UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
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Westernization in Rojava

Infatuation with the West

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Abstract

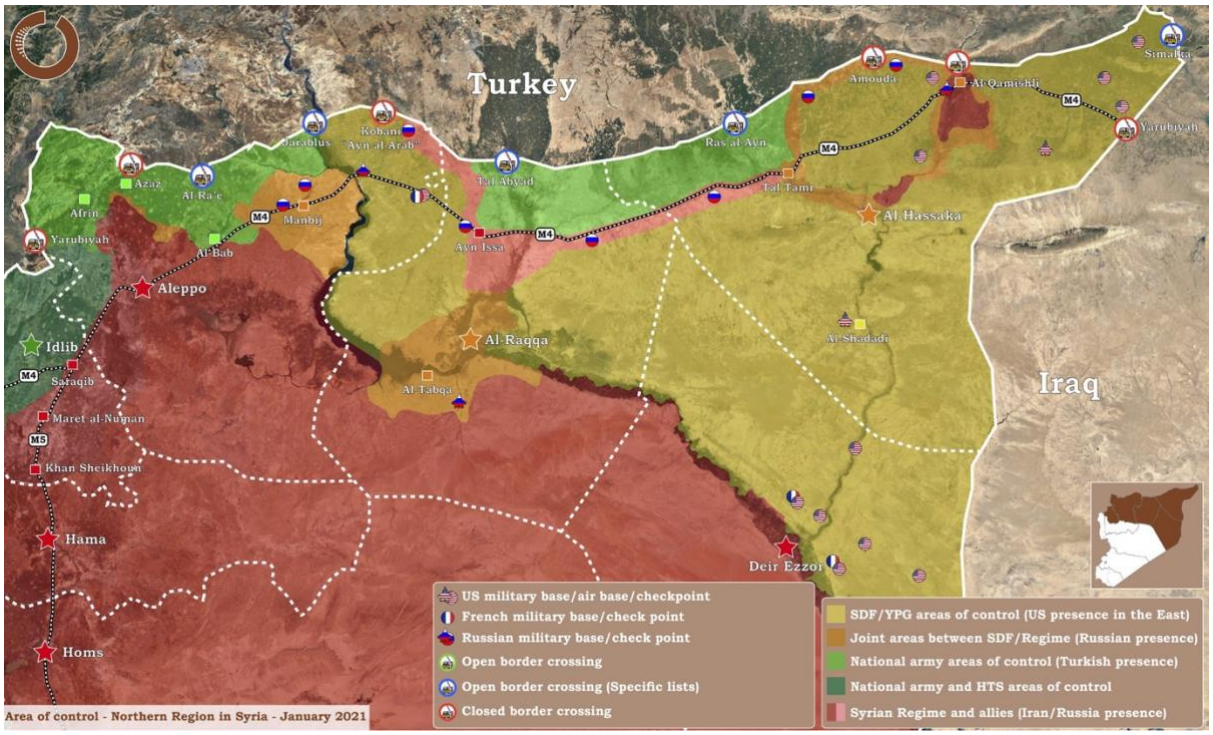
The Kurdish-led Rojava Project in northeastern Syria has gained international attention for its pioneering work on equality, community coexistence, and direct democracy through the implementation of Democratic Confederalism, which is a non-state political system. Although Rojava has only existed for approximately ten years at the time of writing, there is already a body of research on the subject. Researchers have been positive but also critical of Rojava. Scholars' criticism claims that the people who are building and overseeing Rojava are not complying with Rojava's Charters in various ways. However, the question of why Rojava is inconsistent remains unanswered. This paper attempts to fill this gap through semi-structured interviews with individuals who oversee the movement. The paper then draws on Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad's (1984) conceptualization of 'Westernized'. This research argues that there is evidence of a yearning for Westernization among Rojava's elite, with a focus on national self-determination with development aspirations inspired by the auspices of Western modernity, thus aiming to model Rojava after the West. This infatuation with the West may be the reason Rojava is not complying with its discursive goal. This research contributes to critical theories of colonialism and Westernization by showing that procedures with colonial influences are still present.

Key Words: *Rojava, Northeastern Syria, Democratic Confederalism, West, Westernized, Westernness.*

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AANES	The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria	**PKK**	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)
Asayiş	Rojava's police force	**PYD**	Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)
Daesh	Derogatory name for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria	**Rojava**	Western Kurdistan/Northern Syria
DFNS	The Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria	**SDF**	Syrian Democratic Forces
ISIS/ISIL	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/ Islamic State of Iraq and Levant	**Sutoro**	Assyrian and Syriac Christian police force
Jabhat al-Nusra	al-Qaeda in Syria	**TEV-DEM**	The Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk)
KDPS	The Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria	**Yekiti Party**	Kurdish opposition party to the PYD
MENA	Middle East and North Africa	**YPG**	People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)
Peshmerga	The Kurdish military forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq	**YPJ**	Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)

Map of Rojava



Rojava's territorial status in northeastern Syria in 2020/2021 (Source: Netjes and Veen, 2021, p. 10).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Area

European colonization of the Middle East occurred gradually, beginning in the 19th century through overtaking much of the Ottoman Empire and eventually taking control of the entire region, leading to the collapse of the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire between 1918 to 1920 (Quataert, 2000, p. 11). After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, European colonial powers began to divide the Middle East by fictitious borders, which resulted in tribal and ethnic areas being divided into states. The Kurds, who were the largest ethnic minority in the Middle East, had lived together in coexistence for hundreds of years, but suddenly found themselves divided between Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, where they were reduced to minorities in their respective states of residence (Cole and Kandiyoti, 2002, p. 193).

After decolonization, the Kurds were discriminated against in the newly established states because of nationalism. To explain, nationalism entailed discursive and institutional practices that differed from the coexistence-friendly pre-political order of the Ottoman Empire. The nation-state functioned differently in that it imposed a common identity on all its citizens, often emphasizing on national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic unity (ibid., 190). Thus, Kurds living in the newly established Syrian Republic were subjected to Arabization processes, their Kurmanji Kurdish dialect was suppressed, their Kurdish culture was deprived, their Kurdish history was erased from school textbooks, and they were deprived of a Syrian citizenship (Human Rights Watch, 1996, p. 11). All this was done to create homogeneity in accordance with nationalism (Cole and Kandiyoti, 2002, p. 190). The persecution resulted in the Syrian Kurds beginning to mobilize politically, particularly through cooperation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which originated in Turkey. Kurdish political movements in Syria and Turkey were heavily influenced by decolonial movements, as the common denominator between decolonial movements and Kurdish movements was self-determination in the face of an oppressive power (Gunter, 2004, p. 197). Since the general paradigm of decolonization was national liberation, it only made sense for Kurdish political movements to strive for the creation of a nation-state (Öcalan, 2017, p. 72).

However, in the early 2000s, the PKK underwent an ideological shift when its political leader, Abdullah Öcalan, came to believe that states are built on a homogeneous national culture, identity, language, and religion, which could legitimize assimilation and genocide (Öcalan, 2011). Thus, Öcalan argued that the creation of a separate Kurdish nation "would only mean the creation of additional injustice and curtail the right to freedom even more." (Öcalan, 2011, p. 23). Therefore, Öcalan developed 'Democratic Confederalism', a non-state political system focused on equality, communal living, and direct democracy, as he believed it would be better suited for the multi-ethnic Middle East (2017, p. 30).

Since the Kurds in Syria were organized under the PKK, they also followed the ideological shift. Nevertheless, Kurds in Syria could not mobilize properly because they were forbidden to participate in political organizations. This changed, however, as the Syrian uprising in 2011 weakened the Syrian government, resulting in a power vacuum that allowed the Kurds to take control of northeastern Syria. They introduced Democratic Confederalism as their political system and established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), also known as Rojava[1] (Tezcür, 2019, p. 3). Through Democratic Confederalism, Rojava is currently claiming to build a direct-democratic society that fosters ethnic and religious plurality in its institutions and promotes coexistence, equality, human rights, and decentralization as a *sine qua non* for its movement (Rojava, 2016a). Despite these non-state and democratic aspirations, previous research on the movement shows that Rojava deviates from these claims. For example, Duman (2016) highlights that decision-makers in Rojava do not aim to create a Democratic Confederalist society, but rather aim to unify all of Kurdistan. This assertion is supported by Galvan-Alvarez (2020), who argues that Rojava is self-contradictory because they have a strong desire for national self-determination. Likewise, Dinc (2020) argues that Rojava is inconsistent in implementing Democratic Confederalism, especially since the desire for nationality, power, and conformity still prevails among Rojava's elite (p. 54) (see Chapter 3). Thus, while the ideological basis of Rojava produces a non-state discourse focused on democracy and coexistence, the individuals in Rojava who build and lead the movement deviate from the discursive goal of Rojava, making the movement inconsistent.

1.2 Aim of Study and Research Question

Previous research on Rojava has focused on the movement's inability to comply with its Charters. However, the question of why this is the case remains unanswered. Building on

[1]This study will refer to the Kurdish establishment in Syria as 'Rojava', seeing that it is the popularized name.

previous research, this study aims to investigate why Rojava's Charters are not fully implemented. This investigation is conducted through semi-structured interviews with individuals who lead and have partaken in building the movement. During the interviews, the following topics were discussed: desired political system, aspirations for the future, legitimacy, international partnerships, ethnic relations, and Kurdish and national identity, to discern what may be latent. The method used in this study was 'Thematic Analysis', as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was used because of its valuable technique for assessing and presenting trends and patterns in the data. One of the different phases of thematic analysis was to create themes from the data in order to present the findings. The identified themes in the data were, (i) *preferred political system*, (ii) *aspirations for the future*, (iii) *partnership*, (iv) *identity formation*, and (v) *social relations*. These themes were created to better compile and present the research findings.

The theory used in this study was selected after the semi-structured interviews were examined and coded. The result of the semi-structured interviews shows, among other things, a longing to become Western. Therefore, in this endeavor, Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad's (1984) 'Westernized' (Gharbzadegi) proves to be an important conceptual tool as the theory focuses on the global majority's[2] infatuation with the West. The theory is applied to further explore and investigate whether Westernization could play a role in the contradictions of Rojava.

Accordingly, the research question of this study is:

What may contribute to the participants' deviation from Rojava's discursive goal?

1.2.1 Limitations

As this research is based on interviews with participants, the findings of this study are only limited to their narratives and insights. Even though the interviewees have the role of leading Rojava, it is important to keep in mind that they cannot speak for the local population in Rojava/Northeast Syria in particular, and for the rest of Syria in general (Alcoff, 1992). Indeed, we cannot know with certainty whether the local population agrees or disagrees with the respondents. Therefore, further research is recommended to find this out. Nonetheless, the power position of the interviewees has an impact on the implementation of the discursive goal of Rojava, which is why the study is of value.

[2] I use the term 'Global Majority' here in an attempt to decolonize collective terms such as 'Global South', 'Third World', or the 'Developing Countries'. I find it vital to use empowered language that tackles the assumed inferiority to white power structures.

Since the results of this study are related to Rojava, they cannot be directly applied to other cases, although comparisons and generalizations between the results and other similar situations are possible. Furthermore, there can be more than one factor that plays a role in why the interviewees deviate from the discursive goal of Rojava. However, this research has chosen to dive deeper into the extent to which Westernization plays a role in Rojava's enactment of Democratic Confederalism. This is because the evidence in the data strongly suggest the presence of an infatuation with the West. Therefore, this study will be limited to a Westernization paradigm. To uncover the other factors that play a role in Rojava's inability to fully enact its discursive goal, further research is needed. Since Rojava is still relatively young, there is not much diverse research on this topic, which may limit the findings of this study as it builds on previous research. However, conducting this study may prevent future research from being limited.

1.3 Relevance to Global Studies

Global studies is an academic field that, among other things, analyzes, researches, and explains global structures, such as power relations. Therefore, the relevance of this research to Global Studies lies in the study of the influence the West has on the East. By taking a regional case such as Rojava and looking at how global variables relate or impact Rojava, will demonstrate how interconnected the world is, which is the essence of Global Studies. This is important because although we claim to live in a postcolonial era, practices with colonial influences are still very much present. Therefore, research that examines the relationships and influences different regions and countries have on one another is of great importance to Global Studies, as it contributes to a deeper understanding of how these variables shape the globe.

