



Department of Political Science

Chair of Political Sociology

Bachelor's in Politics, Philosophy and Economics

**DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AND
PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN
ROJAVA**

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Academic Year 2020/2021

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Preface

'We want the world to know us not for our weapons, but for our ideas'¹

In Kurdish Rojava means *west*, indicating the part of Kurdistan coinciding with North East Syria. It entered western public debate and captured international attention between 2016 and 2018, when the Syrian Democratic Forces, managing the self-administration in Rojava, entered in a coalition with the United States and effectively defeated the jihadist forces that had taken control of part of Syria. The interesting part of this story is, nevertheless, everything that has not been said in the numerous articles dedicated to the YPJ/YPG fight against ISIS. YPG and YPJ are the self-defence forces of the PYD, which is a Kurdish party active in North East Syria, that, together with other parties and organizations, since 2011 has been implementing the revolutionary model of Democratic Confederalism, elaborated by the imprisoned leader of PKK (PYD counterpart in Turkey), Abdullah Öcalan. This final paper has the purpose of explaining this seemingly utopian model, the political and sociological thought behind it, and how and to what extent it has been implemented in Rojava.

Western mainstream understanding of middle-eastern dynamics is, in my opinion, always and inevitably filtered by two fundamental narratives. The first one is a specific framing for which middle eastern countries are always in need of something, always asking the question, while westerners are those who provide help and solutions to their problems. The second one is that our way of doing things is the best one possible. The capitalist and liberal democratic state is considered the apex of human institutional development. Abdullah Öcalan, and the anarchist Murray Bookchin before him, put this understanding of the world completely in question. Democratic Confederalism is based on participatory and direct democracy, refuses the state and the system of the nation, poses the revolution of women as a precondition to its success, redefines the relationship between human and nature, and puts at the centre of society an individual responsible, active, and political in the truest of ways. Crucial to the conversation is also, of course, the grave context in which this implementation has taken place. Not only it is impossible to separate this process from the civil war of the last ten years, but it is also trivializing to speak about what Rojava is today without taking into consideration the last century of Kurdish history.

In the first part of this paper, the recent history of the Kurdish population and of Syria will be summarized, with special attention to the events developing from 2011 onwards. The second part will explore the political and social thinking of Öcalan and Bookchin and the model of Democratic Confederalism. The third part will analyse how the model was implemented and how it was extended or adapted to the context of North East Syria. The fourth part will conclude by giving an overview of the recent events and current threats to the functioning of the autonomous administration in Rojava.

¹ These words were pronounced by YPG commander Sozda and reported by Dilar Dirik in "Rojava: Una Democrazia Senza Stato" (aa. vv., 2016)

1. Being Kurds

Kurdistan is not a state, but a vast region, extending across four different states. Being already the protagonist of a complex territorial question, Kurdistan was divided between Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria after World War One. This condemned the Kurds to a future of ethnic discrimination and assimilation policies in all of these four countries and shaped the way Kurds perceive themselves as a people and as parts of a community transcending national borders.

1.2 Kurdish Identity

To comprehend what being Kurdish means, and what having a Kurdish identity may look like, is a rather complex undertaking. First of all, because a Kurdish nation does not and has never existed, and, secondly, because any concept of Kurdish identity must be considered as directly linked to the hostile treatment historically reserved to Kurdish people. Before catching the eye of western countries, the Kurdish people was fragmented and mainly tribal and agrarian. Identity ties developed within these tribes and within the family and were defined economically through the semifeudal relationships characterizing the Kurdish society until the nineteenth century.

According to Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019), processes of formation of Kurdish identities can be distinguished since the division of Kurds among the four states in 1923 and has mainly been triggered by the need to distinguish themselves from the “others”. This allowed a connection to develop within the segmented Kurdish population and the creation of what could be defined as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983) of Kurds, resting on different identity bonds.

Economic and social marginalization created a class identity alongside the ethnic one. Kurdish nationalist movements were deeply influenced by Marxism and often employed the class struggle narrative. The PKK², which will be described more at length later was born as a Marxist-socialist movement and it is not a case either that the Syrian Communist Party’s most prominent positions have historically been by and large occupied by Kurds.

Religion played an important role in providing common traditional and spiritual categories to the discourse on Kurdish liberation. The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, and, in particular when speaking about Syrian Kurds, strongly influenced by Sufism, also labelled “Islamic mysticism”. Following the abolition of Sufism in Turkey in 1925 and the subsequent movement of Sufi Sheiks in Northern Syria, Sufism became progressively tied with Kurdish identity, coming to be considered a sort of Kurdish Islam. Moreover, Yezidism, a monotheistic religion developed in Iraq before the appearance of Islam and now in decline, is historically ethnically Kurdish and is today defended by Kurdish movements like PKK as the authentic Kurdish religion.

² Kurdistan Workers’ Party based in Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan.

In conclusion, as was clarified, some sort of identification with a pan-kurdish society does exist for all kurdish communities in the different state and was further strengthened by the reliance on each other and a reciprocal influence of kurdish parties in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, in a collective quest for kurdish liberation. Nevertheless, as can easily be imagined, identity has been shaped in peculiar ways in the different states. Since kurdish identity can be seen as a response to an unfair treatment and as satisfying the need of representing themselves as opposed to, as different from non-kurdish people, it follows that to comprehend the nature of this process in Northern Syria, an account of the recent history of this particular area is unavoidable.

1.3 Recent History of Syrian Kurds

As already explained, before the French mandate imposed by the League of Nation in 1923 and the subsequent definition of Syrian territory and sovereignty, the segmented kurdish people was mainly tribal and agrarian. It was built on kin and semi-feudal relations. The division among the four countries in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria meant for Kurds a future as isolated periphery of these states' policies and their representative and legal systems. It was this exclusion and the increasingly sharp hostility toward the central states that nourished a sense of identity and a drive toward kurdish affirmation as a distinct people, worthy of a nation state and of rights of representation and decision making.

Before Syria was granted independence in 1946, French colonialists were not hostile to kurdish claims of self-administration in the territories they occupied. Nevertheless, they never openly and directly sustained them for fear of making an enemy of the Arab part of the population (Caputo, 2018b). The failure of kurdish revolts against the Turkish government in the 1920s³ prompted kurdish nationalists, which in Syria now comprised also of many kurdish intellectuals exiled from Turkey, to focus on the preservation of kurdish identity.

After Syria gained final⁴ independence from colonists, with the creation of the Second Syrian Republic⁵, Syrian identity came to be increasingly connected with the Arab nation, causing the northern region of the country to be the object of policies of Arab nationalism and forced Arabization targeting mainly the kurdish population residing in that region. Not only little investment but also explicit laws of discrimination against kurdish minority made the region heavily underdeveloped in comparison to the rest of the country.

During this period, kurdish nationalist parties promoted a western conceptualization of identity, representation, nation hood and development, which had a great impact on kurdish political organization. Concomitantly, numerous attempts at Arab unity were made in the following fifteen years or so, which

³ Kockiri (1920), Beytussebab (1924), Sheik Said (1925), and Ararat (1927-30) rebellions.

⁴ A first Syrian Republic had already been created in 1930 as a part of the French Mandate.

⁵ Which will become the Syrian Republic in 1950 and then the Syrian *Arab* Republic from 1961 to 1963

culminated in the unification with Egypt to establish the United Arab Republic in 1958. Nasserists⁶ in Egypt were distrustful of Kurds and, during the first year of Republic, Cairo arrested 36 members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (PDK-S) and condemned the party as being secessionist and illegal.

Following the military coup of 1963 which put an end to this union, the Syrian Arab Republic was created, and the Ba'ath party of Hafez Al-Assad seized the power. This change only exacerbated the already critic condition of non-Arab population in the country, as the Ba'ath Party had always rendered its hostilities towards non-Arab populations (and Kurds in particular) manifest. In the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, adopted in 1973, the first, second and third articles read:

‘(1) [...] Syria is a member of the Union of Arab Republic.

(2) The Syrian Arab region is a part of the Arab homeland.

(3) The people in the Syrian Arab region are a part of the Arab nation. They work and struggle to achieve the Arab nation's comprehensive unity’.

And, again, article eight:

‘The leading party in the society and the state is the [...] Ba'ath Party. It leads the National Progressive Front seeking to unify the resources of the masses of the people and place them at the service of the goals of the Arab nation’.

This connection is even more decisive in the 1969 Syrian Nationality Law defining a Syrian Arab as any person who enjoyed nationality of Syrian Arab Republic and created a legal framework from which non-Arabs were totally excluded.

Under the Ba'athist government a number of discriminating policies were enacted against the Kurdish and other minorities aimed at debilitating and absorbing them and everyone hostile to the party. All non-Arab languages were banned, kurdish private schools were prohibited to impede the teaching of kurdish language, investment in public services and infrastructures like hospitals in the northern region were heavily neglected. In 1963 a special census was conducted in the region of Jazira which resulted more than one hundred thousand Kurds being deliberately deprived of their Syrian citizenship to end up being classified as foreigners (*ajanb*) or unregistered (*maktumiin*). The people so characterized simply stopped existing in the eyes of the state, ending up stripped not only of their land but also of the possibility to have a job, an education, a participative role in politics, or to own anything. As Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019) described, this exclusion of non-Arabs from benefits deriving from the status of citizen, created a ‘unique

⁶ Nasserism is the socialist Arab nationalist political ideology based on the thought of Gamal Abd al-Nassar, second President of Egypt. It was among the most influential ideologies followed in the Arab world between 1950 and 1960.

underclass of Kurds' (p.33), which constituted the base for the construction of a kurdish identity, not attached to any social or class relation.

Kurdish identity was perceived by the central government as a threat to its authority and the building of a Syrian identity, consequently public manifestation of kurdish identity became criminalized. The Arab Belt initiative, the most famous example of Arabization policy, was aimed at changing the demographic fabric of the northern part of the country, through the confiscation of fertile lands in the governorate of Al-Hasakah and the donation of these to Arab families, to the detriment of the mainly kurdish population living in that area and owning those lands. These national persecution of the kurdish minority in Syria continued until the death of the Ba'athist leader in 2000 when he was succeeded by his son Bashar Al-Assad.

Responses to the Baathist government from the kurdish parties varied, some opposed while others tried to reform the system from within. Kurdish politicians were only allowed to participate in elections as independent, and some won seats during the elections of 1990. Nevertheless, minority groups remained strongly underrepresented in politics and bureaucracy and kurdish parties mainly remained underground, monitored by the government, and generally tolerated because of their non-violent nature.

Notwithstanding its official position towards Syrian Kurdish minorities, the Ba'athist government allowed the presence since 1980 of training camps of the PKK, the Kurdish movement born in Turkey and led by Abdullah Öcalan. Although born in Turkey, the PKK began to promote Kurdish identity and to gain support in the districts of Afrin and Ayn al-Arab. With the rapprochement between Turkey and Syria in 1998, the movement was formally expelled from the region, maintaining nonetheless a clandestine presence.

In 2002 the KCK⁷ was created, a coalition between PKK and other allied groups which had as its aim that of implementing Öcalan's ideas in various middle-eastern countries. In Syria a branch, the KCK-Rojava, was set up in the northern part of the country. In 2003, PYD⁸ and YPG⁹ were created as "successors" of the PKK in Syria. The YPG were a sort of paramilitary wing of the party which remained dormant until 2012.

In 2004 in Qamishli what we may consider the first kurdish violent demonstration in Syria in the last century occurred. On the 12th of March, a riot exploded during a football match after some Arab fans raised picture of Saddam Hussein, who had been recently responsible for the Anfal Campaign¹⁰ against Kurds in Iraq. During the funerals of the Kurds fallen victims in the riot, the demonstration widened reaching also other kurdish cities and even some kurdish neighbourhoods in Damascus. In Qamishli a statue of Hafez al

⁷ Kurdistan Communities Union: it acts as an umbrella organization of those parties trying to implement the democratic confederalist model, among which PKK, PYD (after 2003), PJAK (Kurdistan Free Life Party), and PÇDK (Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party)

⁸ Democratic Union Party: Kurdish democratic confederalist party.

⁹ People's Protection Units: mainly kurdish-armed wing of PYD, today leading member of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

¹⁰ In the context of this campaign against Iraqi Kurdistan in which the Iraqi politician Hassan al-Majid acted in orders of Saddam Hussein, between 50,000 and 182,000 Kurds lost their life.

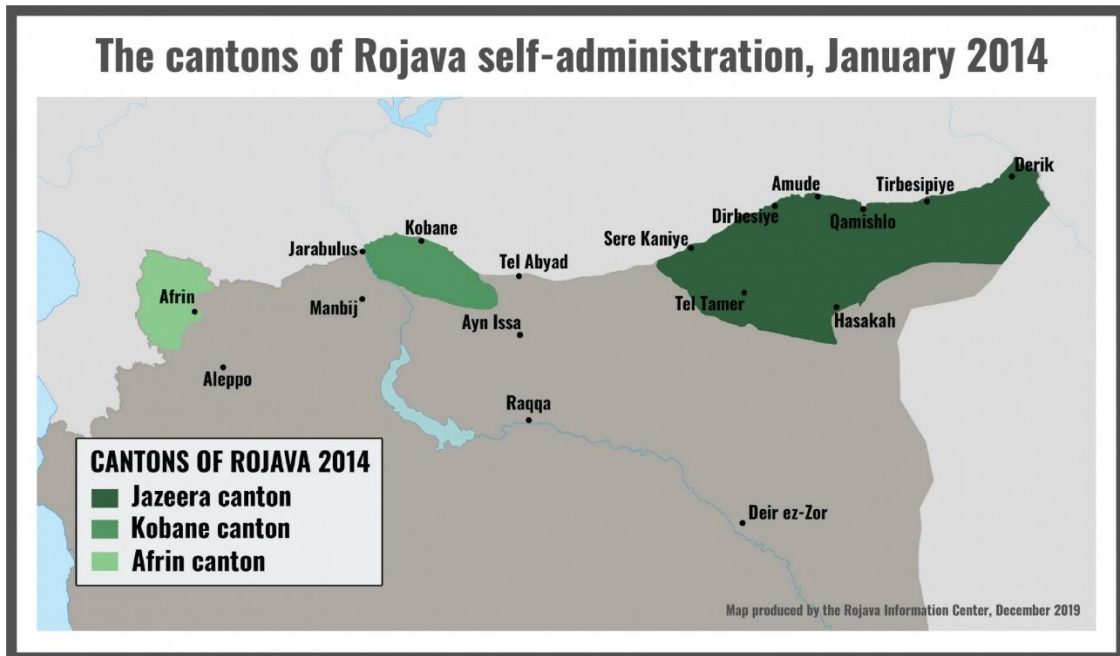
Assad was destroyed, and the Ba'ath party headquarters were set on fire. The response was harsh as it could easily be expected, one thousand Kurds were arrested, thirty killed and probably more than one hundred fifty were injured by the authorities.

1.4 2011-2014

It is with the civil uprising against the regime of Bashar al Assad in the vaster context of the Arab Spring of 2011 that Syrian Kurds had a real opportunity to change their condition. The uprising prompted a series of rushed reforms by the government of Bashar al-Assad, among which the granting of citizenship to a large portion of the state-less kurdish minority. When the situation escalated into a civil war, the Syrian opposition gained control of several regions, and the Syrian government retired its troops from the northern region in 2012 leaving control to the local militias of the re-established YPG, in what seemed an attempt to keep the kurdish militias out of the general unrest in the country. With respect to the degree of involvement of Kurds in the first phase of the Syrian crisis, it must be considered that the revolutionary forces in Syria are of a fundamentalist and nationalist orientation and a collaboration between the two fronts, even if against the Ba'ath party, would have been unthinkable.

The Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC) was formed in March 2012 with the union of PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) to establish a joint leadership of the towns of Kobane, Amuda and Afrin. The territory was gradually extended and YPG together with his female wing, the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) began fighting mainly against the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamist militias such as the al-Nusra Front. In 2013 the KSC was dissolved when the PYD entered in the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) coalition with other parties. A constitution was announced in July 2013, written by the PYD for an autonomous Syrian Kurdish Region. The three Afrin, Jazira and Euphrates regions declared autonomy and the interim constitution was approved in 2014.

