

Kurdish Autonomy Between Dream and Reality

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The defense of the Kurdish city of Kobane against the so-called Islamic State (IS) drew world-wide attention. In the middle of the Syrian civil war, the Kurdish movement is attempting an experiment in democracy and self-rule in three areas in the north of the country, together called Rojava. The leading political force in this experiment is the PYD (Democratic Union Party).

The PYD and its sister organizations in Turkey (PKK) and Iran (PJAK) fight for autonomy for the Kurdish population. In these areas the movements claim to be building a society with equal rights for men and women, direct democracy and social justice. In the 'social contract' of Rojava, a kind of constitution, resources and land are declared to be common property, while democratic freedoms, the right to free education and to a livelihood are explicitly recognized.

The revolutionary process in Rojava is a unique experience and a source of hope. At the same time, much remains unclear about local developments. While the PYD receives support from Western powers in its struggle against IS, her sister organization – the PKK – is still banned in Western countries as a 'terrorist organization'. Many people in Syria strongly criticize the PYD. What kind of movement is the PYD? And what are the developments in Rojava?

In this interview, Joost Jongerden discusses these questions – and others. Jongerden teaches rural sociology at the University of Wageningen in the Netherlands and published numerous books and articles about Kurdistan and the Kurdish movement. Among other works, he wrote *Radicalising Democracy: Power, Politics, People and the PKK* and co-edited an issue of the *European Journal of Turkish Studies* on 'Ideological Productions and Transformations: the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Left'.

The interview was taken and translated from Dutch by Alex de Jong.

Let's start with the political evolution of the PYD. This movement bases itself on the same ideology as the PKK, an organization which started as a Marxist-Leninist national liberation movement. My impression is that since the mid-1990s, and especially since the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, an ideological metamorphosis has been taking place in which direct democracy and autonomy have been put at the center of the movement's discourse.

Let me begin by addressing the characterization of the PKK. This organization was officially founded as a party in 1978 but already from 1972-'73 onwards there was a process of group formation that led to the birth of the PKK. So this group started to form shortly after the military coup in Turkey in 1971. This was a time when the radical left in Turkey was violently repressed, leaders and cadres of left-wing movements were sentenced to death or died during military operations, and many other activists were imprisoned.

What followed was a period in which activists tried to rebuild the left and were looking for a new point of reference. The people who would later form the PKK were already active during

those years and were searching as well. At first, the separations between groups were fluid — there was a lot of internal discussion — but later on these groups evolved into clearly separate organizations.

One important difference between the PKK and the other groups that were formed during that time was that it remained independent from the existing political models. I want to soften the impression that the PKK was very ‘orthodox’. It was a Marxist-Leninist party, with the hierarchy and ideological reference points you would expect from such a party. As such it was not very different from most of the left at the time.

But the difference was that the PKK did not consider any of the ‘really existing socialist’ countries to be a guiding light — not China, not Cuba, not Albania, nor the Soviet Union. These countries aspired to realize socialism, but none of them were considered to be suitable examples. This was an important difference between the PKK and many other left-wing parties at the time, all of which tended to view certain countries as the embodiment of their conception of socialism — as their model.

What implications did this have for the PKK?

The PKK had a more critical view of their own ideology. They didn’t adopt an existing model but were able to interrogate themselves critically. They were more self-reliant ideologically. They always gave a lot of attention to self-evaluation and ideological education; after all they didn’t have a model or guiding state, so they were forced to think more for themselves.

The ideological metamorphosis of the PKK is related to this. In the mid-1980s, the PKK formulated a criticism of the Soviet Union, which led to them being attacked by pro-Moscow parties. Nowadays, the PKK claims that this period was the beginning of a process of ideological self-interrogation.

If you analyze that critique today there is a risk of projecting things onto it, but it’s probably safe to say that there *is* a relation between this critique and later developments. The PKK observed that the reality in the countries where national liberation movements, or ‘really existing socialism’, took hold was very different from the promises for which people had fought.

If you talk about this with PKK members today, they would tell you that it is incorrect to claim that these struggles brought no gains at all — but they will also emphasize that the results fell short of the promises. Even then, questions about the reasons for this were already connect to a critique of the nation state. But back then, while they had this critique, they didn’t have an alternative. The paradigm shift in their thinking about the state was a long-term process that was concluded somewhere in 2003-’05.