1.4 Thesis Outline

This research paper consists of a total of eight chapters. The Introductory chapter provides an overview of the information on which this study is based. The second chapter is the Background, which provides the reader with relevant background information about the Kurds in Syria. The third chapter is the Previous Research, which presents the academic literature on Rojava. The fourth chapter is the Theoretical Framework in which Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad's (1984) 'Westernized' (Gharbzadegi) is outlined. The fifth chapter is dedicated to the Methodology, where the way this research was conducted is presented. The sixth chapter is devoted to the Findings, where the findings of this research are presented in accordance with the identified themes. The seventh chapter is the Discussion, in which the results are discussed and reviewed.

The final eighth chapter is the Conclusion one, where the research question is answered, the results are related to the theoretical framework, and a discussion about future research is provided. In addition, at the end of the thesis are Appendices 1 and 2, where the 'Table of Participants' and the 'Informed Consent Form' can be found.

2. Background

This section discusses the contextual variables that contributed to Rojava's significant progress in achieving autonomy. However, before discussing the path of Rojava's establishment, this chapter first presents the relevant background of the Kurds in Syria. Following this, seeing that the Syrian uprising paved the way for the Kurdish political movement to establish Rojava, the events in Syria after 2011 will then be explained. Finally, knowledge on 'Democratic Confederalism' will also be provided to facilitate an understanding of Rojava's preferred political system and its discourse.

2.1 The Becoming of the Syrian Kurds

After World War I, the Ottoman Empire fell and disintegrated into a multitude of different states and mandated territories. France received a mandate over Syria from the League of Nations under the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was concluded in 1923 (Quataert, 2000, p. 3). As a result, the Kurdish population was divided among several states, most notably Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. In the case of Syria, the Kurdish population lived in the northern province of the state, near the border lines with Turkey and Iraq, particularly in the Jazirah region in the northeast, the Kobanî region in the north, and Kurd Dagh in northwestern Syria. The three regions, but especially Jazirah, received many Kurdish migrants from Turkey, where they had either migrated after the establishment of the Kemalist Turkish state or had gone into exile due to the unsuccessful Kurdish uprising against the Turkish state in 1925 (Zisser, 2014, p. 194). Kurds living in Syria joined together with the newly immigrated Kurds from Turkey to form the Syrian Kurdish political movement, called Khoybun League, in 1927. This Kurdish political movement was founded in Syria in response to the newly established Republic of Turkey, where the movement sought a Kurdish national awakening (Tejel, 2009, p. 17).

The Khoybun League did not pose a threat to the French Mandate in Syria, as the movement was fixated on revolting against the Kemalist government in Turkey. The French Mandate saw this conflict as an opportunity for territorial expansion, as the borders between Turkey and Syria had not yet been finalized. Thus, the French began to fuel the conflict through 'divide and conquer' strategies by allowing the Khoybun League to coalesce and organize in Syria. The

French hoped to strengthen the Khoybun movement so that it would eventually attack Turkey and leave it in a weakened state, which would allow the French to expand their territory (ibid., p. 144). As a result of French support, Khoybun became the center of political and military leadership for the Ararat Revolt in 1927, an uprising against the Turkish government. However, the Turkish military defeated Khoybun in 1930, and the movement returned to Syria with a changed focus, seeking ways to unite the Kurds in Syria. During this time, the Kurdish alphabet was changed from Arabic to Latin letters, which finally established the Kurmanji dialect. In addition, books and articles were written about Kurdish culture and history, and Kurdish societies were established to create a place where people could come together, learn the language, and share their cultural heritage (Yildiz, 2005, p. 29).

As Kurds in Syria became more united, they sought more than cultural rights. The Kurds sought autonomy in Syria, similar to what was granted to the Alawites and the Druze in the 1920s. However, their demands were never met. The last straw for the Kurds was the Franco-Syrian Agreement of 1936, which granted control of Syria to the Arab majority. This led to an uprising in 1937 which was led by the Kurds, but it was put down relatively quickly. Conclusively, the French mandate left Syria with a divided society, especially since the French had used 'divide and conquer' strategies to maintain their rule in Syria, which provoked conflicts between the various minorities and the Arab majority (Tejel, 2009, p. 41).

2.2 Kurdish Oppression in Syria

The colonial period in Syria was arguably the starting point for discrimination against the Kurds, as it triggered the rise of nationalism. In particular, after the establishment of the Syrian Republic in 1946, Arab nationalism became more prominent and triggered a wave of discriminatory treatments against non-Arab ethnic minorities, including the Kurds (Ziadeh, 2009, p. 2). The Kurds were subjected to systematic and institutionalized discrimination by the state, which denied them political and civic liberties, were prohibited from freely living their culture and traditions, speaking their language, and expressing their identity. The Syrian government also initiated an Arabization process in the Kurdish areas in the north, encouraging Arabs to relocate to Kurdish-populated areas in order to suppress Kurdish identity (Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022, p. 3). These discriminatory treatments occurred despite the fact that Kurds make up 10 percent of the Syrian population, making them the largest non-Arab ethnic group in Syria (Tejel, 2009, p. 16).

Kurds living in Syria are also stateless in two respects: *de jure* and *de facto*. The former refers to the lack of a nationality within the country in which one lives, and the latter concerns individuals who reject the nationality they hold because it does not coincide with their own perceived national identity (Batchelor, 1998, p. 172). Syria has divided the Kurds into three different demographic groups, which are, 'Syrian Kurds', 'Foreign Kurds', and 'Concealed Kurds'. Syrian Kurds are Kurds who originate from the Syrian region. These Kurds have Syrian citizenship. Foreign Kurds, on the other hand, are those who came to Syria as refugees. These Kurds were rendered *de jure* stateless in 1962 when some 300,000 Kurdish migrants were stripped of their Syrian citizenship (Human Rights Watch, 1996, p. 11). Finally, Concealed Kurds refer to those Kurds who opted for *de facto* statelessness by denying the Syrian citizenship granted to them, because they did not feel they belonged to Syria's national identity (Ziadeh, 2009, p. 2).

2.3 The Syrian Uprising

The uprising in Syria is believed to have been triggered by the massive popular uprisings that erupted throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2011, often referred to as the 'Arab Spring'. Local populations across the MENA region banded together to express their dissatisfaction with their respective state and political elite. This was the case in Syria, where mostly peaceful protests erupted aimed at institutional reform rather than overthrowing the Assad government (Dabashi, 2012). At the same time, smaller militias began to demonstrate and retaliate, to which Syrian security forces responded with numerous arrests and brutality. The government's use of force led several parties in the dispute to resort to violence, and jihadist groups began to exploit the escalating situation. All of this led to the conflict becoming more complex, which in turn weakened the Syrian security forces. Therefore, the government had no choice but to move its forces from the Kurdish-dominated areas in the north to the west and southwest of Syria. This was done to prevent various rebel groups from advancing into the country's economic heartland in western Syria (Imady and Hinnebusch, 2018, p. 1ff).

2.3.1 The Establishment of Rojava

The withdrawal of Syrian forces from Kurdish-dominated areas in the northeast provided a stage for various Kurdish organizations to pursue their longstanding quest for self-determination. However, this quest was unthinkable before the Syrian civil war, as the Syrian government severely repressed Kurds living in Syria, where Kurds could not form their own

political parties and were prohibited from entering Syrian politics. Hence, this repression became an obstacle for the Kurds to organize and mobilize politically in Syria (Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022, p. 3). For this reason, during the mid-end of the 20th century, many Kurds in Syria invested their time in joining the Peshmerga in Iraq or the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey instead, where they gained knowledge of mobilization and organizational tactics as well as advanced combat training (ICG, 2013, p. 2). Many Kurds later returned to northern Syria with their acquired knowledge and founded the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003, which became an offshoot of the PKK. However, the PYD was still unable to take a conscious stand, especially since it was criminalized by the Syrian state. It was only when the Syrian army showed signs of limited and dwindling strength in northern Syria in early 2011 that the PYD was able to fill the power vacuum and eventually establish the 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria' (AANES), also known as Rojava (Federici, 2015, p. 82). Rojava was built in particular through a constellation of grassroot organizations and self-defense forces such as the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

The defining moment for Rojava came when the self-defense forces were thrust into a looming defensive struggle against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)[3] and other jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra[4]. This is because Rojava's its military wings were at the forefront of a Western enemy, i.e., ISIS. Thus, this fight became popularized in Western media, essentially strengthening the credibility of the PYD and its Rojava project. This allowed the Kurds to portray themselves as an important Western partner with provincial clout, which eventually led to support from the United States (Imady and Hinnebusch, 2018, p. 5). As a result, Rojava was able to launch a social revolution aimed at reshaping the Kurdish nationalist agenda in Syria by building a non-hierarchical and decentralized society (Netjes and Veen, 2021, p. 17). Their aspirations were set out in a social contract called the 'Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' (DFNS)[5], which has been in effect since January 2014. Their social contract is based on PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan's political system of 'Democratic Confederalism' (Federici, 2015, p. 82), which is explained in the following section.

[3] Also called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State (IS).

[4] Also referred to as Al-Nusra Front or Jabhat Fatah and is described as al-Qaeda in Syria or al-Qaeda in the Levant.

[5] 'The Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' has replaced the previous Charters of 'The Social Contract of Rojava', which had previously replaced 'The Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazirah, and Kobanî'.

2.4 Democratic Confederalism

Democratic Confederalism is the result of an ideological transformation that the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan underwent when they abandoned their original goals of a Kurdish nation-state and replaced them with aspirations for a non-state political system. The PKK's initial aspirations to establish a nation-state were inspired by the decolonial movements and their struggle for independence, as the general paradigm of decolonization was national liberation. However, the PKK sought a nation-state not for the sake of nationhood, but to eliminate oppression and democratize the Middle East (Öcalan, 2011, p. 46). The ideological shift occurred when the PKK realized that the nation-state model would not fulfill their goal of achieving coexistence, because states are built on homogeneity. Öcalan believed that homogeneity could be a problem for a multi-ethnic society with its different cultures, religions, and languages, as it could lead to assimilation and even genocide. For this reason, Öcalan developed Democratic Confederalism, a system built on diversity and pluralism, to better meet the PKK's goal of creating coexistence in the Middle East (ibid., p. 46). Thus, Öcalan and his political movement abandoned their aspirations for a Kurdish nation-state and redefined their goals by developing the non-state political system of Democratic Confederalism (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 202).

Öcalan characterizes Democratic Confederalism as a non-state, multi-layered political system that allows individuals the opportunity for self-determination through bottom-up council structures. It aims to deconstruct the state by replacing current state hierarchies and hegemonic authority relationships with lateral, gender-equal, participatory and autonomous partnerships, and by allowing different ethnic and religious groups to self-organize in councils and communes. Thus, the political system focuses on consensual partnerships between different ethnic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic communities that can independently construct and represent themselves as a political body (Öcalan, 2017, p. 33ff). Specifically, Democratic Confederalism operates on the basis of community participation, where different groups within each community – with their different political and sociological backgrounds – can come together to form a single collective. Each section within a union can put forward its policy ideas, which can then be voted on by the members of that union. Representatives from all other unions then vote on the policy and elect delegates, who later form a community council that implements the chosen policy. All community councils then join together at various municipal levels, which then collectively form a federal council that implements policy at the national level (see Figure 1). Democratic Confederalism embraces minority rights and ideals of fairness,

which is why Öcalan deems it a more viable alternative to the nationalist goal of Kurdish national self-determination (Öcalan, 2017, p. 30).

