



Lessons from Rojava to the U.S.

Emergency Committee for Rojava | Left Forum
Sunday, June 30, 2019



Who is the Emergency Committee for Rojava?

The ECR was founded in 2018 following Turkey's invasion of Afrin (one of the three autonomous cantons in Rojava). The ECR's Mission is to defend Rojava (Democratic Federation of Northern Syria) and its tremendously new experiment in Democratic Confederalism built on radical principles of feminism, ecology and pluralism.

The ECR itself, however, is a creation of the Revolution of Rojava. What is this revolution in Rojava? Where indeed is Rojava?!



Above, families flee Afrin in 2018 as, below, Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army rebels celebrate claiming the city



Kurdistan is divided between the modern states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran

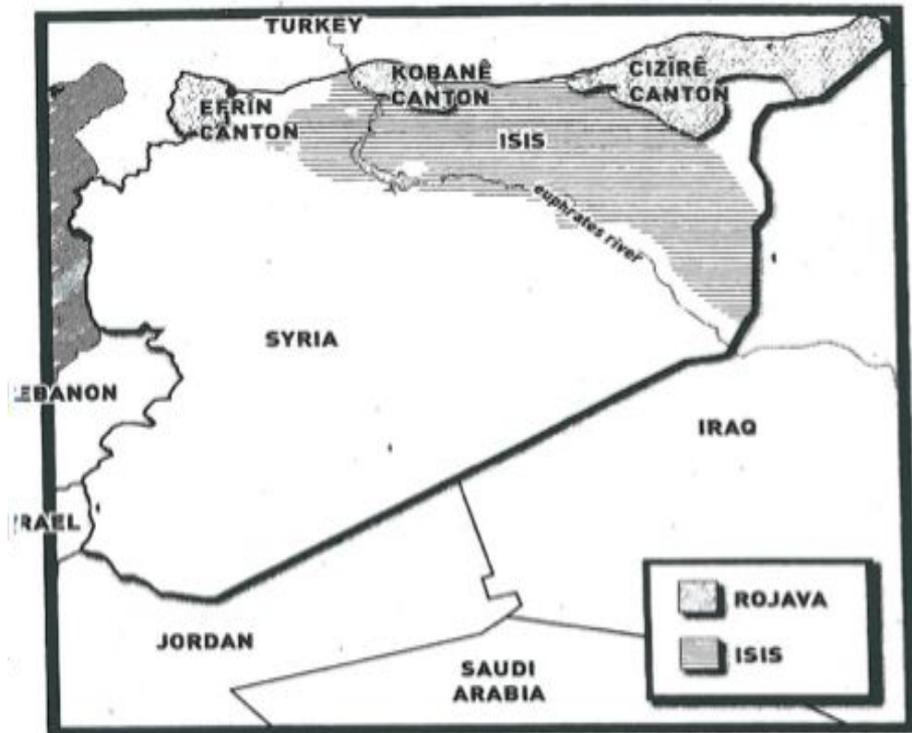


The Rojava region
comprises land in
Syria between the
Euphrates and
Tigris river valleys



Rojava in relation to the regional expansion of ISIS in November 2014

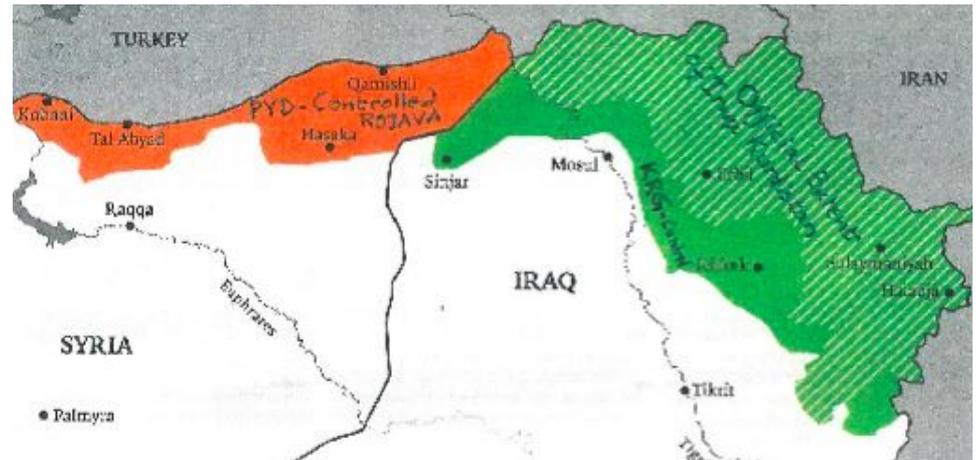
Courtesy of Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness (2015) whose collective contribution is titled *A Small Key Can Open a Large Door*. This collective formed in Brooklyn, NY, and was among the first North American solidarity groups to identify openly and strongly with the Rojava Revolution.