Would it be correct to say that the process of questioning Marxist-Leninist ideology goes back further, but that only in the early 2000s proper answers were formulated?

Yes, exactly.

And this critique, was that one of the state as such, or of certain existing nation states?

Both, actually. It is a critique of the nation state in the sense that it questions how in such a state a certain identity becomes the measure of who has rights — excluding people who don't fit a particular identity or pushing them to assimilate to varying degrees. It's part of the essence of Turkish nationalism, of Kemalism, to assimilate people with a different cultural identity, and the Kurds formulated a fierce critique of such policies. In a way, that is self-explanatory, but many national liberation movements still criticized the state under which they lived while looking for a solution in creating a nation state of their own. The problem returns as the solution!

Inside the PKK, the criticism of the Turkish nation state led to a questioning of the desirability of a Kurdish nation state in which minorities might yet again be disadvantaged. The state as such is accused of having penetrated into the micro-levels of social life and of supplanting people's own capacities and potentialities for self-organization. We all relate to the state as separate individuals while forms of collectivity have, to a large degree, been dismantled. Society is splintered. Instead of turning towards the state for a solution, people's capacities for self-organization should be strengthened.

But in many of Öcalan's writings, the movement's ideological leader talks about an essential, unchanging Kurdish culture. And even if this is no longer related to the goal of a Kurdish nation state, it is questionable how much room this leaves for social pluralism, for groups that fall outside of this category — all the more so because, according to Öcalan, the politics of the PKK are supposedly based on what he considers to be the essence of this Kurdish culture, which is its egalitarian and freedom-loving nature.

I think Öcalan's writings are ambiguous. One reads references to a certain conception of Kurdish history but at the same time when he discusses the category of the 'Kurds', he recognizes that this is a diverse group — for example in the languages that are spoken, or in terms of religion. So if one would try to create a Kurdish nation state, what would be the national language? Those are the kind of questions the PKK poses and that lead to a lot of discussion within the Kurdish movement in general. But in the texts themselves you hardly ever encounter an interrogation of the Kurdish identity.

From roughly the turn of the century onwards, it seems that the movement found some of the answers to the questions it had been wrestling with in the work of Murray Bookchin, a libertarian socialist from the US. Why Bookchin? My impression is that this started with Öcalan who began to read widely after his arrest, encountering Bookchin – and the rest of the organization followed after him. Is that about right?

You have to consider that Öcalan defended himself in the case of the Turkish state against him. This gave him almost unlimited access to literature. There are lists of the books he has requested to read in prison and those are very extensive and varied. Bookchin is one of the authors on those lists but he is not very prominent. Still, he was clearly an inspiration for Öcalan. Öcalan regularly speaks with his lawyers and those talks are recorded, edited and published by the PKK.

At a certain point during such a conversation, Öcalan recommended the members of municipal councils in the Kurdish areas of southeast Turkey to read Bookchin. Clearly, the theory spread from Öcalan himself. At the same time, I think the PKK has been collectively searching for new ideas, but in this process Öcalan remains dominant. Still this role is not completely unchallenged, and in 2004 there was a split away from the PKK of people who disagreed with Öcalan's new orientation.

A few years earlier there was already a split after Öcalan's statements in the Turkish court. A number of PKK militants back then stated that Öcalan had abandoned the goals of the movement, for example, by asserting that the PKK no longer wanted to create a Kurdish state. These members wanted to stick to the old orientation. Öcalan's courtroom statement came as a shock to many members of the PKK.

Yes, indeed.

But that would indicate that Öcalan himself, as an individual, determines this development. There seems to be contradiction within the PKK: this organization and its allies have developed into a movement claiming a kind of direct democracy as its goal, but at the same time this goal of democracy from below seems to be based on instructions from above, from Öcalan?

Öcalan certainly plays a dominant role. Instructions might be putting it too strongly but we could certainly speak of motivation. But take the anarchist movement in the Netherlands in the

early twentieth century as an example: Domela Nieuwenhuis was clearly dominant in this movement and left a very strong impression on it. At the same time, there were various forms of self-organization going on. There is a certain tension between these developments, but a prominent role of a certain individual doesn't exclude the active participation of the others.