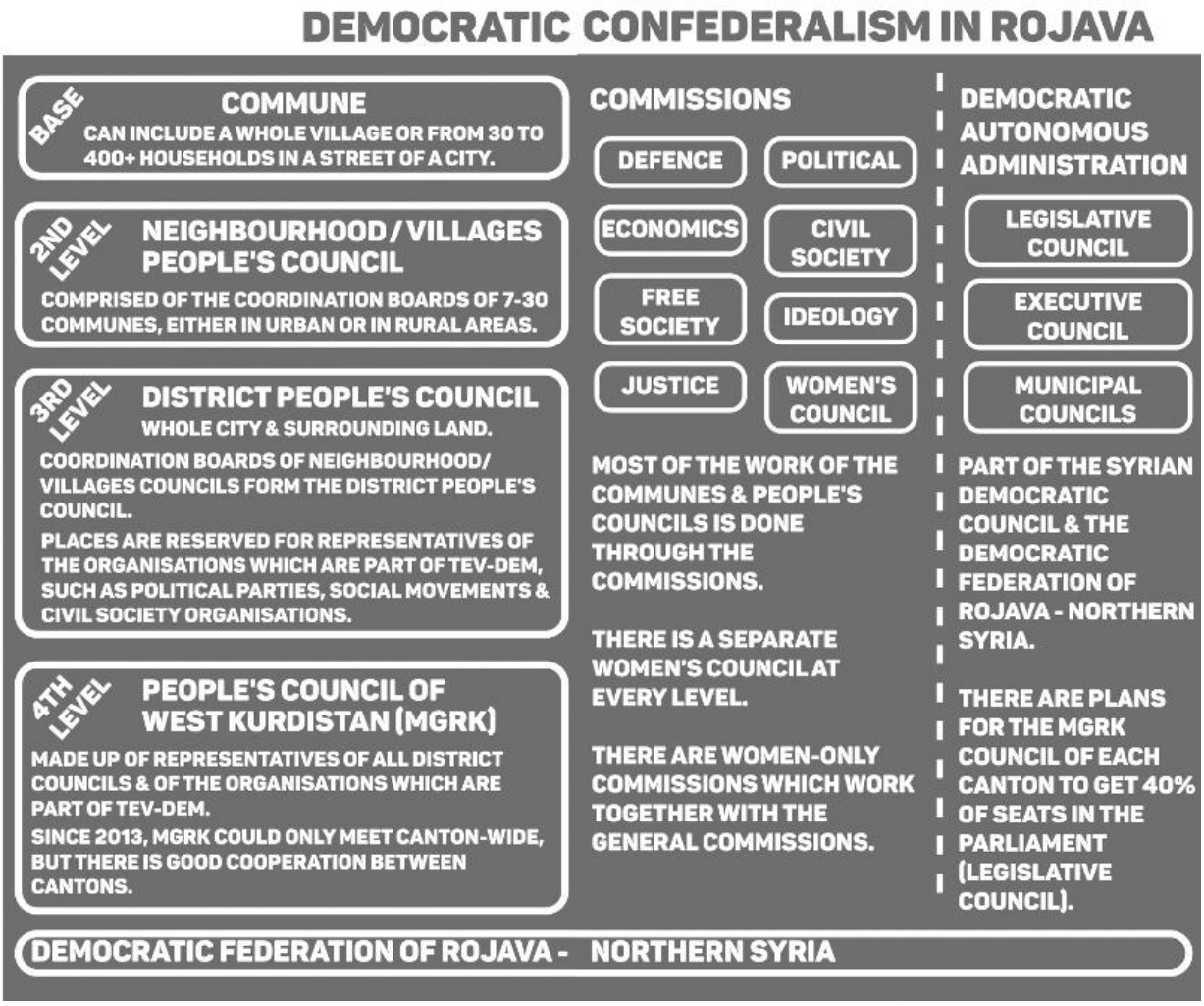

Figure 1. Democratic Confederalism in Rojava post-2014 (Egret and Anderson, 2016, p. 34f).

3. Previous Research

In recent years, a steadily growing body of work on Rojava has emerged that focuses on the ideological origins of Rojava, its ideological transformation, gender, self-defense, and contradictions within the movement. However, less light has been shed on the causes of the inconsistencies in Rojava, which will be the focus of this research. This section will, therefore, introduce previous research on Rojava to then build on it.

3.1 Rojava's Inconsistencies

Scholars often point to an ideological shift within the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as the PKK underwent extensive ideological and organizational changes in the early 2000s, shifting its focus away from nationalism and nation-building toward a non-state ideology known as Democratic Confederalism (Öcalan, 2011). Since the Rojava movement is an offshoot of the PKK, it has undergone similar ideological shifts (Rojava, 2016a). According to Nazan Üstündağ (2016), Rojava has evolved into a more radical democracy with non-state aspirations, moving away from years of guerrilla fighting in the name of national liberation. This democratization process is taking place through the introduction of Democratic Confederalism, where Rojava has managed to introduce structures that promote socialism, feminism, and pluralism through ideological, non-hierarchical structures, the institutionalization of radical direct democracy and the dismantling of patriarchal structures. In doing so, the Rojava movement prevents authoritarianism from taking hold and challenges statehood and biopolitics. Further, the formation of Rojava's non-national and anti-colonial armed units, i.e. the YPG and YPJ, ensures the protection of all persecuted people in the Middle East, which motivates the participation of marginalized peoples and communities. For this reason, Üstündağ claims that the Rojava movement is revolutionary and encourages other resistance movements to adopt Rojava's tactics (2016, p. 202).

According to Joost Jongerden (2019), Rojava's ideological transformation aimed to abolish the nation and its undemocratic structures in order to build a revolutionary society that is democratic, environmentally friendly, and gender equal (p. 67). Similarly, Cengiz Güneş (2013) argues that the ideological shift was a strategic step toward a more democratic discourse

because the states were unable to adequately implement the notion of freedom and democracy (p. 265). Can Cemgil (2016) argues that Democratic Confederalism was developed because the nation-state model was unable to provide freedom for its citizens. The nation-state model is unable to ensure the proper application of democracy because it is too focused on the rule of the state, unlike Democratic Confederalism, which focuses on direct participation in self-government and direct democracy (p. 425).

Üstündağ (2016) argues that Abdullah Öcalan was motivated by Western political theory in developing Democratic Confederalism, as his goal was to establish a Gramscian counter-hegemony that could embrace the historical and current unrest in the broader Middle East following the formation of nation-states and the spread of capitalism (p. 198). Likewise, Cemgil (2016) argues that Rojava is essentially challenging sovereignty and nationalism by implementing Democratic Confederalism. Since the nation-state has not adequately implemented the concept of democracy, Rojava no longer sees statehood as a long-term goal, but instead follows the PKK's example and focuses on forming a democratic autonomous entity within a democratic Syria (p. 426).

However, according to Yasin Duman (2016), despite the ideological transformation, Rojava is struggling to enact Democratic Confederalism due to insufficient participation of the local population. In particular, the policies, laws, and regulations adopted by the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) – which acts as Rojava's parliament – are often not followed by the local population. For example, TEV-DEM published a decision to ban Kurdish symbols and martyrdom posters in Rojava, in order to create a less Kurdish-dominated society. However, this decision was ignored by the local population. Duman argues that this not only delegitimizes TEV-DEM, but also shows that there is a lack of homogeneity between the grassroots and the top in Rojava, as the decisions of TEV-DEM are sometimes ignored by the local population (2016, p. 203). Rena Netjes and Erwin van Veen (2021) also criticize the Rojava movement, mainly because its statements are inconsistent. For example, Rojava claims to have no partnership with the Assad government, but leaked documents prove otherwise. The leaked documents from the Assad government have revealed that it has given Rojava key security resources and economic infrastructure in exchange for military support in quelling anti-government protests. Netjes and Veen claim that such partnership with the Assad regime shows that Rojava has the capacity to be disloyal and secretive, things a democratic entity should not engage in as it contradicts the fundamental principles of a democracy (2021, p. 77).

Furthermore, Pinar Dinc (2020) argues that Rojava is inconsistent in implementing Democratic Confederalism because the desire for nationality, power, and conformity still prevails among Rojava's elite. As an example, Dinc cites two interviews with Salih Muslum Mohammed, former co-chair of the PYD and current member of the International Diplomacy Committee of TEV-DEM (p. 54). Mohammed (2014) had expressed in an interview that the PYD was not trying to establish a Greater Kurdistan, but what the PYD was "trying to do is implement democracy in our lands – it could be a radical democracy for the people" (Mohammed, 2014; cited in Dinc, 2020, p. 55). However, in another interview, Mohammed (2015) stated, "We [the PYD] want to build unity even with the KDP [Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq]. We want to make the dream of Kurds come true. We have no other but our Kurdish people, if we cannot serve our people and our nation we would be ashamed." (Mohammed, 2015; quoted in Dinc, 2020, p. 55). This statement not only contradicts his previous statement from 2014, but also shows that there is an emphasis on the Kurdish people having a unified dream, which is contradicting to the fundamental principles of Democratic Confederalism, as all people should be considered equal. For this reason, Dinc questions whether Rojava has actually joined the PKK's ideological transformation, given the fact that there is an emphasis on nationality and the Kurdish people (Dinc, 2020).

Enrique Galvan-Alvarez (2020) argues that Rojava is inherently contradictory in its military, social, and political practices. Regardless of how discursively different Rojava's military wings (i.e., YPJ and YPG) are from ISIS and the Syrian military, and regardless of how much more humanitarian Rojava's political actions purport to be, it seems undeniable that there are also many alarming parallels between them. For example, Rojava has been accused of committing alarming human rights violations. This not only casts doubt on an idealized notion of Rojava, but also suggests that Rojava and its militias currently rule Syria's Kurdish regions with state-like authority. This is contradictory in that Rojava's actions are inconsistent with their discursive claims to be a non-state, decentralized, and non-hierarchical administration (p. 186). Further, while Rojava claims to be committed to promoting religious and ethnic diversity, its acceptance of political opposition and organizations that do not fall within its purview, seems dubious. In this regard, Galvan-Alvarez argues that Rojava mimics some of the repressive behaviors of surrounding governments (ibid., p. 184).

Furthermore, Thomas Schmidinger's (2018) research on Rojava addresses Rojava's nationalist aspirations. Their[6] book argues that despite Rojava's non-state claims, the desire for nationhood persists. This is expressed in particular in the aspiration to implement Democratic Confederalism within the borders of a Kurdish state (p. 129f). This contradicts Rojava's own Charters, which states that Rojava "recognizes Syria's territorial integrity and aspires to maintain domestic and international peace." (Rojava, 2014a; cited in Schmidinger, 2018, p. 246). The desire to establish a nation-state using Democratic Confederalism as a political system suggests the proposal of a hybrid political system in terms of a combination of Democratic Confederalism and the nation-state model (Schmidinger, 2018, p. 133f).

Indeed, Bülent Küçük and Ceren Özselçuk (2016) argue that Democratic Confederalism was developed to function within state structures, not to replace the state. Therefore, Democratic Confederalism does not aim to destroy the state, but rather to deconstruct it (p. 194). In fact, Abdullah Öcalan (2013) himself argues that Democratic Confederalism works alongside state structures because the goal of Democratic Confederalism is to change political patterns and institutions by establishing direct-democratic alternatives at a grassroots level that allow political power to be transferred over time from local to larger administrative units (p. 56). Schmidinger (2018) is thus not entirely wrong when arguing that Democratic Confederalism can be a hybrid political system, as it is possible to combine it with the nation-state.

However, Küçük and Özselçuk (2016) argue that since Democratic Confederalism does not aim to destroy the state, it is not a revolutionary movement, but rather a resistant one. This is because resistance is a self-correcting mechanism that ensures the preservation of fundamental structures, that is, deconstructs them, while revolution advocates for their complete destruction. For Democratic Confederalism to be classified as a revolutionary movement, it must advocate the destruction of the state (p. 194). Thus, according to Küçük and Özselçuk (2016), the problem is that the nation-state and Democratic Confederalism are mutually exclusive. To explain, in a nation-state, power is centralized and the will of the people is seen as uniform. As a result, the voices of various minorities can be suppressed, which is especially worrisome in a heterogeneous society (p. 196). In contrast, according to Üstündağ (2016), Democratic Confederalism promotes socialism, feminism, and pluralism through ideological, non-hierarchical structures, the institutionalization of radical direct democracy, and the degradation

[6] As there sometimes is an uncertainty of knowing the preferred gender pronouns of the researcher, I find it more appropriate to use they/them/their. In cases where I use she or he, I know for a fact that they identify with that pronouns.

of patriarchal structures. Democratic Confederalism thus challenges statehood and biopolitics (p. 202). Therefore, Küçük and Özselçuk (2016) argue that Democratic Confederalism is on the opposite side of the spectrum from the nation-state. As such, they cannot coexist without one disrupting the true essence of the other, which means that Democratic Confederalism is inconsistent in its essence as it cannot fully fulfill its function of working within state structures (p. 196).