A map of the rugged geography of Kurdistan, from Meredith Tax's (2016) *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State*, a unique contribution to understanding the feminist revolution in Syrian Kurdistan.



A map of PYD-controlled Rojava; the KRG in Iraq; and the arrest/defeat of ISIS in the famous siege of Kobani, from Patrick Cockburn's (2016 LRB) "End Times for the Caliphate?"



What is the Rojava Revolution?

The Rojava Revolution is an exemplary instance of **delinking** from the Capitalist World-System (Trichur 2019, *forthcoming*) in the midst of world-systemic chaos associated with the **terminal crisis of US world-hegemony** (Arrighi 1994; Wallerstein 1983). It is an anti-Capitalist, anti-Statist, anti-Sectarian revolution that fully revealed itself during the 2011 Civil War in Syria and the crushing of the hopes released by the 'Arab Spring'. The war against ISIS, the defense of liberated spaces, and the struggle to reinvent society *in extremis*, turned the Rojava Revolution into an anti-patriarchal and radically Feminist Revolution.

The Rojavan Revolution has thus become the effective name for the **ideological transformation** of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in **a radically feminist direction** due to the historical circumstances of the struggle itself against the Turkish State.

How has the revolution unfolded?

The Rojava Revolution is the outcome of a long-drawn out Kurdish freedom movement in the Middle East. Kurdish struggles initially like all other national liberation struggles privileged the concept of an autonomous Kurdish National State—in relation to Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. However, since 1999, following his imprisonment in by Turkey in Imrali, Abdullah Öcalan, began reading **Immanuel Wallerstein** and **Murray Bookchin** in particular, and radically re-formulated the PKK-ideology in an **anti-Nation-Statist direction**. This reformulation was shaped by newer understandings following the collapse of the USSR and the widespread entry of women in the 1990s into the PKK's movement for Kurdish freedom struggles.

Ocalan reformulated the PKK-ideology by making **Democratic Confederalism** the new formation's centerpiece. The three pillars of Democratic Confederalism became **Libertarian Municipalism**, **Radical Pluralism**, and **Social Ecology**, and the foundation that holds these pillars together is a **Radical Feminism**.



How is the revolution organized through practices of democratic confederalism?

This is what our presentation aims to answer. We'll also explore historical and contemporary affinities, in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939, EZLN (Trichur and Murphy 2019, *forthcoming*) and similar movements within (and outside) the U.S.

