perpetrator. Explained a member of the Gewer legal committee:

*Our way of administering justice isn't as retrospective as it is with state systems. We don't lock people up and then release them fifteen years later. Instead we try to effect a fundamental transformation in the person, and reintegrate them.*

### 2 The Colemêrg Women's Council

Every district in Colemêrg has a women's committee, and every committee consists of ten to fifteen women. This way, problems that arise can be addressed quickly.

*If a woman's neighbor is a victim of violence, she notifies us. She comes to us, not to the state, because people have had bad experiences with the state. And we try to find solutions. One woman moved from her village to the city, after which her husband injured his foot. So he had financial problems. We provided food for them, then we talked to the municipal government, which allocated bricks and sand, so they could build a house...*

*Another example: divorce is not accepted here, but we are firmly opposed to domestic violence. When we know that a woman has been beaten, we sit down with her and find out what she wants to do about it. Sometimes she loves the man very much and doesn't want a separation. In that*

case, we call in the family and the husband for a discussion. We explain to him our attitude toward violence and present him with the woman's demands.

If people are to take our movement seriously, they have to take our demands seriously. That's also true when the woman prefers to separate, and she has to return the gifts she received at the wedding and the dowry. During the period of the divorce, we stand with her.

### **3** A district council in Wan

How is your council organized?

About 15,000 people live in our urban district. We have street councils, district councils, and city councils. When a street council can't solve a problem, it's passed to the district council. If the district council can't solve it, nor the city council, it's discussed in the DTK. Wan has thirty-one districts, five of which have a council. Our work is highly collective and communal, and so we're always considering things in terms of the other districts.

Do you receive outside financial support?

That wouldn't fit our ideology. We're autonomous. So we don't accept financial support...

What else does the district council do?

We have a committee where district people can bring their complaints, like domestic violence and quarrels between neighbors. Let's say a family can't afford to pay for a child's school uniform, or some parents don't want to send their daughter to school. They come to us.

### **4** Amed City Council

What's happening with the cooperatives?

We have cooperatives that grow vegetables and pickle them. Women cultivate mushrooms, or bake bread, to achieve economic independence. Those are a few of the projects that we have under way. There's also the clay house project, which helps homeless people build clay houses. And communes already exist in many rural places, with the goal of providing for themselves.

What do legal committees do?

When we talk about judicial matters, you have to understand that we're trying to organize a society without a state. Many people who have legal disputes or other problems that need solving don't go to the Turkish courts anymore — they come to the city councils. So many of the city councils are developing legal committees to handle legal issues, and people are learning to rely on them to solve their problems.



**5** The Democratic Society Congress, DTK, was founded in 2005 as a democratic confederation for the pro-Kurdish BDP and other political parties, civil society organizations, religious communities, and women's and youth organizations.

On July, 14, 2011, more than eight hundred participants from different tendencies assembled in Amed and issued the Call for Democratic Autonomy, by a common declaration. The published document called for democratic autonomy in eight dimensions: politics, justice, self-defense, culture, society, economics, ecology, and diplomacy. The state [Turkey] promptly criminalized the DTK, as the highest institution of democratic autonomy, and initiated judicial proceedings against it.

As an example of the DTK's work, one of our interviewees described the arbitration of blood feuds. DTK members try to end a blood feud before it can escalate. But they avoid the state courts; instead they discuss and hopefully solve the problem peacefully, within the community.

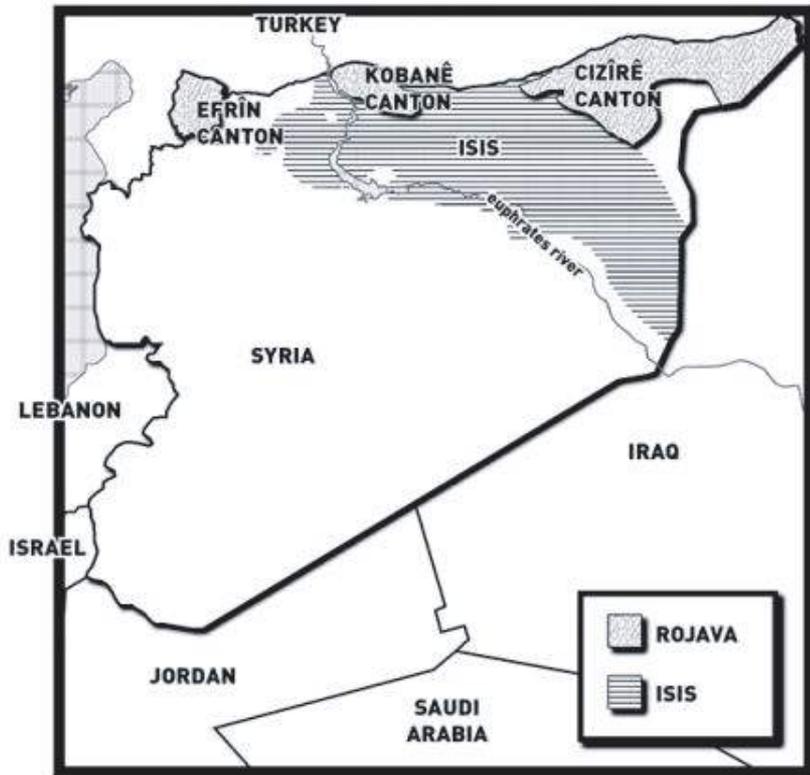
A member of the DTK explained his work:

*A practical example: a man called me up and shouted, 'My wife has left me-I'm gonna kill her! Bring her back, or I'll kill her!' I tried to talk to talk him down over the phone, but when I couldn't, I went over to his place. We talked for a long time, but I couldn't get him to see reason. Now, I had been married for twenty-five years. I finally told this man. " My wife also left me. Should I kill her? Yesterday we had an argument. I bit her, and so she left me. Was she right, or am I right?' He thought about it, then hung his head and apologized. Now, don't get me wrong - that never really happened between me and my wife - I just told him it did.*

*I was mayor for a year, during which time I as a delegate to the DTK. I've seen many cases of blood feuds and honor killings, for which the state has no solution. We stepped in and because we better understand people's sensitivities, we were able to solve the problem. I could tell you about innumerable cases like that. Many of our mayors and delegates face such situations. They do these individual interventions, but every locality also has a peace committee, from the BDP or the DTK, that tries to mediate conflicts.*

These excerpts are interviews from the book *Democratic Autonomy in Northern Kurdistan* by TATORT Kurdistan, translated by Janet Biehl, and accounts from the article *Democratic Autonomy in Rojava* also by TATORT.

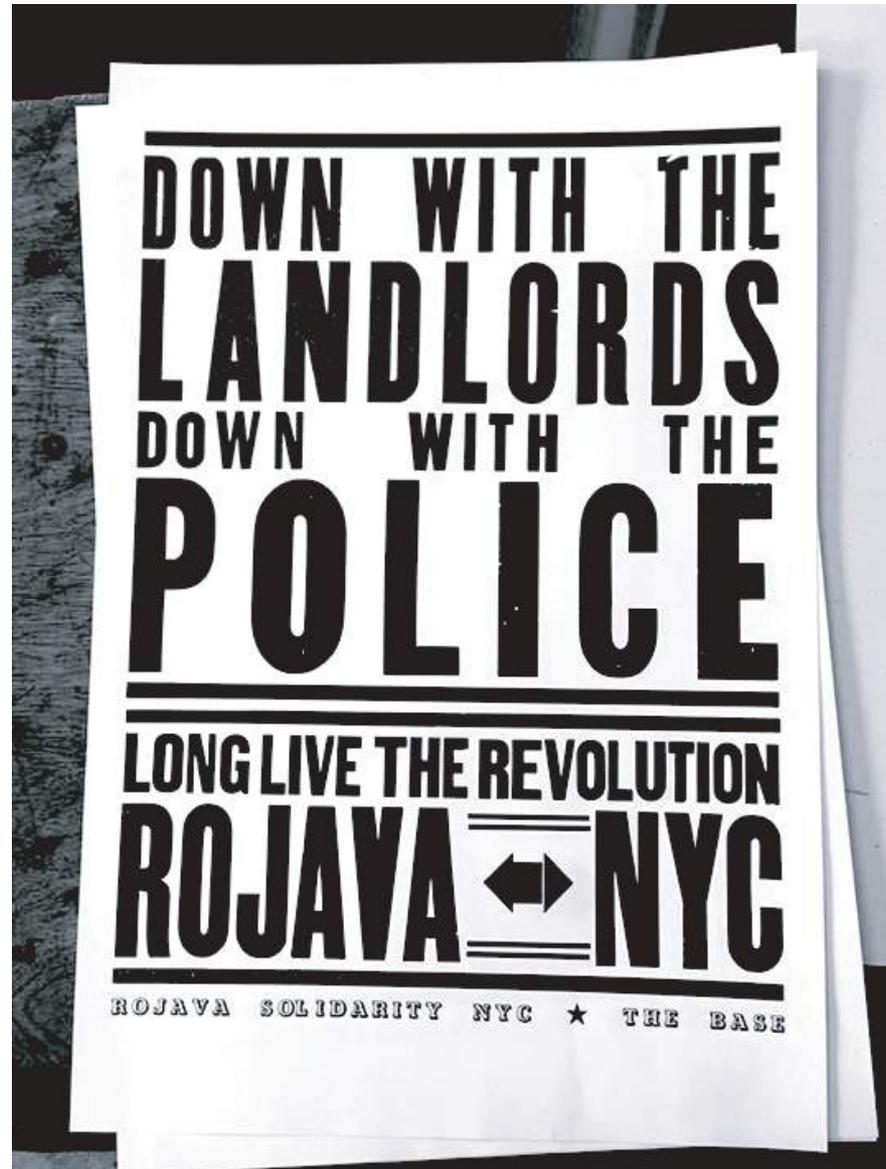




map is current as of November, 2014



Cities in Kurdistan.



Rojava Solidarity NYC is an anarchist organization that aims to spread info and show solidarity with the revolutionary region of Rojava.

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