3.2 Eurocentric Narrative

Some of the available scholarly research on Rojava presents a glorified and romanticized portrayal of the movement. Üstündağ (2016), for example, is fascinated by Rojava's minority-friendly and protective establishment (p. 202). However, Küçük and Özselçuk (2016) argue that while Democratic Confederalism may appear attractive in the eyes of the Western world because of its focus on empowering minority groups with a sense of community cohesion and autonomy, smaller minorities in Rojava are still vulnerable. To explain, Democratic Confederalism is based on community and community representation. Therefore, not only are individuals forced to belong to a particular community in order to be represented in the various unions, but belonging to a community can also provide protective and supportive elements, as each community has a responsibility to its members. Therefore, belonging to a community is essential in a Democratic Confederalist society. The problem is that individuals who belong to a smaller religious or ethnic minority may not have their community present. For this reason, they may be forced to seek shelter with another community, resulting in a gradual assimilation of identity due to the lack of multitude (p. 189).

Clemens Hoffmann & Kamran Matin (2021) characterize the non-state and anti-capitalist project of Rojava as a socialist revolution and are amazed at the movement's ability to emerge during the Syrian civil war. Against all odds, the Rojava revolution shows how ordinary social life remains a significant source of resilience with extraordinary activity far beyond the historical limits of capitalist society (p. 968). However, Alex De Jong (2016) argues that one must be cautious about projecting Eurocentric notions of a socialist revolution onto Rojava, as at the forefront of Rojava's revolution is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), not a working class that is driving revolutionary reform through its deprivations for self-emancipation. Therefore, what Rojava has built is the result of a political initiative of the PYD and not of targeted bottom-up activities (p. 79).

Anders Nordhag (2021) is also intrigued by Rojava's ability to rise up in the midst of war, arguing that peace and war should not be treated as dichotomies in the case of Syria, as Rojava is an exemplary case of how war and peace can exist simultaneously. They refer to Rojava as an example of peace in the context of war and violence, as the movement has been able to implement structural reforms that correspond to fundamental peacebuilding and create a space where violence is off limits. Rojava sought and achieved peaceful conditions that went beyond the absence of direct violence, even during a violent struggle in the Syrian war (p. 15). Nordhag concludes, however, that Rojava cannot be classified as a 'zone of peace' because violence is still present, but nevertheless argues that Rojava has gone beyond reducing the impact of violence and is on the path to building peace in a violent war (p. 21).

However, Ana Drummond, Maria Batista, and Cristiano Mendes (2021) argue that the portrayal of Rojava as less violent is due to the Eurocentric view of the movement. In particular, there is a tendency to portray Rojava as democratic and therefore 'peaceful', in contrast to the 'violent' dictatorial Assad regime. Rojava's democratic and less violent principles make Rojava an ambassador for the enlightened West. Ergo, Rojava is seen as a carrier of liberal principles due to its democratic characteristics (Drummond, et. al., 2021, p. 57). However, Netjes and Veen (2021) argue that the portrayal of Rojava as 'less violent' is not entirely accurate, as reports from Human Rights Watch (2014) and the United Nations (2018) reveal the use of harsh forms of violence, such as excessive use of force against anti-PYD demonstrators, beatings, shootings, killing of people, and arbitrary detention of approximately 50 members of the Yekiti Party[7]. In addition, there are more than 398 documented cases of children in combat operations – including boys and girls – where child soldiers were as young as 10 years old and the recruitment of soldiers included elements of coercion (Human Rights Watch, 2014; and United Nations Security Council, 2018; cited in Netjes and Veen, 2021).

Furthermore, Aina Fernàndez Aragonès (2020) argues that by referring to YPJ members as 'warriors' and 'militants', a new image of empowered women emerges, one in which these women are no longer victims of men. Aragonès further argues that the struggle of YPJ women fighters against ISIS is empowering. This is because in their struggle against ISIS, the female body serves as a powerful metaphor, specifically as Jihadists' fear of being killed by a woman, as they believe that it will deny them access to *Jannah*[8]. Therefore, the female body becomes a weapon, which is empowering in Aragonès view (2020, p. 5). However, Bahar Şimşek and

[7] Yekiti Party is an opposition Kurdish party to the PYD.
[8] Paradise in Arabic

Joost Jongerden (2021) argue that when trying to understand women in traditionally masculine positions, cultural, gendered, and oriental stereotypes are often used. As a result, the true causes and goals of female militants are mischaracterized as they are associated with Western liberalism. While these descriptions may convey the autonomy of YPJ members as liberated female soldiers, they also support a specific geopolitical goal and obscure their true ideological motivations, such as equality and self-determination. In doing so, these women are separated from the larger Kurdish movement and portrayed as heroines in the fight against evil, where their struggle against ISIS is primarily motivated by Western ideological reasons (p. 1041).

According to Valentina Dean (2019), the interest in YPJ women fighters in the West stems from the fact that they are an unusual and therefore unknown subject, which is why their representation is fraught with internal inconsistencies and misunderstandings. Since women's participation in militancy is still considered unusual worldwide, their actions in the YPJ are received with amazement and admiration (p. 16). The general portrayal of the YPJ's struggle against ISIS is dominated by a tactical and military struggle and neglects the fact that women in Rojava are at the forefront of a political and ideological change that has far-reaching implications for the Kurdish movement. Therefore, women fighters are more than soldiers fighting a common enemy with the West – i.e., ISIS – they are also actors in the development of a democratic Middle East and assert their individuality in a system that welcomes all (ibid., p. 25). Moreover, Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen (2016) argue that women who participate in militarized conflicts to protect their 'motherland' against an existential enemy have excessive symbolic significance that can be skillfully used to legitimize the ongoing struggle. Given the danger posed by ISIS, such gendered identification and conceptualization can assist the West in advancing its geopolitical interests (p. 14).

4. Theoretical Framework

"They steal your bread, then give you a crumb of it.
Then they demand you to thank them for their generosity.
O their audacity!"

– Ghassan Kanafani

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of this study, which is based on Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad's (1984) 'Westernized' (Gharbzadegi). This theoretical framework is primarily used to examine Westernization in the case of Rojava, as it both problematizes and analyzes Western influence in the East.

4.1 Westernized

The term 'Westernized' was coined by Iranian philosopher Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad (1984) and refers to the loss of cultural identity through infatuation and imitation of Western cultural identity. Although the term Westernized mainly refers to Iranian society's infatuation with the West, it is also applicable to the global majority. The infatuation with the West stems from the perception that Western ideologies, systems, institutions, technologies, and modernity are considered optimal, while non-Western ideologies are considered invalid and even barbaric (p. 2). Eastern infatuation with the West is not limited to the way the West governs its nations, but also has to do with the color of their white skin, their fine table manners, their music, their medicine and knowledge, their religious beliefs (or lack thereof), and their norms, values, and ways of life. The way Iranians see, think, and talk about themselves and their culture in relation to the West has been altered because of this infatuation, even adopting prejudices about their own culture and social values, leading to a pejorative view of themselves in contrast to Westerners (ibid., p. 20). But that is not all: non-Western countries also adopt prejudices and racist views of other global majority countries, leading to a competition for superiority in the sense of who is closer to Westerners, and thus, more worthy (ibid., p. 29).

Through the ideas and perceptions of the West, which is portrayed as the pinnacle of 'humanity' and 'civilization, Iranians' conception of their future has been influenced to be modeled after

the West. This is because in order to be considered valid, people must change their way of life, become closer to the West, and develop along the lines of the West (ibid., 40). However, Āl-e-Ahmad argues that the goal of becoming Western is a problem because people indulge in the infatuation, and thus, see themselves as less worthy. In addition, any form of development takes time. However, the countries of the global majority are expected to adapt to these Western-style changes overnight, in contrast to the slow and steady development of the West. The drastic nature of the changes has overwhelmed Iranian society and created the impression that Iranians are too barbaric and uncivilized to evolve, which has confirmed and reinforced the West's prejudiced view of Iranians. This justified the argument that if Iranians were to be 'civilized' and Westernized, they would have to be completely stripped of their 'Iranian-ness', which in turn legitimized an interventionist discourse with neocolonial connotations (ibid., 46).

Global majority countries, therefore, feel the need to transform their own culture and society into a Western one, which affects decision-making as individuals in high-level positions make policy decisions that align with the West rather than making decisions based on what is best for the country and its people. Furthermore, the West's presence in the East is justified by offering a 'helping hand' in the Westernization process (ibid., 47). The West is, thus, given the opportunity to plunder the raw materials of the East and then sell them as manufactured goods to the countries from which they were stolen. This makes the countries of the global majority passive markets for Western goods and pawns of Western geopolitics, resulting in the countries of the global majority becoming dependent on the West's mass-produced goods made from stolen materials. The countries of the global majority no longer have raw materials to produce their own products, so they are unable to develop by using their own resources and are therefore dependent on Western goods. Dependence on the West destroys native industries, trade, and production, which prevents a nation from preserving its own historical and cultural identity. Therefore, the West is both a source of production and a source of destabilization. For this reason, Āl-e-Ahmad argues that the West is contagious to indigenous cultures, as the subordination of the East to the West causes the people of the global majority to lose faith in their own exceptional qualities and abilities (ibid., 111).

Āl-e-Ahmad does emphasize that the infatuation of the global majority with the West was not caused by any tangible power. Rather, the distorted image of the non-West is usually rooted in the unconscious, implemented there through family communication, social and school education, and daily consumption of mass media. All in all, the turning of the Iranian heart

from the East to the West has prepared the ground for the universalization of the West, which essentially strengthens and expands Western hegemony (ibid., 116).

5. Methodology

This chapter discusses how the data were collected, describes the research design, analysis techniques, transcriptions, and translations. The data used in this study were collected during the course of a month of a small-scale fieldwork in northeastern Syria, during the summer of 2021 from mid-July to mid-August.

5.1 Choice of Data Collection

The data for this study consists of interviews, field notes, images, the various Charters of Rojava, and Abdullah Öcalan's prison writings (2013) on 'Democratic Confederalism'. The reason for using both the Charters of Rojava and the interviews as data sources is because the study aims to understand the lack of coherence between the two. The reason for using Öcalan's writings is that Democratic Confederalism is an important building block of the Rojava movement.

As for the interviews, semi-structured interviews were used in this study. This method of data collection was intended to allow participants room to explore specific areas of interest and respond more openly, while simontaniously maintaining sufficient structure. An interview guide was prepared in advance for use during the interviews and included a series of open-ended questions on specific topics. The prepared questions were not always asked in chorological order, nor in exactly the same format. In addition, some questions asked during the interviews were not included in the interview guide, as in some cases the topics expressed by the interviewees were further explored.

The themes of the interview guide were developed during the initial phase of the field research, primarily through interactions with locals in southern and northeastern Syria. However, additional elements, such as previous visits to Syria, social media, previous academic research on the topic, as well as conversations with northeastern Syrian refugees in Sweden and Germany, played a role in identifying the themes. Themes covered in the interview guide included, desired political system; aspirations for the future, legitimacy, ethnic relations, international partnerships, and Kurdish and national identity. Since the semi-structured interviews were intended to explore whether there were obstacles that affected the

implementation of Rojava's various Charters, the themes were used with the intention of being exploratory. For this reason, no explicit questions were asked about Westernization; rather, Westernization became relevant based on the research and theoretical linkages of the interviewees' responses. To prevent participants' narratives from relating exclusively to the interview guide questions and themes, each participant was asked at the end of the interview if they had any additional themes they would like to explore (Bryman, 2012, p. 471).