The three regions on which the division of territory in three cantons is based varied in the ethnic distribution of populations. The most diverse with respect to both ethnicity and religion was the Jazira or Hasakah region. Here Kurds, Arabs, and Assyrians were the three largest groups and had a heterogeneous presence in the area: for example, while Hasakah had an Arab majority, Assyrians were concentrated in the Kabhour Valley, while the border with Turkey and Iraq was inhabited mainly by Kurds. In the area surrounding Kobane and in the city, according to the 2004 census, Kurds constituted 90 per cent of the population. Finally, the region between Afrin and Kobani also comprised Turkmens and Arabs, while Kurds were more dispersed.



1.5 Kurdish fight against DAESH

In the meantime, in September 2014 (The Guardian, 2019), more than one hundred thousand people, prevalently Kurds, were forced to escape the north of Syria after DAESH had occupied more than sixty villages in the region of Kobane. The area had been a target in jihadist missions since August 2013 as it could have helped them in moving militants from Al-Anbar (Iraq) to Syria. Already before August 2014, there was a large diaspora of Kurds residing in the region towards the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq (KRI) to seek asylum (Caputo, 2018a). Furthermore, in this period DAESH had already attacked Yazidis in the North of Iraq. It was in this occasion that PYD and PKK, providing a fundamental support to the fight against DAESH, captured the attention of the international community as a viable option for fighting the jihadists and the conception of PKK as terrorist militias started being reconsidered.

During the occupation, only YPG members remained to defend the region from the jihadist offensive, promptly joined by the few of Kurds from Turkey (mainly PKK) who had managed to pass through the border closure punctually imposed by Erdogan. At the end of October, the Kurdish fight with jihadist had received media (BBC, 2014) and international attention and the United States had started launching some air attacks against jihadist forces, moreover, some Free Syrian Army militias and 150 peshmerga from Iraq had joined PYD and PKK.

The unusual coalition managed to repel the attack at the end of January 2015. After the victory over ISIL, the YPG entered in an alliance with the United States, condemned by Turkey. From May to July 2015, YPG and YPJ were occupied in what they titled Operation Commander Rûbar Qamishlo (Western al-Hasakah Offensive) at the end of which they managed to connect the two cantons of Kobane and Jazira, liberating the area dividing the two cities from jihadist forces.

On October 2015, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are founded in which Kurds, Arabs, and Christian-Assyrians cooperate with the support of France, USA and the rest of the international coalition fighting DAESH, with the exception of Turkey. Erdogan had been unhappy with YPG's closeness to PKK and in February 2016 Ankara started bombing kurdish territories.

Nevertheless, in March 2016 in Rmelan the Democratic Confederation of Rojava – Northern Syria was declared by TEV-DEM, the umbrella organization comprising of the parties occupied in the establishment of a federalist system in northern Syria. A draft for a new Constitution was presented in July 2016, meeting the opposition of the nationalist KNC, and approved in December, renaming the region Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

On August 2016 while the city of Manjib is liberated by the SDF, Turkey and FSA join forces and launch the Operation Euphrates Shield with the aim of blocking both jihadist offensive and kurdish expansion. Among the bombing targets were in fact also villages controlled by the YPG¹¹. At October Turkey opposed the widespread intention of launching an offensive to free Raqqa with the SDF. On the other hand, Kurds were asking for support in the establishment of the self-administration of Rojava in exchange for their participation. Operation Euphrates Anger was launched in November 2016 to liberate Raqqa and it was decided that the Arab part of the SDF would have been employed, mainly to avoid ethnic tension with the Arab inhabitants. The city of Raqqa was evacuated before the attack and on 17th October 2017 it was definitively liberated by SDF and USA, although left almost completely destroyed by the ISIL occupation. On 20th October, in the celebration for the victory the militants were united under a flag portraying Abdullah Öcalan (YPG Press Office, 2017).



1.6 Turkish hostility and the Olive Branch operation

At the beginning of 2017, when Trump took office, Erdogan was celebrating the success of FSA in liberating a part of al-Bab (Al Jazeera, 2017), announcing the following targets of Manbij, which had

¹¹ Villages of Jeb el Kussa and al Ararneh were bombed on 28th August (Caputo, 2018a).

already been liberated by the SDF and was now under Arab-Kurd control, and Raqqa. This was, anyway, and later proved to be, rather overstated considering that several months had been necessary to the FSA to enter the much smaller city of al Bab.

At the beginning of February Erdogan met with King Salman of Saudi Arabia (Osservatorio sulla Sicurezza Internazionale LUISS, 2017a). Notwithstanding the hostilities between the two countries, Erdogan managed to convince King Salman to establish a no fly zone in the areas that Ankara and FSA had freed from DAESH, leaning on Saudi Arabia's hostility towards Iranian presence also in Syria.

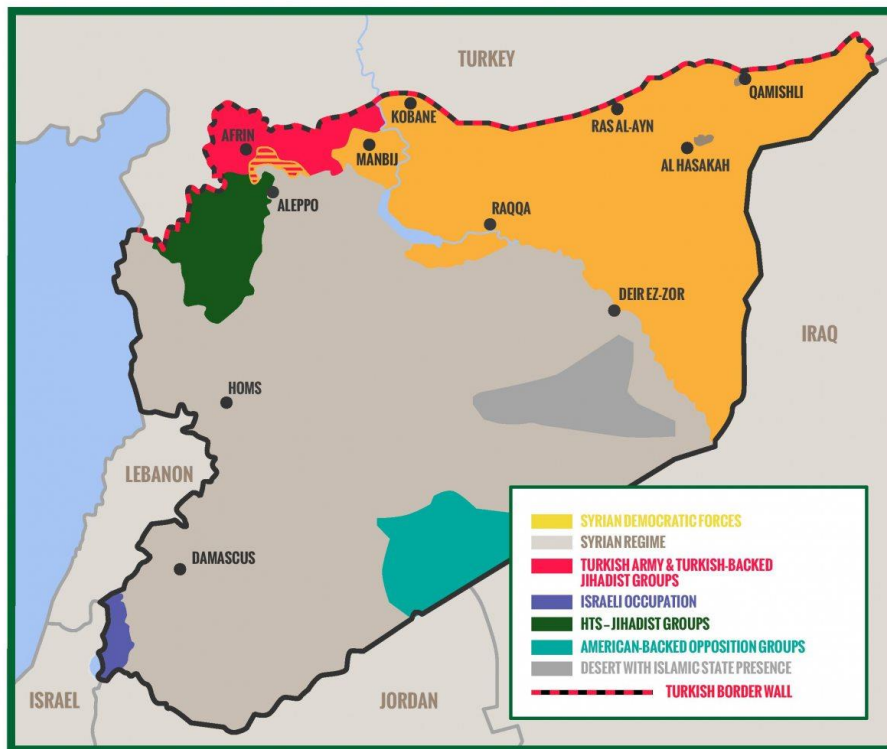
In March 2017 Putin and Erdogan met in Moscow (Osservatorio sulla Sicurezza Internazionale, 2017b): the latter hoped for an alliance in creating a security zone free of both ISIS and YPG. They met again on the 13rd of November in Sochi where Erdogan will lament the participation of Kurdish forces to a Syrian's People Congress organized by Putin and which was to be hosted a week later in Sochi (Atlantic Council, 2017). The conference took place on the 20th of November (The Guardian, 2017) where Assad, Erdogan, Rouhani, and Putin finalized the decision to create four de-escalation zones in Syria, with an assurance of non-interference by external actors. Moreover, in the same period, but in the context of the Geneva talks on Syria, a request was made for Assad and Syrian opposition to participate to another Syrian's People Congress in January, to elaborate a new Constitution and organize election under the supervision of the UN (Osservatorio sulla Sicurezza Internazionale LUISS, 2017c). This will, however, all be worthless since Ankara and FSA on one hand and Syrian militias on the other, will restore military activities before the second congress.

In January 2018, the United States manifested their will to create a force charged with protecting the borders and reflecting in its composition the ethnic composition of the area. SDF would have contributed to half of the militia, mainly to provide order and experience. Notwithstanding Washington efforts to convince Turkey of the necessity of such a project to be employed, Erdogan could not tolerate that Kurdish militias be positioned at its south border (Osservatorio sulla Sicurezza Internazionale LUISS, 2018a). Regardless, opposition to the project came also from Russian and Syrian fronts.

On the 20th of January 2018 Ankara launched its Operation Olive Branch, starting to bomb observation posts of YPG in the Afrin region, with the alleged aim of freeing from terroristic forces (Osservatorio sulla Sicurezza Internazionale LUISS, 2018b) not only the Afrin region but the entire area at east of the Euphrates. On 18th March Turkish militias occupy Afrin and refuse any negotiation with the SDF, considered a terrorist organization. In the middle of June, the YPG, after an agreement between USA and Turkey, accepted to retire his militias from Manjib, and it was established that troops from Turkey and the United States will be responsible for jointly patrolling the area. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) the Turkish operation was responsible for the

displacement of more than one hundred and thirty people, with a majority of Kurds from Afrin (UNOCHA, 2018), fearing that forced demographic changes could be imposed by FSA and Turkey.

SYRIA: AREAS OF CONTROL MAY 2019



Map produced by Rojava Information Center, May 2019

2. The model

As previously mentioned, when the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK) was created in 2002, it was built as an “umbrella” under which Kurdish liberation movements of Turkey (PKK), Syria (PYD), Iraq (PÇDK¹²) and Iran (PJAK¹³) could gather in the project of implementing and realizing democratic confederalism, a model elaborated by the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. This constitutes, in fact, the base for the aspirations of Rojava’s Canton-based Democratic Autonomy.

‘In establishing this Charter, we declare a political system and civil administration founded upon a social contract that reconciles the rich mosaic of Syria through a transitional phase from dictatorship, civil war, and destruction, to a new democratic society where civic life and social justice are preserved.’ (Charter of the Social Contract, 2014, Preamble)

2.1 Öcalan, PKK, and Bookchin

In Turkey, as in Syria, Kurds had undergone and are still undergoing a process of repression and assimilation to the Arab majority. The Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 with the aspiration of becoming part of western democracies but, nevertheless, showed a consistent incapability of recognizing the distinct identities of minorities existent in the region. After a harsh repression of Kurdish revolts between 1925 and 1938, Turkey became determined

¹² Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party

¹³ Kurdistan Free Life Party

to concretely eliminate the existence of Kurds: kurdish language as well as any expression of kurdish cultural identity was made illegal. This prompted a militant reaction recognizable in the creation, between the seventies and eighties, of a movement of kurdish liberation, advocating for the recognition of kurdish cultural, linguistic, and political rights. On this path, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan, a student of political science in Ankara, with the objective of creating a separate socialist nation state for Kurds. In 1982 the Constitution still in force in Turkey was adopted, which reads:

‘The State of Turkey, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish.’ (Turkish Constitution, art. 3)

In 1984 the PKK opened an armed revolt against the state, which led in the following decades, to 3700 victims from both fronts and the destruction and depopulation of around 3000 kurdish villages (Human Rights Watch, 1996). Since 1991 the first Turkish anti-terrorist law¹⁴ allowed for everyone who sustained, also peacefully, kurdish rights, to be persecuted as a terrorist.

In the same year, the Soviet Union fell, and this prompted the beginning of what will be a long phase of reconsideration of those Marxist and Leninist socialist ideas which now appeared useless for Öcalan's cause, in their dogmatic and authoritarian expressions. In 1993 he declared a unilateral cease fire and abandoned the nationalist and separatist aspiration of the PKK, to embrace an approach more focused on equality, democracy, and recognition of universal rights.

In 1999, Öcalan was captured in Kenya and accused of treason. In the trial that followed, he declared during his defence:

‘It is a matter now of determining the democratic criteria for sharing fraternal life freely, together, on a reciprocal social historical basis, not to establish who is right, who is wrong, who lost more, caused more harms or who is strong and who is weak. We must found our democracy together and develop it.’ (Öcalan, 1999: 67)

Öcalan was condemned and sentenced to death. Fortunately, when some years later Turkey asked to enter the EU it was made mandatory for it to eliminate death penalty and Öcalan was given life sentence. During the time in prison, Öcalan expanded his studies and between 2001 and 2002 became interested with the work of Murray Bookchin. Bookchin too had abandoned the Stalinist ideology to embrace a vision more focused on direct democracy and the ‘ecology of freedom’(Bookchin, 1981) than on the revolution of the proletariat.

Öcalan read two of Bookchin's works in particular: Ecology of Freedom (1981), of which we will speak more extensively in the next paragraph, and Urbanization Without Cities (1992). In the second, the anarchist traces the tradition of municipal assemblies back to the greek *ekklesia*, and to the communes of Italy in the middle ages and reconstructs their history up to the Commune of Paris and to those of revolutionary Spain in 1936. He auspices a municipalist revolt against the capitalistic nation state.

The result of the contamination of Öcalan's search for a solution to the problems of the Middle East with the anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalistic and democratic ideology elaborated by Bookchin, can be distinguished in his prison

¹⁴ Act No. 3713 on the Fight Against Terrorism.

works (Öcalan, 2007; Öcalan, 2011c; Öcalan, 2012) and in particular in his manifesto of Democratic Confederalism (Öcalan, 2011a). These publications broke the isolation of the leader from the party and determined an ideological shift both in the PKK and in its Syrian counterpart, the PYD. His renewed ideology was the fuel that allowed the parties of the KCK to ride the wave of civil unrest in Syria and ultimately to launch the confederalist experiment in Rojava.

Although the two scholars never met, in 2004, two years before Bookchin's death and one year before Öcalan's Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan is issued¹⁵, two intermediaries of Öcalan came in contact with the anarchist from Vermont. In the brief correspondence that followed, reported by Janet Biehl, Öcalan described himself 'as a good student of yours [Bookchin]' (Biehl, 2019: 73) and, according to A. S. Ahmed, declared that 'the Kurdish freedom movement was determined to successfully implement your [Bookchin's] ideas' (Ahmed, 2017).

2.2 Conceptual pillars of Self-Administration in Rojava.

At this point, it will be obvious to the reader that an analysis of the theoretical universe of these two scholars is essential to comprehend the foundations on which the experiment in Rojava rests upon. This chapter proposes itself to do so through the analysis of a number of essential concepts which constitute the fundamental pillars of both Öcalan's and Bookchin's ideology and of the 'new democratic society'¹⁶ that the KCK auspices for Rojava and, eventually, the Middle East.

2.2.1 Nation state and hierarchy.

Both Bookchin and Öcalan describe the nation state as something artificial. This artificiality is not to be intended as the simple characteristic of something created by human beings and not existent "at the beginning". It rather underlines an extraneity of the nation state with regards to the characteristics of human life, something which is unescapably in sharp contrast with the best expression of human nature. The nation state often seems and is predominantly described as the last rung on the development ladder of human institutions. However, both scholars rather consider it the last rung on the ladder of human hierarchical systems, the final expression of all types of human domination, first of many capitalism and sexism.

Öcalan himself writes on the first page of his manifesto of democratic confederalism:

'So far [...] there seemed to be only one viable solution: the creation of a nation-state, which was the paradigm of the capitalist modernity at that time. We did not believe, however, that any ready-made political blueprints would be able to sustainably improve the situation of the people in the Middle East. Had it not been nationalism and nation-states which had created so many problems in the Middle East?' (Öcalan, 2011a: 7-8)

Bookchin as well, in particular in his *Ecology of Freedom* (1981), after reconstructing the emergence of hierarchy in human life and its progressive invasion of all its aspects, challenged the assumption for which western institutional development is considered the only development option possible.

¹⁵ Later published in 2011 as a pamphlet with the name of "*Democratic Confederalism*"

¹⁶ From the Preamble of the Charter of the Social Contract, in both 2014 and 2016 versions.

