

## Living Without Approval<sup>1</sup> – Stateless Democracy in Rojava

– Excerpt from *Civilizing the State - Reclaiming Politics for the Common Good*, John Restakis 2021

In our narrative so far, the fundamental role of the nation state has been taken for granted. Whether it is the mass movements calling for social, economic, and political change or the efforts in Spain or Kerala to democratize the political system, the state has been either the object or the agent of these reformist efforts. The assumption has been that the state is *reformable* – that it is capable of embodying, or at least advancing, the political values that underpin these efforts.

Perhaps this is a delusion.

The revolution that is taking place in Northeast Syria believes it is. Democratic Confederalism in Rojava views the state *itself* as the problem. Capitalism and the nation state, far from being in opposition, are two aspects of a single overarching system of violence and inequality that defines the modern era. Democratic Confederalism proposes an alternative model of modernity based on the greatest possible extension of democracy – a *stateless* democracy that systematically disassembles the structures of centralized state power.

What is happening in Northeast Syria is possibly the world's most ambitious attempt to establish a co-operative form of political economy based on direct democracy, gender equality and ecology. It has done so by abandoning the notion of a nation-state. It is the only real democracy in the Middle East, and it is fighting for its life.

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Rojava captured the world's attention in the fall of 2014 when the Kurdish city of Kobane came under siege from ISIS<sup>2</sup>. Up to this point, the advance of ISIS in Syria had seemed unstoppable, spreading terror and trailing horror across the region. The world had watched as a string of beheadings and other atrocities flooded airwaves and social media – part of a calculated campaign to sow terror by appalling the imagination. Could anything be worse than Al-Qaeda or the Taliban? Yes, it turns out. In the terror sweepstakes, ISIS was setting a new standard for depravity.

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<sup>1</sup> "Living without approval", is the apt term used by Dilar Dirk in her interview of the same name for the publication, *Stateless Democracy*, New World Academy, Reader #5, 2015

<sup>2</sup> The name of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has changed over the years, from ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Lebanon) to IS (Islamic State), to *Daesh*, as it is called by the Kurds in Syria. I am using the term ISIS, which is the one most familiar to readers.

<sup>2</sup> In Raqqa, following the expulsion of ISIS, coalition forces were confronted with the ghastly sight of decapitated bodies that had been fitted with the severed heads of other victims.

From October 2014 to March 2015, Kurdish forces slowly repelled the ISIS attack on Kobane with the support of US air strikes and reinforcements from Kurdish fighters in Turkey and Iraq and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In savage door-to-door fighting, defenders on the ground would relay co-ordinates to US bombers who would then target ISIS militants dug into the city. With the destruction of one building Kurdish forces would advance and occupy the site and then send co-ordinates for the next run, slowly retaking the terrain.

The repulsion of ISIS at Kobane handed the jihadists their first defeat. In the wake of their retreat, ISIS left a trail of massacred civilians, raped women, and heaps of headless bodies.<sup>3</sup> But the myth of ISIS invincibility was shattered. Equally significant, the defeat had come at the hands of women. The YPJ, the Women's Protection Units, had fought alongside the men of the YPG, (People's Protection Units) – the heart of the Kurdish militia. For the misogynist ISIS, it was a double humiliation. And with the fame won by the women combatants of the YPJ, the world saw for the first time the feminist face of the struggle. With victory, one senses the glee of YPJ commander Ruken Jirik, when she had this to say:

“Jihadists have little fear of death because they think they are going straight to heaven. They carry a key to paradise around their necks and a spoon on the belts to eat with Mohammed. But they are terrified of being killed by a woman because then they will not go to paradise. They fear women fighters. Fighters of the YPJ will trill to let them know who they are fighting against.”<sup>4</sup>

That fear, it turns out, was well founded. The bone-chilling ululations rising from the YPJ pursued ISIS until its final defeat in Raqqa in October 2017.