Feminism

The Kurdish women's liberation movement

Ecology

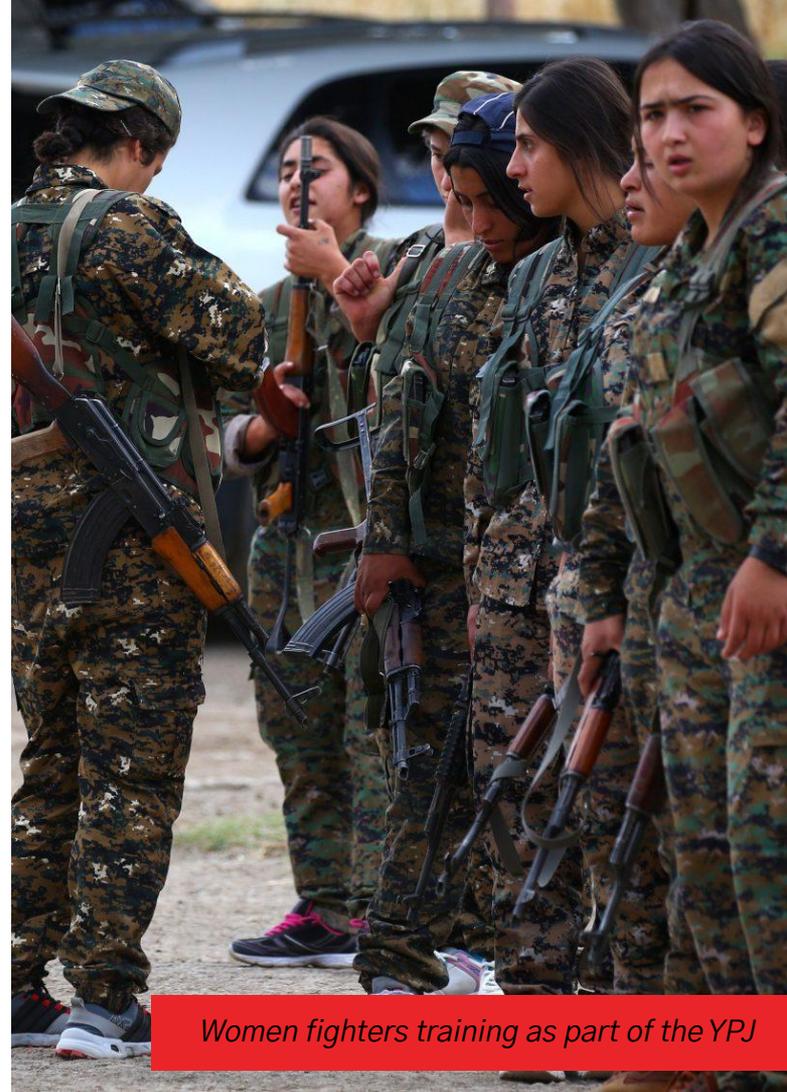
A commitment to a social–ecological society

Democracy

A radical, direct form of bottom–up assembly

Feminism

The Kurdish women's liberation movement

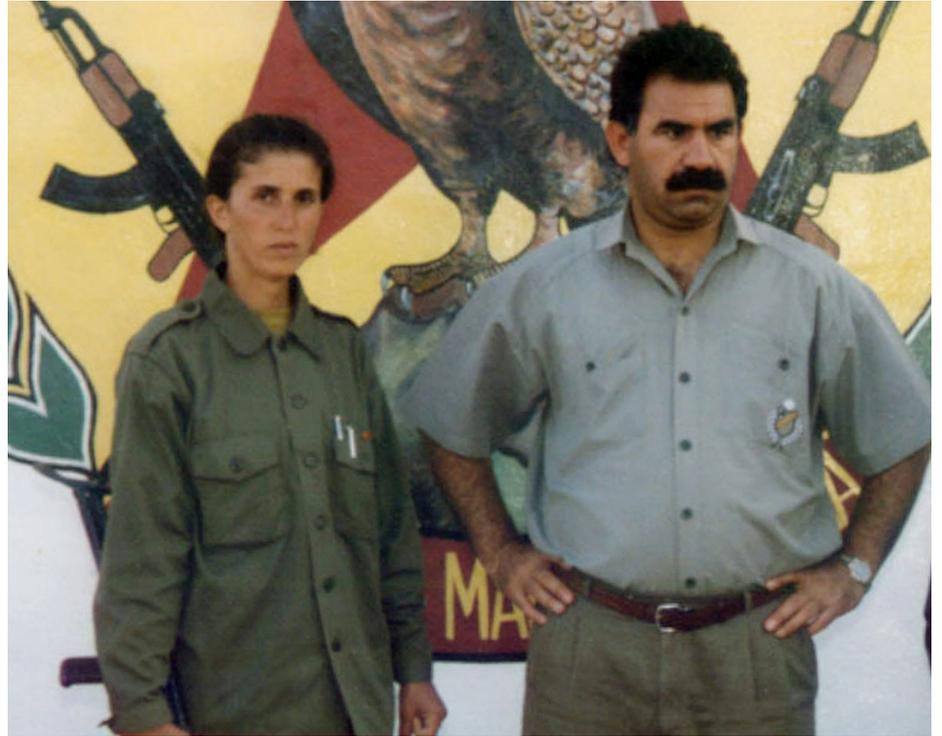


Women fighters training as part of the YPJ

The roots of the women's movement in the PKK in Turkey: Dealing with Patriarchal Norms