‘Until recently, our prevailing system of domination not only blinded us to the full history of our own social development; it also prevented a clear understanding of alternative social developments - some vastly better than our own, others as bad but rarely worse. If these developments are to provide us with alternative ethical and technical pathways to a better future, we must first re-examine the vast legacy of domination that has so far blocked our vision.’

(Bookchin, 1981: 88)

Therefore, the legacy of the nation state appears to both scholars as the ‘cage of the natural society’ (Öcalan, 2011a: 12). It does not only impede the emergence of alternative systems on a factual level, but also represses, through the tyranny it exercises in its assimilation with the notion of development, the very possibility of considering the existence of any alternative.

The modern nation state emerges at the end of the eighteenth century in perfect concomitance with the advent of industrial revolution and, consequently, the logic of capitalistic profit and accumulation: when the bourgeoisie, after having already taken part in this economic process, has wanted to become a significant actor of the political one as well. This, far from constituting a mere historical fact, is the root of Öcalan account of nation states. According to him, the nation state is the mean through which the bourgeoisie could justify the imposition of a capitalistic system and the consequent logic of exploitation. The concept of nation itself as something united and indivisible, allowed the constitution of ‘the most developed complete monopoly’ (Öcalan, 2011a: 10) on all forms of power and coercion.

However, the nation state, as did the forms of domination preceding it, needed an ideological umbrella under which the people could come to understand it as something superior and unquestionable. While for pre-statal tribes, religion and divinity fulfilled this function, for the new modern nation states, which were developing in a contemporaneity moulded by positivism and enlightened secularism, religious notions had to be substituted by another form of ideological veneration. It was, therefore, nationalism with its notions of motherland and national unity, that substituted religion in preserving the ideological community of the modern state.

“Assuming that we would compare the nation-state to a living god, then nationalism would be the correspondent religion.” (Öcalan, 2011a: 15)

A more latent function of nationalism is that of religiously justifying the contradictory and mystifying dynamics of the relations built on profit-maximizing accumulation, which appear to the people as a mysterious and impenetrable complex in which the struggles for political and economic power are indistinguishable (Öcalan, 2011a).

If nationalism is the mean through which the capitalistic system is justified at the eyes of the people, bureaucracy is the tool that preserves the system. Being the state a transcendental fact, bureaucracy is its physical extension that protects its structures. It ensures a good functioning of all the attributes of the statal complex, allowing the relevant actors in the game to get profit in terms of economic and political power (Öcalan, 2011a).

While this is all considered essential for a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary society, the fundamental guilt of the state is, according to the two scholars, the pressing tension towards homogeneity exercised by it on society. Since a complete monopoly of human processes is clearly fundamental for the fulfilment of the chief function of the modern state, diversity and heterogeneity have to be suppressed, in the name of a national identity. Therefore, the modern state and the existence of ethnic, religious, or cultural plurality are mutually exclusive.

Functional to the constitution of a ‘single national culture, a single national identity, and a single unified religious community’(Öcalan, 2011a: 13) is not only nationalism, as was explained before, but also the very notion of citizen, which according to Öcalan “has been created as a result of the quest for such a homogeneity” and “defines nothing but the transition made from private slavery to state slavery” (Öcalan, 2011a: 13).

In this homogeneity is recognized the main factor of artificiality of the modern state. This is in fact one of the chief pillars of Bookchin’s quest for alternative societies more aligned with human natural impulses. In “The Ecology of Freedom”, Bookchin explained in great detail that while traditional sciences and understandings of the world have been worried with cataloguing and standardizing natural (and human) behaviors, evolution itself is based on the rise of complexity of any system. Just like the natural one, human systems become developed in as much they are more and more diversified. It is not, thus, a forced homogeneity and suppression of minorities, for example, that may bring to a “developed stage” (whatever that may be defined as) in human societal evolution, but the acceptance, embracing and the participation in the spontaneous increasing diversification of nature and therefore, as we are natural beings, of human life.

‘The capacity of an ecosystem to retain its integrity depends not on the uniformity of the environment but on its diversity.’ (Bookchin, 1981: 24)

It becomes clear, therefore, how this line of reasoning, found kurdish parties particularly responsive, especially considering the traits of kurdish history discussed in the first chapter. And it is not difficult, then, to comprehend why, in Bookchin in particular, among the other scholars read by him in prison, Öcalan recognized “a kindred spirit’(Biehl, 2019: 72).

Finally, sexism is found by both scholars as being the chief mechanism through which the modern state maintains and replicates its dominance. Women are a resource of free labour and procreation, and as such have been treated and stigmatized in the course of history. Patriarchy is at the heart of the system of hierarchies on which the modern state is built. It is the chief hierarchy and the primal one, the one which has allowed the replication of these type of power relationships at all levels of society.

‘Without the repression of the women the repression of the entire society is not conceivable’
(Öcalan, 2011a: 17)

According to Bookchin, sexual hierarchy developed before class divisions although it is not true that sexist norms were already present in the division of labour of these pre economic societies. There was a division of labour, but this was based on the complementarity of the distinct role of the sexes, and on the different characteristics that modelled their functions in the preliterate civilization. In a simplified and generalized way, it can be said that women’s lack of mobility, mainly due to the dependence of the offspring, made them specialise in the sedentary tasks of survivance. Differently, men spontaneously specialized in the defence of the community, because that was the function that they were more fit to fulfil. However, this division did not determine any patriarchal system or any hierarchy between the sexes. With the emergence of power, and of separated interests, social life became hierarchically compartmentalized and determined ‘a conflict between the domestic and civil spheres - one that extends hierarchy into domestic life and results not only in the subjugation of woman, but in her degradation’(Bookchin, 1981:

80)¹⁷. The birth of these separated interests is determined by the emergence of the elders as a distinct subgroup in the community, who, seeking to protect their fragile position, introduce alliances, groups of power and a generalized process of institutionalization of the communities. The constitution of centres of power determined a modification of the character of the society, the strength and stability of which came to be identified with the functions fulfilled by the male, mainly fight, defence, and domination.

In conclusion, as already underlined earlier in this paragraph, the discourse on the general inadequacy of the modern state is particularly significant with regard to the Kurdish question. According to Öcalan, the quest for a separated Kurdish nation would only benefit a minority of the Kurdish society and could only emerge from the separated interests of a very privileged segment of the Kurdish minority. Thus, not only a democratic solution is necessary for solving the Kurdish question, but, most importantly, one that rejects capitalist claims on a heterogeneous community of people. This, moreover, is not only desirable for Kurds but would constitute a viable solution to the various problems of the Middle East in general.

‘It does not make sense to replace the old chains by new ones or even enhance the repression. This is what the foundation of a nation-state would mean in the context of the capitalist modernity. Without opposition against the capitalist modernity there will be no place for the liberation of the peoples. This is why the founding of a Kurdish nation-state is not an option for me.’(Öcalan, 2011a: 19)

2.2.2 Libertarian municipalism and 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.*’(Öcalan, 2011a: 33)¹⁸

This first principle of democratic confederalism unravels the primal function of the model elaborated by Öcalan. Democratic confederalism was thought (as libertarian municipalism was by Bookchin) as an alternative, or rather a response, to modernity with the aim not only of offering another option to the modern state, but, most importantly, of averting and scaling down the influence that it exercises on society and the damages it already created. Despite the fact that the two cultural universes employed by the two scholars are necessarily different from one another, Öcalan’s model is widely indebted to the one elaborated by Bookchin in the course of his career. Therefore, in explaining their characteristics, nearly no distinction will be made between the two.

Bookchin began re-elaborating his leftist ideals after the Second World War, considering the socialist paradigm obsolete in sight of the new developments that the world was undergoing. He found that industrial workers could not be anymore the actors to place confidence in for a revolutionary thrust able to create a more sustainable future. The factory, on the other hand, appeared too limiting and minimizing to be the adequate realm for the creation of an inclusive and definite reconstruction of society. Dictatorship of the proletariat did not constitute anymore a

¹⁷ Although an attempt was made here to sum up the reconstruction of the emergence of hierarchy in Bookchin, the reading of this chapter of *Ecology of Freedom* is suggested, not only for a better comprehension of the emergence of patriarchy, but especially, because of the interesting and crucial dissertation about the role of the shaman in the introduction of political interests.

¹⁸ Emphasis added. This is the first of the five principles of Democratic Confederalism.

desirable aim in terms of institutional reconstruction of society. Instead, the city and the municipality would be the arenas for a revolution conducted by active citizens seeking to establish a new democratic system of self-management based on direct democracy, ecology, and cooperation. In the last book published by Bookchin before his death, this revolution is advanced as the Third Revolution (Bookchin, 1996-2004) after the pre-industrial one against feudalism and the proletarian one against bourgeoisie. The fight at the centre of Bookchin's revolution is the one against capitalist state and domination, all social and economic hierarchy, sexism, racism, and dictatorships, while its essential tools are face-to-face democracy and decentralization.

As already explained before, the cultural paradigm to which the two quasi-identical projects referred are different, but a brief and not exhaustive analysis may be useful to give an idea of the universality of democratic confederalism / libertarian municipalism. Bookchin in his *Post Scarcity Anarchism* (1971) makes wide reference to the paradigm of the "Commune of the Communes" characterizing the anarchist aspirations of thinkers like Bakunin or Kropotkin.

'The elusive citizen who surfaced historically in the assemblies of Greece, in the communes of medieval Europe, in the town meetings of New England, and in the revolutionary sections of Paris must be brought to the foreground of political theory. For without his or her presence and without a clear understanding of his or her genesis, development, and potentialities, any discussion of the city is likely to become anaemically institutional and formal.' (Bookchin, 1992: 55)

While, therefore, the reference that Bookchin employs to elaborate the concept of decentralized, self-managed municipalities comes from the classical and European universe, Öcalan takes as a starting point the 'loose groups of clans, tribes or other communities with federal qualities' (Öcalan, 2011a: 23), characteristics of ethnic groups populating the Middle East, among which, of course, Kurds.

In explaining the merits of this project as opposed to the classic model of the modern state, Bookchin focuses on its ability to re-educate the individual to civic life. According to him, people have been deprived by the modern state of their natural role of active participant of the community and, consequently, of political life. Modernity rendered politics too distant and unreachable, while civic life and administration of society should be, and have been in the past, a matter strictly pertaining to individuals. Libertarian municipalism with its reliance on participation, gives the possibility to citizens to be again at the centre of the decision making process and to reappropriate society through assembly democracy. As Biehl explains, 'the individual and the community create each other in a reciprocal process' (2019: 66). The activity itself of deliberating, discussing, deciding, and implementing decisions creates the character of an active citizen.

'This eye-to-eye contact of active citizens was an organic politics in its most meaningful, protoplasmic, and self-fulfilling sense. Political assemblies were not mere audiences on which public officials practiced their arts of statecraft; they were legislative communities united by a reasonable commonality of shared public interests and ethical precepts.' (Bookchin, 1992: 52)

2.2.3 Participation and diversity

“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. [...]” (Öcalan, 2011a: 33)¹⁹

As just concluded, participation is the foundation of libertarian municipalism and democratic confederalism. Self-administration is organized on grassroots democracy, through the establishment of inclusive assemblies from the lowest level of society -neighbourhood- to the highest but merely administrative one -confederation or council-. Delegates represent lower assemblies at the higher ones, they are accountable to the assemblies that nominated them but not be understood as policy makers at a higher level: the only direct policy makers are citizens. All strata of society, the village like the city, need to be included in the confederated structure, every level of the community must have a forum to deliberate and participate in the decision making process. From this it follows that decisions will necessarily vary geographically.

This may signal in our “modernized” minds a fragmented polity, unstable and unmanageable. Of course, this is exactly what Bookchin and Öcalan were looking for in their model. If decisions are taken at the lowest level possible and by the actors that would be more immediately affected by them, apart from the obvious advantages in terms of policy making, the immediate result would be that hierarchies in the political and social realm are automatically destroyed and no one would be able to gain a role that could endanger the system.

As a matter of fact, differently from the modern state, self-government based on direct democracy has the utmost privilege of not depending on any type of homogeneity and his not amenable to the domination of the system by a particular group. According to Bookchin, while ecology and community would constitute matters of common concern, municipalism not only allows for the participation of each group present in a given municipality, but it enhances their possibility of expressing particular interests. The efficiency of this model lies in the fact that the assemblies at all levels would necessarily reflect the demographic of the territory and, therefore, will necessarily be truly inclusive of any ethnic, religious, social, or even occupational group.

2.2.4 Economy and ecology

The model of libertarian municipalism is a response, as already stated in this chapter, to the need of an alternative of polity that could provide the possibility of a more sustainable society, not only in social terms but also from an environmental and economical perspective. Embracing the project of libertarian municipalism, would entail the passage from a market economy, based on profit and accumulation, to a moral and sustainable one, based on limit, balance, and cooperation. This is done principally through the mechanism of scaling down and decentralizing the administrative units into smaller municipalities. This would made them easier to manage and more responsive to local economic and ecological needs.

A reformulation of the needs is indeed, according to Bookchin, at the basis of this passage. Capitalism has led us not only to produce ‘for the sake of production’ but also to consume ‘for the sake of consuming’(Bookchin, 1981:

¹⁹ This is the third of the five principles of Democratic Confederalism.

68). Which means that needs are not anymore the reason why economies produces, but rather needs are created in order to consume production, they became detached from human perception and control. Therefore, our perceived needs must be realigned with our rationally-assessed needs, the capitalist rule of abundance must be replaced by the primordial ones of usufruct, complementarity, and the irreducible minimum²⁰.

‘To break the grip of the ‘fetishization of needs’, to dispel it, is to recover the freedom of choice, a project that is tied to the freedom of the self to choose.’(Bookchin, 1981: 69)

However, decentralization does not negate the undeniable social and economic interdependence of the territories. Especially from an economic point of view, an autarchy of the single municipalities is not imaginable. Organs, assemblies, for the organized cooperation and coordination of the municipalities must be created at higher levels at which, as already described, local assemblies will be represented by delegates. According to Bookchin, these would be institutionalized through a ‘*confederation* - the interlinking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens’ assemblies and whose sole functions are coordinative and administrative’ (Bookchin, 1991).

A final pillar of the economic life of libertarian municipalism, is the municipalization, meaning the re-appropriation by the municipalities, of all aspects of economic life, which become integrated in the system of decision making. Economic resources and means of livelihood are owned by the municipality, in the sense that they are administered by them in the assembly and redistributed, also across municipalities, according to the needs of each municipality and its inhabitants– from each according to ability, to each according to the need.

2.2.5 Self Defence

It is clear at this point that a newly found self-administration would necessarily be in conflict with the existing institutions of the nation state and those of the capitalist system. Thus, according to Bookchin, a confrontation with these forces would be almost unescapable and an organ of self-defence necessary for the protection of the freedoms of the communes and their right to self-administration (Biehl, 2019). In Öcalan’s words the central aim of these forces would be ‘the defence of the free will of the society from internal and external interventions’(Öcalan, 2011a: 29).

Self-defence would have to be locally and democratically organized at the level either of the commune or of the confederation. Moreover, since they serve the commune, the militia’s duties would be established, and their activities supervised by the local assemblies. The leadership would be elected by both the assemblies and the militia and its composition would be ‘determined in equal terms and parts by both the political institutions and the confederate groupings’(Öcalan, 2011a: 29).

Finally, an important distinction must be made between the militias and the military apparatus of the nation state. These are fundamentally different, essentially in the fact that the military was created and systematically used by

²⁰ For the purpose of synthesis, usufruct can be defined as the possibility for every member of the community to take part in the control and administration of resources and to use and enjoy them as needed. The irreducible minimum is the rule by which a community ensures that every member has at his disposal a portion of resources sufficient to ensure a satisfying life. Complementarity indicates the cooperation between the different members and forces in a community, in which everyone participates according to its abilities and possibilities. These three concepts are treated by Bookchin in the second chapter (*The Outlook of Organic Society*) in *The Ecology of Freedom*.

the states, not only at the moment of their creation but throughout their history, as tools to maintain domination and establish monopolies outside and within the state, determining, moreover, a militarization of society. Self-defence militias are instead established with the precise aim of combating the existence of a monopoly of the armed forces. Their power and their right to exist rests in the will of the community, and it is exactly the preservation of the community's identity as a democratic self-administration that is their final aim.