It has now been ten blood-soaked years since the eruption of the Syrian conflict. What began as a peaceful movement for political and economic reform has given way to a proxy war of competing interests invested in sectarian control of the region. In November 2012, ISIS forces entered Syria from Turkey at the border town of Serekaniye, with the full knowledge and blessings of the Turkish state. Turkey has used ISIS and other jihadist forces as cat's paws in its power plays in Syria ever since. In March 2018, Turkish forces invaded Afrin and with the aid of Islamist armed gangs, commenced an immediate campaign of ethnic cleansing, kidnappings, rape and repression. It is estimated that half of Syria's population has been displaced by the conflict. Many of those fleeing sought refuge in Rojava, the Kurdish region of Northeast Syria.

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<sup>3</sup> In Raqqa, following the expulsion of ISIS, coalition forces were confronted with the ghastly sight of decapitated bodies that had been fitted with the severed heads of other victims.

<sup>4</sup> M. Knapp, A. Flach, E. Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava – Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, P. 143

## The Kurds of Rojava

Syria is a patchwork nation. Perhaps the most ethnically diverse of the Middle East states, its people are composed of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, Ismailis, Alawi, Druze, Greek Orthodox, Turkmen, Maronite and other Christian sects. Among the oldest inhabitants of this region are the Kurds. Their traditional homeland – Kurdistan – stretches across the northern rim of Syria and extends into Turkey to the north and Iraq and Iran on the east. The creation of Syria, like that of the other Mideast States, was a product of the European Powers' division of the former Ottoman lands following defeat of the empire in WWI. Kurdistan was carved up and divided among four newly minted nations. The result in Syria was that the region's Kurds found themselves cut off from their ancestral lands in Turkey and Iraq. The borders drawn by the French authorities imposed on the Kurdish population new social and political identities that were ethnically, linguistically, and culturally alien.

In Turkey and Syria, Kurds were denied recognition as a distinct people. Their language was banned, their music was silenced, and a policy of sustained cultural extermination was imposed that continues to this day. With a population of forty million the Kurds are the world's largest stateless ethnic group. The Kurds have never given up on regaining a homeland.

Rojava means "Western Kurdistan". It is comprised of the three cantons of Afrin, Kobane, and Jazeera in Northeast Syria. In January of 2014, the three cantons declared their autonomy and succeeded in establishing a revolutionary administrative authority that now controls the predominantly Kurdish region in the north of Syria as well as non-Kurdish territory to the south. Given the history of the Kurdish struggle for recognition and the innumerable possible catastrophes that might have come from the collapse of the Syrian regime in this area, it is a remarkable outcome. This is not only because of the emergence of a particular Kurdish political identity in this war-torn region, but even more because of its character.

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The political vision that has guided the revolutionary movement in Northeast Syria is Democratic Confederalism, a political philosophy expounded by Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey (PKK) and guiding inspiration for the revolution. When he founded the PKK in 1978, Öcalan was a traditional Marxist. He was aiming for a centralist, socialist state for the Kurds and fought for its establishment throughout the 1980's. But after the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union in 1991 the PKK faced a crisis in its aims and political outlook. The party underwent a profound re-orientation of its socialist values and embraced a version of democratic socialism that broke with orthodox Marxist-Leninist political theory. Öcalan in particular, confronted this dilemma through a re-evaluation of his own thinking and sought a new way forward. A deconstruction of the state and top-down power structures was at the

heart of this process. The Kurdish Women's Movement played a pivotal role in this effort. Öcalan was deeply influenced by feminist political thinking and gender equality became a foundational principle in his philosophy.

The core of this change was the radical reappraisal and rejection of the state. It is the central thesis of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, a sister party to the PKK in Turkey and the most powerful political force in Rojava. The adoption of a feminist political critique, stateless direct democracy, and a focus on ecology made the PKK in Turkey among the most innovative and forward-looking leftist organizations in the world. Until it emerged as a political project of the PYD in Rojava, Democratic Confederalism remained largely unknown to the outside world.

### Democratic Confederalism <sup>5</sup>

Democratic Confederalism describes the political theory of stateless democracy in Northeast Syria. It was first adopted by the PYD in 2007 and when the Syrian government forces withdrew from Rojava in March 2011 the model was applied across the whole of the Kurdish territory.

Democratic Confederalism advocates universal and direct democracy as the foundation of a free society and rejects the state as a pre-condition for its realization. This understanding of democratic self-government is *inclusive* – granting democratic rights to all peoples living in a region regardless of ethnicity or religion; *egalitarian* – particularly as it applies to gender equality and the emancipation of women as full citizens; *autonomous* – recognizing the right of communities to govern themselves; and *ecological* – recognizing the co-dependence of human societies with nature and the need to protect her. These principles establish the framework for the governance system of the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria and are embedded in the Social Contract – the constitution of the region.