“...Amed's commander Semdin Sakik said, 'There will be no women left in the army, I am sending them all away. They can go to the cities, nobody can turn the women into candidates for the guerilla. Because women spoil men,' he said. 'And war is a man's business.'”

— *Fatma, member of the Congress of Free Women KJA in Diyarbakir*



Sakine Cansiz, a co-founder of the PKK, with Abdullah Ocalan

Creating a new social paradigm: “Killing the Dominant Male”

“History has always been the history of male domination, because regardless of what class characteristics determined the society, it was always the men who determined social development and power relations.”

— PKK 5th Congress, 1995

“A country can’t be free unless women are free.”

— Abdullah Ocalan



Kurdish Women protest violence against women, Istanbul, 2013

Putting women's liberation into practice at every level of social life

- House-to-house organizing
- Autonomous women's structures & co-leadership
- Alternative justice structures with focus on domestic violence
- Women's academies
- Jineoloji as science of women and life
- Integration of women into economy



At the Qamishli Women's Center. Credit: Karlos Zurutuza/IPS

Radical Self-Defense

- There are women-only military units called the YPJ
- Female members of the local police forces Asayis deal with cases of domestic violence
- Women's peace committees try to resolve family conflicts through reconciliation and mediation



The “Sehid Jin” Battalion of Mothers in Kobane. Credit: Hawar News

Women's Autonomous Organization

- Jinwar is a women-only village in Rojava, built and sustained by women themselves. It is envisioned as a sanctuary for women traumatized by war and male violence.



Short film 'Welcome to Jinwar, a women-only village in Syria that wants to smash the patriarchy' by The Independent

Challenges

“We have only a few Arab and Syriac women in our ranks. The Arabs... they’re often very withdrawn, much more so than the Kurdish women. They’re more strongly influenced by patriarchal institutions. It takes a long time for them to open up.”

— *Bengin Melsa, a commander at Serekaniye*



Syria: Rojava, the Revolution by Women. ARTE Documentary

Ecology

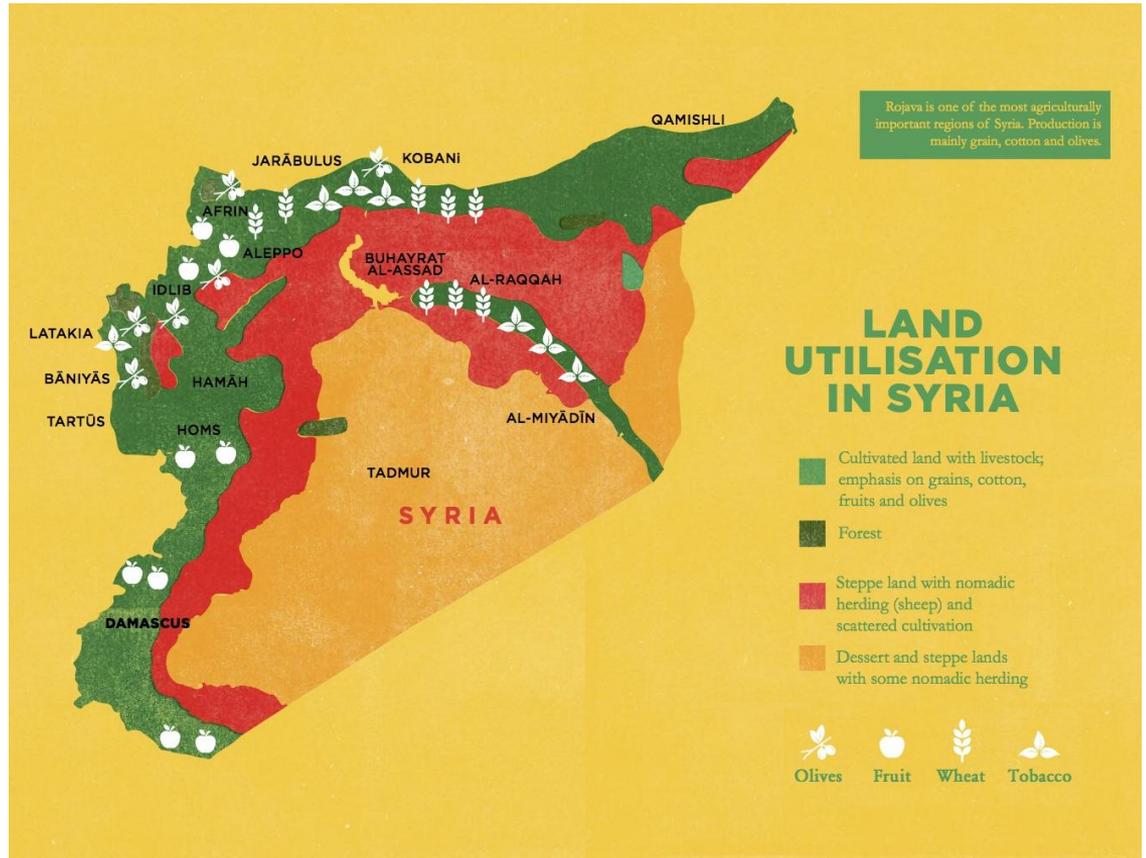
Commitment to a
social-ecological society