2.2.6 Liberating Life

In *Liberating Life: Women's Revolution* (2013), Öcalan analysed the pillars on which the subjugation of women by the dominant man is founded, also providing the tools and the prospect of what he called a 'revolution within a revolution' (Öcalan, 2013: 59) resulting in the liberation of all women. Women constituted, according to the scholar, the first people to be colonized while male dominance, the first and more powerful monopoly ever exercised on society. Therefore, the imprisonment of women is at the basis of any imprisonment, on their exclusion is built the exclusion of any segment of society, their enslavement is the premise for the enslavement of any people.

The family, defined as the 'man's small state' (Öcalan, 2013: 35), constitutes the first centre for the survival and replication of the subjugated position of women. In this sense, it was created in its traditional form, exactly with the purpose of replicating the mechanism of hierarchy and providing once again stability to the wider system of domination and dynasty designed around the modern capitalist state. Marriage and family are the first determinant of women's slavery: marriage replicates state patterns of power, giving it to the male; it ensures unpaid labour of women and the production and upbringing of the offspring (which provides growth for society); it constitutes the bulk on which the rest of society is modelled. The traditional system of marriage determine for women a political, intellectual, and economic segregation which makes family the fundamental tool to legitimate any type of monopoly. Nevertheless, according to Öcalan, family must not be removed as an institution but transformed, eliminating power relationship within it, and remodelling its functions. If transformed, family can become the 'most robust assurance of democratic civilisation' (Öcalan, 2013: 38).

As already described earlier in this chapter, sexism is one of the fundamental weapons used by capitalism in its ideological warfare which has the aim of gaining and preserving its monopoly on thought. Ideological suppression of women, operationalized in gender discrimination and sexist paradigms, is functional and necessary for perpetrating the physical and political one not only on women but on society in general.

'The most effective way for sexist ideology to function, is by entrapping the male in power relations and by rendering woman impotent through constant rape.' (Öcalan, 2013: 43)

Moreover, the development of capitalist society determined the exclusion of women from the economy. According to Öcalan, women are and have always been the real creators of the economy defined originally as the Greek *oikonomiā*, that is the administration of the household, the 'humanitarian and real economy' (Öcalan, 2013: 46). With the passage from the *oikonomiā* to the market economy, not only was the woman deprived of her central role but every economic force -including her- was put at the effort of the logic of profit. The 'woman destitute of economy' (Öcalan, 2013: 47) produced the greatest social paradox of our society, arbitrarily depriving domestic labour and upbringing of children of its economic value, and, thus, leaving the woman excluded from the 'economically valid' (and politically

represented) portion of society. At the same time, it immobilized her in this position, removing the possibility for her to re-gain her prominent position in the economic realm.

The condition of women in the Kurdish society is peculiar as the history that generated it. Kurds have been, historically and for a long time, excluded from the process of modernization and of creation of modern states. This allowed them to maintain more than other populations in the area the semi-tribal structures that characterized the majority of their history. Therefore, the conservation of such tribalism determined a preservation of the matriarchal structure on which it was based, even in the modernity. Nevertheless, recent history affected, especially from the economic point of view, the Kurdish family. Scarce resources, the absence of freedom, the active persecution against them, deprived Kurdish people of their dignity and women became the object of the frustration resulting from these processes. For this reason, a resolution for the condition of women in the Kurdish society strictly depends on the democratic resolution of the Kurdish question itself. It is not casual, according to Öcalan, that the fight for Kurdish freedom and against the ‘internal feudalism’ (Öcalan, 2013: 40) of Kurdish society has attracted since the eighties a great number of female combatants, either within or outside the PKK.

Therefore, as Öcalan concluded, the question of the modern state cannot be detached from that of women, from both an analytical and a practical point of view. The two phenomena cannot be understood separately, and gender equality must be the pillar of any new democratic and egalitarian society. Firstly, the “sisterhood” of women must be the driving force of the revolution, and it must have a distinct place in it. A movement calling for the general liberation of people or of Kurds is not enough for determining the liberation of women as well. Distinct and parallel but independent institutions, parties, NGOs, and movements are necessary that can put women in a position of power in relation to the aim of their struggle and how to achieve it. Secondly, the struggle must be fought also on the analytical and ideological battlefield. Any such movement should be based on what Öcalan defined *Jineoloji*, that is the science of the *jin*, the Kurdish word for women and life. This is characterized by an analytical approach which puts the condition of women at the centre but links it with issues of hierarchy, domination, oppression, and science. It has the aim of clearing a path for women liberation through the reconstruction of the truth of women in a re-definition of the traditional fields of mythology, religion, science, and philosophy. The prominent position of women in the process of liberation of Kurds and the rest of the middle east would be, according to the scholar, the base, the peak, and the synthesis of the struggle against the capitalist modernity, entirely built on male dominance.

“Woman’s success is the success of society and the individual at all levels.” (Öcalan, 2013: 58)

3. Rojava Self-Administration

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the general structure of the system put officially in place in Rojava in 2014, with attention to particular aspects which represent peculiar achievement of the self-rule. As already described in the first chapter and as will be further examined in the next, the project of self-rule has in the last years encountered grave obstacles that add to the already problematic situation caused by the civil war, the fight against IS, and Turkish hostility. Its form and realization has changed in response to these events, to the more recent COVID-19 emergency, and to necessities created by the problem of legitimization by external actors (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019). Therefore, the structure and institutions described in

this chapter are still, to this moment, and will persist to be unstable and volatile, and the system they are implementing, still very much in the making.

The first part of the chapter will concentrate on the development of the self-administration project, it will proceed with the phases of the evolution of the council system, its levels, and structures. In the second part of the chapter, the discussion will concentrate on several specific areas, that I deemed functional to comprehend the changes that the MGRK and DDA system is producing in the liberated territories. The first area will be education and learning, then self-defence, and the new justice system.

3.1 Charters and development of the project

The self-rule project was already adopted by the PYD since 2007, under the Baath rule, in the form of isolated local projects which, however, were not aimed at actively challenging the authority of the Syrian state. Actually, according to Kapp, Flach and Ayboga (2016), already before 2003, when the PYD was founded, committees and assemblies were established clandestinely by the PKK on the territory. In March 2011, the weakening of the Assad government provided the momentum for the expansion of this system, which, albeit still fragmented, now comprised almost half of Rojava (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016). In August, approximately three hundred delegates from the territories already organized established the People's council of Rojava (MGRK). Local armed groups of self-defence were introduced in this phase alongside the umbrella organization of TEV-DEM which had the exact aim of coordinating the effort and comprised of a variety of political and civil actors (political parties, civil, youth and student movements and organisations, collectives), although the driving force and the most influencing actor was undoubtedly the PYD.

PYD and TEV-DEM started expanding their influence and military control first in the Afrin region, then also in Kobani, in Qamishli, and in the Hasakah province. In July 2012 government personnel was displaced from the northern part of the country and mobilized in the struggle against rebel groups in Aleppo. This left the MGRK free to occupy the institutional void and to further establish itself as the administrative authority in the region.

In November 2013²¹ an interim decentralized administrative system was established by PYD and TEV DEM, with the division of the territory in the three cantons of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane. A committee of sixty representatives from the cantons was charged with the task of drafting a shared constitution for the

²¹ At this point the Erbil agreement of July 2012 had failed. This was an attempt to establish a joint administration by PYD and KNC (Kurdish National Council), united in the newly created Kurdish Supreme Council (KSC). I decided to exclude from my description of the events the rivalry between the KNC and PYD because it would have required an analysis of the political values and programmes of the political parties which, while widely interesting, would have diverted the discussion from the topic of our analysis. Nevertheless, the second chapter (Kurdish Political Parties: a Comparison of Political Values) of Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019) or the is recommended for an exhaustive and comprehensive analysis of the history and political paradigms of the two parties. Moreover, the fifth paragraph (The Supreme Kurdish Council: Desteya Bilind a Kurd) of the sixth chapter (Democratic Autonomy in Rojava) of Knapp, Flach, Ayboga (2016) is also recommended with regards to the events of the Erbil Agreement.

cantons. This was presented on 29 January 2014 with the title of Charter of the Social Contract, in the name of ‘the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens’ (preamble of the Charter of 2014). After the Charter was issued, each canton declared autonomy and issued a declaration of Democratic Autonomy, establishing accordingly a transitional democratic autonomous administration (DAA). In these same days (22, 23, 24 January) the Second Geneva Conference for Syria was taking place, from which MGRK and PYD were excluded, after having asked to participate with a delegation in December.

The establishment of the Charter and of the cantonal level was a response to the problem of legitimacy, on both the local and international levels. On one hand, non-kurdish population had some scepticism with regards to the principle of direct and participatory democracy, one with which they were not familiar, as opposed to that of party democracy. On the other hand, the MGRK needed support and some recognition of legitimacy on the international level, and, therefore, to devise a political solution which could be understood and favoured by actors outside Rojava. A parliament, with legislative and executive council, was clearly a more traditional choice. Moreover, the transitional administration was to include as many people and parties as possible and the Charter was negotiated and adopted by fifty actors, between parties and various organizations (the KNC refused to participate).

The Charter, although the precise words are never used, represents an evident commitment to the model of democratic confederalism, with particular attention to direct democracy, environmental sustainability, ethnic pluralism, human freedom, and civic participation. The use of the term “Social Contract” is indicating the distance between Rojava and classical political realities (where the primary source of law is traditionally a constitution). The Kurdish administration does not aim to build an independent state, but ‘a political system and civil administration founded upon a social contract that reconciles the rich mosaic of Syria through a transitional phase from dictatorship, civil war and destruction, to a new democratic society where civic life and social justice are preserved’ (Preamble of the Charter).

In the Charter, kurdish population and kurdish language are not put in any prominent position. Three languages are declared as the official ones of the cantons, Arabic, Aramaic, and Kurdish in Jazira and Arabic and Kurdish in Afrin and Kobane, with the possibility to adopt other as needed, at the local or cantonal level. With regards to human rights, moreover, the Charter represent the unique example of a constitutional document recognising as inviolable all ‘fundamental rights and freedoms set out in international human rights treaties, conventions, and declarations’ (article 20). Even more innovative is article 37, which recognizes the right to seek political asylum to ‘everyone’. In article 30, the rights to ‘work, social security, health, adequate housing’ and to ‘free and compulsory primary and secondary education’ are guaranteed. Furthermore, article 42 establishes that economy must be aimed at guaranteeing general welfare and ‘the daily needs of people’ and at ensuring ‘a dignified life’.

Particular attention is reserved in the Charter to the emancipation of women as a tool for the emancipation of society. Articles 27 and 28 are reserved to the establishment of equality between women and men and women's right to participate in social, economic, cultural, and political life. Articles 47, 65, and 87 establish a forty percent quorum for minimal presence of each gender in every institution. In addition, efforts are being made to reduce cases of underage marriage, polygamy and honour killings, violence and discrimination through legislation forbidding these practices and a new justice system, that is among the greatest achievements of the self-rule project.

In early 2016, the necessity grew to create a bigger overarching coordinating body in response to the expansion of the territories liberated by the SDF outside the cantons. Moreover, the PYD was once again excluded from the Geneva Peace talks in February 2016. In March 2016, a constituent assembly of 31 parties and 200 delegates held a two-days meeting in Ramalan to establish a federal system. A draft of the new Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was approved on 29 December 2016. It established a Democratic People's Conference, a body representing 'all the peoples' living in the Federation, including all ethnicities and 'doctrinal and cultural groups'. Its task is that of guaranteeing the 'right to establish self-administrations' and 'doctrinal, ethnic and cultural freedom by law', organizing society democratically and 'enabling it to live within economic and ecological balance' (article 57). The pre-existing structures of cantons, districts and local assemblies would constitute 'the basis of the democratic federal system' (article 57), while the people's conference 'makes the legislature and generally represents the people and groups' in the Federation (article 58).

3.2 Governance and power structure

As explained in the preceding paragraph, the structure and the bodies in the self-administration changed over time and new ones were created as the system expanded. To explain the different levels of the administration, the assemblies, and their functions it is useful to distinguish the stages in which different strata of governance were created.

3.2.1 Before 2011

Before the creation of the PYD, it was the PKK, already present in Rojava since the 1980s, to guide Kurdish activists in the clandestine formation of councils and working groups, which dealt with matter of local justice and women's issues, taught Kurdish language, and discussed political developments. After 2003 this system was expanded by the PYD in Kurdish majority areas in Syria. Albeit isolated, the local projects were already an important step towards the construction of the self-administration and the experience gathered here will be functional to the subsequent expansion of the system. According to Knapp, Flach and Ayboga (2016) already in 2007 Rojava's cities and the Kurdish neighbourhoods in Aleppo²² were part of the

²²The commune of Aleppo, while an interesting and early example of the functioning of the council system, was not treated within the scope of this final paper because it would have represented too long a diversion from the chief topic of this chapter. Nevertheless, the reading of the fourth paragraph "The commune of Aleppo" of the sixth chapter "Democratic Autonomy in

council system . Nevertheless, the system was still fragmented and lacking structures in the rural areas or in some neighbourhoods.

3.2.2 2011-2014: The MGRK system and TEV-DEM

When the MGRK was established in 2011, the council system already involved almost half of the Kurdish population of Rojava (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016). The TEV-DEM was established as the elected coordinating body of the MGRK, representative of all people, groups and democratic parties participating in the council system. In this period, the state was still present, although the services provided were more and more scarce. The MGRK and the councils gradually took on tasks that the state was not performing or not performing adequately, establishing themselves as a viable alternative to the central state.

As participation in the system rose, the neighbourhood councils became inadequate as the last level of the council system and a lower level was created with the Commune, corresponding more or less to the residential street. The system of the communes was then expanded to the rural areas and with the Revolution of July 2012 in Kobane, the MGRK finally became the only responsible authority in the liberated areas.

The MGRK is based on four levels: the commune, the neighbourhood or the village, the district, and the MGRK. At each level, commissions are formed in the following eight areas: women, defence, economy, politics, civil society, free society, justice, ideology.

▪ The Commune

The Commune is the base level, it generally can comprise of twenty to more than two-hundreds households in a residential street or a whole village. The role of the commune is to meet the local needs of people. Every commune has a *mala gel* (people's house), which is open 24/7 and where the commissions and the coordinating board of the commune and, in some cases, the commune itself meet and discuss. At this level also a *mala jinan* (women's houses) is present, interested in assisting on women-specific issues and solving conflicts in the family and cases of patriarchal violence.

The Commune meets every one or two months, the meetings are open to all people living in the street or in the village. Two co-chairs, a man and a woman, plus one or two representatives from each commission of the commune constitute the coordinating board of the commune, which is elected biannually or annually and is subject to an imperative mandate²³. They meet every week, and all residents are admitted to the meetings.

▪ The Neighbourhood / Village community

Seven to thirty communes make a neighbourhood, and seven to ten villages make a village community. The neighbourhood consists of the coordinating boards of the communes and villages

Rojava" in Knapp, Flach and Ayboga (2016) is advised for purposes of getting a deeper understanding of the events related to the councils of Aleppo and their defence against FSA.

²³ The assembly can recall the members or the whole coordinating board if it goes against the will of the majority.

represented in it. The coordinating boards of this level are again composed of representatives of the commission and by the two co-chairs. The female co-chair can be elected only by the women's council at this level, while the male co-chair is elected by the council in plenary.

- **The District**

The district includes the city and the village near it, which are represented through the coordinating boards of the neighbourhoods and the village communities. The coordinating board is specular to those at the lower level, it usually ends up consisting of thirty people circa and is referred to as TEV-DEM. In the TEV-DEM also social movement or parties are represented by five persons each, with no distinction between bigger and smaller groups.