In Democratic Confederalism, the idea of the “nation” is based solely on the practice of democratic citizenship. It is divorced from the standard conception of the nation as a collectivity based on ethnicity or language or indeed, any other form of collective identity. In the context of a Kurdish identity that is itself segmented and understood variously by different groups at different times, this is of immense significance. All societies are inherently heterogeneous. This diversity of interests, identities, inclinations, and worldviews can be subsumed into a unitary collective identity only through an act of communal mythmaking and coercion. From the perspective of Democratic Confederalism, this process violates the natural composition of human societies and the freedom of individuals.

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<sup>5</sup> Democratic Confederalism is often used interchangeably with the term Democratic Autonomy, which is also used to describe the philosophy of this system. To avoid confusion, I am using Democratic Confederalism throughout as the application of Democratic Autonomy in the actual governance structures of the region.

Öcalan put it this way:

“Democratic Federalism is the offspring of the life of the society. The state continuously orients itself towards centralism in order to pursue the interests of the power monopolies. Just the opposite is true for confederalism. Not the monopolies but the society is at the centre of political focus. The heterogeneous structure of the society is in contradiction to all forms of centralism. Distinct centralism only results in social eruptions. Within living memory people have always formed loose groups of clans, tribes, or other communities with federal qualities. In this way they were able to preserve their internal autonomy . . . The centralist model is not an administrative model wanted by the society. Instead, it has its source in the preservation of the power of monopolies.”<sup>6</sup>

We are accustomed to thinking of democracy as a form of government operating through the institutions of the state. But what does a stateless democracy even look like?

In the cases of Barcelona En Comu in Spain and the communist administrations of Kerala, democratization, decentralization, and citizen participation defined how these efforts sought to reform politics. The same is true of La Via Campesina and its distributed form of decision-making. The mobilization of civil power is central to all these efforts. In the cases of Spain and Kerala, ultimate authority still resides in the hands of the state and exercised through the elected officials of a representative government. Regardless of the degree of citizen engagement, legitimate power is always vested in the institutions of the state; in its executive, judicial, and legislative functions and in the enforcement mechanism of its various armed forces – from police to military. The bureaucratic apparatus is also firmly under the control of the ministers and appointees of the state. Civil society remains an outside force; perhaps consulted, perhaps mobilized into collective action, perhaps engaging with various levels of government on matters of policy and decision-making. But formal power always flows outward from the centre and down from an established hierarchy within the state.

Democratic Confederalism reverses this process. In Öcalan’s vision, ultimate control is vested in the institutions of civil society by delegating to local self-governments the administrative functions as determined by society itself. Its aim is to place society in control of governance. How is this accomplished?

### The Council System

The governance system of the Autonomous Administration in Rojava is a work-in-progress and continues to evolve as experience and circumstances dictate. The basis of this governance architecture is the council system. Self-governance and direct democracy are enacted through a series of nested decision-making

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<sup>6</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, Democratic Confederalism

bodies, which – in theory – are accountable to the levels below them and closest to the actual residents of the neighbourhoods in the region’s cities, towns, and villages. The Administration functions through five interlocking levels: Commune, Neighbourhood, District, Canton and Region. All of these are connected to the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Council.<sup>7</sup>

The foundation of the system is the commune, which is a deliberative body encompassing 30 – 200 families in a residential street. In larger cities, a commune may have as many as 500 households. There are communes in every neighbourhood and a neighbourhood may have ten to thirty communes, each composed of anywhere from 15 to 50 people. Participation in these bodies is voluntary and open to all. The commune is the place where the day-to-day affairs of the residents are discussed, where goods and services are supplied, and where solutions are hammered out for common problems. According to one activist,

“The commune is the smallest unit and the basis of Democratic Autonomy. It is concerned with meeting the needs of the people. Let’s say you need something for your street. In the old system, you’d have to file a petition, which would be forwarded to Damascus. It could take years till someone finally took notice and addressed it. Our system is far more effective. If there’s a women-specific problem in the street, a conflict in the family, the commune tries to solve it. If the problem exceeds the capability of the commune to solve, it goes to the next level up, to the neighbourhood council and so on”.<sup>8</sup>

Each commune also has commissions, or committees, that attend to specific areas of responsibility. There are nine: *Women, Self-defense, Economy, Families of Martyrs, Justice & Reconciliation, Education, Arts & Culture, Health and Youth & Sports*. Most of the work of the Autonomous Administration is done through these commissions, which are constituted at every level of the system.

