

# **Ecology Discussions and Practices in the Kurdish Freedom Struggle**

**with a focus on North Kurdistan (Bakur)**

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Ecology is one of the three pillars of the paradigm of Democratic Confederalism, the political-theoretical concept of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Besides democracy and gender liberation, ecology has been mentioned explicitly as a dimension in this concept since 2005. However to date, ecology is less discussed and practiced than the two other pillars.

## Ecological destruction and exploitation in Kurdistan

With the widespread **introduction of capitalism to Kurdistan in the 1950s** came a systemic and destructive exploitation of nature. The four colonialist states -Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria – started to plan large energy, mining, agriculture, infrastructure and other investment projects whose implementation led to exceedingly grave ecological destruction and exploitation<sup>1</sup>. This is caused, amongst other factors, by the capitalist economic model, respectively low ecological and social standards in the implementation of the many projects as well as by the simple fact that Kurdistan has the de facto status of a quartered colony. While keeping the colonial status, the hegemonial states introduced step by step, using economic as well as military measures, capitalist relations into the societies of Kurdistan. In the **1970s the construction of numerous large projects** – particularly dams, oil-drilling and mining – had been realized through the exercise of the hegemonic power of the highly centralized states in the four parts of Kurdistan under the pretext of progress. After the first preparation work in the 1960s, agriculture started to be industrialized in the 1970s, particularly in West Kurdistan (Rojava) and North Kurdistan (Bakur), later in South (Başur) and East Kurdistan (Rojhilat).

One result of these policies was that communal and solidarity-based relations became weaker in the society of Kurdistan. The infrastructure projects and investments were designed and implemented with absolutely no consultation of the local population and through an authoritarian approach, were in the interest of the colonialist states and the colonialist and collaborative Kurdish upper classes and aimed a profit maximization through capitalist modernization, oppression and a deepening assimilation. While this development was still slow in the 1950s and 1960s, it took on an accelerating character in the 1970s. As a result of the implementation of large infrastructure projects in rural areas and the consequent displacement of hundreds of thousands; the industrialization of agriculture; the continuous economically-driven migration of rural people; rapid urbanization; industrialisation; and the colonialist wars against the population as from the 1980s; society has lost for a big part its characteristics of solidarity and communality. The main characteristics of the pre-capitalist societies were communalist approach and solidarity on decision-making, economy, sociality, culture and others issues, but different intensity of feudal and conservative forms were also present. Since the 1990s, the number of implemented large projects, as well as the livelihoods of people and economic relations, experienced grave changes. The surviving elements of the subsistence economy and local circles of economy were marginalised and Kurdistan became fully part of the “national market” of each state and entered the neoliberal global market.

The former times were certainly full of hierarchy, patriarchy and discrimination, but the transition to capitalism was a brutal break in the social and historical development and in a certain way it has even deepened societal sexism and patriarchy. To understand what has been diminished in

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<sup>1</sup> In recent discussions also described as “extractivism”.

these decades, the following approaches and characteristics of communalism and solidarity were eroded between the 1950s and 1990s. Typically:

- Although usually not inclusive concerning sex and age, many villages had in practice a kind of assembly of mostly older men and sometimes of some older women which gathered if necessary and took decisions.
- Solidarity on economical issues was common. For example, when a family or a household wanted to build a new house, the whole (or most) of the village joined the construction for at least several days which were crucial to building work proceeding significantly.
- It was usual that the animals of all households have been grazed together in appropriate locations. This was managed in turn by all households.
- When a household had a bad year of harvest, the others in the village supported the affected family by supplying them with the basic foods.
- When a household lacked yeast for cooking bread or milk, the neighbors shared it without hesitation or any discussion. In the following days the supported household put the same amount in the front of the house whose family gave the support.
- When a household had a large harvest of a certain product (like walnut), it was often the practice to share some of the surplus with others in and around the village.
- Solidarity on social affairs was also common. For example, when one or two parents of a family died or were forced to migrate in search of work, then the others in the village took care of the children who could not support themselves.
- There was cultural solidarity. In the evenings often people gathered in one of the houses and shared stories, myths, poems and songs among each other.

Kurdistan belongs worldwide to the countries where until recently capitalist modernity<sup>2</sup> was weak and solidarity and communal structures in the societies were still existing in a significant way. Today the older generations of Kurdistan remember quite well how life was until the 1960s or 1970s.

There is no objective to romanticize the life several decades ago, but nevertheless there was a significant solidarity and sharing in the society and not everything was valued monetarily; life and commodification<sup>3</sup> was not materialized as it is the case today.

## Start of discussion on ecology

After two decades of freedom struggle in North Kurdistan, in the 1990s the Kurdish Freedom Movement (**KFM**) **started to discuss the ecological question** on a Kurdish and global level.

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<sup>2</sup> The KFM uses the definition capitalist modernity in order to describe the current hegemonic political-economic system. According to that capitalism covers mainly economical activities while capitalist modernity is a system which includes the political and ideological (for example it is meant: mentality, human relations, social behavior) dimension of the developed hegemonic system.

<sup>3</sup> Change from use value to exchange value

The discussion took place against the background of the systematic destruction in Bakur through the Turkish State's war on Kurds; more than 2,5 million displaced people were confronted in a brutal way with the urban and capitalistic life while Turkish state forces destroyed up to 4000 villages and torched huge forested areas in Bakur. The majority of the displaced people had been living before in a mainly subsistence economy with regional product circulation and limited ecological damage. Particularly between 1992 and 1995 large areas were depopulated and many cities in Bakur often doubled their population without being prepared in any way and without support from the Turkish government or others.

In the 1990s especially the political leader Abdullah Öcalan of the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM) questioned the emergence of neoliberal capitalism, with new analyses in general and notably in relation to neoliberalism's impacts on nature. Particularly the concept of growth, and the increasing disconnection of profit from production has been criticized in Öcalan's writings and speeches. In this sense, he is speaking against the growing number of large investment projects because of the huge and irreparable destruction of nature they cause. Here he included also the climate change which, among others, he considered as an acceleration of ecological destruction by capitalism. To destroy nature for the interest of central governments and profit of companies means usually to destroy the basis of life of millions. The massive ecological destruction affects seriously human life. Often large projects displace a large number of people and/or exploit the land and surrounding areas which they are forced to leave. Öcalan also discussed the disconnection of people to nature and what kind of impacts this could have on people's minds and the relation of people to each other. In a fundamental way the alienation of people has been put in relation to the disconnection of people from nature. At this point Öcalan connects the discussion on ecology with institutionalized hierarchy which has its roots in patriarchy.