The PYD claims to have no organizational ties with the PKK, but they have the same ideological inspiration and develop in similar ways. The two share a common goal. That goal goes by different names. In his early statement for the court, Öcalan speaks of a 'democratic republic'; today the emphasis is on something called 'democratic autonomy'. Both are covered by a third term, 'democratic civilization'. What do these terms mean concretely?

I make a distinction between democratic republic, democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. Democratic republic is the project of reconstructing Turkey, with at its core a new constitution that would separate civil rights from identity. In Turkey's current constitution, civil rights are dependent on being Turkish and this identity is to a certain degree defined ethnically. Democratic republic is the name for a republic in which civil rights are no longer the privilege of a certain ethnic group; a republic in which the *demos* is separated from the *ethnos*.

Democratic autonomy means giving people themselves the power to decide on matters that affect them. Democratic confederalism is an administrative structure of the local bodies, councils, in which this power is organized. I think those are the core elements. Democratic modernity or democratic civilization is, I would say, an umbrella term for these principles.

And the goal is to extend democratic confederalist networks across the existing state borders?

Yes, the goal is to form democratic autonomy from below, by making decisions from below. Democratic confederalism means such decisions are not taken in isolation of the other and are not limited to local concerns and deliberations. Local autonomy needs to be forged in connection with the other, otherwise you could end up in a situation in which a community is only interested in itself and basically ignores the rest of the world.

Parts of Rojava are rich in oil. Without connections between localities, you could end up with a dynamic in which the community living on top of the oil says ‘this is ours’, and existing inequalities between regions would end up being reproduced. Yet in Öcalan’s statements one finds very little discussion of such social-economic issues; he mostly focuses on cultural rights and freedoms. He argues that in the Kurdish regions there is no crystallization of social classes and that there is no class struggle there. How realistic is that?

There are some sharp contradictions, especially related to land. Cizîrê, the largest of the three cantons in Rojava, consists predominately of agricultural land. Or take southeast Turkey, north Kurdistan, which is also a predominantly agricultural region with only a few pockets of industry, similar to Iranian Kurdistan. The exception is southern Kurdistan in Iraq, which is a consumer economy based on the export of oil and the import of almost all basic necessities.

In southeast Turkey, in particular, a middle class is forming and the social contradictions and social struggles are the main issues facing the movement in the cities. Perhaps you can’t really say that there is a working class, because the local economy is relatively undeveloped, but there is an underclass. And the question is: how does the movement relate to this? In theory, this question is not really addressed.

But last year there were a number of meetings in southeast Turkey to discuss how an economy could be organized under democratic autonomy. So the issue does receive some attention, but it is easier for the movement to organize people around cultural or linguistic issues than it is around class. When the Turkish state offers no education in the Kurdish language, you can organize that yourself – and then the state can ban this, but at least the contradictions are clear. Reorganizing the economy is more complicated.

Isn’t this discussion also made more difficult because there is a tendency within the movement to speak in terms of Kurds in general, as struggling against an external form of oppression? After all, if you want to discuss the social question, like contradictions between landless peasants and landlords, you’re basically speaking of contradictions between Kurds, among the Kurdish people, or whatever term you want to use.

This is clearly an issue that receives less attention at the moment. The old PKK regarded both social issues and national liberation as central themes around which to organize people. Under democratic autonomy, in the current ideology, national liberation no longer takes the shape of forming an independent state but rather of self-organization. The social question needs to be a

part of that, but in a context of war as in Rojava today, that would look very different from the situation in north Kurdistan, for instance.

In Rojava, the distribution of energy and foodstuffs is organized through the organs of democratic autonomy. In the social contract of Rojava, land was declared to be under common ownership — but the land of big landlords has not been expropriated because the movement ‘does not want to use force’. Still, if the social contradictions deepen, what is the alternative? At the moment the movement in Rojava has not really been confronted with this issue yet. Many of the landlords have fled and it is not clear what will happen when the war ends, and whether these landlords will return. I think it was a choice of the movement to remain cautious for the moment.