The co-ordinating board of each commune is selected by the residents and consists of two co-chairs (one man and one woman), and usually one man and one woman representing each of the commissions. This gender parity is applied to every decision-making position, including the ministries of the Autonomous Administration. The co-ordinating board convenes weekly and its meetings are open to the public. The members elected to the board can be recalled at any time if they do not meet the wishes of the majority.

The next level up is the neighbourhood council, which usually comprises seven to thirty communes. The co-ordinating boards of the local communes make up the deliberative body of the neighbourhood council. At the neighbourhood council, members elect the co-ordinating board and the male co-chair. The female

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<sup>7</sup> Beyond the Frontline, The building of the democratic system in North and East Syria, Rojava Information Centre, 2019 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/12/Beyond-the-frontlines-The-building-of-the-democratic-system-in-North-and-East-Syria-Report-Rojava-Information-Center-December-2019-V4.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Cinar Sali of TEVDEM, M. Knapp, A. Flach, E. Ayboga, Revolution in Rojava – Democratic Autonomy and Women’s Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan, 2016, p. 87

co-chair is selected by the Women's Council, which also operates at every level of the system. The neighbourhood council also establishes its own commissions that operate in the same nine areas of responsibility.

The third level up is the district, which encompasses a city and the surrounding villages. The boards of the neighbourhood and village councils make up the deliberative body of the district and represent their respective councils. Here again, the co-ordinating board is elected by the members and the area commissions are formed. The co-ordinating board of the district, representing many neighbourhood councils and communes, is called TEV-DEM, The Movement for a Democratic Society. It consists of 20-30 people and it plays a central role in the political and social life of the region.

At the fourth tier of the governance system is the People's Assembly, which operates at the canton level and is made up from the representation of all the district councils. As with the rest of the system, the co-ordinators of the lower level, in this case the district level, compose the deliberative body of TEV-DEM for the canton. Each TEV-DEM member, as well as other activists and specialists, become members of the nine commissions that co-ordinate activities for all of Rojava. TEV-DEM bodies operate in each of Rojava's cantons, which function autonomously.

Finally, the overarching umbrella for the entire system is the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), which provides a political framework for the resolution of the Syrian Conflict. This was the governance structure that had evolved prior to the invasion of Afrin by Turkish forces in 2018.

Following the invasion, the Syrian Democratic Council decided to form a unified administration by establishing seven autonomous civil administrations under the umbrella of the SDC.<sup>9</sup> At present, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria consists of a 70-member General Council representing the civil administrations, an Executive Council composed of the co-chairs of the seven civil administrations, and a 16-member Council of Justice to administer the justice system.

Berivan Khaled, co-chair of the Executive Council explained it this way:

“There was a need for an overarching Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, to bring together these seven regional Administrations at the level of collective decisions, of common laws, to build

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<sup>9</sup> The seven autonomous administrations are: The Democratic Civil Administration of Deir Ezzor, Democratic Civil Administration of Raqqa, Democratic Civil Administration of Tabqa, Democratic Civil Administration of Manbij and its countryside, Democratic Autonomous Administration for the Euphrates region, Democratic Civil Administration in the Jazira, and the Democratic Civil Administration of Afrin.

equality in society, equality on an economic level, develop common perspectives, to coordinate, and to be a force of mediation if problems appear between two regions.”<sup>10</sup>

The priorities of the SDC now are to resist the incursion of Turkish and Islamist paramilitary forces in the region and to play a meaningful role in the political process to resolve the Syrian conflict and to draft a new constitution for the country.

### A New Pathway

Democratic Confederalism breaks with the vision of equality as interpreted by socialist regimes as well as the liberal conception of individualized freedom. It offers an alternative philosophy – a democratic modernity – that institutionalizes the Enlightenment values of equality and liberty by mobilizing the creative energies of society through democratic practice.