All interviews were conducted in early August 2021, towards the end of the fieldwork, and all interviews were conducted in Arabic, specifically the Northeastern Syrian dialect. Conducting the interviews toward the end of the fieldwork was more coincidental than intentional. Furthermore, while the Assad government uses direct violence against opposition groups, Rojava has a firm grip on the entire northeastern Syrian region. Thus, the threat became immediately tangible as soon as individuals left Rojava, so the location of the interviews did not have to be discreet if it was on Rojava territory. Interviews were conducted in offices, in cafes, and in participants' homes. An important point to note is that although all interviews were conducted separately, one of the six interviews had family members of the participant present. While the participant indicated that the presence of family made them feel safer, the presence of others may limit the participant's willingness to speak freely. In fact, even my own presence in the interview shaped all of the participant's narratives and responses (Bryman, 2012). In another interview, another person was present, however, only for a short time. This person's presence was due to the participant asking for help in recalling an incident. Thus, the presence of the other individual was beneficial in that it helped contextualize the narrative. The remaining interviews were conducted one-on-one.

5.2 Sampling of Participants

Two strategies were used to select participants for this study: purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used because this research focused on Rojava. Therefore, the people who wanted to participate in the study had to play some kind of important role in the movement. The reason for this is that the study aims to investigate why the movement is not able to enact Democratic Confederalism.

Purposive selection was also used in selecting participants based on ethnicity, place of residence, gender, and age, because the way these factors interact with each other intersectionally can have an impact on the perspectives of the participants, which can provide

the study with a less homogeneous participant pool (Nash, 2008, p. 9). It is of utmost importance not to homogenize participants, as people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are often portrayed through a homogenizing and Orientalist lens. Indeed, prior to the Arab Spring, journalists, scholars, and politicians were using the narrative of 'Arab Exceptionalism', which claimed that Arabs and their states were incapable of being democratic. Since the Arab Spring, however, a new narrative has emerged, called the 'Arab Awakening, which insinuates that people in the MENA region have 'awakened' to the idea of democracy. This modified narrative builds on the same representational foundations of 'Arab Exceptionalism', namely 'othering' and romanticizing. Scholars and journalists adopt, translate, and portray events along the same pillars of 'othering' and romanticization, while making universalist Eurocentric assessments in the new narrative of the 'Arab Awakening'. Therefore, avoiding homogeneity through the use of random sampling may provide a less Orientalist study (Abu-Lughod and el-Mahdi, 2011, p. 648).

Although the selection of participants was purposive, it was done through snowballing with the help of existing contacts in northeastern Syria. One of the six participants for this research was obtained through existing social contacts in Syria, while the remaining five were discovered through snowballing.

5.3 Transcription and Translation of Interviews

As mentioned earlier, the interviews were conducted in a Northeast Syrian Arabic dialect, but the recordings were translated directly into English during transcription. The reason for not transcribing the content into Arabic first and then translate the transcriptions into English is because – despite my proficiency in speaking Arabic – I lack the knowledge of writing and reading in that language. Also, when I translated from Arabic to English, I was aware that certain sentences and concepts might be misconstrued, since new meanings emerge during translation (Esin et al. 2014, p. 208). For this reason, during the transcription process, I attempted to contextualize certain terms that could not be easily translated into English.

When transcribing the audio data, I began with a simple transcription, noting pauses, reactions, and expressions of emotion in parentheses. In order to see if I had missed anything, I listened to the audio file again and rephrased any terms that were not fully translatable. However, certain terms such as 'Daesh', were not translated in the transcription, because retaining certain terms can provide context for translation, but such terms were contextualized in footnotes. In the case of the word 'Daesh', it is also safe to say that it has become widely recognized as a

pejorative term for ISIS. As for the translations, it is important to remember that they are based on my personal interpretations of the participants' narratives in Arabic. Thus, the translations reflect my perception of the participants' narratives, illustrating a 'collaborative narrative' between the interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). One should therefore be aware that the translations are based on my perceptions, which may be influenced by my position (Baker, 2006, p. 469ff).

5.4 Data Analysis and Coding

Thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006) was used as a technique to analyze the empirical data as well as Rojava's Charters. The reason for choosing thematic analysis is that it is a valuable technique for assessing, evaluating, and presenting trends and patterns in the data. Thematic analysis involves: (i) becoming familiar with the data, (ii) categorizing or coding the content, (iii) creating themes, (iv) evaluating the themes, (v) characterizing and naming the themes, and finally (vi) documenting (p. 22). In accordance with the different stages of thematic analysis, the process began with understanding the data obtained, which was accomplished by reading and rereading the data. Then, the data were coded, assigning a color to each code, highlighting different phrases and sentences with different colors in accordance with each code. In the third phase, themes were generated from the coded data by identifying sequences between the codes. The themes were then systematically reviewed to ensure that they were meaningful to the data. At this stage, it may be critical to return to the preliminary data to ensure that all the information needed for the analysis was present. The final phase involved the compilation of themes, that is, the compilation and presentation of the research findings. The themes identified in the data were, (i) *preferred political system*, (ii) *aspirations for the future*, (iii) *partnership*, (iv) *identity formation*, and (v) *social relations*.

5.5 Researchers Positionality

According to constructivism, knowledge is a constructive process built on subjective experiences with objective truth. This means that it is practically impossible to remain objective, so it is better for the researcher to acknowledge their subjectivity and be aware of possible biases in the research. This gives the reader the opportunity to become aware of the researcher's point of view, which gives the reader the opportunity to critically evaluate the study (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985, p. 161). Thus, I am a woman born and raised in Sweden with a Syrian background. More specifically, I am of Syriac/Aramaic descent – a small Christian ethnic minority – from a town in northeastern Syria that is currently within the

borders of Rojava. Because I am a Syriac living in Sweden, participants saw me as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. On the one hand, I was an insider, most likely due to my appearance combined with my Arabic accent, which distinguishes me as someone from northeastern Syria. On the other hand, I was an outsider because I grew up in Sweden and therefore did not experience the hardships that the participants endured during the Syrian civil war.

A person who is both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' is referred to by Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) as a 'halfie'. It is not uncommon for a 'halfie' to encounter obstacles when researching their own community, as the 'other' is part of the creation of the 'self'. The challenge for someone researching their own community does not bias, but rather the formation of the 'self' and one's identity in relation to the 'other' through culture. This means, then, that I cannot be objective based on my constructive knowledge of Syria (p. 143). However, according to Maja Povrzanović Frykman (2004), the purpose of the research should not be objective because the effects of the researcher's positionality can shape the study, thereby offering an interesting conclusion (p. 90). Thus, I am aware that my positionality and subjectivity shaped this study, but in a particular way, thanks to my insight.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

For security reasons, the exact city or municipality from which participants originate is not mentioned, to prevent their accounts from being traced back to them. Likewise, the name of each participant is not disclosed; rather, all have been given a made-up name that is a typical Kurdish-Syrian name. The estimated age, sex, occupation, and ethnicity of the participants are listed in Appendix 1. This precaution is due to the Assad government's extensive use of direct violence against opposition groups, organizations, or individuals, but also because all interviewees in the study wished to remain anonymous.

Before the interview began, each of the participants was given a consent form in Arabic (see Appendix 2). Since I cannot read or write Arabic, my father helped me write the consent form, which was later reviewed by an Arabic teacher to check for possible errors. According to Hennink (2008), getting help from family members and friends is a modified way to conduct cross-cultural research (p. 22). Participants did not have to fill out the form if they did not want to (many were skeptical about signing their name because it could potentially be traced back to them). Rather, the consent form was used to inform participants in writing of the potential dangers of participating in the study and to emphasize that they could opt out of the interview at any moment. Before the interview began, participants were verbally informed of the contents

of the consent form. Participants were also required to give verbal consent to be interviewed and recorded. It is important to note that giving consent is a sign of power between the interviewer and the interviewee (Clark, 2006, p. 421), so the process of conducting interviews is hierarchical. I attempted to reduce this hierarchy by conducting semi-structured interviews because they allow participants to speak freely if they so choose.

6. Findings

This section presents findings from data, which consists of semi-structured interviews, field notes, images, Rojava's Charters, and Abdullah Öcalan's prison writings on 'Democratic Confederalism'. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the following themes were extracted from the data: (i) *preferred political system*, (ii) *aspirations for the future*, (iii) *partnership*, (iv) *identity formation*, and (v) *social relations*.

6.1 Preferred Political System

In examining the data, it became clear that it is believed that peaceful coexistence in the Middle East may have been disrupted by the introduction of the nation-state model. For example, Rojava's Charter of the 'Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' states, "We, the peoples of Rojava-northern Syria [...] recognize that the nation-state has made Kurdistan, Mesopotamia, and Syria a hub for the chaos happening in the Middle East and has brought problems, serious crises, and agonies for our peoples." (Rojava, 2016a, p. 1). Another charter, entitled 'The Project of a Democratic Syria', states, "The Ottoman Empire did not deny the existence of different peoples, tribes, and clans; rather, it accepted pluralism, even in the name of the caliphate. The empire played an important role [in] the history of peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Kurds." (TEV-DEM, 2015, p. 3). Therefore, the nation-state is considered to be the root problem for the issues. For this reason, Rojava has chosen to implement Democratic Confederalism – developed by PKK's political leader, Abdullah Öcalan – as its political system, because it is "an optimal solution to address the national, social, and historical issues in Syria." (Rojava, 2016a, p. 1).

Rojava describes Democratic Confederalism as:

> an administrative and political decentralization […] The consensual democratic confederal system guarantees the participation of all individuals and groups, on equal levels, in the discussion, decision, and implementation of affairs. It takes ethnic and religious differences into consideration according to the characteristics of each group based on the principles of mutual coexistence and peoples' fraternity. It guarantees the equality of all peoples in rights and duties, respects the charters of human rights, and preserves national and international peace (Rojava, 2016a, p. 1).

This description is consistent with Öcalan's (2011) characterization of Democratic Confederalism as an ethical, political, and administrative expression of society, in which different identities and groupings coexist harmoniously independent of a state (p. 23). Similarly, Mansour – who is a member of the Rojava Political Council and was involved in drafting one of Rojava's social contract charters – characterizes Democratic Confederalism as "a multi-layered system [...] based on a decentralized and non-hierarchical society."

Despite these non-hierarchical assertions, clear signs of hierarchy are sometimes evident in the interviews. For example, Rozerin, who is a member of the Rojava Executive Council and active in the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), states that "Abdullah Öcalan is our political leader [and] he will forever be our political leader." Öcalan's leadership position has even been reaffirmed in Rojava through pictorial proclamations that have replaced all images of Bashar al-Assad (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Image of Abdullah Öcalan (Photograph taken by the researcher).

While Rojava's Charters favour Democratic Confederalism as a political system, Mehmet, who is a member of the Rojava Political Council, has expressed a desire to establish a liberal democracy, arguing that the Kurds "have been neglected the opportunity to build a liberal democratic society here in the Middle East." Dawûd – a senior member of the YPG, member

of the Rojava Executive Council, and involved in drafting one of Rojava's Charters – argues similarly to Mehmet, stating that:

> We also want a liberal democracy. Americans believe in cooperation with other international actors, which we also believe in, they also believe in human rights, which we also believe in, they believe in secularization, which we also believe in. I mean, think about it: if all the countries in the world were democratic, would there really be war? But whether the Arabs can have democracy is also debatable. Many believe that the Middle East is not capable of democracy because it is not secular. So the introduction of a liberal democracy is not bad, because it will bring peace (Dawûd).

This is not in line with Democratic Confederalism, as Öcalan (2011) argues that countries that have adopted liberal democracy, such as the U.S., tend to use authoritarian solutions in times of crisis. Therefore, he believes that liberal democracy is not a suitable political system for the Kurds and instead advocates for Democratic Confederalism as a better alternative (Öcalan, 2011, p. 36).