- **MGRK**

The People's Council of West Kurdistan consists of the TEV-DEMs of all the district councils. Also at this level, a TEV-DEM is elected as coordinating board and eight commissions are formed, representing all Rojava. Meeting of the MGRK for all Rojava have been problematic since 2014 because of the territorial discontinuity but separated MGRK and TEV-DEM for each area (cantons) have continued to meet and function separately.

- **The Commissions**

The commissions is where the self-administration truly takes place. At the lowest levels, commissions in one or two of the eight areas mentioned before may lack. Participation in the commissions is not limited in number and can involve up to twenty people. Apart from the women's commissions, all other commissions have a forty percent gender quota.

Women's commissions exist as parallel councils at each level of the MGRK and are formed by the activists of Kongreya Star. The women's commissions are the only ones that can elect the female co-chair to the coordinating board of each level. Women's communes are engaged with women through visits at home and social and political activities. They are also the first level for the resolution of cases regarding patriarchal violence. Moreover, women's councils also have their commission which work along the ordinary ones and may also establish sub-commissions in sub-areas.

The defence commissions (usually made of three people) organise the security and defence of the district, also training young people. Since 2014, HPC (Society Defence Forces) are created as the first line of defence in case of attack by outside.

Economic commissions are charged with the task of making sure that each household have the necessary resources and are responsible for construction, administering agriculture and public companies, collecting donations, and organising the maintenance of the system. Cooperatives are created with the aim of transitioning towards an alternative economy.

The politics commissions are made of the parties supporting the MGRK system. They maintain contact with them and the other political groups part of the MGRK and are responsible for diplomatic relations. Civil society commissions organise the occupational groups and represent them at the MGRK levels. Free society commissions provide for the families of martyrs, and other people in particular need.

The Justice commissions are the peace committees, the base of the justice system. They have gender parity, with more or less ten members, and decide by consensus. The cases of domestic violence or in general regarding patriarchal violence are decided by a separated women's peace committee.

The ideology commissions deal with education. They open and manage school and academies for each area and prepare seminars for the communes and neighbourhood councils. Sub-commission may be formed and include those dealing with press, art, language, and culture in general.

3.2.3 The Cantons and the DDA

With the Social Contract of 2014, the cantonal level was created, and each canton issued its Declaration of Democratic autonomy, forming the Democratic Autonomous Administrations. Each DDA is administered by a legislative and an executive council and a supreme constitutional court. The legislative council is a sort of regional parliament and is elected for four years. The legislative council elects an executive council and its two co-chairs. Ministries are created and distributed among the parties.

3.2.4 2016: The Federation

The 2016 Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria introduced, as already explained, an additional layer to the DAA structure. The Charter instituted a democratic people's conference, a legislative body representing all the people of the Federation. The members of the conference are elected within the cantons according to the electoral law of each with a four-years term. The conference is administered by two co-presidents and four deputies forming a "presidency office".

The Conference works with Committees: they draft legislative projects which, then, are proposed to the general conference. Among other tasks (article 59), the conference 'shapes general policy and decides the strategic goals', 'declares the state of peace and war', 'prepares or amends the social contract', is responsible for the approval of the general budget, general amnesties and the accession of a region or canton to the federation, and 'discusses and approves the charters and treaties' concluded in the name of the Federation.

3.3 Education and learning

In order to fulfil the purpose of this chapter a selection was made of three fields of institutional development that can exemplify how the philosophy behind the model of democratic confederalism is being applied in the region. The attempt to establish an efficient educational system started just after the self-rule

administration developed in July 2012 and is still in progress and at danger, due, of course, to the practical difficulties deriving from the civil war. Nevertheless, efficiency is not the paramount criteria in the so-called “war of education” by activists in Rojava, as here and in the context of the revolution, education acquires a whole set of new different and crucial meanings.

Education is, first of all, a tool to achieve the revolution itself, through a sort of collective training to the principles of self-rule and collective discussion. Education of this kind and collective learning practices are open also to the adults and the elderly and are aimed at forming active and ‘politicized’²⁴ citizens through the creation of the revolutionary culture. Secondly, education contributes to identity reconstruction not only of Kurds, but also of the other ethnicities, more or less institutionally ostracized by the Baath regime. Languages and cultures are recuperated and regained through the use of different cultural and linguistic curricula in the schools. Thirdly, education is functional to stress integration in society. It does so through a pedagogy of coexistence, explicitly devoted to educating the different cultures and ethnicities of Rojava to reciprocal acceptance. The education system is a way for the people to make a passage from the old mentality of the Baath regime, characterized by authority and homogenisation, to a new mentality based on the pillars of the revolution, most notably diversity, feminism, ecology, and democracy (Boyle Espinosa, 2020).

The model of basic education is built on three different curricula linked to the three majoritarian cultures present in the region— one in Kurdish (*kurmançî*), one in Arabic and one in Aramaic. The first six years of studying are counted as primary school. In the first three grades, student study their own curriculum’s language, while in the fourth they choose a second language, and in the fifth a foreign one (normally English). Languages are studied through the intermediate and high school, which terminates with the twelfth year. Apart from the differentiated curricula, students share school spaces, celebrations, multicultural festivals, and collective discussions, in a continuous process of education to mutual respect and tolerance (Stefani and Ruge, 2019).

Education is believed to be not only scientific but also moral and to be the depository of a public function. Students in schools confront each other in discussions and debates on moral issues and behavioural questions. Participation is, not surprisingly, actively encouraged. Learning and teaching styles, with assessment methods, vary greatly in the activities so as to include every student in the learning process. Curricula and methods are also discussed by the teachers with the families and the students themselves, to create the most inclusive system possible. At the root of this practice, is a rejection of unidirectional teaching methods which turns into a continuous intersubjective discourse built on the reciprocal interchange between students and teachers.

²⁴ This term was used by Salih Muslim (former PYD co-chairman) in an interview with Janet Biehl (2015) in November 2014, as cited in the mentioned article.

The same objective of forming conscious and active individuals able to discuss and construct ideas, constitute the basis of the higher education institutions in place at the moment. Universities and academies are aimed at forming people in fields regarding the previously cited pillars of the revolution (diversity, democracy, feminism, ecology).

The Agriculture faculty, for example, was opened in Qamishli in 2016. Here students learn agricultural skills, in particular diversification of crops, agricultural engineering in order to devise ecological innovations and a self-reliant economy. Agriculture is a mean for reappropriating the agricultural identity and culture of which people in the regions were deprived as a result of the forced underdevelopment imposed by the Baath regime.

Another prominent instance of the application of democratic confederalism in higher education is represented by the Mesopotamian Academy, opened in Qamishli in 2014. The Mesopotamian academy offers courses mainly dealing with sociology and history. The objective of the faculty is to reconstruct the history of denied people, creating a new social and historic sciences free from the ‘enslavement of thought’ imposed by hegemonic forces (Biehl, 2015). Through the free exploration and discussion of social issues with teachers, students learn ‘to educate themselves’ in a ‘struggle for social freedom’²⁵ (Biehl, 2015).

A last but equally crucial instance of high level education is the Yekîtiya Star Academy (Biehl, 2015), founded in Rmelan in 2014 to form female revolutionary activists. Here students are taught *jinealojî* and how the recovery of ‘knowledge stolen from women’²⁶ (Biehl, 2015) and establishing an egalitarian study of history and social sciences. Economics is dealt with for the point of view of *oikonomia*, with the woman being its central actor²⁷. History is centred on the emergence of the state and power dynamics in pre-Mesopotamian societies and the difference between the two. The students explore the political mechanisms and organisations of Rojavan civics and are also formed on gender construction and on how it will be women active participation in society to change patriarchal understanding of it.

3.4 Self Defence

Self-defence forces of the YPG and YPJ were crucial for Rojava, not only for security and military action itself, but for legitimacy purposes as well: on the international level (with the fight of the SDF against ISIS) and on the domestic one, where people living in liberated villages became acquainted with the ideology behind their establishment, began to contribute to the fight and relying on them for their security.

In article 15 of the Social Contract of 2014, YPG is described as the ‘sole military forces of the three Cantons’ established with the purpose of preserving the security of the DAAs. Beside the People’s Protection Unit (together with YPJ) the Asayish forces ‘are charged with civil policing functions’. The YPG

²⁵ This expression was used by an instructor of the Academy in an interview with Biehl reported in Biehl (2015)

²⁶ From an interview with instructors of the academy reported in Biehl (2015)

²⁷ This point of view on economics is described in the second chapter of this thesis, in the paragraph “*Liberating Life*”.

and YPJ are devolved to the purpose of legitimate self-defence. The conception of legitimacy is based on the so-called “theory of the rose” according to which every social unit or being is entitled to establish its own way of defending itself. Self-defence is not about defending an institution (the state), but about defending people: it constitutes, in the end, not only a defence method but, most importantly, a self-empowerment and educating method (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016). The protection units never attack to offend, but only to defend. The only exception to this rule is the liberation of areas under DAESH control in which the majority of people sympathize with and want to be part of the self-administration: it is not a process of expansion but of liberation.

As for conscription, it was introduced in some areas (e.g., in the Jazira canton in July 2014 and in Afrin in 2015) for men and, on a voluntary basis, for women. It was established that a basic service of six months must be completed by everyone over eighteen and under thirty years old. These young recruits are not part of the YPG, although they can join afterwards if they want, and generally an attempt is made to keep them away from military fighting. Moreover, self-defence units have been established in 2015 at the neighbourhood level to work together with Asayish in securing internal protection.

3.4.1 People’s Protection Units (YPG, *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)

Created clandestinely in 2004 after the repression of the Kurdish protests in Qamishli, the YPG were originally constituted by few self-defence units of young people aimed at protecting Kurds when the regime attacked or arrested them (YPG commander Silan Karacox in Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016). When the revolution began in July 2012, these small units were joined in the fight by experienced PKK militants, their existence was formalized in the YPG, and training camps and academies were started. The YPG militants usually operate on the borders of liberated areas and are sided by the Asayish in the battle against external threats only when an emergency occurs, as did during the Manbij campaign in 2016 in Kobane and Hasakah.

3.4.2 Women’s Protection Units (YPJ, *Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*)

YPJ was set up as a force composed of both men and women - although the latter were already majoritarian. Crucial strength and experience was provided by women fighting in the YJA star (the PKK’s female wing active since 1984) who came back to their motherland to contribute to the liberation and to the establishment and training of an exclusively female self-defence. Legitimacy was acquired for them as a female wing of the YPG through an ideological process of sensibilization towards the necessity of a liberation of women alongside the liberation of Rojava.

YPJ can be considered to be of a dual nature. On one hand, they fight on the same level of their male counterparts and are crucial especially in the fight against IS²⁸. On the other, they design the path for

²⁸ In an interview conducted by Knapp, Flach and Ayboga (2016) with YPJ commander Ruken Jirik, she reported that jihadists have particular fear of being killed by a woman, because this would prevent them from reaching Paradise, which is what drives

women's own process of liberation and empowerment within society through reappropriation of the essential and most symbolic means of male dominance, weapons, and military fight. According to Knapp, Flach and Ayboga (2016) thanks to their participation in YPJ, women's involvement in social and political life is progressively becoming automatic.

3.4.3 Training and education

Training of self-defence force is integrated for both men and women, in the academies and in the training camps, by a solid ideological basis, aligned with the principles of democratic confederalism. For example, in *Sehid Silan* academies and in the *Sehid Jinda* Defense academy the students also study history, politics, society, and nature (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016).

In almost each larger city in the liberated areas is a YPG and YPJ centre that represents them and deals with registrations. Generally, rules about enlisting establish that people that are too young, mothers, only children, or have health issues are not accepted. Exceptions are made for particular cases in which people are, for example, escaping violence or forced marriage, although under the age of eighteen they will not be allowed to fight.

3.5 The new justice system

With the refusal of the state and its agencies also came the rejection of the traditional ways to establish security and administer justice. A new justice system was created based on a reformulation of the very concept of justice and law. The traditional understanding of 'written' law, and justice, as something administered and established from above, born from 'the desire of the ruling class to give permanence to customs imposed by themselves [...] and maintained only by the fear of punishment' (Kropotkin, 1886²⁹) is not only clearly incompatible with the principles of democratic confederalism but also inadequate for dealing effectively with the problems that lie at the basis of criminality, especially in Rojava.

The new justice system is based on the concepts of restorative and transformative justice, while consensus is the tool for their achievement. Restorative justice is based on the use of mediation and reconciliation practices to achieve individual appeasement between the parties (both the offender and the victim) and social peace at the community level. Transformative justice aims at transforming both the individual and the society through a rehabilitation and re-education of the offender. Consensus indicates the effort to reach a solution, rather than a conviction, which will be agreed upon by and advantageous to both parties.

them to suicide and martyrdom: "They're afraid of women [...] when we fight, we will trill loudly, so they'll be sure to hear our voices".

²⁹ In his formulation of the concept of law, Kropotkin makes a distinction between the written law (coercive and functional to the domain of the ruling class) and customary law (consensual and functional to society's wellbeing as a whole).

Therefore, death penalty was abolished and life imprisonment, which amounts to a maximum of twenty years of detention, can only be given in cases of extreme violence like murder, terror, or torture. In any case, reclusion is considered a last resort and the detained individual is considered someone necessitating a process of rehabilitation, rather than a traditional criminal. Particular attention is addressed to the living conditions in prisons and to their eventual conversion in rehabilitation centres (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016).

3.5.1 Basic structure

The structure of the justice system follows that of the councils, in the sense that different strata of the system exist on different levels of governance. The key objective is always to administer justice and reach reconciliation at the lowest possible level, that of the commune. At this level Peace and Consensus Committees³⁰ (the justice commissions) constitute the basis of the justice system with the goal of reaching consensus between the parties through mediation and dialogue. PCCs are the main locus of social justice, they constitute the main innovation of the system and what really distinguishes it from traditional justice system. If resolution is not reached by the PCC at the commune level (note that PCCs are not authorized to imprison people), the case is taken to the PCC of the neighbourhood.

When this also fails, the case is taken to the people's courts which exist at the city and regional level. The judges in the people's courts are nominated by the justice commission, also among people living in the commune or area where the conflict took place. Justice platforms are an alternative to the people's courts, which again attempt to reach reconciliation through discussion of the case in an assembly of approximately three hundred people, among which CSOs and people from the commune. The decision is taken again by consensus or, in alternative, by voting. At the regional level four appellate courts exist while one cantonal/regional court includes all three cantons.

At all levels, parallel committees and courts exist which are managed and composed exclusively by women and the related organizations. Their activity is focused on cases of patriarchal violence and will be better described later in this paragraph.

3.5.2 The activity of the PCCs

The PCCs, like councils, had already been established in kurdisch neighbourhoods before 2011. They were managed by the elders of the community and were mainly employed to appease conflicts among tribes or families, but also between individuals. The modern PCC members are now elected by and among the members of the commune, and most of them are over 40 years old. At the neighbourhood and district level, the assemblies are composed by delegates of the lower PCCs. A typical PCC is generally made of around ten people, who are deemed by the other residents capable of mediating between conflicting parties.

³⁰ Also referred to as Peace and Reconciliation committees or simply Peace committees, later referred as PCCs

Usually, the PCC invite both sides of the conflict to a meeting in their premises upon a complaint or go directly to the persons involved to hear both versions of the story. Depending on the reason of the conflict, the PCC may call upon experts or organizations whose experience can be useful in that specific dispute.

After hearing the opinions of the experts and the versions of both sides, the PCC produces options for reconciliation. These proposals always have the aim of protecting the interest of both parties. If the first proposition is not accepted by either one of the parties, the case is re-analysed by the same PCC and a second solution is proposed. If this is again refused, the case is passed on the higher level.