For Öcalan, the practice of this philosophy is transformative. It changes the individual that takes part in its application. Democratic Confederalism creates a new social identity, a “new Kurdish man” that transcends the particularities of ethnicity. Revolution entails a process of personal transformation that is inseparable from the political aims of social change. The council system puts this idea into daily practice.

This council architecture did not appear from nowhere. Its roots may be found in the council system of the tribal elders that adjudicated the affairs of traditional Kurdish society from ancient times until well into the 1960s and ’70s. Throughout Kurdish history, communal values such as collectivism and mutual aid, anchored in tribal identity and autonomy, have provided a cultural bulwark against the imposition of centralized control in all its forms. Democratic Confederalism, with its focus on decentralized local autonomy, is a continuation of this tradition. Its formulation as a project of social revolution took shape with the application of this model by the PKK in Turkey. When Öcalan founded the PKK in 1978, the party’s goal was not merely to establish a socialist Kurdish state, but also the liberation of women and of all people in society regardless of ethnicity or political outlook. It was a universalist project of social liberation, but still based on the idea of the nation-state.

The PYD sought to de-ethnicize politics and establish a political system that was free from the centralized structures of the state and from any association of ethnicity with the idea of a nation. Traditional parties such as the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, view ethnicity as a defining feature of a new political system that represents Kurdish interests in a distinctly Kurdish territory – A Syrian Kurdistan. The PYD’s strategy ignores the established frontiers of state and territory altogether. Its aim is to establish Democratic

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<sup>10</sup> file:///Users/johnrestakis/Desktop/Beyond-the-frontlines-The-building-of-the-democratic-system-in-North-and-East-Syria-Report-Rojava-Information-Center-December-2019-V4.pdf



Confederalism wherever communities wish to adopt its principles, irrespective of ethnic or other distinctions.

The leadership in Rojava sees this system as the best means of securing a lasting peace – not only for the Kurds, but also for other ethnic groups suffering under despotic rule in Syria and throughout the Middle East. The Kurds of Rojava still consider themselves as part of Syria. They reject the label of separatists, despite what others may claim.

### Transforming Politics

Changing the nature and operating logic of social institutions changes the attitudes – *and aptitudes* – of the people who use them. One learns democratic practice by practicing democracy. The same is true of co-operation. In the context of a changing tribal society this is crucial. One way of appreciating the significance of what is at work in the practice of Democratic Confederalism is to use the language of social capital.

The tension between the fierce allegiances of the tribe and the difficulties that these tribal identities create between groups is the difference between bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Social capital is that store of mutual trust that enables a group or a society to work co-operatively to achieve common aims. *Bonding* social capital is what binds and defines the co-operative relationships among members of a group or community that shares a high degree of similarity. A tribe, a religious group, or an ethnic community are classic examples. *Bridging* social capital is what enables co-operation and connectivity between *a diversity* of groups.

What Democratic Confederalism tries to do through the council system is to generate bridging social capital that can unite the constituent groups of the region into a new form of sovereignty – a social sovereignty. It does so by changing the character of the institutions through which the society operates. The transformation of politics is achieved through the democratic transformation of the society's economic and social relations. For Democratic Confederalism, the state reproduces hierarchy, inequality, and an unfree society.

Stateless democracy promotes social freedom and the common good through the widest possible distribution of democratic practice. If local autonomy and direct democracy are the keys to transforming political and civil life, they are equally important in re-imagining the ultimate aims of an economy. The co-operative economy that is taking shape in Rojava, despite its innumerable obstacles, is the economic face of democratic transformation.

This is the vision. To what extent has it been realized on the ground?

Travel in the Kurdish controlled areas of Rojava, although severely restricted by the continuous closure of the border crossings, is still the safest in Syria. The terrain here is flat, dry, a dusty yellow hue colours the landscape. Oil derricks poise like giant insects, immobile, meditative, rusting sentinels of the desert. Rojava sits atop Syria's richest oil fields. With the war and an economic embargo imposed by Turkey, Iraq and Iran, replacement parts and supplies are impossible to get and without access to markets the administration has had to rebuild the economy from the ground up. Oil refineries have been repurposed to produce the diesel that runs the generators that produce the electricity. Electricity is rationed and at night the towns and villages go dark.