Zucchini sprouts in a community greenhouse

Rojava contains a great deal of Syria's most productive land

Until 2012, the region was under a colonially-dependent relationship with the Assad regime, producing monocultures of olives, grain and cotton for Syria's urban centers and export, while at the same time **being disallowed from farming for their own subsistence.**



Monocropping has degraded soil as capitalist modernity pollutes air and water

“On a global scale, the use of chemical fertilisers has so degraded the soils... that this form of agriculture can only be practiced for about **fifty more harvest phases**. After that, the soil will simply be unusable.”

— *Internationalist
Commune of Rojava*



Social ecology as an answer to the destruction of capitalist modernity

“As long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist and inevitably lead our planet to ecological extinction.”

— *Murray Bookchin*

“
The connections between the market economy, exploitation, destruction of nature, war and migration show what the result is when centralist and hierarchical systems try to subjugate nature. A solution that ignores these relationships, a solution within the existing system, is not possible.
”

INTERNATIONALIST
COMMUNE OF ROJAVA

A battle of fire and water against the powers of the Turkish state and jihadist violence

Turkey's upriver water policy disrupts irrigation, energy production and even daily crossings, while hotter and drier weather affected by climate change spreads fires set throughout Kurdish lands by IS and the Turkish military.



Despite outside pressures, an ongoing struggle for autonomy blossoms

Bringing land under democratic control has helped Rojava increase land dedicated to subsistence crops like lentils, chickpeas, beans and even grapes from 10% to 25% in the past few years.



First grapevine planting in the garden of the Internationalist Academy.

Replenishing soil and re-diversifying the local biosphere to achieve balance

Afforestation and agroforestry have re-introduced more than 8,000 fruit and flowering trees to the region's cities and newly-created nature reserves, 100,000 more will be planted in the next couple of years.



Nature at the environs of the
Internationalist Academy.

Challenges in the production of clean and reliable energy continue to mount

The PKK's "terrorist" categorization has made it impossible to import parts needed for a full-scale green revolution so the region's autonomy depends on the use of its plentiful but polluting oil.



An effort to make Rojava green again is underway in cities and nature reserves

Tree nurseries and greenhouses operate in tandem with projects dedicated to composting and grey- and black-water reclamation to create natural fertilizer from household waste.