The decision to start a trial in court is made by one or both parties to the conflict. In this case, an investigation will take place and the decision of the court will be enforced. No attempt at reconciliation and peace-building is made at the court level. Therefore, there is generally a strong intention to solve the conflict, often inter-ethnic or inter-religious, at the level of PCCs. The type of mediation offered by the assemblies does not end with the acceptance of a solution but proceeds at the community level with the rehabilitation of the offender and a re-education process of the community as a whole through initiatives of collective learning and training on the issues, managed by civil society or specialized organizations.

3.5.3 Patriarchal violence

The approach just described has enormous implications when it comes to cases of domestic and patriarchal violence, childhood marriage, polygamy, etc.. These cases can only be treated and deliberated by women. That is why, as already explained, every assembly and court of the justice system has a parallel and specular body composed only of women and related organizations, like Kongreya Star or the women's houses (*mala jin*).

The separate women's communes, together with the organizations, intervene, first of all, with preventing these cases through a continual process of eradication of feudal narratives and understandings of the role of women in the community. They organise educational work, group discussions, seminars and so on. When a dispute arises they mediate, make house visits, and talk to both the victim and the offender, and try to solve it. When necessary they offer assistance and protection to women threatened by patriarchal violence.

When the matter is not resolved by the organization or the commune, it is taken up to the separate women's PCC and then follows the same track as other cases, in parallel all-female assemblies and courts. The PCC and the courts continue to work with the organization at all levels and to attempt at resolving cases through reconciliation. A conviction and imprisonment of the offender, although it protects the woman in the short-run, does not help in solving the problem at the root and transforming society. Supervised

education is preferred and ends only when complete rehabilitation of the offender, assessed by experienced trainers, is achieved.

This transformative justice system is of course dependent on the trust of people toward the reconciliatory approach of the PCCs. According to several scholars (Ayboga, 2014; Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016; Duman, 2017; Kakae, 2020), this has proven to be the case. The numbers of prisoners has lowered considerably³¹, as did the honour killings, while mediation by PCC has reportedly been preferred to undergoing trials in court. People, also of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, have progressively started to rely on PCCs for all types of disputes, from inter-tribal conflict to debt liability.

4. The Current Situation

As briefly explained at the end of the first chapter, since 2018 Rojava and the system of the communes has been encountering challenges primarily caused, on one hand, by Turkish hostility, on the other and more recently, by the covid pandemic. Notwithstanding territory losses to both Turkey and jihadist or rebel groups backed by Turkey, the system is resisting where the territory remains under the control of the SDF. This chapter is aimed at giving a quick overview of what happened in the last four years, the consequences that these events had or are having on the people in Rojava and the current challenges that the system has been encountering in the last year.

4.1 Turkish Occupation and erasure in Afrin (2018)

On the 20th of January 2018, Turkey started launching airstrikes against a hundred locations in Afrin, in what the government had labelled “Olive Branch Operation”. The invasion was justified by the fact that ‘more than 700 attacks have been launched from the Afrin area under PYD/YPG control against Turkish cities’, as declared by Erdogan’s spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin (CNN, 2018), later belied by investigations conducted by BBC³² (2018). Both civilian and YPG and YPJ positions were targeted in the attack. In March, ISIS and opposition militias used as proxy on the territory by the Turkish government, placed Afrin under artillery shelling, targeting also the only operating hospital in the region. SDF retreated and by 18 March Turkey had completed the invasion of the region, getting and maintaining control through administrative and military presence of both Turkish and proxy forces (Rojava Information Center, 2019a). According to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (2019), between four and five hundred civilians were killed during the operation, while others were executed after. Moreover, according to Human Rights Watch (2019) civilians were killed while trying to flee the region and more than three hundred people were displaced.

According to the Rojava Information Center (2019a), in the first year of occupation, new councils, mainly composed of male members politically tied to the Turkish government, were set up to replace the

³¹ As cited by Mirian Kakae (2020), the number of prisoners in the city of Sere Kaniyê have decreased from 200 before the revolution to 20 in 2016.

³² Investigations found that only 21 attacks against Turkey were launched from Syria, of which 15 could attributed to the area of Afrin.

communes. Moreover, ‘Turkish-backed militias have engaged in looting, confiscation of property, abduction for ransom, forced displacement, extrajudicial killing, and sexual violence against women’: in particular, the cited data indicate nearly three thousand kidnappings, at least fifty abductions of women and fifty five instances of rape (Rojava Information Center, 2019a: p. 6). The aggressors are reported to be predominantly members of Turkish proxy militias or other violent groups and the attacks mainly fall in these categories: kidnappings for ransom (sometimes the same person was kidnapped repeatedly and each time a ransom was asked), politically or ethnically motivated attacks and kidnappings, murder of residents of Afrin defending themselves from the armed groups, shootings by Turkish snipers from across the border.

In addition to the atrocities committed by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces, an ‘economic occupation’ was conducted according to the Rojava Information Center (2019a) and documented by numerous sources (BBC, 2019 and Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2019). An agreement was made between the new councils and Turkish proxies as a result of which 75% of Afrin’s olive harvest, reportedly worth of eighty million USD, was sold abroad as Turkish.

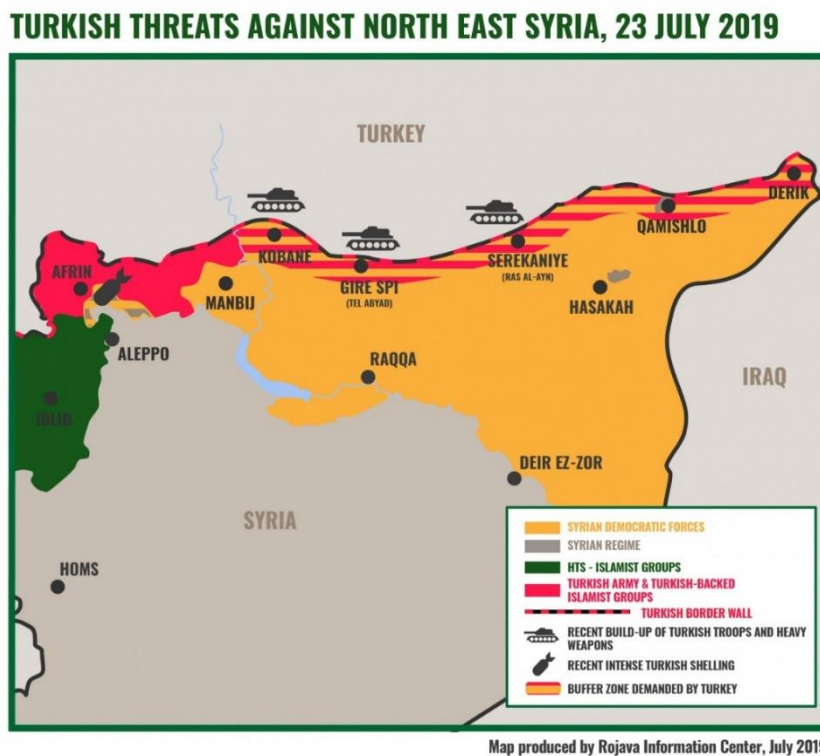
What can be called an identity war was also conducted to the detriment of Kurdish and other ethnicities living in the region. Kurdish language was banned, and Kurdish names of streets, cities and public spaces were removed and substituted by Turkish ones. Turkish became the official language for schools and public institutions. Statues of Kurdish heroes were destroyed. An ethnic cleansing by the integralist groups is targeting the Yazidis who failed to flee at the beginning of 2019: according to the RIC (2019a), many of them have been abducted, sexually abused, assassinated, or forced to convert to Islam, their houses have been turned into mosques, their villages occupied, and their shrines destroyed.

Since April 2019 homes, and public building were demolished in order for Turkey to start the construction of a wall separating Afrin from the rest of Syria, which was completed in April 2020. In addition, Turkey is ethnically occupying the land through demographic engineering. While in 2011 Kurdish people constituted more than 90% of the population, today 70% of the people living in the area are Turkmen and Arabs. This demographic change is carried on by either occupying the homes of displaced inhabitants or by confiscating them from their owners (RIC, 2019a).

4.2 Peace Spring operation: the invasion of NES (2019)

In Summer 2019, Turkey was pushing to occupy a buffer zone on the Turkish border of Rojava in order to relocate Syrian refugees from outside Rojava. In an attempt to contain Turkish aspirations, USA negotiated an agreement with the YPG. YPG and YPJ would have dismantled their operational bases at the border, at their place US troops would have set up to oversee the interested area. While YPG respected their part of the agreement, in October 2019, after months of build-up of Turkish troops at the border, Trump arranges with Erdogan the withdrawal of his troops, leaving Turkey free to invade the buffer zone. The invasion was once again justified on grounds of protecting the border from attacks from inside northern

Syria, although, according to the RIC (2019) only one attack had been launched from across the border against Turkey throughout 2019; thirty had been instead those launched by Turkey against ‘civilians and farmers living along the border’.



On October 9, Turkey starts to carpet bomb the cities of Kobane, Serekaniye, Tal Abyad and Qamishlo. In less than one week two hundred thousand people were displaced (for which refugee camps were set up near Hasakah and Qamishli), self-defence militants were killed, and the cities were bombed, targeting in particular buildings and people of the women organizations and communes, civilian and humanitarian infrastructure, medical staff, and infrastructure. On the 13th, an agreement was made between Damascus and the self-administration, that allowed Syrian troops to enter the territories under SDF control to deter Turkish offensives. A five-day ceasefire was negotiated on October 17 between Erdogan and US vice president Mike Pence in exchange for a full withdrawal of SDF from the border. It was then extended to an additional one hundred and fifty hours by Putin, when SDF moved thirty kilometers away from the border and from the cities of Manbij and Tal Rifaat. In the meantime, Serekaniye and Tel Abyad had already fallen under jihadist control.

The damages and casualties caused by the invasion and continued after the occupation are difficult to assess, as international and local press has fled the region, which was then closed to all media and humanitarian organizations not licensed by Turkey. As of December³³, according to the RIC (2019b),

³³ Most of the following data are taken from the report of the Rojava Information Center, Turkey’s War Against Civilians, which dates 1st December 2019.

already three journalists had been killed by Turkish aircraft. As a consequence, most of data gathering has been allowed by phone footage spread by the militias themselves.

No less than 90 civilian victims of the invasion were identified by the KRC (KRC, 2019), plus 2400 injuries caused by artillery shelling, gunshot, and airstrikes. Moreover, numerous attacks have been registered in territories outside the supposed field of operation, between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye. Turkish random shelling has targeted civilians and totally destroyed civilian homes in the villages of Ayn Diwar (near Derik), Perrik (a Christian village near Ayn Diwar), and Serrik, in the city of Qamishlo and in west Kobane periphery. RIC has gathered testimonies by US military sources of Turkish-backed forces executing civilians. Indiscriminate shelling was described by refugees who had fled Sere Kaniye, but was registered also along the border in general, far from military targets, and especially targeting people attempting to return to their home.

Numerous attacks (at least twelve in one month³⁴) were registered also targeting health and humanitarian infrastructure, vehicles, and staff. The attacks included not only shelling, airstrike, heavy weapons fire, but also, in some cases, the abduction and execution of health workers. The gravest humanitarian impact was caused by the repeated targeting of the Allouk water station, near the Turkish border, from 9 October onwards. Although the manipulation of the water flow in NES was a practice already used by Turkey, which has basically control over waterflow in the region, the direct targeting of the station has no precedent and, according to the UN, 450,000 people were left without water by the attack. Moreover, access to the station was prevented by Turkish-backed militias. Attacks have been also targeting a dam near Derik, a tension line of the Tishreen dam, an electrical substitution, powerlines, telecommunications facilities, and, most notably, road networks.

This type of targeting was aimed at both the expulsion of civilians from their homes and villages and at blocking cross-border aid to the occupied population. This has left the militias occupying the territory free to loot and destroy or occupy properties of the displaced people. In particular, a fatwa issued by the Syrian Islamic Council declared the fight against SDF, a jihad, giving in some way legitimation to looting and property crimes committed by TNA³⁵ (RIC, 2019b). In Sere Kaniye and Tal Abyad, all public property and cooperatives have been put under the control of Turkey. In particular, cooperatives of wheat were particularly damaged, as the wheat was looted and transported to Turkey. Also components of electrical infrastructure and reserves of diesel fuel were looted, causing power and fuel shortages in the cities and in the surrounding areas. Private properties in the two cities were seized or destroyed and 'marked' by the various militias, or by their militants individually, as their own (RIC, 2019b: p. 30).

³⁴ At page 11 of RIC (2019b) is a list and description of each attack registered by the RIC.

³⁵ Turkish-backed National Army, coinciding with Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Army. Their fighters are paid and sometimes trained by Turkey.

4.3 Covid-19 (2020)

After nearly a decade of civil war, Syria in general found itself predictably unprepared to tackle the covid 19 crisis. In the NES, in particular, the situation was worsened by the early interruption of the cease fire established by Turkey and Russia in March and by grave waves of violence in Idlib. Moreover, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, militias are using the crisis to weaken the civilian population (Atlante Guerre, 2020). The situation is particularly problematic in the widespread refugee camps by the obvious problems related to water and health infrastructure.

In the territory of Rojava, the invasion of Turkey and the long-lasting civil war, joint with the lack of international recognition, have made it nearly impossible to keep the population secure and actively fight the pandemic. In March 2020, according to the RIC (2020a), 600,000 people were internally displaced or refugees on a population of four million people circa, and 1,650,000 were in need of humanitarian assistance. The water crisis, determined mostly by closure of the Allouk water station for the reason explained previously, have caused more than 460 thousand people to be left without water. During the war against ISIS and the Turkey invasion, nine out of eleven public hospitals were damaged and the only two functioning PCR test machines, in the Sere Kaniye hospital, were seized. Only forty ventilators and thirty five beds in intensive care are present in the region. In this situation, while 1,200 test kits has been provided by WHO to the Syrian government, none was supplied to the NES.

In November 2020, according to an update by the RIC (2020b), NES was experiencing the ‘worst economic hardship in Syria’ and, as a result of this, 93% of the families were having difficulties in implementing the basic preventive measures. Quarantine has reduced people’s ability to work and make a sufficient income³⁶ but also the community’s ability to provide for the basic needs of people. Reportedly, one difficulty is convincing people of the existence of the virus. The biggest consequences have gravely impacted the functioning of the system engineered by the SDF in particular in regard to providence of public education, ‘financial service, legal service, and psychological support services’ (RIC, 2020b: p.2).

Conclusion

Many are still the obstacles to the full implementation of democratic confederalism in Rojava. At the time of writing, though it is not possible to gather reliable data on the actual condition of the population with regards to the coronavirus, the water crisis is worsening in the canton of Kobane and, as explained in the previous chapter, this has grave consequences on the possibility to handle the pandemic. According to Uiki Onlus (2021), in the last month (May 2021), thirty more water stations near Kobane have been closed due to Turkey’s reduction of the volume of water flowing in the canton, while seven were already out of service in

³⁶ According to the RIC (2020b), 48% of people have signalled that, due to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, their ability to make a sufficient income has been negatively impacted.

the past two months. As a result, more than eighty two villages in the Kobane area have remained out of clean water, in what is a full-fledged (and illegal³⁷) continuation of the war on the part of Turkey.

Nevertheless, democratic confederalism has been effectively implemented in the liberated territories, not only following, when possible, the founding principles of the model, but also having the expected effects on the problems of the local population, especially with regards to patriarchy and ethnic conflict. In fact, one prominent example of these results is the new justice system and how, since its implementation, both the cases of patriarchal violence and those of ethnic or tribal conflict leading to violent episodes has diminished drastically (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016 and Duman, 2017). Moreover, the collective practice of discussion and decision-making has reportedly reduced discrimination between ethnic groups (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, 2019).

Aside from the geopolitical considerations on the topic, the model itself and the fact that it could be implemented in such a situation sheds, in my opinion, a meaningful shadow not only on western understanding of Middle East countries and dynamics, but most importantly on our formulation of the concepts of democracy and power. In Rojava, as observed by Dilar Dirik (Dirik et al., 2017), real political power has been given to communities and people which, until ten years ago, had not been able to decide on the most basic aspects of life (what language to speak, for instance). These people have been able to implement the purest form of democracy, by gaining active and awake power in relation to the faith of their communities. In the wake of this success, our comprehension of society, of democracy, of diversity and of unity, of state, of power, of nature, of community, of justice, becomes misleading and the way we seek to propose solutions to the problems of others (and ours as well), inadequate, when the most obvious answer, to put the community at the centre, proves to be the successful one.