The old PKK saw its revolution as a project that developed in two stages: first national liberation, through the formation of an independent Kurdish state, and then social liberation and equality. Does the diminished centrality of the social question today still reflect the influence of this sequence?

I don’t think so. In principle, the movement sees the two as simultaneous but also as processes that are ongoing. It is the same for the gender issue: the movement doesn’t say ‘first we establish democratic autonomy and take care of cultural and linguistic issues and only after that we deal with the position of women in society’. Instead, they work simultaneously on these issues. In Rojava, for example, some families keep their daughters at home and don’t allow them to go to school. The movement doesn’t force these families to send their daughters to school; they talk to them, try to convince them. Liberation doesn’t happen overnight — it is a continuous process.

In the case of these conservative families, it might be counterproductive if the movement tried, in a top-down fashion, to force such cultural habits to change.

But it is the same with the issue of land, and of who owns it — that is also a cultural matter.

But in the case of land there is a clear contradiction between the interests of the big landlords and of the landless peasants. Force becomes unavoidable.

True, but if a strong peasant movement would arise to expropriate the land I don’t think — and I’m speculating here — that the PKK or PYD would turn against it. If these landlords return after years and demand their land back, the people who have been cultivating that land will probably not give in easily. I think it’s possible that daily reality brings about a process of expropriation, but that is not certain.

All this speaks of a certain conception of revolution; it is no longer like the old PKK, which saw its task as seizing power and then implementing socialism by decree. Instead, revolution is seen as a process of raising consciousness and giving ideological guidance. The PKK nowadays no longer says it is the ‘vanguard party’, but the catalyst and ideological inspiration. So the PKK/PYD does have as a goal to fill these democratic structures with its own ideology.

I think so, hence the strong emphasis on ideological education.

One of the core elements of that ideology is women’s liberation. But, as you already mentioned, there are also strong patriarchal traditions in the region. Where does this emphasis on women’s liberation come from?

Here again Öcalan played a significant role by raising this issue within the organization. But it did not start with him. Women played an important role in the early PKK already — maybe they were not many but they had influence. That distinguished the PKK from other left-wing parties at the time, which had no women in leadership roles. And the attention for women’s liberation grew over time. From the beginning, the PKK’s struggle provided a space in which women could play a social and political role, and as the influence of the PKK grew this space grew along with it.

Öcalan’s role was to raise women’s liberation as a theoretical issue within the party. At the same time, women in the party often refer to his name. Around 2003/’04 there was an internal struggle within the PKK after the party leadership decided that the women’s movements should be subordinated to the party. The women’s movement strongly opposed this and they used the arguments of Öcalan, the leader, to strengthen their case. They won this battle. So Öcalan’s statements are also used by the members to struggle for a certain autonomy for themselves.

The PKK has a peculiar conception of women’s liberation. They hardly ever refer to feminist thinkers or currents outside of their own organization and tend to think in terms of a dichotomy between men and women — and to prioritize this contradiction over others.

True, but this is an attempt to form a certain subject. The contradiction colonizer-colonized is a contradiction that enables the formation of a group. The social question is another, although this one is given less attention now), and the contradiction between men and women — the gender question — is another. There are multiple fields of struggle and the attempt is to formulate a type of politics that doesn’t prioritize one struggle over the other.

But many PKK texts discuss ‘the woman’, while one of the insights of the feminist movements is that there is no such thing as a single, homogeneous category of ‘the woman’ – women are divided along nationality, sexual identity, class, and so on.

I think the women’s struggle is formulated on a highly political and ideological level and takes place along lines that are partly the result of the division of labor between men and women, and partly the result of cultural and religious conceptions about the roles of men and women. Discussions on how to shape that field of struggle are being followed by people who are close to the movement, but I don’t know what impact this has within the party. People who are not affiliated to organizations or who are not party members often play an important role in discussions about left-wing politics, and with the PKK as well you can see that people become active around a certain issue and discuss these issues outside the party as well.

Does the PKK take an interest in those kind of discussions?

They rely strongly on their own education and ideology. At the same time, when you go around the region and look, for example, at bookstores that are close to the movement and that sell books that are published locally, you see a broad range of thinkers. Think of people like Wallerstein and Chomsky, but Adorno and Gramsci are translated as well.