From the management of energy supply to the production of food, co-operatives have taken a crucial place within Rojava's economy. Beyond being a survival strategy, co-operatives extend the principles of Democratic Confederalism to the economy. While family and private enterprises are accepted as a key part of the economy, monopolies are illegal. Land that was formerly owned or expropriated by the Syrian state, or that has been recaptured from ISIS, is treated as commons and placed under the control of the communes. The land and property used by co-operatives has in turn, been provided to co-ops by the communes who are also responsible for managing local economic affairs.

Co-operatives in Rojava are much like co-operatives everywhere. They are collectively owned and democratically controlled by their members; members each have one vote; they have an administrative body that is elected by the membership and is accountable to it; membership is open to all who accept the rules of the co-operative; and the co-operative is expected to cultivate an ethic of co-operation among its members through a variety of training and educational activities. In Rojava, specific reference is made to the equal treatment of women and the rejection of racism. In addition, there are a number of features that give co-ops in Rojava a very clear communal cast in their role as social, as well as economic entities.

Co-operatives here are primarily seen as economic organizations that serve the interests of society as a whole. In the west, a co-op's purpose is usually framed as the provision of benefits to individual members. In Rojava, co-ops also serve the collective interests of the society. This is reflected in their open membership. Individuals who live in the region but are not working for the co-op may yet become members and support it. Open co-operativism is a unique feature of the system and holds important lessons for understanding the wider potential of a co-operative economy.

When I visited Rojava in March of 2018, there were about a hundred co-operatives. At this writing, there is twice that number.

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Kasrik Co-op

Kasrik co-op is a green oasis rising out of the baking land 120 km southwest of the city of Qamishlo. Set among furrows of brown earth, olive trees, and gardens a group of greenhouses stands under arched canopies of plastic sheeting. Sheep browse among the tall green stalks of ripening corn. The co-op has the use of 5,000 hectares of land that was formerly owned by the state and used to grow wheat. For decades, the land was deforested to make room for monoculture and the use of chemical fertilizers severely depleted the nutritive value of the soil.

Originally started by a group of farmers, Kasrik co-op now produces vegetables, corn, livestock, cheese, and cooking oil for the region. All produce is organic. This has required extensive re-education and training, particularly since chemical fertilizers are no longer available. Plans were underway to build additional greenhouses, to increase the co-op's flock of 1,250 sheep to 10,000, to establish local markets in the towns and villages, and to plant trees on 3,000 hectares of land provided by the commune. The administration also provided seeds, equipment, and training.

At the time I visited Kasrik, the co-op had 5,000 members and 100 workers. Their goal was to employ 1,000. The cost of a member share was 100 USD, and if they could not afford the cost a member could work it off by contributing their labour. Anyone in the region could purchase a member share and a limit of 10 was imposed to prevent undue concentration of control. With members from across the region purchasing shares and volunteering labour, the co-op was able to accumulate \$500,000 in working capital within the first year. Workers are paid 8 per cent of the value of the produce when it is sold and the rest is re-invested in the co-op. Workers are also allocated a portion of the produce for their personal use. Like most other co-ops in Rojava, all workers are paid the same amount.

Kasrik is one of dozens of agricultural co-operatives that link producers and consumers through their common membership in the co-op. This community membership model is vital. It not only expands the pool of capital that can be mobilized for co-operatives, it builds solidarity among disparate groups. The inclusive mandate of co-operatives is a crucial tool for rebuilding a sense of community. In a highly fractured society where ethnic animosities have been cultivated for centuries, it is a highly effective strategy for building trust. And, as we will discuss shortly, it is a cornerstone strategy for healing the divisions of political polarization.

Co-operatives like Kasrik are a primary source of employment and food for the communes. Other co-ops focus on providing essential services such as energy and water. In a time of crisis they are indispensable to the communities they serve. But their significance carries beyond the crisis of the present war to prefigure a model of political economy that could meet the demands of a truly foreboding future – not only in Syria but also for the world at large. Their focus on inclusivity, community service, equality and ecology make the co-operatives of Rojava bedrock institutions for relating democratic autonomy to the mainsprings of

economic and social life in the region. The co-operative economy being constructed in Rojava is a product of both necessity and ideology. It is a natural extension of the political philosophy of Democratic Confederalism. That it is succeeding amid the vortex of forces that conspire to defeat it is something of a miracle.