³⁷ Weaponizing of water flow by turkey is made illegal by the agreement of 1987 between Turkey and Syria, according to which Syria has a right to 500 m³ of water flow per second. A further agreement in 1989 between Syria and Iraq established that 42% of the water must remain in Syria, while 52% must go to Iraq. Turkey has been repeatedly violating the agreements since 2017, when it first started reducing water flow in Afrin.

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Introduzione

Il Rojava si è inserito nel dibattito pubblico occidentale e ha catturato l'attenzione internazionale tra il 2016 e il 2018, quando le Forze Democratiche Siriane (SDF), gestendo l'autoamministrazione in Rojava, sono entrate in coalizione con gli Stati Uniti e hanno sconfitto le forze jihadiste, che avevano preso il controllo di parte della Siria. La parte interessante di questa storia è, tuttavia, tutto ciò che non è stato detto nei numerosi articoli dedicati alla lotta dello YPJ e YPG contro DAESH. Il PYD, insieme ad altri partiti e organizzazioni, dal 2011 sta implementando il modello rivoluzionario di Confederalismo Democratico, elaborato dal leader incarcerato del PKK (controparte del PYD in Turchia), Abdullah Öcalan. Questa tesi ha lo scopo di spiegare questo modello apparentemente utopico, il pensiero politico e sociologico dietro di esso, e come e fino a che punto è stato implementato in Rojava.

1. Essere Curdi

Il Kurdistan è una vasta regione, divisa tra i quattro stati di Iraq, Iran, Turchia e Siria dopo la Prima guerra mondiale. Tale divisione ha reso i Curdi una minoranza etnica in ognuno di questi stati e li ha resi oggetto, nell'ultimo secolo, di politiche discriminatorie e repressive.

1.1 Identità Curda

Essendo i curdi un popolo storicamente frammentato geograficamente e tribale, i primi rapporti identitari tra curdi si sono formati proprio in funzione di queste dinamiche e di regole semifeudali, che hanno continuato a caratterizzare la vita curda fino al diciannovesimo secolo. Secondo Allsopp e van Wilgenburg (2019), infatti, già nel 1923 era distinguibile un'identità curda, consolidatasi con la necessità per il popolo curdo di distinguere sé stessi dagli "altri". Inoltre, una relazione economica si è sviluppata nel corso dell'ultimo secolo, in cui la marginalizzazione ha accomunato anche a livello economico i curdi dei diversi paesi, creando quasi una classe di emarginati a sé stante. Anche la religione ha occupato un ruolo importante attraverso la diffusione dell'islam sunnita tra la maggioranza dei curdi, e del sufismo, in particolare, tra i Curdi residenti in Siria.

1.2 Storia Recente dei Curdi Siriani

Nel 1923, oltre alla divisione del Kurdistan in quattro stati, fu stabilito dalla Lega delle Nazioni anche il mandato francese sulla Siria. Durante gli anni Venti ebbero luogo diverse proteste per la liberazione curda, la cui repressione violenta, però, portò i movimenti curdi in Siria a concentrarsi sulla preservazione della propria identità. Dopo l'indipendenza del paese (1946), l'identità siriana andò a legarsi sempre di più a quella araba, il che rese tutti i non-arabi, e in particolare i curdi, il bersaglio di un'arabizzazione forzata. Da una parte, poco investimento economico condannava le aree in cui i Curdi risiedevano ad una condizione di sottosviluppo rispetto al resto del paese e dall'altra, esplicite politiche discriminatorie li escludevano dalla vita politica e sociale e negavano la possibilità di manifestare identità culturali diverse da quella araba.

Nel 1963, un colpo di stato fece fallire il progetto di unione tra Egitto e Siria, che si era concretizzato nel 1958 con la fondazione della Repubblica Araba Unita, e portò alla fondazione della Repubblica Araba Siriana. A guidare il colpo di stato e a subentrare al potere dopo la caduta della repubblica, era il partito baathista di Hafez Al-Assad, manifestatamente ostile alla popolazione non-araba. Questo cambiamento, dunque, non fece altro che peggiorare la condizione della popolazione curda, che nella nuova Costituzione, veniva totalmente esclusa dalla vita del paese in quanto non-araba e, quindi, non-siriana. Tristemente degna di nota è l'iniziativa della Cintura Araba, che mirava a ri-modellare il tessuto demografico nel nord del paese. La situazione non cambiò con la morte di Hafez e la sostituzione col figlio Bashar: nella politica ufficiale i curdi rimasero sempre fortemente sottorappresentati, mentre, clandestinamente, sia il PKK turco che altri movimenti civili in Siria erano impegnati nel mantenere viva l'identità curda, soprattutto nelle zone di Afrin e Ayn al-Arab. Nel 2002 il PKK e altri partiti e movimenti curdi nei diversi paesi si coalizzarono e fondarono il KCK (Unione delle Comunità del Kurdistan) con lo scopo di implementare le idee di Öcalan, e, in Siria, nacque il KCK-Rojava. L'anno dopo fu creato il PYD (Partito dell'Unione Democratica) e il suo organo di autodifesa YPG (Unità di Protezione Popolare).

1.3 2011-2014

Con lo scoppio delle proteste contro il governo centrale nel 2011, per i Curdi giunse l'opportunità di prendere controllo della situazione nel nord del paese. Infatti, quando l'opposizione siriana cominciò a guadagnare territorio nel resto del territorio, le truppe siriane furono ritirate dal nord, lasciando i partiti Curdi liberi di occupare lentamente il vuoto istituzionale lasciato dal governo, che nel frattempo diventava sempre più impossibilitato a garantire anche i più banali servizi pubblici. Nel 2012 nacque il KSC (Comitato Supremo Curdo) che stabiliva un'amministrazione condivisa tra PYD e KNC (Consiglio Nazionale Curdo) delle terre di Afrin, Kobane e Amuda. Tale progetto fallirà nel 2013, quando il PYD entrerà nella coalizione del TEV-DEM (Movimento per una Società Democratica), che più esplicitamente assumeva la missione di implementare il Confederalismo Democratico. Nello stesso anno le tre aree di Afrin, Jazira e Hasakah dichiararono l'autonomia cantonale, approvando la Carta del Contratto Sociale nel 2014. In questi anni, infatti, YPG e YPJ (Unità di Protezione delle Donne) avevano già cominciato a estendere il territorio liberato attraverso la lotta contro gli occupanti jihadisti (ISIL) e appartenenti alla fazione ribelle del FSA (Esercito Libero Siriano). È importante sottolineare come i tre cantoni fossero caratterizzati da una forte variazione etnica degli abitanti : in essi convivevano in maggioranza Curdi, Turchi, Assiri, Siriani, Arabi.

1.4 La guerra contro DAESH

A settembre 2014, l'ISIL riuscì ad occupare un ingente territorio nella zona di Kobane, di forte rilevanza strategica per la vicinanza al confine turco. Da qui, partì la liberazione di Kobane e la lotta contro DAESH che ha reso celebre le forze dello YPG e YPJ in tutto il mondo. Al momento dell'occupazione jihadista, i militanti dello YPG, rimasti per difendere i villaggi, furono velocemente raggiunti dai militanti

del PKK, nonostante la chiusura del confine da parte di Erdogan volta a bloccare il loro passaggio. Alla fine di ottobre, anche gli Stati Uniti cominciano a lanciare attacchi aerei contro i jihadisti e sia FSA che i peshmerga iracheni giunsero nell'area per contribuire alla liberazione. Alla fine del 2015 la coalizione vince definitivamente, liberando Kobane, e vengono create le Forze Democratiche Siriane (SDF), una coalizione multietnica in cui, oltre ad altri movimenti minori, YPG e YPJ collaboravano con USA e Francia nella lotta contro DAESH. Nel febbraio 2016, però, Ankara, scontenta della vicinanza tra PYD e PKK (che in Turchia è considerato un'organizzazione terroristica), comincia a bombardare i territori curdi. Nonostante ciò, la Confederazione Democratica del Rojava viene dichiarata a marzo da TEV-DEM e una nuova costituzione viene approvata. SDF continua la sua attività di liberazione giungendo nel corso dell'anno e mezzo successivo a liberare sia Manjib che Raqqa, considerata capitale dello IS. Nel frattempo, l'FSA si era coalizzato con Erdogan nell'operazione Scudo dell'Eufrate, che si prefiggeva lo scopo di respingere sia i jihadisti che le forze di liberazione curda dalle zone contese.

1.5 L'ostilità turca e l'operazione Ramoscello d'Ulivo

Dopo quasi un anno di negoziati da parte di Russia, Usa, Assad, e Arabia Saudita, anche nell'ambito delle Nazioni Unite, e la creazione di zone di *de-escalation*, sia Assad, che Turchia e FSA ripristinano le attività militari prima ancora del Secondo Congresso del Popolo Siriano, supervisionato dall'ONU. Nel gennaio 2018 Ankara lancia l'operazione Ramoscello di Ulivo, con lo scopo di liberare dalle forze terroristiche (YPG, YPJ e SDF furono dichiarate tali) la regione di Afrin e l'area ad est dell'Eufrate. Lo YPG, alla luce di un accordo mediato dagli Stati Uniti, lascia la regione, che avrebbe dovuto essere amministrata unitamente dai due paesi. Secondo l'UNOCHA (2018), nell'ambito dell'operazione (conclusa a marzo) Ankara si è resa responsabile della dispersione di circa trecentomila persone.

2. Il modello teorico

Sul modello di Confederalismo Democratico di Öcalan, fortemente ispirato a quello del Municipalismo Libertario di Bookchin, sono costruite le aspirazioni dell'Autonomia Democratica del Rojava. E, come già detto, il KCK fu creato con l'esplicito scopo di implementare i principi di questi modelli.

2.1 Öcalan, PKK, e Bookchin

La storia dei curdi in Turchia si distingue per una profonda incapacità da parte del governo centrale³⁸ di riconoscere le differenti identità culturali delle minoranze presenti nel paese. Dopo gli anni Quaranta, che erano stati caratterizzati da forte repressione nei confronti delle proteste dei movimenti di liberazione curda, lo stato turco assunse su di sé, in maniera sempre più esplicita, il compito di eliminare la popolazione curda

³⁸ La Repubblica Turca fu fondata nel 1923

del paese. Tale progetto risultò in misure di repressione identitaria simili a quelle viste in ambito siriano dal 1963 in poi, e provocò una reazione militare da parte delle minoranze. Nell'ambito della creazione di numerosi movimenti di liberazione d'ispirazione socialista tra gli anni Settanta e Ottanta, nacque il PKK (Partito dei Lavoratori del Kurdistan) fondato da Öcalan nel 1978 con l'obiettivo di creare uno stato curdo separato.

Il PKK entrò presto in uno scontro armato con lo stato turco, che durò per tutti i decenni successivi. Dal 1991, chiunque sostenga, anche pacificamente, i diritti curdi è considerato un terrorista in Turchia. Nel 1999, Öcalan fu arrestato in Kenya ed è da allora confinato nell'isola di Imrali. Già dal 1991, con la caduta dell'Unione Sovietica, era partita una fase di riconsiderazione delle aspirazioni socialiste e nazionaliste nel partito. Una volta arrestato, Öcalan continuò a contribuire al lavoro del partito attraverso un'intensa ricerca accademica che lo portò a interessarsi, tra il 2001 e 2002, ai lavori dell'anarchico americano Bookchin, e a due sue opere in particolare, *Ecologia della Libertà* (1982) e *Urbanization Without Cities* (1992). In quest'ultimo, Bookchin ripercorre la storia delle comuni e delle assemblee locali in Occidente.

Risultato di tale contaminazione fu la proposta di una soluzione per le società mediorientali dal carattere antigerearchico, antiautoritario, anti-capitalista e democratico.

2.2 Fondamenti teorici

I prossimi paragrafi si propongono di affrontare gli aspetti fondamentali (e più attinenti allo scopo di questa tesi) dell'ideologia condivisa di Bookchin e Öcalan.

2.2.1 Stato Moderno e Confederalismo Democratico

Per Bookchin e Öcalan, lo stato è un elemento artificiale rispetto alla società umana: esso è estraneo alle caratteristiche della natura umana e si trova in forte contrasto con la migliore espressione di essa. Per i due studiosi, lo stato rappresenta l'ultimo scalino sulla scala dei sistemi gerarchici umani e l'espressione finale di tutti i tipi di dominazione. In senso politico, poi, esso costituisce un ostacolo concreto a uno sviluppo positivo delle società. Definito 'la gabbia della società naturale' (Öcalan, 2011a: 12), esso impedisce non solo lo sviluppo di sistemi alternativi, ma anche la possibilità stessa di concepirli, attraverso il monopolio ideologico che esercita.

Nato con la rivoluzione industriale, lo stato nazione sarebbe lo strumento attraverso cui, nel diciottesimo secolo, la borghesia ha potuto giustificare l'imposizione di uno sistema capitalista e la sua logica sfruttatrice. La dominante concezione dello stato, inoltre, come qualcosa di unito e indivisibile gli ha permesso di esercitare sulla società 'il più sviluppato monopolio completo' (Öcalan, 2011a: 10). In tale cornice, il nazionalismo assume il ruolo di ombrello ideologico sotto cui proteggere lo stato, come i concetti di madre patria e unità nazionale diventano i mezzi per elevarlo a qualcosa di superiore e indubitabile e proteggere le dinamiche mistificatorie e contraddittorie costruite sull'accumulo e la massimizzazione del

profitto. La burocrazia invece è la macchina fisica che assicura il giusto funzionamento delle parti e preserva il sistema.

Alla radice dell'artificialità dello stato è la continua e pressante tensione all'omogeneità a cui esso sottopone la società umana e, in vista della quale, reprime l'eterogeneità e la diversità in nome dell'unità nazionale. Ovviamente tale pressione risponde alla necessità di esercitare un monopolio unitario sulla società e, per questo motivo, lo stato e la sopravvivenza di una pluralità culturale, religiosa, ideologica, etnica, si escludono a vicenda. Tale tensione è inoltre contro natura perché, come spiegato da Bookchin, in *Ecologia della Libertà* (1982), l'evoluzione di qualsiasi sistema si basa sull'aumento della sua complessità; dunque, il raggiungimento di un eventuale "stadio sviluppato" del sistema umano, richiederebbe l'accettazione e la partecipazione nella spontanea e progressiva diversificazione della natura umana, e, se vogliamo, nel continuo divenire del mondo. Infine, il sessismo è considerato il principale meccanismo con cui lo stato moderno mantiene e replica il suo dominio.

Dunque, il modello di Confederalismo Democratico/ Municipalismo Libertario si pone come alternativa con lo scopo di deviare e ridurre l'influenza dello stato moderno e i danni che da esso già sono stati prodotti sulla natura umana. Il locus di questo progetto sono le città, le municipalità o, più in generale, le comunità locali; il suo protagonista è, invece, il cittadino attivo, attraverso cui si crea un nuovo sistema democratico di autoamministrazione basato sulla democrazia diretta, la cooperazione e l'ecologia. Con tali principi alla base, il municipalismo libertario fornisce all'individuo la possibilità di riacquisire il suo ruolo di principale attore nei processi decisionali e permetta alla comunità di riappropriarsi di sé stessa, attraverso la democrazia assembleare.

2.2.2 Partecipazione e diversità

L'autoamministrazione delle comunità è basata sulla democrazia dal basso, che si traduce nella creazione di assemblee inclusive dal livello più basso della comunità -quartiere- a quello più alto, ma meramente amministrativo -consiglio o confederazione-. Ad ogni assemblea, le assemblee precedenti vengono rappresentate da delegati con mandato imperativo, che li rende semplici portavoci, lasciando il cittadino come unico decisore politico.