6.2 Aspirations for the Future

The Rojava Charter of the 'Final Declaration of the Rojava-Northern Syria Democratic Federal System Constituent Assembly', it is stated that "The goal of the Rojava/Northern Syria democratic federal system on the regional level is to achieve democratic union between all the peoples of the Middle East in the political, economic, cultural and social spheres" (Rojava, 2016b). When participants were asked about Rojava's aspirations, many spoke in favor of maintaining their establishment. Meram, who is a member of Rojava's Executive Council and one of the founders of the YPJ, stated that Rojava's goal is to "build a free, environmentally friendly, egalitarian, and democratic society." This aligns with Rojava's Charter of the 'Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane, which states that Rojava is "In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability" (Rojava, 2014a).

Mehmet argued that he believes "that the future of the Kurds is in this autonomous administration. I mean, we are already in the future, you could say, because we have existed for ten years now." Likewise, when Dawûd was asked what the future of Rojava would be, he responded similarly:

> We are a legitimate institution, having been in existence for ten years now, but we must work to maintain our institution and to expand and stabilize it. The only way for us to achieve our goal for the future is to be recognized by regional and international actors. Regional and international actors must see us as legitimate, because if negotiations occur, we want to participate in them

> to show that we are open to dialogue. But the future is near, I think the dialogue will start in 2022, and then hopefully we will be there. But whether we are talking about the future of Rojava or the future of Syria, we will only see improvements in the political process if the international community pays more attention to the deepening crisis in our region, because we demand assistance, not just in terms of military assistance. We also need explicit support. Regional leaders need to be more engaged in the political process in Syria, and Turkey's inexplicable hostility toward us needs to be addressed by international actors. But if we truly want a stable future, America's policy goals for Syria must be made clear for us to follow. A modern democratic solution must be demanded of Syria, as well as a greater push to move Syria toward a modern society. Syria must be reminded and pressured to implement democracy to combat issues of freedoms and human rights. This will only succeed if Russia's aspirations for Syria are hindered (Dawûd).

Here, Dawûd notes that Rojava's future is in some ways linked to Syria's, as reflected in Rojava's charter, called the ’Proposal by the Self-Administration of Rojava for a solution to the conflict in Syria', which states that "the solution lies in the embodiment of democracy in building a pluralistic decentralised Syria" (Rojava, 2014b, p. 1f). Rojava's aspirations to build democracy beyond its own autonomous administration may stem from the notion that Kurds are portrayed as the agents of democratic change in the Middle East. For example, Öcalan argues that "Thanks to the geostrategic situation of the Kurdish settlement area, successful Kurdish democratic projects may even advance the democratization of the Middle East in general." (Öcalan, 2011, p. 24). Likewise, Rozerin states that:

> [T]he local people will see that we are better than the Syrian regime. We are democratic, the Syrian regime is dictatorial [...] we want to implement Democratic Confederalism not only here in Rojava, but throughout the Middle East, so that people can finally be free. If the Kurds simply ignore the situation in the Middle East and do not want to liberate the people who live here, then the Middle East is doomed. Without democracy and the Kurds, the Middle East is doomed (Rozerin).

In addition to striving for democratic change, some of the interviewees have expressed a desire to be recognized internally and externally. Mansour stated, "We also want global recognition," primarily because "we want the world to see us as a potential ally, a potential trading partner that they can rely on. We want this recognition because it will legitimize us." Dawûd also seeks recognition, stating, "We want to be recognized internationally. We want to participate more in international trade and politics." (See Figure 3). He also argues for internal recognition: "We want the [Syrian] regime to recognize both the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Asayiş[9]." What is interesting here is that both Mansour and Dawûd argue for recognition while talking about trade, which may be important for the functioning of a nation-state, but recognition is of

[9] Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Asayiş are police units in Northeast Syria

no use when it comes to building a Democratic Confederalist society (Öcalan, 2017, p. 72). Thus, the emphasis on recognition may be rooted in the aspiration to have a state, which have in fact been expressed by the interviewees. For example, Meram argues, "We also do not believe that an established nation-state under the name of Kurdistan will belong only to the Kurds. We believe in an inclusive Kurdistan where all ethnicities come together and live free from oppression." Mansour makes a similar argument when he states, "We will always want our own state [...] but we do not want a capitalist nation-state. When we establish our own state, we will implement the system of Democratic Confederalism." This indicates a preference for a hybrid political system, with a form of civic nation maintained by various local groups and communities through their participation in public life and democratic deliberations.

Figure 3. Image of Fanta and Coca-Cola (Photograph taken by the researcher).
What is important to note here is that Syria does not sell Coca-Cola, due to the company's ties to Israel (Losman, 1972), yet, we find Coca-Cola being sold in northeastern Syria, which may signify that Rojava has trade agreements with international corporations.

According to Öcalan, the aspiration for a state may be due to the fact that " Kurds have not been able to enjoy a national society in a state of their own." (Öcalan, 2011, p. 51). Mansour argues similarly, "The Kurds have always wanted to have their own nation." Mehmet also comments on this, stating that:

> I think that if you ask any Kurd, the dream is to have a country of our own […] if we had our own state, we would not endure prejudice and genocide. Our women would not be raped, and our children would not grow up in a country where they are told that they are less just because they are Kurdish (Mehmet).

Mehmet goes on to justify their aspiration for a state through nationalism, territoriality, and a dose of patriotism, saying that:

> I think we all agree that the most important thing for us Kurds is our land. We are the largest ethnic minority in the Middle East, and we make up more than 20 million people here. What unites us is not our language, but the land. Therefore, our identity is based on belonging to one nation. The Kurds have lived in this land, that is, Kurdistan, for thousands of years. Yet they have failed to give us statehood, to be rulers of a real nation, to have something so powerful. All these minorities are seen as fragile and weak, why? Well, because we do not have a nation. We are seen as weak and need other nations to take care of us. But the Kurds are not weak, we are strong. It was our military that defeated ISIS. Yet, we have been denied the pride of having our name on the map and being recognized as a nation. We have not had the chance to control our own destiny. It is degrading for us to define Kurdistan by the lands we were forced to live in for centuries. It feels as though something has been taken away from us (Mehmet).

This indicates an effort to unify all of Kurdistan, suggesting territorial expansion. Mehmet even says that they "will never give up until we get our land back." In Öcalan's writings, however, he expresses skepticism about the nation-state model, asking, "Had it not been nationalism and nation-states which had created so many problems in the Middle East?" (Öcalan, 2011, p. 7) and even states that "a separate Kurdish nation-state does not make sense for the Kurds." (Öcalan, 2011, p. 23). However, when Mansour was asked to clarify how Öcalan may see on the issue of achieving a nation-state, he stated that:

> Öcalan is not against the principle of a state, only a capitalistic nation-state, and he is against the current arbitrary borders that were created by the British and the French after colonialism. If we were to bring about Democratic Confederalism in our own established Kurdish state, it would not go against Öcalan's teachings (Mansour).

Some of the interviewees go on to argue that their aspirations align with the U.S.'s. Specifically, Mehmet states that:

> America does not fancy the regimes in the Middle East and believes they are in dire need of democratization and secularization. They believe that women should have more rights, that children should have the right to education. They simply believe that the people of the Middle East deserve human rights and democracy. They want to give us what we deserve, and we deserve peace, freedom, democracy, and human rights as much as anyone. We also deserve to be developed like Europe and America and have their structures and systems. We have been failed to be given the opportunity to build a liberal

> democratic society here, and that is why so many people have migrated from here to Europe. So we agree with the Americans on what they want for this region. Kurds and Americans have common dreams for the future of the Middle East (Mehmet).

Dawûd makes a similar argument, stating that "our goals are largely the same as America's. Ultimately, America wants us to be free and have our own state." When asked if they could join NATO once they established a state, Dawûd replied, "Yes, I think we would. I mean, Kurds and Americans have cooperated with each other for a long time. We helped the Americans get rid of Saddam Hussein, for example, so I think the Americans would like to have us on the NATO team."

6.3 Partnership

Much of Rojava's methods for achieving its goals are centered on building relationships and partnerships with local, regional, and international actors. Rozerin says that building relationships with various civil society organizations abroad has brought Rojava closer to its goal. She reveals, "We receive a lot of donations from Kurds living in Europe, especially from Germany." Mansour also elaborates, saying that:

> We have many supporters from Europe who fund us. They are usually Kurdish organizations; most are from Germany […] we send our report on what we want to use the money for and then they either approve or deny the report. It all depends on if they feel as though the idea is good enough […] after we get the money, we send them videos and pictures as proof (Mansour).

In addition, Rozerin argues that Rojava has also partnered with the PKK, which has proven to be beneficial as Rojava's military wings – the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the all-female military units known as the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) – have received military personnel from the PKK. Rozerin argues that people "from Turkey, Iraq, and Iran come to Rojava to help us in our efforts. This has strengthened our military." Some have even moved to Rojava from Europe to join the fight, where Rozerin gives an example of a white British woman: "Her name was Anna Campbell[10] [...] she came to Rojava as a volunteer to work with the YPJ in the fight against Daesh[11]."

In addition, according to Dawûd, Rojava has also partnered with the United States (see Figure 4). This partnership has resulted in the protection of oil fields and gas pipelines, which are Rojava's source of revenue. Specifically, Dawûd explains the following:

[10] See https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43453292 for information about Campbell [Accessed: March 1, 2022]
[11] Derogatory name for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

> [W]e have experienced extensive coalition airstrikes which has caused our output of oil to diminish. But the field has been defended by U.S. trained guards and American military troops make regular visit to the field [...] We have managed to defend gas pipelines because of U.S. military training. For example, Daesh managed to successfully attack a gas pipeline in a territory held by the Syrian regime. They also attacked dozens of power facilities in Iraq. But our forces have successfully managed to prevent similar attacks to occur here in northeastern Syria (Dawûd).

Figure 4. Photo of U.S.'s flag on the right, and PYD's flag on the left, as well as graffiti of Rojava's military wings; YPG and YPJ (Photograph taken by the researcher).

Mansour argues that such partnership with the U.S. has opened diplomatic doors, where he stated that Rojava has:

> [M]anaged to make America change its perception of the Kurds. In the past, America was always worried as they did not believe they could trust us. I do not blame them; Arabs are unprofessional and to discuss with them is similar to bargaining with Arabs at the *bazaar*[12]. So I understand that the Americans were hesitant to us, but we have managed to show them that we are not like the Arabs but that we are more like the Americans. In the past, America has questioned our power and our ability to resist. However, our most recent meeting shows that the Americans feel more secure with the Kurds, as they did not question our relationship with the Assad regime. Instead, they told us that they recognized us as a military force in Rojava. They even told us that they recognized our political will. America has made it clear that they are

[12] *Bazaar* is a Middle Eastern market.

> supporting us, our project, and our vision, as they pledged to support our project materially. They have confirmed that they are supporting the Kurds and they want to establish friendly diplomatic relations with us. So, the United States has opened new diplomatic doors (Mansour).

Although the U.S. does not want to question the relationship between Rojava and the Assad government, there is evidence of relations between the two, which Dawûd admits to, particularly in stating that Rojava engages in profit-driven trade "with the Assad regime", where they trade oil and receive "money, but also refined oil products" in return. Rojava's efforts to build a Democratic Confederalist society began with the weakening of the Assad military in northeastern Syria, their establishment is sustained through cooperation with the Assad government.

Rojava also initiated a partnership with Russia, with Dawûd revealing that "Russia clarified its position and announced that it would not accept Turkey's occupation of new Syrian territories." This led to "strong military coordination and relations, as well as joint military points with Russia." (Dawûd) (see Figure 5). This partnership with Russia benefited Rojava because "[Russia] has been playing the role of mediator between us and Damascus for some time now, and we believe that Russia's role can directly influence the Syrian regime." (Dawûd).

Figure 5. Photo of a Russian patrol car in Rojava (Photograph taken by the researcher).