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### Contradictions and Conundrums

The crux of Rojava's revolutionary model is the absorption of state functions within society itself. This is ultimately what stateless democracy means. The intended purpose is to eliminate the power hierarchies and injustices that are hard wired into the institutions of the state. We must pose the question: Is this feasible? What happens when the separation of state and society is erased? In Öcalan's teaching, the governance functions normally attributed to the state are subsumed within the administrative functions of civil organizations that are directly controlled by the people of a given community. The entire apparatus of the Autonomous Administration and the council system is the embodiment of this idea.

There are two problems with this philosophy. The first is that there is no guarantee that the contradictions associated with hierarchy and the concentration of power within a state structure will not simply reappear and be diffused throughout society itself. Indeed, the problem of inequitable power could be made worse if the power structures become less visible. In the case of a state and formal government the locus of power – its operations and abuses – are relatively clear and visible and can be identified. If these functions are absorbed within the very fabric of society how does one resist them? How does one recognize them? Might the potency of an institutionalized but *informal* social hierarchy be even more insidious and difficult to control?

The second problem is whether Democratic Confederalism can actually be put into practice absent the social attitudes and values that make its application feasible. These attitudes, as Öcalan has said, depend on the reconstruction of society and the individual through the practice of Democratic Confederalism itself. Attitudinal change depends on Democratic Confederalism and the success of Democratic Confederalism depends on attitudinal change. This is a paradox faced by every political movement that seeks revolutionary change but whose values are democratic. The change must be initiated and sustained by a body or a political movement that takes on this revolutionary role. That is, the role of a vanguard party or movement which, to be effective, must be a controlling power within the society. If the freedom and autonomy of society is to be an ultimate value, society itself has to have the means to maintain its autonomy and guard itself against the abuses that may arise even from this revolutionary movement, just as it must against a state. History is littered with examples of what happens when this principle is violated. One hierarchy is simply replaced by another.

If stateless democracy is the solution to statist oppression, the paradox of revolutionary change while building a sovereign civil society is the mother of political conundrums.

TEV-DEM (Tevgera Civaka Demokratik) – Movement for Democratic Society

The Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) is an ambitious attempt to meet these challenges. TEV-DEM was created in August 2011, to organize and support the council and committee structures of direct democracy and to mobilize civil society to take on the functions envisioned in Democratic Confederalism. It sought to create within civil society an organized body and a forum through which society as a whole could express itself and make its interests known – both to itself and to the structures that were set up to administer the new system of self-government.

Zelal Jeger, co-chair of TEV-DEM, described its role as follows:

“TEV-DEM organizes society outside of the Autonomous Administration. But our goal is not to be in opposition, we’re not against the Autonomous Administration. Because our government is not a state, our thinking is not like that of the state. If the people have complaints, we write down the protests of society and we send them to the Autonomous Administration - we criticize it. And so, we play a complementary role to the Autonomous Administration within the system of the democratic nation. But if the Autonomous Administration doesn’t listen to us, we will send a message - we will create an uprising.

TEV-DEM works as an umbrella organization and an assembly for all civil society organizations such as unions and some civil associations . . . Its role further extends to organizing those people who are not part of these organizations and defending the rights of the people. TEV-DEM acts as a counter-power to the Autonomous Administration, preventing it from reproducing itself as a state and protecting the values of Democratic Confederalism.”<sup>11</sup>

On the face of it, this statement describes a civil institution that mobilizes civil society politically and holds accountable the governance system to society as a whole. The ultimate aim of Democratic Confederalism is to make society more powerful than the institutions of governance.

In Democratic Confederalism, the withering away of the state does not depend on the elimination of class, as in traditional Marxist-Leninist theory. The state is dissolved through the absorption of state functions by society through the practice of direct democracy. Direct democracy also dissolves the hierarchies of power that are perpetuated by the state. The sovereign society is autonomous and independent of any particular ideology or influence associated with any of its constituent parts. What then, is the relation of a

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<sup>11</sup> H. Allsopp, W. van Wilgenberg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria – Governance Diversity and Conflicts*, 2019

revolutionary movement to the society-at-large and to the actual operations of political power within the body politic? The issue of where power resides and how it is controlled is central to the subject of system change and many of its complexities are brought into focus in the case of Rojava.