Il vantaggio principale di tale sistema risiede nel fatto che esso non dipenda da nessun tipo di omogeneità, il che lo rende non suscettibile al dominio di un solo gruppo di potere. Inoltre, essendo le assemblee locali, esse necessariamente rifletteranno la realtà demografica della comunità locale, diventando inevitabilmente inclusive e dando la possibilità a tutti i gruppi presenti di avanzare i propri interessi.

2.2.3 Economia e ecologia

Il modello presuppone il passaggio dall'economia di mercato, basata sul profitto e l'accumulo di risorse, ad una sociale, costruita sui concetti di limite, equilibrio, necessità e cooperazione. La

decentralizzazione dei processi decisionali è già funzionale a rendere le unità amministrative più semplici da gestire a livello economico e le decisioni più responsive alle reali necessità del territorio. In particolare, secondo Bookchin, questo passaggio richiederebbe una riformulazione delle necessità che elimini la ‘feticizzazione dei bisogni’ (Bookchin, 1981: 69), creatasi in epoca capitalista, a causa della quale i bisogni sono specificatamente creati per consumare la produzione. Essi dovrebbero, invece, ritornare al controllo delle comunità e la loro elaborazione essere basata sulle logiche dell’usufrutto, complementarità, e minimo irriducibile. In base a tali bisogni le risorse economiche, che vengono prodotte dalla comunità e restano in possesso della comunità, vengono poi redistribuite sia all’interno di esse che tra esse.

2.2.4 Auto-difesa

Un’autoamministrazione basata sul confederalismo democratico entrerebbe necessariamente in conflitto con le entità istituzionali già esistenti, creando la necessità di possedere un organo di autodifesa delle assemblee a tutti i livelli. Tale organo sarebbe organizzato a livello locale e democraticamente, e avrebbe lo scopo di difendere l’arbitrio delle comunità locali e il loro diritto ad auto-amministrarsi.

2.2.5 Liberare la Vita

In *Liberare la Vita: la Rivoluzione delle Donne* (2013), Öcalan descrive le colonne portanti su cui la soggiogazione delle donne viene costruita da parte del maschio dominante, fornendo, poi, gli strumenti per quella che lui chiama la ‘rivoluzione nella rivoluzione’ (Öcalan, 2013: 59). Il patriarcato è il primo e il più potente tra i monopoli esercitati sulla società. La famiglia “tradizionale” è il primo centro in cui esso si manifesta e si riproduce. Il matrimonio replica le dinamiche di potere dello stato moderno e, allo stesso tempo, costituisce il modello su cui si costruisce per analogia il resto della società. Il capitalismo, inoltre, ha determinato l’esclusione della donna dall’economia che, però, se intesa in termini non capitalisti (*oikonomiā*), è sempre stata storicamente creata e amministrata dalla donna.

La condizione delle donne nella società curda è peculiare in quanto, data l’esclusione per molto tempo dei curdi dallo sviluppo moderno, un certo tribalismo matriarcale si è potuto preservare all’interno delle comunità. Allo stesso tempo, però, la scarsità di risorse, l’assenza di libertà, e l’esplicita persecuzione ha privato la comunità curda della propria dignità, rendendo la donna oggetto e valvola di sfogo di tale frustrazione. La questione dello stato non può essere disgiunta da quella patriarcale, sia da un punto di vista politico pratico che analitico. La battaglia analitica si combatte, secondo Öcalan, attraverso la creazione della *jineoloji* (letteralmente in curdo la scienza della donna), che pone la condizione femminile al centro ma la collega alle questioni della gerarchia, della dominazione, e della scienza.

3. Amministrazione autonoma del Rojava

Nel terzo capitolo viene introdotta la struttura generale del sistema in vigore in Rojava (ufficialmente) dal 2014.

3.1 Sviluppo del Progetto e della Struttura Amministrativa

È necessario tenere a mente che tale sistema ha incontrato numerosi ostacoli nell'ambito della guerra civile, dello scontro con l'ISIS, dell'invasione turca, e, recentemente della pandemia di Covid, ed è dunque variata nel tempo (soprattutto dal 2019 in poi) in risposta a tali eventi.

3.1.1 Prima del 2011

Già dagli anni Ottanta, grazie all'attività del PKK, piccoli e isolati progetti a livello locale erano nati con lo scopo di preservare l'identità curda. Dal 2003, con la creazione del PYD, questo sistema sempre molto frammentato e clandestino, iniziò ad allargarsi progressivamente e andò a costituire sempre più uno strumento di autodeterminazione per le comunità curde delle grandi città. Nel 2011 quasi metà della popolazione curda era coinvolta nel progetto, che comprendeva ormai tutte le città curde e il quartiere curdo di Aleppo.

3.1.2 2011-2014: il Sistema dell'MGRK e il TEV-DEM

Ad agosto 2011, un'assemblea formata dai delegati dei vari consigli cittadini stabilì la nascita del Consiglio Popolare del Rojava (MGRK), formalizzando così l'esistenza del sistema dei consigli locali. Inoltre, furono creati i gruppi locali di auto difesa e il TEV-DEM (Movimento per una Società Democratica) come corpo coordinante eletto dell'MGRK. I consigli locali cominciarono progressivamente ad assumersi responsabilità che lo stato centrale non poteva più sostenere, affermandosi come organo amministrativo nei territori del Rojava. Con l'aumento della partecipazione dei residenti, fu creato il livello della Comune, corrispondente più o meno alla strada residenziale, e il sistema si diffuse sempre di più anche nelle aree extra-urbane.

L'MGRK è articolato, quindi, su quattro livelli: la comune, il quartiere o il villaggio, il distretto, e l'MGRK. Ad ognuno di questi livelli sono create delle commissioni nelle seguenti otto aree: donne, difesa, economia, politica, società civile, società libera, giustizia e ideologia (educazione).

La Comune comprende dalle venti alle duecento unità famigliari e serve lo scopo di soddisfare i bisogni locali degli abitanti. Ogni comune dispone di una *mala gel* (casa del popolo) e di una *mala jinan* (casa delle donne, dove si discutono questioni specifiche riguardanti le donne). Due co-presidenti (un maschio e una femmina) oltre a uno o due rappresentanti di ogni commissione costituiscono il consiglio di coordinamento. I consigli di coordinamento rappresentano ogni assemblea a quella del livello successivo e ad ogni livello sono organizzati in questo modo. Da sette a tre comuni costituiscono un quartiere, da sette a tre villaggi una comunità di villaggio. Il distretto include, invece, una città e i villaggi vicini. Il suo consiglio di coordinamento consiste nel TEV-DEM, in cui partecipano anche partiti e movimenti sociali. Tutti i TEV-DEM costituiscono l'MGRK.

La reale attività di auto amministrazione si svolge nelle commissioni. Le commissioni delle donne esistono come consigli paralleli a ogni livello dell'MGRK e sono gestite dalle attiviste di Kongreya Star. I consigli femminili possono formare delle commissioni nelle varie aree. Le commissioni della difesa organizzano la sicurezza e difesa del territorio. Le commissioni economiche si assicurano che ogni unità familiare abbia le risorse necessarie ed è responsabile per le costruzioni, l'agricoltura, le aziende pubbliche e le cooperative. Le commissioni politiche sono composte dai partiti che sostengono l'autoamministrazione. Le commissioni di giustizia coincidono con i comitati di pace, che sono il primo livello del sistema giudiziario. I casi di violenza patriarcale sono decisi da un separato comitato di pace femminile. Le commissioni ideologiche si occupano dell'educazione.

3.1.3 I cantoni e le DAA

Nel novembre 2014, il TEV DEM e il PYD stabilirono la nascita di un sistema di amministrazione ad interim e divisero il territorio nei tre Cantoni di Kobane, Afrin e Jazira. Sessanta rappresentanti dei vari cantoni furono poi incaricati di scrivere una "Carta" per l'amministrazione, che fu approvata dai singoli cantoni nel 2014 come Carta del Contratto Sociale. Dopo di che ogni cantone dichiarò l'autonomia, creando le amministrazioni democratiche autonome (DAAs).

Il contratto sociale indica come lingue ufficiali il curdo, l'arabo e l'aramaico, con la possibilità di adottarne altre se necessario. Inoltre, essa rappresenta l'unico esempio di documento costituzionale a riconoscere come inviolabili tutti i diritti contenuti in tutte le dichiarazioni, trattati, convenzioni esistenti al mondo. Particolare attenzione è riservata, inoltre, all'emancipazione femminile (art. 27, 28, 47, 65, 87).

3.1.4 2016: la Federazione

A inizio 2016, con l'espansione del territorio liberato crebbe la necessità di creare un livello di coordinamento in più. Il sistema federale fu istituito a marzo, aggiungendo il livello della Conferenza Democratica del Popolo. Essa lavora con i comitati a livello cantonale nella preparazione dei progetti legislativi.

3.2 Educazione

L'educazione è prima di tutto uno strumento per raggiungere la rivoluzione, attraverso una sorta di educazione collettiva ai principi di autogoverno e discussione collettiva. Il sistema contribuisce al processo di ricostruzione identitaria, tramite l'insegnamento di diversi curricula linguistici e culturali nelle scuole primarie e superiori, ponendo comunque al centro l'integrazione. Gli studenti, inoltre, si confrontano l'uno con l'altro attraverso dibattiti di carattere morale, comportamentale, sociale, ecc.. La partecipazione è, ovviamente, molto incoraggiata. Lo stesso obiettivo di formare individui coscienti e attivi in grado di discutere e costruire idee costituisce anche le basi del sistema educativo universitario e accademico.

3.3 Auto-difesa

Nella Contratto Sociale lo YPG è descritto come ‘la sola forza militare dei tre Cantoni’ (art. 15), con la funzione di preservare la sicurezza delle DAA. Oltre allo YPG e alla sua forza parallela esclusivamente femminile, lo YPJ, gli Asayis ‘si occupano delle funzioni di polizia’ (art. 15). Le unità di auto difesa non sono autorizzate ad agire attaccando, ma solo in difesa delle DAA. L’unica eccezione a tale regola è la liberazione delle popolazioni residenti in territori occupati da DAESH.

3.4 Il nuovo sistema giudiziario

Il rifiuto dello stato e dei suoi sistemi si traduce anche nel rifiuto delle modalità tradizionali di imporre l’ordine e amministrare la giustizia. Il nuovo sistema giudiziario si basa sui concetti di giustizia riformativa e trasformativa, che vengono raggiunte attraverso il consenso. La pena di morte è stata abolita e l’ergastolo, che ammonta al massimo a venti anni di reclusione, viene dato solo in casi di estrema violenza. La reclusione è in ogni caso ritenuta l’ultima istanza e l’individuo detenuto viene posto al centro di un percorso di riabilitazione.

La struttura del sistema rispecchia quella delle comuni e dei consigli: esso si articola, infatti, attraverso diversi strati posti a tutti i livelli di governo. L’obiettivo principale è sempre quello di amministrare la giustizia e raggiungere una riconciliazione al livello più basso possibile, quello della comune, attraverso i Comitati di Pace e Consenso. I casi di violenza patriarcale possono essere trattati e deliberati solo dalle donne.

4. La situazione attuale

Come brevemente spiegato alla fine del primo capitolo, dal 2018 il Rojava e il sistema delle comuni stanno affrontando sfide dovute principalmente, da un lato, all’ostilità turca, dall’altro e, più recentemente, alla pandemia di covid.

Il quarto capitolo vuole fornire una rapida panoramica di ciò che è accaduto negli ultimi quattro anni, le conseguenze che questi eventi hanno avuto o stanno avendo sulle persone in Rojava e le attuali sfide che il sistema sta affrontando nell’ultimo anno.

4.1 Operazione Ramoscello d’Ulivo e Occupazione di Afrin (2018)

Il 20 gennaio 2018, la Turchia ha iniziato a lanciare attacchi aerei contro un centinaio di località in Afrin, in quella che il governo aveva intitolato "Operazione Ramoscello d’Ulivo". Secondo l’Osservatorio Siriano dei Diritti Umani (2019), durante l’operazione sono stati uccisi tra i quattro e i cinquecento civili, mentre altri sono stati giustiziati in seguito. Inoltre, secondo Human Rights Watch (2019), un numero indefinito di civili è stato ucciso nel tentativo di fuggire dalla regione, mentre più di trecento mila persone sono rimaste sfollate. Inoltre, ‘le milizie sostenute dalla Turchia hanno attuato saccheggi, confische di

proprietà, rapimenti a scopo di riscatto, sfollamenti forzati, uccisioni extragiudiziali e violenze sessuali contro le donne' (Rojava Information Center, 2019a: p. 6). Dall'aprile 2019, alcune case e edifici pubblici sono stati demoliti per consentire alla Turchia di iniziare la costruzione di un muro che separa Afrin dal resto della Siria, progetto completato nell'aprile 2020.

4.2 Operazione Sorgente di Pace e Occupazione del NES (2019)

Nell'estate del 2019, la Turchia stava facendo pressione alle SDF per occupare una zona cuscinetto al confine turco con il Rojava, al fine di ricollocare i rifugiati siriani al di fuori del Rojava. Nell'ottobre 2019, dopo mesi in cui le truppe turche si radunavano al confine, Trump organizza con Erdogan il ritiro delle truppe statunitensi, lasciando la Turchia libera di invadere la zona cuscinetto.

Il 9 ottobre, la Turchia inizia a bombardare a tappeto le città di Kobane, Serekaniye, Tal Abyad e Qamishli. In meno di una settimana duecentomila persone venivano disperse, militanti dei corpi di autodifesa sono stati uccisi e le città sono state bombardate, prendendo di mira in particolare gli edifici e gli attivisti delle organizzazioni femminili e delle comuni, le infrastrutture civili e umanitarie, il personale e le infrastrutture mediche. In due settimane Serekaniye e Tal Abyad cadono sotto il controllo turco-jihadista. Numerosi attacchi sono stati registrati in territori al di fuori del presunto campo di operazione, tra Tel Abyad e Sere Kaniye. Diversi anche gli attacchi (almeno dodici in un mese) registrati contro infrastrutture, veicoli e personale sanitario e umanitario. Questo tipo di attentati aveva come scopo sia l'espulsione di civili dalle loro case e villaggi, sia il blocco degli aiuti transfrontalieri alla popolazione occupata, che ha lasciato le milizie occupanti libere di saccheggiare e distruggere o occupare le proprietà degli sfollati.

4.3 Covid-19 (2020)

Dopo quasi un decennio di guerra civile, la Siria in generale si è trovata prevedibilmente impreparata ad affrontare la crisi del covid-19. Nel NES, in particolare, la situazione è stata aggravata dall'interruzione anticipata del cessate il fuoco stabilito da Turchia e Russia a marzo e da gravi ondate di violenza a Idlib. Nel territorio del Rojava, l'invasione della Turchia e la lunga guerra civile, unite alla mancanza di riconoscimento internazionale, hanno reso quasi impossibile mantenere la popolazione al sicuro e combattere attivamente la pandemia. Nel novembre 2020, secondo l'ultimo aggiornamento del RIC (2020b), il NES stava attraversando la situazione di 'peggiore difficoltà economica in Siria' e, di conseguenza, il 93% delle famiglie aveva difficoltà ad attuare le misure preventive di base.

Conclusioni

Nonostante molti siano ancora gli ostacoli, il confederalismo democratico è stato efficacemente implementato nei territori liberati, non solo seguendo, quando possibile, i principi fondanti del modello, ma anche ottenendo i risultati attesi riguardo i problemi della popolazione locale, soprattutto per quanto concerne il patriarcato e i conflitti etnici. A parte le considerazioni geopolitiche sul tema, il modello stesso, e

il fatto che esso sia stato implementato in una situazione del genere, mette, a mio avviso, in crisi non solo la comprensione occidentale dei paesi e delle dinamiche del Medio Oriente, ma soprattutto la nostra formulazione dei concetti di democrazia e di potere.