Democracy

A radical, direct form of
bottom-up assembly



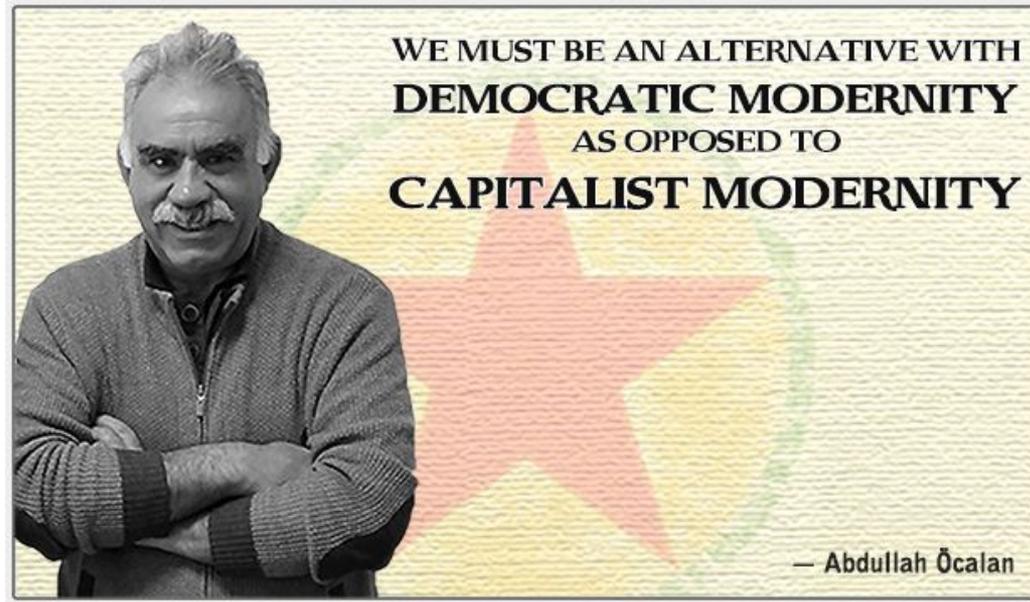
Public meeting space in Dêrik, Cezîrê Canton

“This kind of rule or administration can be called a non–state political administration or a democracy without a state. Democratic decision–making processes must not be confused with the processes known from public administration. States only administrate while democracies govern. States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus. Office in the state is determined by decree, even though it may be in part legitimized by elections. Democracies use direct elections. The state uses coercion as a legitimate means. Democracies rest on voluntary participation.”

[...]

“Whether nation–state, republic, or democracy – democratic confederalism is open for compromises concerning state or governmental traditions. It allows for equal coexistence.”

—Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic
Confederalism (2011)*

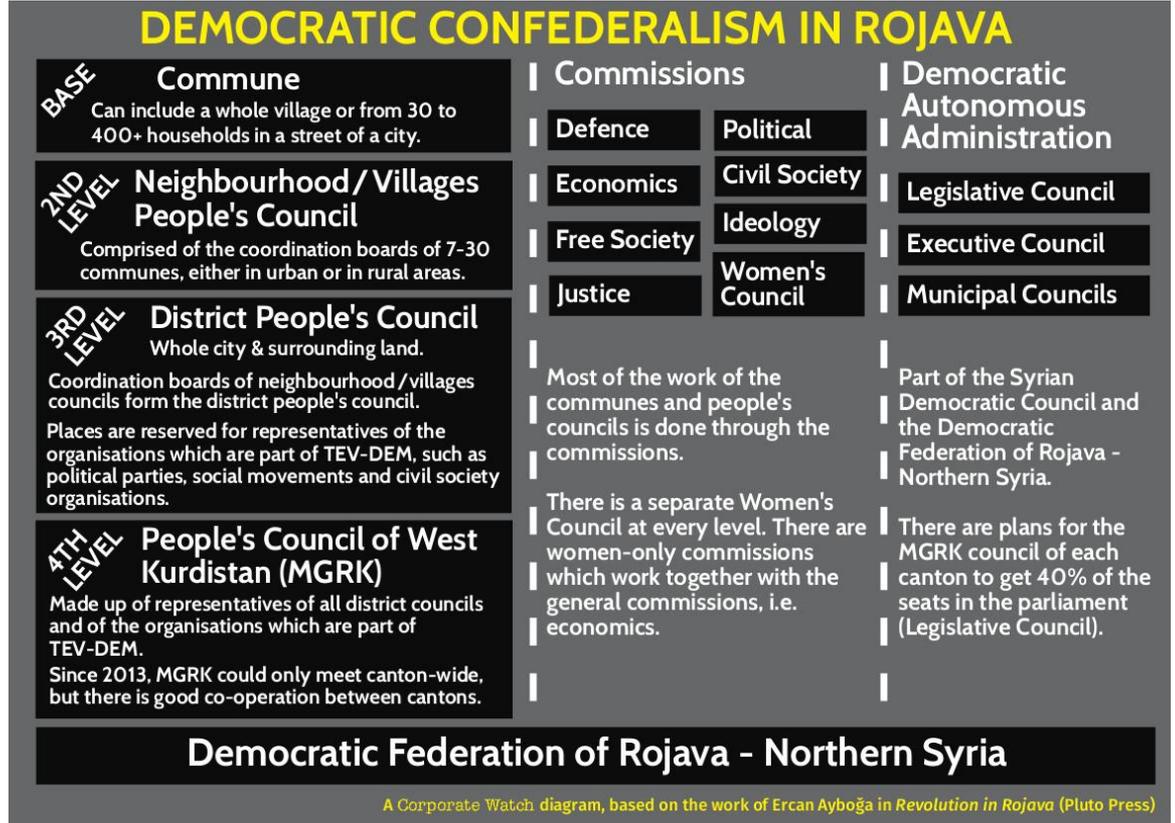


Democratic modernity vs. Capitalist modernity

Democratic autonomy

Democratic Confederalism / Democratic Autonomy within Rojava

The current idealized structure hybridizes “representational” and “direct” democracy, with the intention of blending the two in Legislative Council.



Democratic Confederalism / Democratic Autonomy within Bakur (Turkey)

In Turkey these structures are largely dependent on electoral success and political winds – requiring mayorships, and other judicial/parliamentary mechanisms for cover.

Democratic Autonomy in Bakur

DTK - Democratic Society Congress



Province assembly



City assembly



Neighbourhood assemblies

In the three upper levels, 40% of places are allocated to representatives of social movements, civil society organisations, municipalities, workers' organisations and professional organisations

A Corporate Watch diagram, based on an interview with the DTK, correspondence with Ercan Ayboğa and Paul White's book *The PKK: Coming Down From the Mountains*

**Economic
democracy**

**Judicial
democracy**

Self-defense

Direct democracy, as with anti-state socialist and anarchist political theory, is not limited to the “legislative” or political sphere. Here are commune based self-defense units.



Creating a Social Economy in Rojava through Cooperatives

Philosophically similar to Proudhonian mutualism or “market socialism.” Currently formed through evangelism rather than expropriation.

Find more on how Rojava’s coops work at:

<https://mesopotamia.coop>



Lessons

Radical democracy in Rojava offers insights on the tension between democratic process and revolutionary ideology.

It also, with its non-teleological notion of Democratic Modernity, makes us question strategies for direct democracy or dual power building without “final revolution” or socialist conquest of the State.





Relating Rojava to contemporaneous movements in the U.S. and beyond

[Symbiosis](#)

[Cooperation Jackson](#)

[Fearless Cities](#) / [Municipalism in Barcelona](#)

[Roar Magazine](#)

[Libertarian Socialist Caucus](#) (DSA)

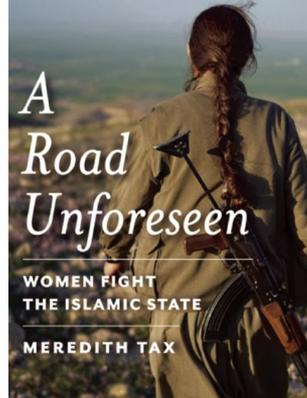
[Demand Utopia](#)

Want to know more about the Emergency Committee for Rojava?

You can join our cause locally here in NYC, or you can start your own chapter of the ECR in your town or on your college campus. Speak to us afterward to learn more!

Contact us at:

Website www.defendrojawa.org
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