What I found interesting was the letter written by Suphi Nejat Agirnasli, who was supposedly a member of the Turkish MLKP, and who fell in the defense of Kobane. He referred to a number of left-wing feminists – something you might not expect from a member of a Maoist organization like the MLKP. And recently, circles that are close to the PKK organized a large conference in the German city of Hamburg to which they invited different left-wing thinkers like John Holloway and David Harvey.

Does the involvement of several left-wing Turkish groups with Rojava lead to changes within the Turkish left?

I can’t assess the significance of that. What’s more important is the development of the legal Kurdish left-wing HDP party, and to what extent it will succeed in finding support in the west of Turkey. The legal Kurdish parties have always tried to form alliances with the Turkish left and often entered elections together, but these parties remained small. The HDP is now trying to build a party structure that can appeal to left-wing Turks as well and which is broader than the existing, normal radical groups. If they succeed in this, there is a chance of a political breakthrough.

Rojava drew a lot of attention during the struggle against IS in Kobane. But the experiment in Rojava was made possible by the civil war in Syria. The PYD is accused of striking a bargain with the Assad regime: the regime pulled out its troops and the PYD won't open a new front against the regime, creating a kind of win-win situation for Assad and the Kurds.

But it's also the case that, since 2005 already, people have been working on the idea of democratic autonomy. In Turkey, such structures are also being formed and they are trying to begin the same process in Iran. But in Rojava this project was able to take a very different shape, indeed partly because of the war. People work on the same project and are trying to shape that project inside the existing power structures. The civil war in Syria provided an opportunity to develop this project, but you can't say the movement wanted it this way. From the beginning the PYD said it opposed armed struggle against the Assad regime. The PYD supported peaceful protests — but when the armed struggle began and there was a danger that the Free Syrian Army or jihadis would enter Rojava, they rapidly armed themselves.

The PYD claims the YPG and YPJ are not party militia but form the defense forces of Rojava. Other Kurdish groups do not find that very credible; they consider these organizations the party-militia of the PYD.

It's true that these military forces are ideologically closely related to the PYD, but there are also groups inside the YPG-YPJ that aren't necessarily PYD members, like the Arab or Christian units. I think it was a wise decision of the PYD to limit the number of militia in the area. And besides the YPG/YPJ, local units represented in the command structure as well. These local units defend their own villages but are not mobile; they can not be dispatched to other areas.

But there are clearly contradictions between the PYD, on the one hand, and the Syrian parties that are linked to the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraqi-Kurdish President Barzani on the other. Similarly, but to a somewhat lesser degree, there are tensions with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan from Iraq. Those parties have a very different conception of power, of the future and the development of Kurdish self-rule. They are much more conservative.

There are also sharp contradictions between, on the one hand, the PYD and on the other hand, to simplify things, the Arab opposition. The PYD did not support armed struggle against Assad, but this kind of struggle was not an option freely chosen by the opposition – it was a matter of self-defense. The PYD is accused of benefiting the Assad regime by not only preventing the formation of a new front, but also by repressing anti-Assad demonstrations inside Rojava. People have been killed by the YPG during such protests. How do you see the development of this relation?

There is some cooperation on a local level – a number of Arab tribes have joined the struggle of the PYD. But the relationship with the politically organized opposition is much more difficult, even if there is cooperation with parts of the FSA. The jihadis have grown very strong in the Arab opposition and their worldview is in direct opposition to that of the PYD.

There are other accusations of human rights violations. Recently there were claims that the YPG forced out the Arab population of a number of villages under the cover of the struggle against the Islamic State.

The PYD stands for a Rojava that is the expression of cultural and ethnic diversity. For example, Efrin is home to many Alevites and the female co-president is Alevite. In Cizîrê, there is a large Arab population and one of the co-presidents is Arab. You see the same on a local level. A major difference between the PYD and the Syrian allies of the KDP is their attitude towards the Arab population in Rojava. The KDP current says: ‘those people have been brought here as part of an Arabization policy of the Baath-regime and they need to leave, even if they have been here for generations.’ The PYD says that everybody who now lives in Rojava should be involved in building a new society.

The defense of Kobane was a success, partly as a result of aid by Western powers, most importantly the airstrikes by the US. Some critics say the PYD has become a tool of the West – how would you respond to that claim?

That kind of criticism comes from the attempt to stay ideologically pure. It’s more difficult to remain pure once you are involved in the struggle. If you are involved, you have to navigate a field determined by relations of forces that you did not select, and you have to make choices inside that field. There were no real options except for pressuring the US to bomb IS. And that was done in a very clever way. The US was not eager to intervene: shortly before the airstrikes the White House still declared that Kobane was ‘not a strategic asset’. The fact that they started bombing,

and increasingly intensively, is because the PYD made the defense of Kobane in a certain sense a strategic issue: if the city had fallen, that would have been an immense moral blow that would have affected the US as well. IS would have been strengthened. You could almost say the Kurds have forced the West to get involved there. There were few other options. One of the defenders of Kobane tweeted that if the international left had had an air force, they would have asked that one for help.

But even if you recognize that the PYD had no other options, you can ask whether – against its own will – it has not become dependent on the US.

But I don't see this dependence. Maybe there have been agreements that I don't know anything about, but the PYD has not only maintained itself; its position is now stronger than before. Kobane has become a symbol of their success.

But it is likely that the US will turn against the Rojava project if, for example, the PYD insists on the principle that resources like oil should be common property.

That is likely, but you can question how much influence the US will have in the region in the future. Since 2003 and the invasion of Iraq, the influence of the US has been dwindling there. Local powers like Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia play a much more important role in the local developments than before. The US is still a factor but is no longer as powerful as before.

Turkey, especially, is an enemy of the Kurdish movement at the moment.

Turkey is doing everything in its power to marginalize the PKK and the PYD, without success. But Turkey's relationship to the governing parties in south Kurdistan, north Iraq, is very different. They had a good relationship for a long time but those ties were recently damaged. When the city of Erbil in north Iraq was in danger of being taken by IS, Barzani asked Turkey for help but got the cold shoulder.

The PYD claims the Turkish state actively supports groups like IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. How credible are those accusations?

I think there are good reasons to believe them. There are many indications that Turkey is giving direct and indirect support to jihadist groups. For example, there are recordings that show Turkish soldiers interacting with fighters along the border of areas controlled by jihadis. The Turkish secret service MIT has been involved in delivering arms. There are many such examples. Recently it became known that the Turkish army had given artillery support to jihadis when

they attacked an Armenian village in northern Syria, Kassab. Leaders of jihadist groups can meet without any problems in Ankara; jihadis have been taken care of in Turkish hospitals — you could go on.

Is this organized by what is called the ‘deep state’ in Turkey, or is it active government policy?

I think this is discussed and decided at the governmental level. Turkey’s foreign policy under the AKP government, so-called neo-Ottomanism, is based on Sunni-identity politics, on supporting Sunnite movements in Syria and Iraq. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are also trying to gain influence through Sunni movements, just like Morsi tried to do when he was president of Egypt. Turkey has tried, without success, to repress the PYD by supporting Sunni groups that are hostile to it.

This policy means the Turkish state is playing with fire by supporting jihadist groups. IS has already threatened on several occasions to attack Turkey if its government changes its attitude. Many IS fighters have a Turkish background and they might in the future become a risk factor inside Turkey itself; all the more so because support for IS has grown inside Turkey.

A few weeks ago the Assad regime declared that it has no objections to Kurdish flags — a symbolic break with the Arab nationalist Baath ideology. Is that a taste of what’s to come, of an autonomous Kurdish region inside Syria?

Kurdish autonomy is already a reality — and even if the Assad regime would decide to turn against it, I doubt it would make much of a difference.

The last few weeks have seen some quite intense clashes between the YPG and the Syrian government army. Is there a chance this could lead to a real war between the two?

That is difficult to say, but Assad has no interest in such a war: his regime is already weakened. Assad’s interest is in an agreement.

The PYD also has nothing to gain from such a confrontation: they have their hands full fighting IS and al-Nusra. But the current situation is volatile and won’t remain the same for long.

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In this interview, Joost Jongerden reflects on the Rojava revolution, Öcalan's leadership role, the position of women in the Kurdish struggle and the PKK. This interview originally appeared in Dutch on Actie voor Rojava.

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