In addition, Rojava has initiated cooperation with local actors, which has proven useful for the territorial expansion that Rojava seeks. Dawûd explained that Rojava has joined forces with local Arab tribal brigades and other armed minority groups such as the Sutoro[13] to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which have become Rojava's official defense forces. Dawûd explains, "The SDF was formed for the purpose of protecting the local population from various Islamist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. The beneficial thing with the SDF is that they are mainly composed of Arabs, so the SDF has really helped us to better reach out to the local Arab population." This has led to the expansion of Rojava's territory beyond the majority Kurdish areas, as Dawûd adds: "When ISIS lost all of its territory in Syria, we managed to take control of the areas around al Hasaka and Deir ez-Zur." It should be noted that al Hasaka and Deir ez-Zur are majority Arab-populated areas.

6.4 Identity Formation

The emphasis on identity in Rojava is largely due to Öcalan's guiding ideology, as the inclusion of diverse identity groups is central to Democratic Confederalism (Öcalan, 2011). However, this emphasis on identity has led to a prioritization of Kurdish national identity in public discourse in Rojava. For example, Rozerin said that "the people who live [in northeastern Syria] are all Kurds, it does not matter if you are of Armenian, Syriac, Assyrian, or Chaldean origin, they are all Kurds." Similarly, Dawûd emphasizes that the Kurds hold power in Rojava and insinuates Kurdish homogeneity by stating that "since the area is controlled by Kurds, everyone who lives here has a Kurdish national identity and is no longer a Syrian [...] everyone in the area is a Kurd."

Moreover, there is a denial that Rojava is within Syria's territorial borders. For instance, Rozerin stated that "we are not in Syria here. We are in Rojava." Similarly, Dawûd stated, "We no longer consider this region to be Syria." Indeed, street and village names have been changed to Kurdish names, for example, al-Hasakah has been renamed into Hesekê; al-Malikiya to Dêrik hemko, al-Qamishli to Qamişlo, and all of northeastern Syria has been renamed into Rojava, an acronym for "Rojavayê Kurdistanê," which means West Kurdistan in Kurdish Kurmanji (Rojava, 2016b). Arabic script has also increasingly declined, and Kurdish Kurmanji scripts are increasingly found (see Figure 6). In addition, all Syrian flags have been replaced

[13] Sutoro is a police force composed of Assyrian and Syriac Christians.

by various flags belonging to Rojava (see Figure 7), and martyr posters of YPG and YPJ fighters can be seen in all Rojava cities (see Figure 8).

Figure 6. Image on a bus with Kurdish Kurmanji lettering (the Kurdish Kurmanji is the one that is written with the Latin alphabet) (Photograph taken by the researcher).

Figure 7. The flag on the left belongs to PYD and the flag on the right belongs to AANES (Photograph taken by the researcher).

Figure 8. Image of a martyr poster (Photograph taken by the researcher).

This self-conscious Kurdishness has also been transmitted through education. For example, all state schools in the region and some Christian schools were cleared and converted into Kurdish schools, where they were "teaching people about Kurdish history" (Rozerin). In addition, Rozerin argues, "We also encourage people to speak more in the Kurdish language, because there is no shame in using our language. We can see that this region is starting to speak Kurdish as a first language instead of Arabic. Even your people[14] are starting to speak in Kurdish instead of Arabic." This encouragement contradicts Rojava's own Charter of the 'Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane', as it states, "The official languages of the Canton of Jazirah are Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac. All communities have the right to teach and be taught in their native language" (Rojava, 2014a, article 9). Another charter, called the 'Social Contract of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria', states, "All languages in northeastern Syria are equal in all areas of life, including social, educational, cultural, and administrative dealings. Every people shall organize its life and manage its affairs using its mother tongue." (Rojava, 2016a, p. article 4).

[14] When she is saying “your people”, she is referring to the Christian Syriacs and Assyrians in the region.

This strong Kurdish national identity seems to have been present in Syria for a long time, as Rozerin explained that many Kurds refused the Syrian citizenship when it was granted to them in 2006. She explained that:

> [I]f we took the Syrian citizenship, we would have to send our men to the Syrian military. Why should we serve the Syrian military when we can serve our own Kurdish military? Many did not want their children dying for a country that did not belong to them. If you ask me, I will rather have my children dying for Kurdistan than for Syria (Rozerin).

The exercise of Kurdish identity has seemingly been legitimized by the lack of nationality. Moreover, from what has been said by the interviewees, one can conclude that there is a denial of other ethnicities, or at the least claim that there is evidence that the Kurds are *primus inter pares* by asserting a Kurdish national identity.

6.5 Social Relations

Rojava's Charter of the 'Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane' speaks of the good relations they have established with various local ethnic and religious groups, stating that "The Canton of Jazirah is ethnically and religiously diverse, with Kurdish, Arab, Syriac, Chechen, Armenian, Muslim, Christian and Yazidi communities peacefully coexisting in brotherhood." (Rojava, 2014a, article 3, section c). However, several of the interviewees said that they had difficulty convincing the non-Kurdish local population. Dawûd, for example, said that:

> We found ourselves in a situation where the local population were unhappy with us, especially after we lost Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tal Abyad[15]. As a result of this, it was difficult to develop a constitutional path forward […] I think that people fear changes, but once they realize that these changes are beneficial for us all, they will come to like it here (Dawûd).

Rozerin also expressed skepticism about the popularity of Rojava among the local population, saying that the local population is "slowly getting used to it. For example, people are stubborn about exchanging the license plates on their cars for new ones, and many still have not exchanged their Syrian driver's license for a Kurdish one, but I think with time, they will." (See Figure 9).

In addition, several reports have shown that the YPG has used harsher forms of violence (see Chapter 3, section 3.2, for more information on the reports). Violence has been used despite Rojava's social contract stating that, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman

[15] Cities in northeastern Syria

or degrading treatment or punishment" (Rojava, 2014a, article 25, section b). However, when Dawûd was asked about the use of harsh violence, he replied, "The use of violence is necessary. After all, we are in wartime circumstances, and therefore violent measures are necessary to counter the many threats we and the local population face."

Figure 9. Photo of Rojava's driver's license. (Photo taken by the researcher).

Furthermore, reports of the abduction of children and the use of child soldiers have also been published (see Chapter 3, section 3.2 for more information on these reports). When Meram was asked about this issue, she quickly responded, "The YPJ strongly condemns child soldiers, and we do not allow anyone under the age of 18 to join us. [...] We signed the Geneva Convention and promised to protect children in armed conflict." However, she later admits that the YPJ military academy has forcibly admitted people: "No women participated in the first three courses [of the military academy]. Then, when the fourth course was coming up, we decided to knock on doors and take women from their families so they could be educated and trained." Hence, there seems to be a gray area in terms of kidnapping, because she speaks out against the kidnapping of children, yet, justifies the kidnapping of people for the purpose of education and military training. In fact, this practice is not uncommon, as Ahmad – an Arab man who is a member of the Rojava Military Council and has risen to become a senior member of the YPG

– stated that he, too, was forced to join the YPG, explaining that "if you do not join [the YPG] voluntarily, they will come and take you to the mountains when you are old enough." Such actions by Rojava's military forces may be the cause of the lack of success in building good relations with the local population. Moreover, although it is not unusual for war to have a major impact on a democracy's capabilities, Rojava's use of coercive measures has affected the movement's legitimacy and popularity among the local population.

7. Discussion

The ideological basis of Rojava generates a discourse on the restoration of the pre-colonial past, as Democratic Confederalism has strong epistemological similarities with the pre-colonial Ottoman Empire's 'Millet System'. Both Democratic Confederalism and the Millet System are non-state political systems that focus on the diversity of religious[16] and ethnic communities, the right to organizational and cultural autonomy, and the protection of minorities (Barkey and Gavrilis, 2016). While Öcalan himself does not claim to have based Democratic Confederalism on the Millet System, both Öcalan and the Rojava Charters do argue that the introduction of the nation-state model is the cause of the atrocities that the Middle East has experienced in its postcolonial era (see Rojava, 2016a, p. 1; and Öcalan, 2011, p. 7). Moreover, Rojava's Charter also states that the Ottoman Empire allowed different ethnic groups to coexist and accepted pluralism (see TEV-DEM, 2015, p. 3). Rojava's rejection of the nation-state, combined with its adoption of a system that closely resembles the region's pre-colonial system may be an indicator that Rojava is attempting to make up for the historical transgressions of colonialism in the Middle East.

While Rojava's Charters claims that the nation-state and colonialism are the cause of the problems in the Middle East, the interviewees had rather different views on this issue. The interviewees tend to argue that Arab culture and its non-secularization are to blame for the Middle East's failure to prosper. This line of argument is not uncommon, as scholars such as Francis Fukuyama (1989) and Bernard Lewis (2002) argue that the Middle East is incapable of being democratic because of its Arab culture and Islamic religion. According to this line of argument, once the Arab culture and its Islamic religion are eliminated, democracy can flourish in the Middle East. Such assertions are, however, strongly Orientalist in nature and stem from a narrative of 'Arab Exceptionalism', which is a common, yet questionable answer for the widespread absence of democratic governments in the Arab world (Abu-Lughod and El-Mahdi, 2011). These interviewees' views indicate a propagated Oriental depiction of others in the Middle East (Said, 1978) and are, at times, accompanied by a need to show that Kurds are not

[16] Although the Ottoman's Millet system only recognized the Abrahamic religions by law. Hence, ancient religions such as Yazidism were not recognized, and faced much persecution by the Ottomans.

like Arabs because Kurds are democratic and thus closer to Westerners. The dichotomy between the democratic Kurds and the dictatorial Arabs is a clear sign of Western infatuation. Adopting prejudiced views of other non-Western people allows Kurds to distance themselves from the rest of the Middle East and thus ontologically converge with the West (Āl-e-Ahmad, 1984).

The Orientalist portrayal of the Arabs as undemocratic and uncommunicative in contrast to the democratic and communicative Kurds also demonstrates the presence of an attitude of superiority, not only among the interviewees but also by Öcalan. This superiority complex may be linked to an effort to show that the Kurds are closer to Westerners and thus more civilized. Specifically, Öcalan and the interviewees portray the Kurds as the bearers of democratic change in the Middle East. The Kurds are thus seen as better because they are more democratic and therefore more modern than the undemocratic and less modern Arabs. For this reason, the Kurds are worthy of imitation, while the rest of the Middle East represents what needs to be corrected. This portrayal of superiority is reminiscent of the Western attitude toward the 'uncivilized other' who needs Western systems and values to become 'civilized' (Hettne, 1983). However, an interesting observation is that, on the one hand, interviewees have a superiority complex in the sense that they will bring democracy to the Middle East. On the other hand, interviewees affirm the West's self-proclaimed duty to address the concerns of the global majority, also known as 'the White Man's Burden' (Easterly, 2007), as they repeatedly emphasize that the U.S. has the knowledge for peace and stability in the region. Without U.S. assistance and leadership, the region will not prosper. So, while there is a superiority complex, there is also an inferiority complex in the sense that Rojava cannot adequately manage its own affairs without the leadership of a preferably Western power.

This belief that 'the West knows best' has even led Rojava to subordinate itself to international civil society organizations with which it cooperates. While cooperation between different civil society organizations on a global level can be healthy, it can be harmful if one organization simply dictates what Rojava must do with the donations it receives. This is because it grants the organization in question the ability to steer Rojava's development in the direction that is beneficial to the organization, rather than the direction that is beneficial to Rojava. Moreover, dictating where the money should go not only reinforces the unequal global political economy, but also places the international organization at the center of decision-making. This devalues the local population’s first-hand experience, essentially disregarding their local knowledge, creating an image in which the European organization holds the right tools and knowledge, and

thus portraying the local organization as incapable of appropriate decision-making (Mutua, 2001, p. 202). This can be damaging to the local organization, especially if it has not yet fully achieved local legitimacy (Lederach, 1998, p. 43). Furthermore, this constructs channels of knowledge in which the right knowledge comes from the West and is distributed to the rest, reflecting colonial dynamics (Said, 1978, p. 54). Therefore, it is crucial for the international organization to play the role of a supporter and not that of the 'Core Player', as it can be detrimental to the peace process if the external actor positions itself as the 'Core Player' (Lederach, 1998).