Both the PYD and TEV–DEM have come in for criticism from other political parties and from actors within civil society in Northeast Syria. While their accomplishments with respect to ethnic and women’s rights are acknowledged, it is also claimed that TEV–DEM controls the political culture and direction of the Autonomous Administration and promotes the ideology of one particular group – the PYD and its allies beyond the borders of Syria.

Moreover, while political parties participate in the SDC, parties that do not recognize the validity of this system are not represented nor are they acknowledged as legitimate political players. This remains a major bone of contention within the system. It has left the Autonomous Administration open to the charge of not being representative and of being controlled by the political interests of the SDF and the PYD, whose Kurdish representatives dominate the system. Charges have also been made that the administration discriminates against Arabs in some areas.<sup>12</sup>

Given the fact that the SDF created the system it is not surprising that it would be a dominant force within it. Can the commitment to inclusion and the democratic sharing of power create the political space for meaningful challenges to the PYD and its allies? Time will tell, but the strife on the ground and the continuous attempts by outside interests such as Russia, Turkey and Assad himself to undermine the system by sowing division among the tribes and ethnic groups is making the task all the more difficult.

The council system itself is also grappling with a host of structural issues. Elections have been problematic and this has called into question the validity of the elections process. There is great disparity in how effectively councils operate, in the services they offer, and how representative they are of the local populace. As we saw in the decentralization process of Kerala, the autonomy of local councils makes the application and co-ordination of general policies difficult. The sheer complexity of the system, as anyone who has read this far might appreciate, is hard to grasp – much less operate – and the claims it makes on people’s time and energy is immense. It would be unsurprising if over time, popular participation ebbs and a small minority of people wield actual power.

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<sup>12</sup> [https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/04/kurdish-led-sdf-dominates-political-life-in-eastern-euphrates/?utm\\_source=Enab+Baladi+English+-+List+of+Emails&utm\\_campaign=eb12214bc7-RSS\\_EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_cf6fe07083-eb12214bc7-200425005](https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/04/kurdish-led-sdf-dominates-political-life-in-eastern-euphrates/?utm_source=Enab+Baladi+English+-+List+of+Emails&utm_campaign=eb12214bc7-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_cf6fe07083-eb12214bc7-200425005)

These are the natural challenges of a system of autonomous direct democracy absent the centralizing institutions of a state. The question is, can they be resolved without the replication of hierarchies and power inequities within the social body itself?

Inside Northeast Syria, the notions of gender equality, cultural diversity, and ecology present a challenge to traditional attitudes. The adoption of such a revolutionary value system – while generally supported – remains incomplete. Building understanding is slow, patient work and the only way it can be sustained is through the gradual acceptance of a populace that sees in the administration a set of values and practices that provides not only ideas for a better future, but actual, concrete solutions to the demands of surviving the present. Security, food, water, employment – these are bedrock issues that the administration must attend to while fighting off the deadly forces arranged against it.

Meanwhile, the work continues. Concepts like “commune” and “council” have become part of the local lexicon and a window has opened onto another, possible world. The revolution in Rojava offers more than hope and light to a long-suffering people. It opens a door to a new understanding of what deep democracy can mean and how it can be practiced. It offers a vision of modernity that, while rooted in the communal values of the past, reshapes those values for universal application by focusing on the co-operative underpinnings of community and the transformative power of self-governance.

Transcending the divisions of ethnicity and nationality, Democratic Confederalism bypasses our fixation on nation-states and offers a working model of radical democracy embedded in the relationships of everyday living. So long as it persists, Rojava is a beacon and an example to the oppressed and a mortal threat to oppressors.

Eventually, the bloodletting in Syria will end. What is being fought for now is for what follows. The sense of community that is being cobbled together by the PYD and its allies is premised on the belief that all peoples have the right of recognition and the freedom to live in peace. It is the one hope that democracy can offer. And it is precisely this that the despotic powers of the region are determined to snuff out.