But ecology had not found a place at the core of the ongoing discussions in the 1990s. It was new, not yet theoretically strongly developed and in the shadow of the ongoing brutal war of the Turkish state. The central theoretical discussion at that time focused on highly important topic of women's liberation. At that time, it was most urgent for the Kurds to discuss the liberation of women as it was the main tool for overcoming conservative and hierarchical structures in society. However an important part of the revolutionaries and political activists within the KFM took note of the discussion on ecology of the 1990s. It influenced in the following years the minds of thousands of politically engaged and interested people. Öcalan's discussion showed a strategic approach as it was a discussion which was ahead of the times in comparison with all other left(ist)-democratic groups and movements in Kurdistan and Turkey. Öcalan was rather at the same level with some global discussions and movements which had started to discuss the ecological contradiction.

## **Municipalities in Bakur – Challenge to develop an ecological practice**

Shortly after Öcalan has been kidnapped through an international plot under the coordination of the USA and delivered to the Turkish state in 1999, the armed struggle of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) stopped, and a new and broad discussion on means and perspectives of the freedom struggle started while giving priority to the political-civil struggle. The aim to set up a "Kurdish state" has been given up finally. In the same year in the local elections several im-

portant municipalities had been won by HADEP, the People's Democracy Party, the legal party of the KFM at that time. The gained municipalities – among them Amed (Diyarbakir), Batman and Wan (Van) – became essential elements of the freedom struggle of the Kurds. This coincided with decreasing repressive conditions mainly because of the stop of the armed struggle. This facilitated the space for the municipalities, HADEP and other organizations of the KFM to spread their own political ideas and to get better in contact with new and not politically organized parts of the society. What has been claimed for years, namely that the KFM has better and much more democratic concepts, could be implemented at local level through municipalities and other political organizations. But at the same time the dynamic created by the armed struggle did not exist anymore. A shift in the way of thinking and acting became necessary.

Between 1999 and 2004 **HADEP administered 37 municipalities** and has been challenged to prove to the population that it is capable to govern better and more socially-responsibly than all other authoritarian and corrupted political parties of the hegemonic system. After taking over of the municipalities the state repression never ceased, but it was much less than in the 1990s. Rather the State's approach was to give some space, but to bring the HADEP (replaced in 2002 by DEHAP, 2004 DTP, 2009 BDP and 2014 HDP/DBP) municipalities with certain imposed policies, including challenging frameworks like neoliberalism and administrative centralism, to a point where they would fail, thus loose the following local elections and finally lose their attractivity.

The HADEP municipalities, and in broader terms the Kurdish Freedom Movement, have the declared political goal of creating a democratic-ecological society with the year 2000. It was expressed publicly that the approach to the nature would be respectful; natural sites would be conserved and developed within the cities and their surroundings would be more clean and green; and the investments projects would not be implemented at the expense of nature. The practice had to be significantly different from municipalities ruled by other parties which in Kurdistan did not care in any way for ecological life.

These first years were the time when thousands of political activists and other politically-interested people in Kurdistan and Turkey started to read articles and books on ecology and particularly social ecology, including Murray Bookchin. This brought forward the discussion how an ecological life should be developed and what that could mean in long-term and short-term politics. It affected also some employees and politicians in the municipalities. This was important as the difference can be observed sometimes in the details. It should be considered that in the whole state of Turkey the discussions on a more ecological or "sustainable" country were quite new, and political campaigns against destructive and exploitative developments and projects were rarely carried out. But it was also the time when in several regions struggles against large investment projects came up. In Bakur two struggles became widely known. One was against the Ilisu Dam on the Tigris which is planned to flood a large part of the Tigris Valley and the ancient town of Hasankeyf. Another one was against several dams on the Munzur River in Dersim where live mainly people of Alevi believe. Both struggles gained big support amongst the Kurds. The Kurdish society started to discuss for the first time issues of rivers, dams, energy, cultural and natural heritage and development in relation to each other on a broader scale that contributed to an increase of a critical awareness on these issues.

However, in fact the gained municipalities in their first period (until 2004) showed a practice which was by far better than the others from an ecological point of view. The **cities became cleaner and healthier** with improvement of the waste system, also in the poorest neighborhoods which had been neglected for decades. The drinking water supply and sewage manage-

ment was improved significantly in several cities within few years. The green area per person increased too. The sites of cultural heritage got more attention and accessibility for the public. More public spaces like squares or market places had been build up. The public transport had been developed to all settled areas and for a comparatively low price. Some designed large projects with problematic social and ecological impacts had been canceled or changed by the municipalities or not followed up. The life conditions in the poor quarters had been improved also by paving the streets, building social infrastructure like social centers or washing centers for clothes and the neglect of unpaid water bills. Efforts to include civil society groups in the decision-making process on many projects and even city planning became day to day reality. We can state that in the very beginning there were many urgent works in the field of basic services that had to be undertaken. The living quality in most cities was under a big threat – a stress that was exacerbated by the situation of those displaced by conflict in the 1990s.

Although these positive developments occurred, there was lack of an overall consensus as to how to develop a further and future ecological policy and the bigger ecological context could not be explained well. Almost all mayors and policy decision makers of the municipalities and other structures of the KFM did not consider the ecological perspective as one of the main strategic approaches and it remained often secondary if other aspects prevailed. The ecological consciousness of such people stayed limited with the pragmatism of parliamentarism. This was not very surprising as the general political movement stayed weak in the field of ecology and the discussion was quite new for the movement in general and particularly for the broader society. There were no strong actors within society who claimed a stronger ecological policy by the municipalities. In these years the fore-mentioned ecologist movements against dam projects concentrated their efforts on the dam projects; and the new “environmental” associations and civil organizations that were emerging in the cities, including organisations of engineers, architects, lawyers and medical doctors, did not yet demand strongly enough ecological criteria to be included in urban development.

There were two other aspects of relevance. The first is that the society was only just emerging from an extended period of intensive systematic state terror and was still in a phase of basic recovery. The political focus of the KFM was mainly on the human right violations of the 1990s and the demand for Kurdish identity in Bakur to be accepted with basic autonomous rights within the Republic of Turkey. The second is that capitalism in Kurdistan became very strong after the crisis of 2001. In 2003-2004, the official economic growth rate achieved up to ten percent, the money in the economy accumulated significantly and everywhere new and larger investments were done. Many more people started to earn big amounts of money through trade and investments. This created an intense pressure also on the cities in Bakur and approaches to open space for private investors affected almost all municipalities which suffered from structural financial low income. These were the years when neoliberalism entered Bakur.

In Bakur and also in Başur (with the US occupation in 2003) and Rojhilat, the development of extractive industries (mining, oil and gas) became very dramatic in these years. Investment projects in all fields had become widespread. In this sense the rural areas had been confronted with the following projects: all rivers should be transformed by hundreds of dams into artificial lakes or dried out by diversion dams; thousands of licenses had been commissioned to companies for test mine drilling; all main roads started to be broadened; mega coal plants had been constructed in several provinces; one of the world’s largest cement factory had been constructed; Bakur had become a hot spot for fracking; and finally the whole agricultural land – even the

mountainous areas – faced fast change according to capitalistic market rules. The state planners started to consider each square meter in terms of financially exploitable land and prepared or approved thousands of projects. The AKP government under Erdogan attracted with such policies the interest of global capital. Only the cities administered by the KFM resisted for a big part this development. That is why the government could not implement the most planned policies in half of the cities of Bakur.

In a period when the society of Bakur started to develop quickly an ecological awareness, the neoliberalized capitalism started to make the largest historical ecological (and thus social) destruction and exploitation in Bakur. The destruction of nature and overcoming of most of remaining social-traditional elements in the society was much more intensive than during the war of the 1990s. Only the mountainous areas with difficult access for humans could recover after 2000.

## **Ecology within Democratic Confederalism: the theoretical concept**

On Newroz 2005, Abdullah Öcalan **declared “Democratic Confederalism”** as the new political-theoretical concept of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Thereby the writings and discussions of the prior years and the whole experience of 30 years of struggle could be summarized and put into relation to each other in a systematic way. Without doubt Democratic Confederalism cannot be considered disconnected from the discussions and critics after the collapse of the “state/real socialism” around 1990 and the new leftist and libertarian social and political movements all around the world. The outcome was a critical, inclusive and radical thinking with new perspectives for the Kurds in relation with other people in the Middle East. The new political concept is being expressed with a paradigm **based on three pillars**. An ecological approach to the life was stressed as much as radical democracy, which goes beyond parliamentarianism, and gender liberation with a focus on women liberation. To repeat the obvious: The pillars and the whole concept are expressed with the aim to achieve a liberated, emancipated, equal and solidarity-based society in harmony with nature.

Radical democracy and women’s liberation had been stressed and developed strongly among the Kurds already for many years before. But actually each of the three pillars of Democratic Confederalism cannot be thoroughly developed without links to the other two. However the **initial starting point is women’s liberation**.

Prior to 5000 years of women’s oppression and exclusion evolved the Neolithic period when a complete communal social order was created around woman which can be also called matri-centric society. Öcalan emphasizes that this social order saw none of the enforcement practices of the state order and existed for thousands of years. It is characterized by equality and freedom, was viable because the social morality of the matriarchal order did not allow ownership and it had a harmony with the nature. It is this long-lasting order that shaped humanity’s collective social consciousness; and it is our endless yearning to regain and immortalise this social order of equality and freedom that led to our construct of paradise.

Öcalan states that with the overcoming of matri-centric society by patriarchy institutionalized hierarchical structures had emerged and spread among human societies and characterized the upcoming states until nowadays. Long before explicit social classes came into being, the first



oppressed and exploited class are women. This has been followed in the following centuries and millenia by the oppression of children and man. This political-ideological formation led **also to the domination and destruction of nature** by humans during the different periods of human history. The ecological exploitation and destruction must be analyzed basically from such an approach.

Today the conservative and reactionary approaches of existing states is experienced in the first instance by society through the oppression of women. Another important point is that Women as oppressed gender have a stronger relation to the nature than men; in all patriarchal societies men are usually more attached to power and thus are more alienated from nature than. Thus, the struggle for an ecological and liberated society means in the end also the struggle against patriarchy and liberation of women or, to put it another way, without the liberation of women there cannot be an ecological society.

As the oppression of society starts with patriarchy, it is logical that the KFM has started to focus more and more on the liberation of women which at the same is the liberation of all kind of genders and the whole society. Within the KFM, this consciousness came out to top in the beginning of the 1990s and thus an intensive and widespread discussion on women's liberation started which became more deep and systematic after the halt of the war in Bakur in 1999 and additionally more with the development of Democratic Confederalism.

Discussing more in depth the approach of the KFM on nature, firstly it has to be stated that the KFM views **nature as the body** of all living beings, including humans. Humans are part of nature and do not stand over it or any species. Like in the Neolithic Period it is regarded as alive and animated, no different from themselves. All living beings are part of one common big ecosystem which offers enough opportunities to live for everybody. Nature was omnipresent, there was for the significant majority of people always in the daily life a strong connection with nature. Öcalan describes this as follows: "This past awareness of nature fostered a mentality that recognized a multitude of sanctities and divinities in nature. We may gain a better understanding of the essence of collective life if we acknowledge that it was based on the metaphysics of sanctity and divinity, stemming from reverence for the mother-woman." Today there are still some beliefs where in nature are a multitude of sanctities and divinities, one of them is the Alevi belief. Consequently for spirituality and inspiration among humans nature was and is the main source.

Based on through adherence to ecological principles nature should be treated respectfully and not as a resource for profit. Nature was and is the source of food, housing and all other material needs of life. Under capitalist modernity, humans living in urban centers are usually weakly connected to nature and understand less the relation and connection to nature. Nature had and has a multidimensional meaning in life and is essential for the development of culture and identity as well as spirituality. Due to the alienation between human beings which contributes significantly to the alienation between nature and human beings, nowadays nature is overexploited. Despite everyone experiencing the impacts of grave ecological destruction in the next decades, the destruction of nature seems to continue. The current approach of human driven capitalist modernity is a state of **betrayal** of humans to nature, to their body.

In this sense, if **human** beings would **meet only their needs**<sup>4</sup>, nature would not experience serious destruction and the ecosystems would have the capacity to recover itself. At this point,

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<sup>4</sup> Often "basic needs" is used in such discussions. But its quite difficult to differ between "needs" and "basic needs", thus here it is foregone to use "basic".

the question what is the real need of people today is not easy to be responded and should not be left only to biologists or economists, rather it relates to the question of democracy, i.e. whether a society can take decisions under broadly democratic conditions free from imposed exploitative-extractive economy policies. We assume that in a liberated, solidarity-based, radical-democratic and ecological society there will be no pressure to over-extract “elements”<sup>5</sup> from nature.

Do not forget that humans are not only physical or material organisms, they have strong and deep immaterial feelings and metaphysical needs in their life. Although humans cannot express them, they do not think and act only in a rational way. For thousands of years, people have sought **inspiration and motivation** following different methods, including retiring from their surroundings to nature. With the exponential increase of urbanization, asphalt application, cultivation of landscape and investment projects all over the territories, less areas are suitable in this sense and so it becomes always more difficult for inspiration by nature, in capitalist modernity particularly for poorer people from cities who have less financial capacities to experience directly nature. In connection with that this affects also physical reproduction and recovery activities for people from urban centers.

Communities far away from the urban centers, industry and industrial agricultural areas are closer to nature and have more spiritual connection with environment. The less there is capitalist modernity, the more natural and spiritual the life can be. If such communities in non-urban areas belong to **oppressed groups** like the indigenous peoples of Latin America, the Adivasi from India and Alevi Kurds, then the connection to nature may have an additional importance because the oppressed peoples express themselves also through nature. In this sense the nature is a very essential part of their **oppressed identity**. Accordingly the destruction or misappropriation of nature by the colonialist force is an elimination of their identity. This is often not much understood by people in the capitalist and big urban centers where life no longer has a strong relation to nature.

In the ideology of the KFM, the ecological perspective is considered of strategical importance and as a tool to create awareness in the whole human society and all human linked activities and processes from a nature conservation, anti-capitalist and holistic perspective. In doing so, the approach is that the dimensions not covered by gender liberation or radical democracy would be expressed with ecology. In this sense, the emphasis on ecology within Democratic Confederationism can be understood also as the **completion of the two other pillars**.

However, it should be underlined that **nature conservation** and even nature restoration by humans is a **strategic goal**. From the very beginning on, the KFM stressed that each living being has the right to exist due to its natural occurrence. The life of animals and plants must be protected actively by humans. Regarding nature conservation, the goal to limit and stop anthropogenic climate change is a crucial topic, as in the next decades it could affect in a much more dramatic way everything on our planet – actually Kurdistan and Middle East have already been affected for almost two decades due to decreasing precipitation. Climate change is no less important than “nature conservation” (here it meant projects/policies to conserve species, habitats and areas of high biodiversity) and reverse, as some environmental organizations or politicians prioritize in their discussions, they are mutually dependent and should not be treated independently from each other. Climate change can not be limited without the conservation and restoration of

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<sup>5</sup> Instead of “resources”, which is used widespread nowadays, here “elements” is preferred. “Resources” assumes that they exist or wait to be extracted and exploited by capitalist economy.

forests, vegetation, rivers, water cycle, soil, air etc. For the KFM, climate change is part of nature conservation and a reason why in this paper climate change is not mentioned specifically.

Thus it is concluded that each struggle against ecological destruction is very essential and a necessary step to reestablish a relation to nature for many people; but in long-term not enough to protect the contested natural area and related human society. Not enough because the related investment project as well as all other destructive projects are caused by the dominant political-economic system. This dominant system will never step back to implement all designed and planned projects.

That is why being ecological means **also to criticize all processes in the society**, particularly the way of producing and consuming, feeding, housing, mobilization, organizing leisure etc. The KFM rejects categorically the way these models are implemented by capitalist modernity and the direction they take today – KFM's insistence on communal life is an expression of such a rejection. The current level of consumption is without doubt too much for the earth. Going on like this would end in the dramatic destruction or significant deterioration of all existing ecosystems and the loss of the most biodiversity. If there is no deceleration in the short-term and significant conceptional change in mid-term, nature's destruction and climate change will continue and the basis of life will become much weaker with grave impacts for the ecosystems, biodiversity, animals, plants and billions of humans. The worst affected people would be mainly people, communities and states with weak socio-economic capacities.

To achieve a considerable change of these models, the basic approach must be to reduce consumption of energy and material by at least 80 % in industrial states in mid-term and to find a new balance where each human has the same amount of energy and material for use; one important criteria should be to allow degraded ecosystems and biodiversity to recover.

At this point it should be emphasized that **each destruction of nature or ecosystem has serious impacts on humans** and is thus a social destruction – several factors determine the level. Each investment project like dams and mining has the high potential to destroy nature as well as to violate the basic rights of affected people. So ecological destruction must be understood also as the violation of political, social, cultural and economic rights of people. This connection is still not made by many critical activists or analysts in our world.

Going one step further the KFM is **aware that with capitalism – even without neoliberalism – the ecological destruction can never be stopped**, not to mention the reversal, i.e. the renaturation of nature and restoration of climate balance. If capitalism dominates the global economy and capitalist modernity the political sphere, there will be an intense pressure to have “growth” in the capitalist sense and (almost) no space to develop other forms of living, for democratic decision-making processes and a communal and democratic economy. Over centuries and decades, capitalist modernity has conquered the brains and behaviors of billions of humans in a subtle way. It cannot be overcome with a concept based only on new social and economic goals as “real/state socialism” intended to do. Hierarchy, state and capitalism is firstly an ideological development.

Capitalist modernity has started to deepen at an accelerated tempo the **alienation of humans from humans and from nature**; and this much more than the former hierarchical political systems. Particularly in the last 200 years each area of the world and each community has been affected by capitalist modernity. Nowadays all people – except the rich – have been put under pressure with neoliberalism. Through displacing people from their natural environments by physical or economic force to cities, humans lost their culture of living in much more

natural surroundings. And when territories are under threat by such destructive investments in areas where people are oppressed on the basis of their identity, the displacement of people by nation-states contributes to the **assimilation of cultures** under threat and pressure. Small or marginalized oppressed cultures are particularly affected by such policies. The Kurds are one important example for that.

People in cities do not only consume, they are also disconnected from their strong social and cultural heritage and thus are lost fishes in the sea easily to catch. Disconnected from their cultural past means, among others, to be open for extreme individualistic and isolated ways of life where a healthy balance between individuals and society does not exist. People alienated from nature and communal and solidarity-based relations are much easier to become instruments of exploitation in industrial production, consumption, reactionary thoughts and establishing of authoritarian political systems. Urban people do not know usually any more the name of most plants and animals and how in practice processes in nature function or how humans can benefit from them sustainably as our ancestors have done it for thousands of years. So humans in cities do not live the nature on a daily basis. In other words, humans do not feel soil, plants, water, sun and air and start to lose a deep understanding for them and their context; they may know it usually in theory like biologists. In cities, more now than ever before, everything is organized with money while villagers still can produce some of their needs, exchange goods among themselves and support each other with self-produced goods. People in rural areas are usually less affected by capitalist modernity and reproduce a thinking and lifestyle less connected to capitalism and state hegemony. In cities, on average humans are faced with more psychological and social traumas than in rural communities; and these traumas are transferred to their children. The traumas of displaced people from rural areas are maybe the worst. Actually, today the majority of our societies live under heavy psychological conditions.

Capitalist modernity creates people offering their labor force to private companies or public organizations without to produce any of their needs as their ancestors did in villages. Thus from their salary they have to buy all their needs. These people are **put under hard and stressful working conditions**. Working people under permanent pressure did not care much about the ongoing ecological destruction in the first period of industrialization when working conditions and salaries were in the center of their interest. Although strong trade unions did not develop an ecological approach until recently. However after generations more and more people in almost all parts of the world have started to think about ecology and alternatives to the capitalist way of living. While in the older industrial states the most people start to learn facts on nature and an ecological life from zero, in the newly or hardly industrialized states there are much more characteristics and remnants of non-capitalistic relations, processes and thinking on which critical people can build up. The recovery can be realized in an easier and faster way as for example critical people can benefit from the experience of their grand parents or even parents. Kurdistan is such a geography.

While above the connection between ecology and women's liberation has been introduced, there is still the **connection between ecology and democracy** to be described. In order to defend nature and ecological relations, destructive and exploitative projects need to be stopped and the models of housing, production, consumption, mobility etc have to be altered radically. All this can be done only if democratic decision making structures are dominant in the society, i.e. radical democracy is developed, and no more small circles in the society can influence via lobbying the political decision. Only when there is an economy based on solidarity and communality can the

big ecological destruction be prevented in long-term. Summing up it can be analyzed that the connection between ecology and democracy is realized particularly via the sphere of economic relations.

The KFM has developed over the years some **new terminology** with the concept of Democratic Confederalism which may be of interest. Many movements do this, but within Democratic Confederalism some more words have been created. It starts with the name of the concept. Some definitions are a combination of words like “democracy” and “autonomy” or “democratic” and “nation” which are widely used. The theory of Democratic Confederalism follows also the line to occupy existing crucial definitions like “nation” or “modernity” and to give them also a positive content in a certain framework. From an ecological perspective within Democratic Confederalism the terms “ecological industry” and “communal life” is of higher relevance. Ecological industry may be controversial as industrial activities have led to a big part to the destruction and pollution of the nature and concentrate continuously economic and political power. But at the same time the human societies have achieved a point of life and economical relation which can not be maintained without industry. For the KFM “industry” is understood as the production of goods in a systematic and concentrated, i.e. by mechanized processes, way. It needs some expert skills and higher technologies. Actually primitive forms of industry exists for a long period in human history. The current level of industry with its negative impacts was not inevitable; history could have taken a different turn. However, nowadays it is extremely challenging (almost impossible) to de-industrialize societies which would have incalculable risks. Thus the question is how to reorganize the industry in terms of technology, capacity and management from an ecological perspective and breaking with the existing concept of economic growth. Democratic Confederalism has on this topic yet no well-developed concepts, but rather basic ideas.

## **Role of the Guerrilla in the growing ecological awareness**

The increasing ecological awareness is related also to the guerrilla of the PKK, the People’s Defense Forces HPG, which never ceased to exist widespread in the mountains of North and South Kurdistan since the 80ies. The HPG has thousands of guerrillas in huge areas of Northern Kurdistan, and in a broad stretch of 250 km in South Kurdistan; thus must be considered as a geographically and political highly important factor. When not fighting with the Turkish Army, the guerrillas spend their time in a mix of military and political education. In South Kurdistan, the focus is even more on political discussion and education.

The **guerrillas discuss the entire range of social and political issues** in their political educational program. Since the 1990s when Öcalan started to discuss the ecological crisis, the guerrilla included ecology in their discussions. The manner in which it discusses ecology and all the other topics differs from people and organizations in the broader Kurdish society, which makes the discussion itself more independent. The guerrillas are not part of the hegemonic political system and have no narrow individual expectations from the state or others. In contrast, people and organizations from the “normal” society are influenced continuously by concerns and personal limitations. Even if they struggle intensively to get rid of influences by capitalism and statism, there is always a remaining part.

The difference with the guerrilla is that since its emergence in the beginning of the 1990s, the **life conditions** are exceedingly difficult, but completely **communal, based on solidarity and**

**far away from capitalist modernity.** There is almost no private propriety existing; money and material interests play no role in the relations among humans; decisions are taken sometimes on a basis democratic way; and a system of criticism and self-criticism is implemented systematically.

Concerning ecology, it is also very crucial that the **guerrilla lives in harmony with the nature.** There is almost no negative impact by the guerrilla on plants, animals and ecosystems; rather in the last years they care more than ever on this issue. The life is oriented strongly alongside ecological criteria. It comes along that the existence of the guerrilla in many mountainous regions leads to the prevention of widespread hunting, and to the preservation of many forests through calls or bans on the start or continuation of numerous destructive infrastructure projects of the Turkish state or the Kurdish Regional Government in South Kurdistan.

The discussions and **proposals** for overcoming the ecological crisis are often **practiced in the guerrilla areas** on a small scale and as much as possible in the lives of individual guerillas and as a community. So there are not solely theoretical outcomes, there is also a dimension of practice. Through this practice in some cases the guerrilla can adjust their first theoretical assumptions.

The ecological practice of the guerrilla can be explained with the following examples. It is absolutely forbidden to throw away waste like plastic or metal in the environment; trees are cut only under exceptional cases; animals are hunted not much and only in a way so that no species would be endangered in a certain region – some species could recover; a few dozen small diversion dams for electricity are built in South Kurdistan which divert usually one third of the flowing water (most states divert between 2/3 and 90%); as much as possible food is produced by the guerrilla's own means in the mountains.

The **results** and developed approaches of the guerrilla **reflect the material conditions** with the strong characteristics of solidarity, communality and ecology; and they challenge the other parts of the society – particularly the part of the population which is physically and politically close to them. The reason is that criticism is much more profound and ideologically justified, the claims are higher and there are less “realistic” elements which could limit thinking. Thus the guerrilla accept fewer compromises and thus fewer spaces for capitalism. The approaches of the guerrilla are closer to harmony with nature and request stronger and broader communal structures.

Developed approaches and **proposals** on ecology – like with the other fields – can be connected and **transferred quite easily to the broader society** of Kurdistan as there is a strong relation of the guerrilla with the Kurdish society. Consider that each year hundreds of thousands of people meet and discuss with guerrillas. Coming from the capitalist modernity and meeting revolutionaries who share communal life affects these people and beyond, especially young ones.

However in all fields two basic approaches within the Kurdish Freedom Movement – one represented mainly by the expressed ideas of the guerrilla – **collide often in a strong way.** Not all proposals are approved one to one by political activists or politically interested people in the broad society who live in different material conditions. There are aspects which the guerrilla does not consider in their discussions as they live far away and in different and extraordinary conditions. Generally, the approaches of the guerrilla are closer to what is considered more democratic, communal, gender liberated and ecological.

The **synthesis** must have been in majority of the cases the most correct way as the KFM managed to survive and to get stronger in the last years. We can say that the mountain-city relations of the Kurds have created over the years a specific dynamic which is beneficial for the whole KFM.

## How the contradiction creates a dynamic

The Kurdish Freedom Movement has been winning the local elections in an increasing number of cities in North Kurdistan since 1999, and they have acquired some important knowledge on how local governments can transform the society to be more social, gender liberated and ecologically oriented. It is only since 2010/2011 that the **reasons to transform life ecologically were grasped substantially**; previously, the approach and the discourse of ecology were rather shallow as described above.

There are basically **three reasons for that**. First, capitalist relations continued to advance quickly in North Kurdistan in the second part of the 2000's and the ecological destruction reached seriously concerning levels. Second, the concept of Democratic Confederalism has encouraged and strengthened ecologists in Bakur to deepen and broaden their struggle. Third, the critic and resistance against the ecological destruction and exploitation increased in an organized way, gathered some serious experience and even small successes.

The book "In defense of a people" by Öcalan published in 2004 and the **declaration of Democratic Confederalism** in March 2005 contributed definitively to the better systematization of the ideas and discussion on an ecological society in Bakur and other parts of Kurdistan. In the first months after the declaration of Democratic Confederalism, there was a controversial discussion among many political activists within the KFM or those close to it, about the pillar ecology. While for the activists who already incorporating ecology in their activism and discussions this was very encouraging and supportive, the others either did not take it into account seriously or raised concerned and considered it premature to emphasize ecology or "not fitting to the reality of Kurdish society". However, in general, the political structures of the KFM welcomed the pillar ecology and started to discuss it – even it was still only superficially. At least it opened the mind for ecological discussions, campaigns and requests.

Just in this time the **Ilisu Dam** and Hydroelectric Power Plant, the largest dam project in planning or construction in Bakur and Turkey, came again on the agenda after the Turkish government started a new effort to build it – the first attempt had failed in 2001/2002. Between 2006 and 2010 the struggle against this dam project, which would have huge grave impacts on social structures, cultural heritage and the Tigris ecosystem and destructive consequences for the local society, was continuously on the agenda of the Kurds and got support by many Kurdish organizations, activists and media. Coordinated by the Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive this campaign was an expression of the increased ecological and cultural awareness among the Kurds. It contributed at a new level to the questioning of energy, water, agriculture and development policies of the Turkish state and exceeded significantly the discussions during the first round of struggle on the Ilisu project between 1999 and 2002.

In the following years there was a steady increase in the **number of groups and people working on issues** concerning nature conservation, the impacts of big infrastructure and energy projects, food production and social ecology theory. Associations and initiatives opposing dams, mining, coal plants, environmental pollution, urban development, commercialization of life etc. have been initiated or strengthened for example in Amed, Dersim, Çolemerg (Hakkari), Batman, Qoser (Kiziltepe), Wan and Riha (Urfa). Although in these years the diversity of contested project types broadened, dams were still the main challenge for the ecology movements. These were the years when each square kilometer of Bakur and the whole Turkish state territory have been considered by state planners and big companies as a source of profit – internationally

this approach started to be discussed as “extractivism”. Capitalism was spreading to all niches of the society of Bakur. The capitalist modernity unfolded its maximum destructive forces, the AKP government did everything to enable investments in the region. The need to form a coalition of groups and activists with a strong ecological and critic awareness in Bakur has become important in these years.

Considering these growing protests and the need to act in a comprehensive way against the encroachment of neoliberal capitalism, the coordination of the Mesopotamian Social Forum, which has been organized for the first time in 2009 in Amed, decided to organize an **Ecology Forum**. At this forum in January 2011 with the contribution of activists by all struggles of Bakur, researchers, representatives of different civil organizations and movements and activists from Turkey and other countries, ecological struggles and approaches were discussed in Kurdistan in a broad and organized way for the first time in history. As consequence of the forum, “ecology activists” started a discussion to form a network of groups in Bakur. It took more than one and half year to achieve the first meetings of about ten groups and a decision to form the “**Mesopotamia Ecology Movement**” was taken. The theoretical basis from the very beginning on was Social Ecology and Democratic Confederalism. Although the name described it as a movement, rather in the first years it was a network.

In these years **capitalism has started to affect in a strong way also some political structures** and thinking of activists in the KFM, including municipalities and activists in small towns. Due to the fact that there was still a lack of system and depth in the discussion of ecology regarding all decisions and actions within the KFM, it is not surprising that some people and structures acted contrarily. The impact in the practice was that, among others, the behavior and approaches of political parties and organizations of the existing hegemonic system did not change significantly for many activists of the KFM decisions like city planning did not really brake with capitalist-statist prescriptive practices; some mayors were co-opted by local entrepreneurs to get tenders; and competition far away from solidarity relations between organizations and activists partly increased. These challenges may always come up and become dominant in the case of a not very well developed and accepted radical democratic structure with transparent and inclusive decision-making processes. The KFM had only started in 2007 to set up a completely new political structure which takes the paradigm of Democratic Confederalism as basis. The **Democratic Society Congress** (in Kurdish: KCD; in Turkish: DTK) as the umbrella structure of the KFM for the new people’s councils from the neighborhoods, civil society organizations, social movements, professional organizations, municipalities and political parties was quite new and still in the process of finding a way to function properly given the big diversity of above-mentioned structures.

**In the initial stage**, the Mesopotamia Ecology Movement (**MEM**) was challenged to find ways to bring the member groups together around subjects, campaigns and discussions and set up a permanent and reliable working structure. If this could be realized, the struggle against the numerous destructive and exploitative projects and policies of the state could be confronted better and within the KCD the struggle for ecological discussions, thinking and approaches would get more political weight. In confronting the government’s projects and objectives, a continuously rising number of people started to question the state policies in other areas. Not only the policies on Kurdish identity, collective rights, education, women’s rights, militarization, but also those on economy, energy, agriculture and related issues in Bakur became more and more a focus



of the political struggle. Each economic decision or investment project started to be perceived more critically.

At the same time, the **municipalities** governed by the legal party of the KFM came under a critical focus by the MEM because municipalities acting against the political goals of the general movement would harm the whole struggle, including the ecological dimension. The demand was that municipal politics had to be changed comprehensively along ecological principles, developed by the MEM, and the self-administration of people's councils. The aim of the state is clear: it wants to dominate, oppress and exploit the society in close cooperation with big companies, and in Bakur also with middle big companies. In this struggle, the KFM municipalities had to make a clear stance against the state policies. Although municipalities are according to Turkish law in the end an organ of the central government, they have limited capacities and freedom with which they could challenge state policies. While on the one hand they are forced to act in compliance with Turkish law, on the other hand the municipalities should do everything in their power to support radical democratic structures in the society, i.e. particularly the people's councils, women's self-organization and a communal economy, as well as taking a stance against the gentrification of urban areas and bringing equitably services to the entire population. But the reality in these years was often only in part like this. Capitalism has put the municipalities of Bakur under the pressure to follow the neoliberal AKP municipalities as development model through the domination of discussions about urban development. It was a time – up until 2011 – when economic growth in Turkey was high, the social contradictions in Turkey and Bakur were significantly less and the AKP government was still not very repressive: hence, the criticism by the KFM against capitalist modernity did not go down well in Kurdish society. Another pressure was systematic financial discrimination by the Turkish national government: since 1999, KFM municipalities could not benefit from many governmental funds unlike other municipalities. Obstacles were also often created in the approval of big projects (each big project needs usually approval by the governor who is directly appointed by the Turkish government) and the KFM municipalities have not been supported with experts and skills like the other municipalities. This latter discrimination was not very surprising as the Kurds have been oppressed since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. It is a subject with which a struggle is needed.

However, what was more concerning for the MEM was the lacking stance of the municipalities on capitalist development. In this respect, one case became important for the ecology struggle in Kurdistan. It is about the hill "Kırklar Dağı" in the outskirts of the city of Amed where a housing project was announced in 2009. As a historical and natural area at the south edge of the city of Amed, Kırklar Dağı is very known among the population and thus a sensitive location. When the physical preparation for the housing projects started in 2011/2012, which actually was not in line with the master plan approved in 2006, the MEM and some other civil organizations requested an immediate stop and cancellation: after long discussions and negotiations, the two involved municipalities of Amed rejected this demand. So, when the construction started fully in 2013 a demonstration by the MEM with thousands of people was organized. Although the project did not stop, the demonstration was a novum for the KFM: a civil organization criticized publicly in a sharp way a municipality from the "own political movement" because of an urban project. However, this had some long-term impacts. In the following years, the Democratic Regions Party (DBP; the party of the KFM and member of the HDP) municipalities started to act more carefully when they planned any housing or bigger project. This case showed that thinking and acting ecologically needs activists to consider also their own side and not the other side, the state and

big capital. Apart from the case of Kırklar Dağı there are many other **projects in the cities**, which are object of capitalist transformation and need to be regarded much more critically.

Another criticism of the MEM targets the big shopping malls which have been constructed in the last years in each city. These are private projects and of course supported by the AKP government, but there were some cases where the DBP municipalities have not intervened and in few cases even welcomed them. Some of the shopping malls could have been prevented, or at least delayed. The Turkish law allows the central government to take over city planning whenever it considers necessary. So, the question is how to resist this legal unfairness; even if it not possible to impede in the long-term the non-wanted projects, at least they should be delayed and subject to public debate. After intensive criticism by the MEM and other movements like the women's movement in 2014, a much more critical approach has been implemented by the DBP municipalities.

These two cases show that the ecology struggle in Bakur has not only to focus only in rural areas, but also in urban areas, because capitalism has started many years ago to seek for profitable investment projects everywhere. **2013** was the year when an **ecological awareness** and criticism started to express itself much more openly, accompanied by public actions and this not only through the MEM. The youth movement, women's movement, professional organizations (particularly architects, engineers, medical doctors), trade unions achieved qualitatively a new level in their approach as to how society might be conceived from an ecological perspective.

At this point, it needs to be stated that within the concept of Democratic Confederalism one field – in Bakur society is organized by the Democratic Society Congress (DTK/KCD) into 14 fields (also branch or sector), like women, justice, health, education, diplomacy, beliefs, ecology, municipalities, youth, self-defence – is usually promoted by one movement or organization, but it is not only limited to this organization. Actually, it is favored that activists from other fields also discuss deeply ecology, women's liberation or communal-democratic economy. For this, the connections between the fields become important. In parliamentary systems, ecological/environmental NGOs and movements act usually on their own for the objective to stop certain projects and/or to change the laws or society in ecological sense. In the new system of Bakur – and Rojava – the social movements struggle for their objectives, but do it within a democratic and inclusive system. This comes from the perception that society is one whole and has been divided by capitalist modernity so much that the different social and political groups and genders do not act in balance with each other: one group tries always to dominate the other one. In capitalist modernity, usually the groups with big financial capacities or weapons dominate over the others. This is a significant difference which has been brought by Democratic Confederalism.

An example how the different movements can work successfully together and how much the different fields are interrelated, are the **relations of the MEM with the economy movement**. The economy movement has been formed in 2013 after broad discussions by dozens of activists from different struggles and critical economists from Bakur and Turkey. Among these people were several activists from the MEM. Since then there is a good connection and exchange between the two branches. The good relationship has brought together the two branches into co-operation on certain projects; projects which are related to both fields ecology and economy. One example is the long-discussed construction of a bank for local organic seeds. A dynamic, cooperative and critical relation with the new upcoming economy movement, which wants to develop a communal and democratic economy in Bakur, is crucial for the aim to develop an ecological society. All that is discussed and developed among the MEM is aimed to be implemented

in cooperation with the economy field as well with as the municipalities. Without considering communal economy, an ecological society is impossible as described above.

## The Mesopotamia Ecology Movement

In 2014, a **new discussion** among the activists of the MEM about its restructuring with the aim to become a real and broad social movement started. After many discussions, it resulted in the formation of councils in each province of Bakur which offered space for political activists working on ecology and for newcomers. All previous and new initiatives and associations and activists working on ecology, but also other civil society organizations, professional organizations, unions, municipalities and the people's councils of the KCD in the urban quarters and rural regions had been invited to participate. This form of representation intends to include as much as possible of societal players and to establish something which in short and medium term should build a society that is more ecological, and thus, more just and democratic.

The **main work** of the MEM is done in the different **commissions** which are established according to the needs and emphasis defined by the provincial councils. Every activist in the MEM joins at least one commission in its province. Apart from the commissions which exist in nearly every province, there are some specific commissions. For example, in the province Dersim, there is one commission for forests and, in the metropolitan area of Amed, one for animal rights. There are also a few commissions at the Bakur level, like those for diplomacy, law and organising. The coordination at provincial level consists of the two co-spokespersons – one woman and one man. The co-chairs are elected periodically (3 or 6 months) by the provincial assembly which gathers at least twice a year (sometimes 4 times each year). Each provincial assembly elects annually several (around 6) delegates based on gender quota for the **assembly at Bakur level** which meets twice a year. The coordinations at provincial level elect two delegates, one woman and one man, for the Bakur coordination which meets more often than the Bakur assembly. As it can be determined within the MEM each structure has a gender minimum quota of 40% for its delegates. The MEM has a 50% quota.

Since this restructuring the MEM is now **represented more strongly in the KCD** through the actions, projects and campaigns it is realizing. The MEM can bring better its content and requests to the coordinations of the KCD on provincial and Bakur level and to the KCD general assembly. The stronger the MEM is, the more it can have impacts on the KCD as a whole, and on its activists. For example, it is crucial to work towards those municipalities which have no good practice on ecology as well as on other issues.

The MEM is **connected quite well with many ecological movements** and NGO's outside of Bakur within the Turkish state. Since 2015 for several times there were common actions, delegations (like on forest fires) and discussions. In this sense it is part of the ecology council of the People Democratic Council (HDK). The HDK is the turkey-wide supra-structure of all structures of direct democracy, thus also including the HDP. In other words, HDK is equivalent to KCD while not being comparatively strong like the KCD.

Since its start the MEM had to **struggle with a low awareness for ecology** in society which has its impacts in the different organizations of the KCD. Although there is a meaningful change in the last years, ecology is still considered by a big part of the society as something elitist and far away from real life and is associated with focusing on the conservation of some species or

important natural areas or having healthy but expensive organic food. Moreover the terminology used still does not make much understandable what the activists are seeking. That is why practice has become so crucial in order to attract more people for the movement. Considering that even a large number of people with an academic background are interested less in theory and more in practice, projects on the ground can motivate and activate many and can make better understandable what is aimed with an ecological society. Projects like common gardening and traditional construction, which all interested people can join, have also the impact that the MEM can validate and develop its theoretical approach based on the outcomes of such projects. This should be considered also in the light that the KFM starts with the general approach in the most fields of society and substantiate its approach in a protracted process of practice and discussion. **Projects on the ground** offer collective work and give back the feeling of community and solidarity to people, particularly from cities. One successful project was the collection of local and organic seeds from different areas Bakur in the winter 2015/2016 and their reproduction in 2016 in seven provinces. The reproduction has been done mostly with the local people's neighborhood councils which is a good example how the different fields of the KCD can work together. This campaign on seeds received interest by many parts of the society. Considering that humans are rational as well as emotional beings, touching soil, water, mud, plants and wood can create a big synergy. A further result such a practical approach can have: in times of repression and war it can hold people together and allows them to come through politically difficult periods like the one started with the war in summer 2015 which worsened with the state of emergency in summer 2016.

In autumn 2015 the MEM conducted a half year **discussion** on the **eight main political fields** (agriculture, energy, water, health, communal economy, forests/biodiversity, ecological cities, eco-technology) for what working groups at Bakur level had been established. At the end of these processes, papers have been prepared and later approved at the first MEM conference in April 2016 in Wan. These **policy papers** have become the guidelines for the future work which cover a broad span and are linked to other political fields like women's liberation, economy and health. This challenging work may help to find initial answers on the question as to which direction the MEM should take, strengthen without doubt the commitment to the struggle and provide tools for successfully struggling against state and companies as well as within the KFM.

Mesopotamia Ecology Movement, [www.mezopotamyakoloji.org](http://www.mezopotamyakoloji.org)

## Remarks

1. It needs to be stated that the heavy political repression in Bakur on all levels of political engagement, which started in summer 2015 and achieved with the state of emergency, declared in July 2016, an extreme level, has affected in a strong way also the MEM. Since then the most activities of the MEM have been limited, halted or changed. However the activities have undergone some important change. In this paper the period after the state of emergency has not been considered. Rather it has been aimed to describe the development of the consciousness and discussion on and the struggle for ecology in Bakur before the current repression.

2. The discussions and practice of Rojava has not been included in this paper as there are very different frameworks (no state any more, much less capitalism etc.) although the political concept is the same.

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