In addition, some of the interviewees expressed interest in liberal democracy, international participation in the economy and politics, as well as in joining NATO, although this contradicts Democratic Confederalism and Rojava's Charters. This interest may be due to the West's apolitical discourse that encourages universality (Shils, 1993). To explain, Western (liberal) thinking is based on concealing its own political self-awareness and unique characteristics, which is why significant moral qualities are attributed to the West. The problem, then, is that this Western moral discourse denies particularity and therefore focuses on universality, which results in specific interests being hidden under actions taken in the name of morality (Cuadro, 2011, p. 31). By concealing the true political nature of liberalism, it presents itself as acting in the interest of humanity. In this way, any political opponent is transformed into an ultimate enemy, which allows for the dehumanization of the opponent. The dehumanization of the 'other' under the pretext of serving humanity – for the sake of universality and thus disregarding particularities – legitimizes the extermination of the 'other'. This leads to homogenizing the world under a single socio-political system that aims to eliminate differences (Mouffe, 2007, p. 150). Hence, in order for Rojava to maintain its establishment, it must abandon its Democratic Confederalist aspirations and instead adhere to liberal democratic principles in order to escape 'otherness'. Indeed, contemporary scholars warn of the dangers of attempting to establish a cosmopolitan system such as Democratic Confederalism, as we currently live in a unipolar world in which Western hegemony will do everything in its power to suppress counter-hegemonies (Cuadro, 2011, p. 31).

8. Conclusion

Previous research on Rojava has focused, among other things, on highlighting the movement's self-contradictory behavior. What has not been as researched is the question of why individuals in certain positions of power essentially ignore the content of Rojava's various Charters, which is the purpose of this study. This was particularly done through semi-structured interviews with individuals who are constructing and overseeing Rojava. Akin to previous research, this study found that there is a lack of homogeneity between Rojava's Charters and the interviewees. The various Charters of Rojava rely on Democratic Confederalism and advocate for a non-state, decentralized, equal, and human rights-based society, while the interviewees defend the use of various forms of violence, advocate for the creation of a Kurdish state, and assert the dominance of Kurdish identity in Rojava. These actions are contradictory to Rojava's non-state and non-hierarchical claims, as it is reminiscent of authoritarian and nation-state rule, but also echoes hierarchal structures. Even more interestingly, some of the participants in this study were involved in drafting of the charters of Rojava, yet, do not enact their own developed discourse, which makes it even more intriguing to answer the research question, which is:

What may contribute to the participants' deviation from Rojava's discursive goal?

There is more than one component as to why the interviewees do not adequately implement Rojava's Charters. However, the semi-structured interviews revealed that the participants show signs of Westernization in the sense that they long to be westernized. It is therefore worthwhile to explore this perspective to determine if Westernization might play a role in the deviation. For a starter, there is a goal of adopting social and political systems along the lines of Western discourse, as some participants advocate for the creation of a Kurdish state despite the non-state political discourse in Rojava. This desire for the nation-state model as developed by the West is not only a verbal aspiration, but is also being translated into action. For example, some interviewees assert a unified Kurdish identity, as not only are all people in Rojava considered Kurds-regardless of their ethnic origin-but there are also attempts to make the Kurdish Kurmanji dialect the main language in Rojava. This is contrary to Rojava's Charters, which call for the right to have one's own ethnicity and the right to speak and teach in one's own language. Furthermore, Rojava is not considered part of Syria, but rather its own entity, as evidenced by

the various flags of Rojava scattered throughout the region. This testifies to an effort to create a homogenizing Kurdish identity with its own region in which the Kurds are *primus inter pares*, which is evocative of state rule and Kurdish hierarchy. This also contradicts the Rojava Charters, which seeks remain in a democratic Syria and desires to establish a non-hierarchical society in which all groups can coexist.

The choice of the nation-state model instead of one's own developed system could indicate that the participants do not believe in their own developed system because Western systems, institutions, and values are seen as optimal. It may also be that the effort to adopt Western institutions, systems, and values might be a means to avoid future invasions and neocolonialism. Or it could be that Rojava is seeking the adoption of a nation-state model because it could bring foreign investment. For Rojava to receive any form of investment, it must change its form of democracy to one that corresponds to Western democracy. That is, Rojava must have certain secular and liberal systems and values that the West can recognize in order to become more attractive to the West and its investment. This may explain why some interviewees seek liberal democratic principles. Rojava may feel that its own democratically developed system, i.e., Democratic Confederalism, does not meet the standards of Western democratic rule, which could explain the deviation from Rojava's initial democratic system. In any case, the interviewees are essentially working against Rojava's non-state claims and are rather embracing the social and political changes that colonialism introduced to the region. The aspiration to embody Western systems, institutions, and values is a sign that the interviewees have internalized their subordination to the white man and could be the reason why Rojava is not being true to its own discursive aspirations. What remains then is if the West will accept their self-consciously crafted Western identity.

Nevertheless, this longing to be Westernized shows an internalized Oriental depiction among the interviewees in the sense that they believe that West's superior knowledge will lead to a prosperous and modern Rojava. They themselves do not have the ability to establish Rojava', rather, this could only be done through help from the West. Only then will Rojava stabilize, or the entire Middle East for that matter. Indeed, some of the participants even argue that Syria must develop in the likeness of the West, which is proof that Rojava believes Western systems and institutions are superior to their own. If Rojava believed in their own systems and institutions, they would have rather argued that Syria must develop in the likeness of Rojava. Rather than questioning West's claimed knowledge, the interviewees view West as their role model, which echoes an existing anxiety of aspiring to deploy a Western future, which

corresponds to the idea that the colonizers' cultural values are fundamentally better than one's own.

All in all, Rojava and the interviewees have different discursive constitutions. There is a horizontal dilemma in which Rojava's Charters aims to deconstruct a state, while the interviewees aim to build one. Thus, the political identity of the interviewees requires a different kind of discourse. With the help of the theoretical framework, i.e., Jalāl Āl-e-Ahmad's 'Westernized', this study concludes that there is evidence of an infatuation with the West that has led the participants to develop a divergent focus from the implementation of a non-state and decentralized administration. Instead, they have pursued national self-determination with development aspirations that align with Western modernity in order to reconstruct Rojava along the lines of the West. What this theory cannot explain, however, is the way in which the West has managed to achieve hegemony to the point where the global majority has developed its infatuation. That is, the way the countries of the global majority became infatuated with the West is not explained by the theory. Nor can the theory explain with certainty whether this infatuation with the West is something that the West itself has constructed for its own geopolitical advantage. Nonetheless, 'Westernized' suggests that any form of Kurdish self-determination can only be achieved if there is an epistemological decolonization of the hegemonic Western knowledge system that pertains to national liberation.

8.1 Further Research

This research on Rojava is limited to a Westernized paradigm. To find out if there are other components as to why Rojava is contradicting to its own Charters, future research is needed. Nonetheless, this research on Rojava raises several crucial questions that challenge existing theories of self-determination. By way of explanation, infatuation with the West can prevent a group from achieving full self-determination because it does not seek self-determination in terms of its own desires, but in terms of the West. Thus, the infatuation with the West can cause groups to become blinded to what they want because they are fixated on achieving self-determination in accordance with the West. Therefore, new theorizing that addresses this is needed.

Furthermore, while there is much research on the women of Rojava, especially in combat, there is not much that addresses the sexism that women in northern Syria still endure. Interviews revealed that women in combat often have their uteruses removed to avoid becoming pregnant. Since this study aimed to understand why interviewees deviated from the discourse in Rojava,

it was not relevant to investigate these claims further. However, further research in this area is urgently needed to determine if Rojava is indeed gender equitable. Indeed, further research on this topic can contribute to the investigation of Rojava's inability to enact Democratic Confederalism.

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Appendix 1

Table of Participants[17]

Name	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Occupation
Dawûd	1960-1970	Male	Kurd from Syria	High ranking military personnel within the YPG and serves on the Executive Council of Rojava. Involved in drafting one of Rojava's Charters.
Rozerin	1960-1970	Female	Kurd from Syria	Serves on the Executive Council of Rojava. Also active in YPJ.
Mehmet	1970-1980	Male	Kurd from Syria	Serves on the Political Council of Rojava.
Meram	1960-1970	Female	Kurd from Iraq	Serves on the Executive Council of Rojava. Played a vital role in founding the YPJ.
Mansour	1950-1960	Male	Kurd from Syria	Serves on the Political Council of Rojava. Involved in drafting one of Rojava's Charters.
Ahmad	1980-1990	Male	Arab from Syria	Serves on the Military Council of Rojava. Military personnel within the YPG.

[17] A vague description of the participants' work position will be provided to protect their identity. Further, if the participants partook in drafting one of Rojava's Charters, the name of the Charter will be not be disclosed, in order to limit the ability of narrowing down individuals and in turn uncover the participants identities.

Appendix 2

Informed Consent Form

مشروع البحث
محقق البحث: خاتون شامان (Chaton Chamoun)

لا نتوقع وجود أي أخطار مرتبطة بمشاركتك، ولكن يحق لك إيقاف المقابلة أو الانسحاب من البحث في أي وقت.

نشكرك على موافقتك على إجراء مقابلة كجزء من مشروع البحث أعلاه. تتطلب الإجراءات الأخلاقية للبحث الأكاديمي أن يوافق الأشخاص الذين تمت مقابلتهم صراحة على إجراء المقابلات وكيفية استخدام المعلومات الواردة في مقابلتهم. نموذج الموافقة هذا ضروري بالنسبة لنا للتأكد من أنك تفهم الغرض من مشاركتك وأنك توافق على شروط مشاركتك. لذلك، هل تقرأ ورقة المعلومات المرفقة ثم توقع على هذا النموذج للتصديق على موافقتك على ما يلي:

- سيتم تسجيل المقابلة وسيتم إنتاج نسخة طبق الأصل
- سيقوم خاتون بتحليل نص المقابلة كمحقق بحث
- سيقتصر الوصول إلى نص المقابلة على خاتون
- سيتم إخفاء هوية أي محتوى مقابلة موجزة، أو اقتباسات مباشرة من المقابلة، والتي يتم توفيرها من خلال المنشورات الأكاديمية أو المنافذ الأكاديمية الأخرى، بحيث لا يمكن تحديد هويتك، وسيتم توخي الحذر لضمان أن المعلومات الأخرى في المقابلة يمكن أن تحدد هويتك لم يتم الكشف عنها
- سيتم تدمير التسجيل الفعلي بعد الانتهاء من النسخ
- لن يحدث أي تغيير في الشروط المذكورة أعلاه إلا بموافقتك الصريحة الإضافية

اتفاقية الاقتباس

	أرغب في مراجعة الملاحظات أو النصوص أو البيانات الأخرى التي تم جمعها أثناء البحث المتعلقة بمشاركتي.
	أوافق على أن يقتبس مباشرة
	أوافق على أن يتم نقل اسمي مباشرة إذا لم يتم نشر اسمي واستخدام اسم مختلق.
	أوافق على أنه يجوز للباحثين نشر مستندات تحتوي على اقتباسات من قبلي

بتوقيعي على هذا النموذج أوافق على ذلك؛

1. أنا أشارك طواعية في هذا المشروع. أفهم أنه لا يتعين على المشاركة، ويمكنني إيقاف المقابلة في أي وقت؛
2. يمكن استخدام المقابلة المكتوبة أو مقتطفات منها كما هو موضح أعلاه؛
3. لا أتوقع أن أحصل على أي فائدة أو مدفوعات مقابل مشاركتي؛
4. يمكنني أن أطلب نسخة من محضر المقابلة الخاصة بي وقد أجري تعديلات أشعر بضرورة ذلك لضمان فعالية أي اتفاق يتم إبرامه بشأن السرية؛
5. لقد تمكنت من طرح أي أسئلة قد تكون لدي، وأتفهم أنني حر في الاتصال بالباحث بشأن أي أسئلة قد تكون لدي في المستقبل.

اسم المشارك

توقيع المشارك

توقيع الباحثين

تاريخ

تاريخ

معلومات للتواصل

إذا كانت لديك أي أسئلة أو مخاوف أخرى بشأن هذه الدراسة، فيرجى الاتصال بـ:

خاتون شامان

رقم هاتف:

بريد الالكتروني: