

# Anticolonial Separatism in the Neoliberal Era

The Renegade



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# Abstract

*In an era of concentrated capital, concentrated power, and deteriorating political conditions, separatism has yielded itself as a vehicle for marginalized populations to uplift themselves. Amid a wavering liberal international order, this thesis serves to provide a better understanding of how populations free themselves, and what challenges they face in doing so. From the question of what impacts the capability of separatist movements to secede in the neoliberal era, I argue that state coercion, state co-optation, and internal dynamics of a movement impact this capability to secede. I compare separatist movements with internally decentralized characteristics to those with internally centralized characteristics in how they respond to mutual challenges. The cases of decentralized Rojava in the Levant and centralized Artsakh in the Caucasus are closely observed and contrasted as movements that have resisted intersecting problems in the neoliberal era. I find answers to the question of why Artsakh collapsed while Rojava has not. Late-stage statism is also included in this thesis as a new theoretical approach to describe the pattern of an increasingly authoritarian international system.*

# Introduction

Since the 1970s, a wave of separatist movements has emerged across the international system in response to increasingly authoritarian governments, influxes of foreign corporations, and other problems imposed on marginalized populations. This wave has been described by some as an “ethnic explosion” which “blasted across the world” with marginalized populations mobilizing to free themselves from a deteriorating political environment, leading to the emergence of anticolonial separatist movements such as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, Khalistan Liberation Force, Tigray People’s Liberation Front, and many others (Chandhoke, 2006, p. 1). This description of the “ethnic explosion” remains consistent, as many active separatist movements today either began mobilizing or resumed their armed struggle in this nascent stage of the neoliberal era. While these groups often differ in ideology, a common characteristic is their anticolonial tendencies, that is, an emphasis on resisting foreign control and subjugation (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001). A key distinction in their methods of resistance can be observed between movements that are centralized and movements that are decentralized (Graeber, 2007).

With some states perceiving these movements as exploitable proxy forces and other states perceiving them as threats to their power structures, states have attempted to coerce and co-opt anticolonial separatist movements in a myriad of ways. In some cases, backer states attempt to form a dependency by flooding the movement with aid or controlling it as a proxy, often reshaping its internal principles to accommodate this dependence (Heibach, 2021). Occupying states, on the other hand, attempt to diminish these movements into submission by enticing their represented population with increased political representation and dividing the population politically (Jesse & Williams, 2010).

How movements respond to these problems often determines their capability to accomplish secession. To examine the dynamic of recent anticolonial separatist movements, my thesis asks, **what factors impact the capability of anticolonial separatist movements to secede in the neoliberal era?** I argue that state coercion and co-optation along with the internal dynamics of a movement impact its capability to secede in the neoliberal era, and that decentralization leads to fewer challenges in seceding. I will look at how various movements have resisted problems imposed on them in attaining or failing to attain secession, as well as ideological frameworks that affect the sustainability of a movement.

Scholars, and certainly separatists themselves, have contributed to the discussion of how movements secede and the conditions that determine their fate in the neoliberal era. Looking at state involvement in a movement, some find dependence on state backers to affect the movement negatively by diminishing its original principles, as seen in the Southern Movement of Yemen (Heibach, 2021). Others point out that dependence on state backers can affect a movement positively, particularly in movements that are resisting oppression in post-Soviet regions (Aksenyonok, 2007). The theoretical debate of decentralization versus centralization is also a central point of conversation as it pertains to the function of anticolonial separatist movements.

I will compare decentralized movements to centralized movements and analyze how they have responded to various challenges. In looking at a decentralized movement, I will examine the Rojava revolution, as this is a prominent case of anticolonial separatism in the neoliberal era that displays a decentralized method of resistance. In observing a centralized movement, I will examine the Artsakh resistance, as this shows a movement operating from a different model of centralization that is more susceptible to challenges in the factors discussed. I will compare and contrast how these differing examples of separatist resistance interact with factors discussed in the literature review, and to what extent they have succeeded or failed at attaining secession.



# Literature Review

## Conceptualizing Separatism

For the purpose of this thesis, I contend that movements which are separatist in nature intend to create a separation of power from existing political structures, and that this can include autonomy within a state. Some scholars, such as Don Doyle (2010), suggest that movements seeking autonomy within a state are not separatist but rather reformist. Contrary to this assertion, autonomy within a state still counts as separation of power from an existing political structure. This debate is rooted in how one perceives the threshold for secession, or separation of power. Though separatism is most commonly associated with separation from a state, the term has also been argued by some scholars as pertaining to religious institutions as well (Bumsted, 1967). In this thesis, I refer particularly to separatist movements that wish to separate power from a state.

Furthermore, I contend that separatism and secessionism are interchangeable terms. This interpretation has also been contested. John Wood (1981) and Aleksandar Pavković (2015) assert that secessionism explicitly denotes separation from a state with the aim of creating a new one, whereas separatism more broadly advocates for reduced central authority over a population or territory. However, they agree with the interpretation that separatism can include autonomy within a state, and can be broadly applied to numerous forms of power separation. Separatist movements are therefore distinct from other forms of rebellion in that they aim to form a separate political structure, not necessarily replace an active government. The premises for separation are often characterized by a group's differing ethnic, religious, or political values from that of a state's ruling class. The act of secession is thus defined in this thesis as the creation of political autonomy separate from an existing state or institution's power structures.

## Anticolonialism

Following the suggested interpretation of George Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh (2001): movements that are anticolonial in nature are those that, in their original principles, intend to resist oppression and control from foreign and external power structures. As described by Yatana Yamahata (2019), anticolonial movements should be "understood as a continuous political and epistemic project that extends beyond national liberation. They challenge the coloniality of power as well as shift the state-centric focus of decolonisation" (p. 4). The concept of anticolonialism can scarcely be discussed without the concept of decolonization as well. According to Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001), anticolonialism utilizes decolonization as a vehicle to expel colonial tendencies in a given society, both social and political. Helen Tiffin (1995) argues that decolonization is a "process, not arrival; it invokes an on-going dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them" (p. 95). That is, anticolonialism includes objection to hegemonic structures that are attempting to colonize a population with its own social and cultural norms.



This interpretation challenges the traditional idea of colonialism, which strictly involves the migration of settlers into a colony. This traditional interpretation is employed by David McCullough (2015) for example, indicating colonialism to be a practice by settlers who “risked the dangers of settling new lands for reasons of faith” (p. 403). The interpretation of colonialism followed in this thesis is not strictly one of settler-colonialism, but one of social colonialism as well. As described by social ecologist thinker Cynthia Radding (1997), colonialism is a process that encompasses “social stratification along ethnic, class, gender, and income lines” imposed by the administering hegemonic power. It is a system that entails a myriad of social repercussions beyond the simple migration of colonists (Radding, 1997, p. 1). Thus, anticolonialism is the objection and resistance to these social repercussions of colonialism.

Lastly, I contend that anticolonial movements can be distinguished from extremist movements in that extremist movements are coercive in nature, attempting to forcefully subjugate or assimilate populations on the basis of an enforced hegemony, while anticolonial movements are not coercive in nature. Anticolonial movements may participate in isolated acts of coercion, but these acts are not supported by their official principles. Coercive extremist movements, as suggested by progressive thinkers such as Aijaz Ahmad (2008) and Geoff Eley (2016) of *Socialist Register*, may commonly fall under the label of “fascism.” This includes clerical fascism in movements like ISIS and al-Qaeda, which intend to destroy all secular influence by force, or social fascism of vanguard movements like the Sendero Luminoso of Peru, which intentionally massacred peasant populations to extend its power. Since the term “terrorism” is highly subjective and often abused for state narratives, I will not be using it to describe extremist movements.

## **Neoliberalism**

At its foundations, many economists associate the neoliberal era with a transition from “Fordism” to a “post-Fordism” in the world economy. Mass production has become a global phenomenon where corporations and monopolies now have unprecedented international powers compared to the age of Fordism, where corporate power was more limited and trade barriers more prevalent (Miller, 2018). The philosophy of neoliberalism, which advocates oligopoly, decreased trade barriers, and rapid corporate expansion at the expense of labor rights, became a mainstream political doctrine in the nation-state system around the time of the 1973 Chilean coup that brought Western-backed neoliberal dictator Augusto Pinochet to power in Chile (Miller, 2018). The doctrine subsequently became a globalized policy during the Reagan and Thatcher administrations in the 1980s, definitively replacing the remnants of Fordism. This phenomenon is weaponized by states against marginalized populations and their separatist movements, with common state tactics including information warfare, state integration of the military-industrial complex, increased armament production, and commodification of weapons technology (Miller, 2018).

Within the topic of neoliberalism there is an extensive discussion on late-stage capitalism: the idea that capital becomes increasingly concentrated into the hands of fewer people over time and cannot sustain itself as a medium of human interaction (Targ, 2006)(Peck and Theodore, 2019). In conflicts involving separatism, one may find *late-stage statism* to run concurrent with the idea of late-stage capitalism. Thinkers such as David Graeber (2007), Harry Targ (2006), Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (2019) theorize that UN-recognized nation-states grow increasingly authoritarian and autocratic as political power simultaneously shrinks into fewer and fewer structures. Like the

capital which has developed them, these nation-states struggle to sustain themselves as legitimate mediums of human interaction. Growing exponentially illegitimate to populations marginalized by their power structures, nation-states and their megapoles resort to coercion and co-optation to suppress these populations (Targ, 2006)(Peck and Theodore, 2019). One can find examples of this in both cases studies observed in this thesis. Since there is not yet a term coined to describe this phenomenon, I describe it here as late-stage statism.

## **State Involvement**

### **Coercion**

States will often pursue separatist movements militarily in “counterinsurgency,” which military sciences scholar David Ucko (2012) defines as the “totality of actions aimed at defeating irregular forces” (p. 68). Counterinsurgency is a major doctrine discussed among military sciences communities in their approach to coercing separatist movements. Some counterinsurgency scholars go as far as advocating for aggression against civilian populations to contain separatist movements, which are often thrust into the ambiguous and dehumanizing “insurgent” label. Neoconservative-aligned military sciences scholar Daniel Levine (2009) maintains that “coercive measures aimed at population control are part of mainstream counterinsurgency strategy” and that restriction of civilian freedoms is “backed up with the threat of force” (p. 5).

Disarmament is also a common objective when it comes to state strategy in coercing separatist movements. Subcomandante Marcos (1998), a commander of the anticolonial Zapatistas movement in Mexico, points out in one of his dispatches that the Mexican state has ignored cartel and rogue paramilitary violence to focus on disarming his movement and prevent it from seceding.

### **Paramilitaries and Information Warfare**

In the neoliberal era, state-backed paramilitary forces have emerged as an increasingly common instrument to suppress separatism. States will often arm domestic proxy forces so that conventional militaries and police forces do not have to confront the separatists directly. In one example, Ricardo Dominguez (2015) elucidates how the Mexican state has armed corporate paramilitary forces to combat Zapatista presence in Mexico. When disarmament of the Zapatistas failed, a state-backed paramilitary called *Máscara Roja* was armed with the purpose of combating the Zapatistas. *Máscara Roja* subsequently committed the Acteal massacre of 1997, slaughtering dozens of supposed Zapatista sympathizers (Dominguez, 2015).

This pattern of arming nonstate actors to coerce separatist movements has been widely observed across the nation-state system. In arming unregulated paramilitary forces, states coerce separatist movements by terrorizing local populations without having to take direct blame for it. As Frank Bovenkerk and Yücel Yeşilgöz (2004) illustrate, the Grey Wolves of Turkey, for example, have been armed by the Turkish state to suppress the Kurdistan Workers’ Party. This arming of the unregulated Grey Wolves paramilitary has, in turn, led to numerous massacres of civilian populations in Kurdistan. With the intentions of the state in this matter, however, it can be argued that regulation or lack of regulation for the paramilitaries may not make an ethical difference (Bovenkerk and Yeşilgöz, 2004).

Emma Sinclair-Webb (2013) indicates in her analysis of the Kuşkonar and Koçağılı massacres of 1994 that states have abused information warfare to carry out false flag narratives as well, blaming the separatist movement for actions it did not commit. When this false flag narrative is accepted among the general population, the movement is then confronted with a struggle of information warfare. This is particularly the case with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which has been subjected to a Turkish propaganda machine widely perceived as legitimate among the engaged Turkish population. Information warfare contributes substantially to the normative conflict between a separatist movement and its state adversaries, the state often making an intensive effort to disseminate and internationalize coercive norms.

## **The Megapole**

The concept of the megapole is a key characteristic of the neoliberal era in its coercive response to separatism. Coined by Subcomandante Marcos (1997), a megapole is an alliance between the state and corporate sector intended to coerce (or co-opt) populations into submission via “destruction/depopulation” and subsequently “reconstruction/reorganization” to plant state and corporate authority in a region by force (p. 567). Indigenous populations are often most impacted by this neoliberal practice from the Mapuches of Chile to the Montagnards of Vietnam, subjected to renewed settler-colonialism in the wake of corporate expansionism. Subcomandante Marcos explains that “Megapoles reproduce themselves all over the planet,” being a natural tendency of hegemonies in the nation-state system. All megapoles are entwined with the global capitalist system in one way or another. Marcos knows best that his movement, the Zapatistas, has not only had to resist coercion from the Western megapole in the wake of NAFTA but also the co-optive incentives of dependence on Eastern megapoles such as those seen in the Belt and Road Initiative.

## **Co-Optation**

While many separatist movements are faced with the challenge of external coercion by force from states, many are also faced with the erosion of their perceived legitimacy as a result of state co-optation. That is, when disgruntled populations are “transformed into supporters of the status quo” (p. 42) as a result of states satisfying the elite of that population, whether this be via bribery, political power, or social status (Jesse & Williams, 2010). The elite then disseminate this satisfaction to the population, causing armed dissent to be ostracized into an out-group of “radicalism” or “extremism” juxtaposed by a legitimized “moderate” bloc. The purpose of state co-optation is not necessarily to defeat separatist movements with hard power, but to diminish them with soft power.

Anti-separatist Max Boot (2013) argues that separatist movements are successfully contained in this manner, but with the help of extensive military involvement. Boot (2013) contends that state militaries must not focus “on chasing guerrillas, but on securing the local population” (p. 112). When this occurs in unison with state policy, he argues, separatist movements are effectively diminished. In other words, Boot believes that separatist movements cannot truly be dismantled without concerted state and military efforts to “win hearts and minds” as a co-optation strategy with the disaffected population (Boot, 2013, p. 112).

## **Federalization**

Neera Chandhoke (2006), also in favor of containing separatism, proposes instead that federalization has acted as an effective deterrent. In federalization, the dissatisfied population is granted some form of representation in the political chambers of the state. Chandhoke (2006) concludes that providing dissatisfied groups with engagement in collective action erodes demands for sovereignty. The elite are co-opted, and in a manner that distracts the population in question from their own armed struggle, diverting their attention to state political chambers. However, Chandhoke (2006) warns that when a state centralizes, demands for sovereignty increase as the state's hegemony absorbs regional decision-making. Using the Indian state as an example, with the absorption of regional governments under state administration, separatist movements in Kashmir, Punjab, and Assam have become more active as ethnic voices are denied in the political process (Chandhoke, 2006). This has been particularly prevalent during the Narendra Modi administration.

## **Dependence on Backers**

Some scholars find that a movement's dependence on a backing state or institution can affect it detrimentally. In one example, the Southern Movement of Yemen has become so dependent on support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that it "answer[s] directly to the Emirates," its decision-making largely replaced by the backing government (Ardemagni, 2017, p. 2). As Eleonara Ardemagni (2017) points out, with the voices of local populations largely nullified in the administering process, the movement loses its legitimacy. The presence of foreign influence has also led to general discontent among local populations (Ardemagni, 2017). Jens Heibach (2021) suggests one of the purposes of UAE backing is to "usurp the Southern Movement's secessionist demands," manipulating its interests to best accommodate Emirati power in Yemen meanwhile diminishing the movement's organic interests (p. 6).

Other scholars suggest that dependence on backers has been of considerable importance to separatist movements, particularly in the Russian sphere. Adding to the "ethnic explosion" of the 1970s and 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union injected yet another array of separatist movements into the international system. The Russian Federation has since been widely observed backing many of these separatist movements to secure its regional influence. Alexander Aksenyonok (2007) suggests that without Russian backing, ethnic groups like the Abkhaz are doomed to perpetual marginalization in UN-recognized nation-states. Following the collapse of the USSR, "unitary states were introduced by brute force" leading to "Smoldering interethnic conflicts flar[ing] up with new intensity when the central governments abolished the broad privileges that had been enjoyed by ethnic minorities...in a federal state" (Aksenyonok, 2007, ¶ 25). From this lens, it is argued that state backing of separatist movements is justified when it ensures the rights of marginalized ethnic groups.

Russian backing, Arsene Saparov (2014) argues, acts as a mechanism of conflict resolution for the Russian state, as the autonomy of these ethnic groups diminishes the responsibility of neighboring states to suppress their separatist movements. From this lens, dependence on a powerful backer is mutually beneficial for both the separatists and the occupying state. This relationship with the backer is not always cordial, however. Pål Kolstø (2019) argues that in spite of Russian dependence, Abkhazia has presented its autonomy by voicing dissent with various Russian poli-

cies. Though walking a thin line between Russian dependence and total collapse, Abkhazian civil society and government are not always compliant with the Russian Federation when it comes to making their autonomy clear.

## **Internal Dynamics**

The internal dynamics and framework of a movement are fundamental in determining its capability to resist collapse and attain secession. In the neoliberal era, a dichotomy between decentralized and centralized movements comprises the bulk of all active anticolonial separatist movements. The way in which movements conduct and administer themselves often determines their longevity, and subsequently their fate. Decentralized movements generally have power distributed in a web of social bodies within the movement. This can take the form of a confederal system where local and regional councils are more powerful than the central governing body, as seen in the Rojava and Zapatista movements respectively (Dirik, 2018). Centralized movements, on the other hand, generally harness concentrated decision-making power in the hands of a small elite. This is often manifested in the form of a vanguard, or centralized party which operates a heavily hierarchic top-down command system beginning with the elite (Vanaik, 1986)(Kautsky, 1997).

## **Decentralization**

Proponents of decentralized separatist models often argue that decentralization creates more elasticity and fluidity in a movement, preventing it from collapsing easily. In anticolonial movements, this line of thought usually follows indigenous, libertarian socialist, and anarchist models, but can also include interpretations of Marxism (Kautsky, 1997). Subcomandante Marcos (2003), a commander of the decentralized Zapatista movement of Chiapas, Mexico, proudly exclaimed in a letter to Basque separatists: “I shit on all the revolutionary vanguards of this planet.” Here Marcos separates the Zapatista model from the failed Marxist-Leninist movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which had collapsed upon the onset of the neoliberal era and the fall of the Soviet Union. Marcos (1998) explains how his movement, the Zapatistas, have been able to adapt to the neoliberal era by confronting it with decentralized power, taking a strictly anti-corporate and anti-colonial stance collectively, with the power of each community balanced equally in the movement.

Libertarian socialist thinker Naomi Klein (2002) adds that movements with less hierarchy are less isolated and more accessible to international solidarity. The success of the decentralized Zapatistas in creating autonomy in Chiapas in spite of coercion from state and corporate actors, she notes, “could not be written off as a narrow ‘ethnic’ or ‘local’ struggle” and instead “it was universal” (Klein, 2002, p. 4). Klein notes, “The traditional institutions that once organized citizens into neat, structured groups are all in decline: unions, religions, political parties” (p. 7). The broader phenomenon of decentralized anticolonial organization emerging organically “is not a movement for a single global government but a vision for an increasingly connected international network of very local initiatives, each built on direct democracy” she continues (Klein, 2002, p. 12).

This form of decentralized administration is also followed by the Rojava revolution in the Levant, which I will look closely at as a case study. Kurdish activist Dilar Dirik suggests that without this decentralized model of “stateless democracy,” the Rojava revolution would be unsustainable

and vulnerable to collapse (Dirik, 2018). This lack of hierarchy, Dirik (2018) argues, has led to the movement's success in keeping its power separated.

Decentralized separatist models are certainly not without critique, however. In fact, they have been criticized in the Marxist tradition for at least 150 years. During the formation of decentralized international models in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Mikhail Bakunin and other decentralist members of the International Workingmen's Association, Friedrich Engels (1872) notably adopted a hardline stance against decentralized rebellion of any kind, arguably exceeding any of Marx's critiques. In his 1872 piece "On Authority," Engels angrily insists that decentralists either "don't know what they're talking about, in which case they are creating nothing but confusion; or they do know, and in that case they are betraying the movement of the proletariat. In either case they serve the reaction" (Engels, 1872, ¶ 14). Since Marx's and Engel's expulsion of libertarian socialists and anarchists from the International Workingmen's Association in September of that year, many Marxist thinkers have inherited this antagonizing approach to decentralization, particularly in Marxism-Leninism. This 150-year-old debate remains one of the most divisive in the Marxist tradition to this day. It is notably Eurocentric and tends to neglect decentralized indigenous models of resistance such as those seen in Kurdistan and Chiapas.

## **Centralization**

Marxist-Leninist thinker Achin Vanaik (1986) argues that centralization in a movement is critical to opposing centralized institutions of oppression, particularly hegemonic states. "The bourgeois state is the vanguard organisation of bourgeois society, the most important bulwark defending the domain of ruling class oppression and exploitation," he asserts, "Just as the bourgeois state must centralise the understandings and experiences of various segments of the oppressor classes the better to defend them, so too the revolutionary party must centralise the understandings and experiences of the various components of the oppressed and exploited classes the better to defend them" (p. 1640). This argument has been widely adopted by Marxist-Leninist thinkers in their approach to separatist movements, following the top-down model of centralized vanguards. Vanaik backs up his defense of vanguardism, in this sense, by alluding to the many Marxist-Leninist revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that successfully separated power from the "bourgeois state" (Vanaik, 1986).

Jayadeva Uyangoda (2005) discusses the centralized Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its response to the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. He asserts that the hyper-centralized LTTE structure was able to enact disaster relief efforts far more effectively than the Sri Lankan state, which suffered from corruption and an ineffective bureaucracy. Because of its centralized efficiency, "the LTTE could immediately deploy its cadres and volunteers in the rescue and relief operations," which in turn saved thousands of lives (pp. 10–11). The LTTE's model of "humanitarian intervention from above," Uyangoda argues, was so effective that it made the Sri Lankan state appear completely incapable of responding to disasters (Uyangoda, 2005). This use of centralization to provide efficient humanitarian and medical care can strengthen centralized movements and improve their legitimacy.

Stephen Day (2010) suggests that centralization in the Southern Movement of Yemen has helped it remain unified. The Yemeni state has been unable to divide southern tribes and pit them against one another because of their mutual loyalty to the top-down Southern Movement. Though now heavily influenced by the UAE, the Southern Movement was built from the founda-

tions of the highly centralized state of South Yemen, which sustained sovereignty from 1967 to 1990. South Yemen “criminalized acts of tribal revenge, imposing law and order through an assertion of state power” while “sheikhs lost their influence in society” (p. 7). With these centralized acts, a common cohesion and national unity was consolidated among the southern tribes. This unity through centralization, so to speak, is part of how the Southern Movement has been able to sustain its power among the southern tribes of Yemen to this day (Day, 2010). A similar dynamic can be observed in the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, which was recently able to separate its power from the Ethiopian state through a system of democratic centralism.

The centralist stance is heavily contested by decentralist separatist perspectives. Many point out that centralized movements have failed to withstand the neoliberal era, and have collapsed under the pressure of liberal institutionalism. The late anarchist thinker David Graeber (2007) points out how it has become increasingly rare for centralized vanguards to sustain “an alliance between a society’s least alienated and its most oppressed,” mentioning the contradictions between the centralized movement’s elite class and its general membership (ch. 9). The hierarchy of centralized movements has become increasingly perceived as ineffective and even a threat to human rights among critical theory thinkers. John Kautsky (1997), alluding to the many purges and massacres committed within centralized movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notes that the vanguard relies on “mass persuasion, mass regimentation and mass terror” to attain and sustain power (p. 379). Kautsky echoes the sentiment of his grandfather Karl Kautsky, a renowned anti-Bolshevik Marxist thinker.

Lenin (1917) asserted in *The State and Revolution* that the “democratic republic is the best possible political shell for capitalism,” while insisting that the proletarian state is at the opposite end of this binary. Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Ocalan (2012) counters this idea by asserting that the state in itself is a shell of capitalism, and thus any movement attempting to achieve a state of its own will inevitably succumb to capitalism or collapse altogether, as seen with the Soviet Union. Ocalan contends that no matter how much a centralized statist movement wants to run away from capitalism, it will never be capable of separating itself unless it dismantles hierarchy beginning at the community level (Ocalan, 2012).

Centralization relies on vertical (top-down) structures, while decentralization relies on horizontal (bottom-up) structures. This discussion also intersects with the concept of conventionality. Armies and militaries of UN-recognized nation-states are near universally centralized top-down structures, a model normalized in recent centuries to the degree it has been deemed the “conventional” or “regular” military model (Kilcullen, 2019). This model is juxtaposed by “unconventional,” “irregular,” “asymmetric,” or “guerilla” actors, which are often structured asymmetrically or horizontally in a manner that attempts to subvert larger conventional forces with fewer resources at their disposal. Conventional forces are almost universally centralized whereas unconventional forces are sometimes decentralized. These terms are accompanied by “conventional warfare” when two conventional forces wage war, and “unconventional warfare” when an unconventional actor is involved (Kilcullen, 2019). Conventional militaries often struggle to confront unconventional forces on the battlefield with conventional tactics. Some separatist movements which begin unconventional attempt to transition to conventionality once a separation of power has been attained. This can be seen in the case of Artsakh.

## **The Discussion**

In sum, scholars and separatists alike have many contradicting ideas as to what impacts the capability of a movement to secede in the neoliberal era. Beginning with the meaning of separatism itself and anticolonial tendencies within the separatist umbrella, there exists no universal consensus on this sensitive topic. Some find state coercion and counterinsurgency to be an important determinant, coupled with information warfare and corporate alliances as symptoms of the neoliberal era. Others find state co-optation to be a strong deterrent of separatist power and influence. Regarding the internal dynamics and ideological framework of a movement, debate is largely split between the concepts of centralization and decentralization. Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers predominate this debate on internal dynamics when it pertains to anticolonial movements.



# Methodology

I will now address my argument that state coercion and co-optation impact the capability of an anticolonial separatist movement to secede in the neoliberal era as well as a movement's internal dynamics and ideological framework, with decentralized movements possessing a greater capability to secede. To address my argument, I will analyze one example of a decentralized movement and one example of a centralized movement in how they relate to the factors discussed, then compare and contrast how these movements have interacted with these factors.

I will look at the Rojava revolution, a decentralized movement attempting to create sovereignty in Northern Syria. I chose the Rojava revolution because it is a recent example of a largely successful anticolonial separatist movement which has achieved a significant degree of power separation, with its success largely owed to its internal renewability. I will illustrate how the movement has been able to adapt to state coercion while resisting co-optation, and discuss how its internal characteristics have structured the movement's integrity. Attempts from foreign corporations to infiltrate the economy of Rojava will be examined, as they correlate with Western attempts to co-opt Rojava alongside an increasingly corporatized neoliberal era.

I will also look at the Artsakh resistance, a centralized movement attempting to create sovereignty in the disputed region of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh). I chose this movement because it is a recent example of a movement that has been directly impacted by many of the factors discussed and consequently faltered. I will address how overdependence on the Armenian state, conventionalization of its armed forces, internal rigidity, and other factors have contributed to the collapse of the Artsakh resistance. The increasingly authoritarian nature of the Azerbaijani state will also be briefly discussed in how this relates to its coercion of Artsakh, as this pertains to the temporal dynamics of the neoliberal era at large. I will relay how the factors discussed have impacted the movement's status and observe how much the movement has achieved in its objective of secession, along with how much it has changed with the factors in mind.

Lastly, I will compare and contrast these movements in how they have been capable or incapable of achieving secession. Some questions considered will be: What are some mutual factors that can be observed in both the Rojava revolution and Artsakh resistance? How has Rojava survived multiple invasions while Artsakh collapsed after one invasion? What have been the determinant factors leading to the success or failure of the movements in achieving secession? This comparison will aid my argument and conclusion, displaying how state involvement and internal dynamics have heavily impacted both movements in their capability to secede, the decentralized movement generally reacting positively to the factors discussed and the centralized movement generally reacting negatively.

# Rojava

## Contextualizing Rojava

Rojava (meaning “west” or “land where the sun sets” in Kurdish) also known as Gozarto in Assyrian, is a region within the UN-recognized borders of Syria that has broken off from the Syrian state and maintained its autonomy since 2013. The region is often referred to as “Northern Syria” given that its territory comprises most Syrian-claimed land north of the Euphrates River. Rojava’s governing administration is officially called the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria,” although many non-Arab inhabitants do not claim the region to be Syrian. One may notice Kurdish inhabitants sometimes calling the region “Syrian-occupied Kurdistan” and Assyrian inhabitants calling it “Syrian-occupied Gozarto” given the fact it is still recognized as part of Syria to the international system (Kurdistanipeople, 2020)(Hosseini, 2016). Regardless of the semantics one prefers, Rojava lays at a crossroads of social and political metamorphosis in West Asia. A homeland of numerous ethnic groups and communities that have been marginalized by states and empires alike, many find the autonomous region to act as an oasis of refuge and egalitarianism, complemented by its stateless direct democratic political structures. This oasis did not emerge out of nowhere, however. Tens of thousands of Rojava’s inhabitants and dozens of foreign volunteers have been martyred while creating this oasis in a resistance known as the Rojava revolution (RIC, 2020a).

The foundations of the Rojava revolution can be traced back to the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in 1978 by Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Ocalan. In response to the Turkish state’s authoritarian and discriminatory policies against the Kurdish people, Ocalan formed the first major revolutionary movement in Kurdistan aimed at liberating the Kurdish nation from the nation-states imposed on it. In 1984, the PKK took up arms and mobilized against the Turkish state, hoping to achieve a separation of power. The movement would soon expand into Iraqi-occupied Kurdistan, Iranian-occupied Kurdistan, and Syrian-occupied Kurdistan, becoming a legitimate regional power with millions of members and supporters (Ocalan, 2017).

Though the PKK began as a centralized vanguard with Marxist-Leninist tendencies, it would take an ideological U-turn following Ocalan’s arrest in 1999. Influenced by libertarian socialist thinkers such as Murray Bookchin, Ocalan removed his emphasis on the creation of a Kurdish nation-state, instead emphasizing the liberation of all marginalized communities in West Asia. This abrupt change of pace led the movement into a period of internal dialogue and restructuring. In 2011, Ocalan published his keystone piece *Democratic Confederalism*, where he called for the movement’s unitary structures to be entirely discarded and replaced by a decentralized web of councils under a stateless and decentralized political system known as Democratic Confederalism. Women’s liberation became a centrifugal doctrine upon this restructuring, and intersectional dialogue led the movement to question its original objective of simply replacing occupying states with another state (Ocalan, 2012)(Hosseini, 2016). With the exception of hardline Marxist-

Leninists, many followers of Ocalan approved of the movement's transition, and his new model would soon become a widely respected international blueprint via the Rojava revolution.

Just south of the UN-recognized Turkish border, the Rojava revolution was born out of this internal dialogue and fundamental transition to decentralization in the PKK, coinciding with a conflagration of grievances against the Syrian state in the early 2010s. The model of Democratic Confederalism materialized in Rojava largely due to the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) and its predecessors, a progressive coalition in Rojava influenced by Ocalan and the PKK. After decades of Baathist rule, Syria's marginalized communities were looking to put an end to Arab hegemony, which had been fused into the state following the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement and 1923 Lausanne Treaty that created Syria's modern borders. Beginning in 1962, hundreds of thousands of non-Arabs were stripped of their citizenship and subjected to ethnic cleansing policies that hoped to create an "Arab belt" in their ancestral homeland (RIC, 2020a). Syria's colonial legacy led the state into an authoritarian spiral under the Assad dynasty. Many in the marginalized Yazidi, Armenian, Circassian, Assyrian, and Kurdish communities of Rojava found TEV-DEM to be the most suitable candidate for the desired abolition of Syrian statism, calling for a complete subversion and overhaul of the Syrian power structures.

TEV-DEM embraced the PKK's ideological transition and adopted the new model of Democratic Confederalism. The movement was given its first opportunity to implement this model in the wake of the Arab Spring. Upon the onset of the Syrian Civil War in mid-2012, the Syrian Arab Army withdrew from the north to confront rebelling militias of the Free Syrian Army to the south and west. This allowed TEV-DEM to secure autonomy in the north with a confederation of councils, communes, and cooperatives (Hosseini, 2016). The following year, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) declared its separation of power from the Syrian state representing one collective Rojava free of colonial structures, and constructed the first complete governing model of Democratic Confederalism. Rojava has since faced an invasion from ISIS and three invasions from the Turkish state and its allied militias, compounded by sporadic fighting with the Syrian state. Rojava has also resisted attempted co-optation from the US and other actors (RIC, 2020b). Despite losing part of its territory in the process, the decentralized administration of Rojava remains completely intact and has not been altered. The region is defended by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is a coalition of progressive militias led by the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

The Rojava revolution is a separatist movement in that it aims to separate its power from the Syrian state, and it has achieved this. Rojava was born out of resistance to the oppressive colonial structures of the Syrian and Turkish states, forging its political model around ensuring colonial structures are never present in the region again. Thus, Rojava is anticolonial in every connotation of the term. The movement has also resisted many components of the neoliberal era that shall be discussed, such as corporate opportunism, drone warfare, information warfare, and the megapoles which drive them.

## **State Coercion of Rojava**

It is without question that the Rojava revolution has been afflicted with an onslaught of state coercion intending to limit its capability to remain seceded and autonomous. Though ISIS has coerced Rojava to a significant degree, it will not be included in this section since ISIS is not a

nation-state nor is it internationally recognized. The UN-recognized nation-states of Syria and Turkey will be observed here in their coercion of Rojava and intent to extinguish its separation of power, as well as their crimes against Rojava's population.

### **Syrian State Coercion**

Beginning with the Syrian state, the Baathist power structure of Syria under the Assad dynasty hopes to expand its megapole into Rojava after losing occupation of the region in 2012. Though an unstable ceasefire has been in effect between Syria and Rojava since August 2015, it has been made clear that the Syrian state finds Rojava's separation of power illegitimate (AJ, 2015). Military force has been used against Rojava by both the Syrian Arab Army and its allied paramilitaries, backed with support from the Russian megapole and military-industrial complex.

The Syrian state has armed paramilitary actors to coerce Rojava, such as the National Defense Forces (NDF). Two major battles have occurred between the NDF and SDF in the city of Hasakah after the paramilitary attempted to expand its occupation in Rojava, the first in August 2016 and the second in January 2022. Both occasions resulted in loss of territory for the NDF. Battles and skirmishes have also occurred in Deir ez-Zor region, particularly around Khsham (The Renegade, 2021). Syrian state backing of the NDF and its direct support from the Syrian Arab Army have proven problematic for Rojava, though not as dire a threat as the Turkish state.

Information warfare is also a key piece of the Syrian state's coercion of Rojava. Antagonization of Rojava disseminated largely through the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) can be observed, describing the Syrian Democratic Forces as "Kurd militants" and frequently spreading claims accusing Rojava of crimes there is no evidence for (SANA, 2020). The Syrian Ministry of Information has developed and expanded its operations significantly throughout the neoliberal era to accommodate social media and digital information, especially during the Syrian Civil War. The Syrian state's information warfare has seen productive results regarding international support bases, drawing in newfound support from many authoritarian communities on the left and right alike. A network of front agencies oversee the international dissemination of pro-Assad information, all connected to a transnational organization calling itself the "Syrian Solidarity Movement" (Davis, 2019). In this sense, globalization in the neoliberal era has allowed the Syrian state to further internationalize its efforts in information warfare.

### **Turkish State Coercion**

Since the attempted 2016 coup in Turkey, the Turkish state has reached its authoritarian zenith in the era of late-stage statism and neoliberalism. A Justice and Development Party ruling class led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become determined to consolidate its power and externalize Turkey's domestic issues. In this process, the Turkish military-industrial complex has become further entwined with the government, resulting in a highly imperialist megapole. This megapole happens to be a NATO power with a military backed by Western tax money.

Unlike the Syrian state, the Turkish state is direct, forceful, and overt in its attempts to coerce Rojava, making heavy use of counterinsurgency in its strategy to eliminate Rojava's autonomy and replace it with Turkish occupation. The Turkish state has brutally enforced population control in its three invasions of Rojava: the invasion of northern Aleppo region in 2016, invasion of Afrin 2018, and invasion of Serekaniye in 2019 (RIC, 2020a)(RIC, 2020b). This counterinsurgency

operation has been brutal and devastating to the entire region, and may even classify as genocide. Aggression against civilians has proven a major component of the Turkish state's plan to subjugate Rojava's population under the guise of counterinsurgency. The Turkish state has also directed its megapole toward Rojava, evidently fixated on destroying the region.

(Trigger warning: sexual violence) According to data collected by the Missing Afrin Women Project between January 2018 and June 2021, 170 women were confirmed kidnapped by Turkish forces and SNA proxy militias, dozens of these women forced into sex slavery and many of them minors (Missing Afrin Women Project, 2021). Given heavily enforced censorship under Turkish occupation, the actual number is likely much higher. Mass rape and kidnappings have continued following this collection of data, and some estimates put the figure at over 1,000 victims (Bianet, 2021). During the invasion of Afrin, some estimates convey that 80% of olive trees grown by Kurdish farmers were either burned or stolen by Turkish forces and relocated to Turkey, eliminating the livelihoods of the farmers while leading them and their families into starvation (ANF, 2018). According to Saleh Ibo, a representative of the Afrin Agricultural Council in 2018:

“The most beautiful canton in Northern Syria used to be Afrin, it was known for it. It was a rich canton with its nature, culture and economy. That is why the invading Turkish state targeted Afrin quite deliberately... The invading Turkish state targeted Afrin's forest areas in April in particular. Many trees, including olive trees, were burned. The invaders first stole 20 tonnes of Afrin's wheat and took it to Turkey in front of the whole world to see. They bought from a very limited group of people. We as the Agricultural Council did a study that shows that the Turkish state bought produce from Afrin at 25% of what would have been an acceptable market price. Farmers and producers can't survive like this. But they confiscated most of the wheat illegitimately in any case” (ANF, 2018).

These crimes against Rojava's population were exacerbated around the Turkish state's second invasion in 2019, which targeted the cities of Serekaniye and Gire Spi. Prior to the invasion, the Turkish state had committed mass arson on Rojava's crop fields, wiping out multiple seasons of crop yields and rendering the land fallow from Raqqa to Hasakah regions. In committing this egregious crime against humanity, the Turkish state attempted to weaken Rojava by starving its population and sending it into a period of severe famine. This act of state arson was corroborated by a video captured at the border showing a Turkish soldier deliberately setting a field on fire (Pressenza, 2019).

Despite sending Rojava into famine, the Turkish state failed to defeat the SDF and was forced to halt its offensive in November 2019. It did not stop coercing Rojava, however. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Turkish state then weaponized water against the people of Rojava by shutting down Alouk Water Station near Serekaniye, cutting off water access to nearly 500,000 people. This left a large portion of Rojava along with its medical facilities without water, resulting in a sudden lack of resources to combat Covid. A spike in Covid along with a worsening famine across Rojava followed, killing many people (HRW, 2020). The Turkish state's deliberate destruction of Rojava's basic life necessities, intended to send the Kurdish, Yazidi, Assyrian, and Armenian populations into famine, has been described by many as an act of genocide. Deliberate widespread destruction of sacred historical sites by Turkish forces and allies has been cited in this discussion of genocide as well (NPA, 2021).

The Turkish state has armed many paramilitary groups to complement its aggression against the population of Rojava. In 2017, the Turkish state founded the Syrian National Army (SNA) to aggregate its coalition of proxy militias. The Turkish state has exported units of the SNA abroad to fight as a proxy force, primarily to Libya and Azerbaijan. Presence of Turkish-backed mercenary militias abroad has added complications to peace processes and stalled negotiations, especially in Libya. Turkish state-backed paramilitary efforts against Rojava do not end at the SNA, however. Turkish National Intelligence Organization-backed armed cells have been discovered and captured within the territory of Rojava (ANHA, 2020).

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and artificial intelligence are military characteristics of the neoliberal era which have added a major source of revenue and power for military-industrial complexes across the world, the Turkish state one of the most prominent examples of this. Since the introduction of the Bayraktar drone family in 2005, drones have become the centerpiece of the Turkish military-industrial complex at the expense of Rojava's population and many other communities in the Global South who have been the recipients of Turkish drone attacks, from Tigray to Artsakh. Since the Turkish state's first invasion of Rojava in 2016, Bayraktar drones have killed hundreds of civilians in Rojava and probably thousands across the world, though the ever-increasing number may never be known (Feroz, 2016). The Turkish state is able to use drones as a method of population control in areas it does not occupy militarily, striking fear into civilian populations through artificial aerial terror.

Normatively, the Turkish state bears a neo-Ottoman education system which indoctrinates its students with anti-Kurdish and anti-Armenian curriculum, sharing many of the same characteristics of the Azerbaijani state's system. Supported by a media network of state-sponsored channels of information, Turkish education widely desensitizes the population to state crimes, and is particularly problematic due to the Turkish state's expanding regional power.

Thus, information warfare is a fundamental component of the Turkish state's coercion in Rojava. Many attacks which occur in Turkish-occupied territory are immediately blamed on the SDF and PKK without any investigation, even when they are later found to be committed by ISIS or a result of infighting within the SNA. Kurds, Yazidis, Assyrians, Armenians, and all of Rojava's communities are frequently described as "terrorists" by the Turkish state, fueling severely racist and violent currents of Turkish nationalism which span across not only Anatolia but also the Turkish diaspora internationally (Baghdassarian and Zadah, 2021). Misinformation is often abused as a device to divert international attention from Turkish war crimes.

Being a NATO member, the Turkish state's claims are often perceived as more credible than Rojava's, creating a perpetual funnel of misinformation to Western states, human rights organizations, and even the UN. The Turkish invasions were endorsed by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenburg, who did not condemn the Turkish state but rather condemned dissent within NATO against the Turkish state's actions. Stoltenburg stated in 2018 during the invasion of Afrin: "All nations have the right to defend themselves...Turkey is one of the NATO nations that suffers most from terrorism" (Daily Sabah, 2018). He stated in 2019 during the invasion of Serekaniye: "Turkey is important for NATO...We have used, as NATO allies, the global coalition, all of us have used infrastructure in Turkey, bases in Turkey in our operations to defeat Daesh (ISIS). And that's exactly one of the reasons why I'm concerned about what is going on now. Because we risk undermining the unity we need in the fight against Daesh" (Reuters, 2019) In these statements, Stoltenburg diverts attention from the unilateral nature of the Turkish invasion, instead falsely claiming it to be a matter of Turkish national security against terrorism and a matter of collective

security. With this, Stoltenburg aligns with Turkish state information warfare to keep the Turkish state's image permissible within NATO. In April 2021, the Biden administration renewed a \$5 million bounty on PKK leaders, also exhibiting its alignment with Turkish state information warfare (US Dept. of State, 2021).

## **State Co-Optation of Rojava**

### **Syrian State Co-Optation**

In the midst of late-stage statism, the Syrian state has also reached its peak of authoritarianism, which manifested in the Syrian Civil War. The Syrian state does not dedicate much effort to securing the "hearts and minds" of Rojava's population because it has antagonized them both in policy and military force for decades. Resentment toward the Syrian state in the region accumulated and festered over decades of repression, culminating in the 2004 Qamishli massacre. Legitimacy of the Syrian state is particularly scarce north of the Euphrates River, being the most marginalized region. With this in mind, the Syrian state has prevented itself from securing sympathy from most of Rojava's population.

Syrian forces have been present in various pockets of Rojava and along the Turkish border as part of an agreement made during the 2019 invasion of Serekaniye. The agreement allows the Syrian Arab Army into some regions, but not any new Syrian state administration, keeping Rojava's autonomy unscathed. The Syrian state practices what has been dubbed "hamburger trick diplomacy," where relations are dropped once the Syrian state has extracted the most out of these relations it can, metaphorically resembling a trick where the meat of a hamburger is attached to a string then removed so that a customer receives only the bun (McKay, 2018). Many Rojavayis have demonstrated their distrust for the Syrian state, its manipulation of crises to expand power, and drawing of the Russian military into Rojava (Rudaw, 2020).

Nonetheless, the Syrian state has occasionally shown signs of willingness to negotiate with Rojava. Negotiations for Syrian-recognized autonomy for Rojava reached a high point in 2015, but have since been stalled. Syrian state policy on Rojava became particularly inconsistent following the resignation of Syrian State Minister for National Reconciliation Affairs Ali Haidar in 2018 (Belewi, 2015)(Rudaw, 2022). Federalization has been on the table for the Syrian peace process, although this becomes complicated with Rojava's insistence on autonomy and the Turkish state's insistence on excluding Rojava from any Syrian peace process. The Russian state has advocated for including Rojava in the Syrian peace process, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stating that the "experience of Iraqi Kurds should be passed on to Syria," alluding to the federalized autonomy of the Kurdistan Regional Government within the Iraqi state (Rudaw, 2022). The Syrian state has remained reluctant, however, satisfied with Rojava's complete exclusion from the Syrian Constitutional Committee.

### **Russian State Co-Optation**

The Russian state has taken advantage of its alliance with the Syrian state to have a military presence in Rojava, being a party in many agreements made between Rojava and the Syrian state. The Russian state has been the most important ally to the Syrian state under the Assad dynasty for decades, but particularly since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War.

With clear consent from NATO on the Turkish invasions and US policy yielding to this consent, Rojava has been forced to gravitate away from its military partnership with the US Coalition in the direction of Russian backing. That said, relations between President Putin and the Rojava administration have waxed and waned depending on convenience to Russian state interests. Putin believes the territorial integrity of Syria should be respected under the unitary Assad regime. Nonetheless, he has demonstrated favorability of Rojavayî autonomy over Turkish occupation in his foreign policy (Rudaw, 2022).

In October 2019, the Russian state agreed to conduct joint-patrols with the Turkish military in the wake of the US withdrawal from the border, yielding a deterrence mechanism for further Turkish encroachment and helping end of the Turkish invasion of Serekaniye. In October 2021, the Russian state effectively established a no-fly zone over Rojava by repositioning a squadron to Qamishli Airport (Newdick, 2021). The Russian Armed Forces have frequently mediated ceasefire negotiations following clashes between the SDF and Syrian forces north of the Euphrates. Though this mediation cannot alleviate the ideological tension between Rojava and Syria, it has led to swift de-escalation of armed confrontation on numerous occasions. With the Russian state now a normalized mediator in tensions between the Syrian state and Rojava, it can be argued that the Russian state has co-opted Rojava diplomatically to the extent its mediation is deemed legitimate to the Autonomous Administration.

The Russian state's presence in Rojava comes with many layers of nuance. Though the Russian state acts unilaterally in its support of the Syrian state, its interests in countering Turkish power have intersected with Rojava's interests just enough to not have an antagonizational relationship. Nonetheless, many residents of Rojava have expressed their dissatisfaction with the Russian state's presence by confronting patrols and protesting, finding the Russian state to be manipulative and opportunistic (Rudaw, 2020). In one noteworthy example in December 2020, citizens of Ain Diwar village in Hasakah region confronted a Russian patrol. A man stated to the Russians: "Throughout Syrian history, your presence has been for your own benefit." One woman said to the Russian Army translator: "We are the people of this area. How much money have you received?" to which the translator responded, "I get a lot." The woman replied, "We get honor...You should respect yourselves and go back to your country" (Rudaw, 2020).

Though the Russian state has indirectly backed Rojava through its agreements with the Syrian state, the Russian state does not enjoy nearly as much legitimacy in Rojava as it does in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donetsk, and other separatist regions it has backed. Mutual interests in deterring the Turkish state create a mutually beneficial relationship with the Russian state, but also one that enables an unwelcome Russian military-industrial complex driven megapole in the region. In the words of SDF commander Mazloum Abdi: "If we have to choose between compromise and genocide, we will choose our people" (Abdi, 2019). Enabling of Russian military presence in Rojava is certainly a compromise, but one that may be necessary to prevent genocide at the hands of the Turkish state.

## **US State (and Corporate) Co-Optation**

In 2014, the Autonomous Administration accepted a military partnership with the Pentagon and a coalition of Western militaries to help defeat ISIS, a partnership which continues today consisting of training, arms supply, and logistics. The Autonomous Administration has maintained its separation from the US Coalition at an arm's length so to speak, refusing Western encroach-



ment on the economy or civil society and keeping the partnership limited solely to military backing. In October 2019, the US Coalition encouraged the SDF to disarm and demilitarize its northern borders following a supposed ceasefire agreement with the Turkish state. This immediately led to the Turkish invasion of Serekaniye and subsequent heinous crimes against humanity committed in it. In this sense, the US abused co-optation to subtly coerce Rojava simultaneously through disarmament, favoring its NATO ally in the Turkish state over the livelihoods of millions. The US has also subtly coerced Rojava by arming the Turkish military with vehicles and weapons, which have subsequently been used against Rojava. US-made and US taxpayer-funded bombs are found frequently falling on the soil of Rojava, killing workers, children, and families completely uninvolved in the conflict. The US arming of the Turkish military and withdrawal of US forces have been widely perceived as a major backstab to the people of Rojava and the Autonomous Administration (The Renegade, 2022).

Unlike the Russian megapole in Rojava which is limited to its military-industrial complex, the US has attempted to expand its megapole in Rojava to include Western corporations and extraction of natural resources. “I like oil. We’re keeping the oil,” President Trump told the press in November 2019 after his agreement to allow the Turkish state to invade Rojava. (Global News, 2019). In April 2020, Delaware-based oil firm Delta Crescent LLC was granted a one-year sanctions waiver to “advise and assist” oil production in Rojava, a waiver which remained untouched by the Biden-appointed US Department of the Treasury until its expiration (Rosen, 2021). Delta Crescent LLC then infiltrated Rojava without full consent of the Autonomous Administration, only a few officials within it. Tasked with refining oil from Rojava’s oil fields and exporting it, Delta Crescent LLC failed to gain local support and its operation crashed in the face of resentment from Rojava’s population, only able to hire a meager total of 10 employees. The Autonomous Administration dismissed the corporation as soon as its sanctions waiver expired. A worker from Qamishli named Ahmed Saeed commented on the development: “They will pump oil and steal it amid this famine. They will not work in the interest of the country...Nobody understands them, the Americans. They have been here for years, what has changed? When the Americans go somewhere, they work for their own interests, not the people’s” (Rosen, 2021).

Weaponizing corporations for foreign-direct investment amid crises to extract from local economies is a common neoliberal characteristic of US foreign policy which has been observed most extensively since the Reagan administration. Though attempted infiltration of Rojava’s economy was initiated under the Trump administration, policy between the Trump and Biden administrations on Rojava remained largely unchanged. Both administrations enabled attempts to occupy the oil sector and failed to do so because of both the population’s and Autonomous Administration’s refusal to feed the US megapole (The Renegade, 2022).

With these facets of co-optation in mind, the US Coalition presence in Rojava is likewise met with wariness from Rojava’s population due to its display of opportunistic co-optation and betrayal. Protests have been organized against the presence of US forces, often involving stone or potato-throwing and blocking of patrols (AP, 2019). Mazloum Abdi’s words of “If we have to choose between compromise and genocide, we will choose our people” most certainly apply to Rojava’s military partnership with the US Coalition as well, a compromise seen as a military necessity to expedite the collapse of ISIS, but not one that can ever damage Rojava’s self-sufficiency (Abdi, 2019). Firat, a former fighter in the SDF who fought ISIS, believes ISIS would have been defeated by the SDF without US military backing, and that it “just would have taken longer” (Firat, 2020–2021). This sentiment has been echoed by many in the SDF.

I asked a member of Asayish (Rojava's security force) who shall be called Mahmoud: Do you believe Rojava is overdependent on any of its backers or allies, from the US to the PKK?

Mahmoud replied:

“Rojava in her current government, what it would take to get to the shape it is now without the PKK seed and the US air support and coverage—I don't think the issue has become related to Kurdistan or the Kurds, it is related to a Kurdish party. If the Kurds abandon it (Rojava), they will be killed and displaced whether by the regime or the Turks. So the PKK is not a supporter but a founder, and the US can be shaped as a friend with benefits” (Mahmoud, 2022).

I found this description of the US as a “friend with benefits” to be comical yet precise. The US Coalition is a military partner for selective military tasks, but not political ones, and certainly not ones that infiltrate the social psyche of Rojava. From Mahmoud's standpoint, the military partnership is necessary so that less Kurds die, but it does not mean that Rojava has become controlled by or dependent on the partnership (Mahmoud, 2022).

## **Framework of the Rojava Revolution**

Having survived numerous brutal onslaughts of coercion from very powerful state and non-state actors that would render most regional societies collapsed, one must question where the structural resolve of Rojava derives from. In Democratic Confederalism, the political structure of Rojava, social balance is emphasized, with no power structure given power to coerce another, but every power structure free to determine its own actions with direct engagement from the community it represents. In the words of Ocalan: “Democratic Confederalism is open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, multicultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented. Ecology and feminism are central pillars” (Ocalan, 2017). Simultaneously, a social force-field of autonomous councils and assemblies spawned by the democratic confederation resists external aggression and colonialism, whether this comes from foreign corporations, megapolises, or militaries.

### **Political Structure of Rojava**

Municipal councils generally include a defense, economics, free society, civil society, justice, political, and women's council. Similar councils are found at the canton (regional) level. Most councils (excluding all-women or all-men councils) guarantee at least 40% representation of women and at least 40% men, the co-chair seats also requiring one man and one woman. In areas where the ethnic makeup is heterogeneous, seats and councils are generally reserved for each population. The confederal Autonomous Administration includes four main chambers: Municipal Councils, Executive Council, Legislative Assembly, and Syrian Democratic Council (Ayboga et al., 2016)(SYPG, 2018). These four chambers are subservient to the municipal and regional councils, municipal councils collectively being one of the four main chambers of the Autonomous Administration. In other words, legislations made in the Autonomous Administration must be passed by these councils in order to go into effect. Councils may choose to accept or deny legislation from the Autonomous Administration, but are mutually bound to a confederal social charter

of various egalitarian doctrines and laws (Ayboga et al., 2016). This horizontal structure ensures lack of social schism in Rojava, ensuring there is no distraction from the common front against coercive (and co-optive) actors. The Syrian Democratic Council acts as a diplomatic and representative body for the many political parties of Rojava. Though it is mostly concerned with the political and international relations of Rojava, it also has the power to appoint members of the Executive Council when elections have been postponed.

A network of media cooperatives serves to combat information warfare from coercive actors and provide an information channel for news on the ground that is often ignored by mainstream media. Rojava Information Center, Syrian Democratic Times, SDF Press, and many other outlets form a collective voice for Rojava, one that has gained the attention of many internationalists across the world and made the movement less isolated (RIC, 2020a). Grassroots media constructed by independent journalists in Rojava serves as an alternative to profit-driven mainstream media such as CNN or Fox News, which operate around Western megapole spheres of consensus. In Rojava, this media network has enabled the internationalization of the Rojava revolution and contributed significantly to its internationalist tendencies.

Military councils are detached from civil councils in order to ensure a separation of the military from civil society. This allows increased efficiency in the military councils while also preventing them from infiltrating civil political bodies. Accountability of the military is ensured both by civil and military councils and also by the confederation at large. In the defensive dimension, a subterranean tunnel system has been created, hampering the effectiveness of Turkish drones and artillery (Ayboga et al., 2016). Owing at least in part to its horizontal structure, the SDF has been able to hold off the Turkish state despite its intentions to annex the entirety of Rojava. A decentralized and unconventional guerrilla force has thrice been able to stop NATO's second largest military from annihilating Rojava.

## **Disaster Relief**

Though decentralized, disaster response has been highly efficient in Rojava. During the famine-spawning fires of 2019, disaster committees were able to rapidly dispatch volunteer firefighter teams, decreasing the damage done to infrastructure and saving many lives. Agricultural councils then swiftly enacted efforts to replant lost crops while ecological councils led efforts to reforest natural areas. During the Turkish state-induced dysfunction of Alouk Water Station, Rojava's water committees worked together to redirect water input and import drinking water to prevent further humanitarian disaster. This action saved Rojava's population. In the midst of the subsequent famine and Covid spread, health assemblies were able to reorganize medical infrastructure and expand services such as Heyva Sor a Kurdistanê (Kurdish Red Crescent). The presence of specialized disaster committees and assemblies has proven very beneficial for Rojava, no competition between private interests and no corporate meddling leading to loss of life (Ayboga et al., 2016)(Pressenza, 2019)(TRISE, 2020).

## **Tekmîl and Hevaltî**

In military and civil assemblies alike, a community discussion process called Tekmîl (meaning "report" in Kurdish) is an important piece of connectivity, honesty, and cohesion in the community. In Tekmîl, each participant "gives critiques and self-critiques without any response from

the other participants,” and sessions can be called by any member at any time, according to former SDF fighter and commune member Philip Argeş O’Keeffe (O’Keeffe, p. 1, 2018). This may sound like a simple activity, but it is highly significant to the social structure of Democratic Confederalism. Tekmîl is driven by a doctrine called Hevaltî. In the words of O’Keeffe: “*Hevaltî* roughly translates to friendship or comradeship. It is the idea that we work together, we help each other, we share everything from the tangible to the intangible not because we expect something in return but simply because we are comrades, that we are humans living, struggling and experiencing life together, that we are sharing the same purpose of trying to advance the collective wellbeing. It is the idea that we can trust and believe in each other and that we need not fear ulterior intention” (O’Keeffe, 2018). Tekmîl and Hevaltî both guarantee that no grievance goes unheard, and that collective decision-making is fluid while bound to no unilateral interests. Chairs and co-chairs of a given council are held accountable by the group they represent in this process. Aggregately this creates an ever-flexible social engine of civil and military society across Rojava.

### **Women’s Participation**

Women’s participation is integral to the Democratic Confederalist structure. Unlike in Western states, feminism is not a contested idea constantly battling patriarchal structures of capitalism to become normalized, it is a codified norm of Rojava which has been interwoven into society at large. According to one Rojavayî citizen by the name of Xelîl: “We are embarrassed when we speak about 5,000 years of patriarchy. We should have raised our voice, we should have risen up. Dominant history writing belittles the Neolithic society and calls it primitive, but thousands of years ago, community was more ethical and centered around women. And now look what happened to the same geography” (Dirik, 2018, p. 233). The transition from Syrian state occupation to the Autonomous Administration saw a massive improvement in women’s rights and representation due to a feminist doctrine in Rojava known as “Jineology” or “women’s science.” According to one woman from Rojava: “A lot of husbands would not let women go out and would force them to stay in the house to take care of the children. Now everything has changed” (Argentieri, 2016). This is not to say patriarchy has been completely wiped out in Rojava, however. Sexual repression and internalized patriarchy in women’s structures have been cited as causes for concern, showing that the power of internal dialogue in the movement may have its limits (Gudim, 2021).

By empowering women and placing them at the helm of the revolution as well as its direction, the Rojava revolution enjoys the feminine power of half its population, a power which has rarely been accessed in centralized revolutionary movements to the same degree. The civil activation of as many social facets of Rojava as possible has allowed for its maximal power as a separatist movement, and this is largely owed to its decentralized Democratic Confederalist structure.

### **Flaws in the Democratic Confederalist Structure**

Rojava’s political model does not come with perfection, however, having some notable weak spots. Occasional lack of organization and consensus can sometimes lead to vulnerability. Delta Crescent LLC’s exploitation of a few officials in the Autonomous Administration to occupy Rojava’s oil sector, for instance, shows that there may not be an effective mechanism of consensus

in place at the confederal level. Though corruption is scarce in Rojava due to its tight systems of accountability, there is still some room for officials to act unilaterally, especially at the confederal level.

Irregular elections have also been noted as an issue in the electoral facet of Rojavayî society, particularly at the confederal level. Elections have been announced then postponed multiple times for the Executive Council, Legislative Assembly, and Syrian Democratic Council due to disruptions and security concerns from fighting (KNK, 2014). This has consequently expanded the power of the Syrian Democratic Council, which has the ability to elect members of the Executive Council. Municipal and regional elections have been held more regularly, though also frequently face challenges leading to postponement (Ibrahim and Edwards, 2018).

## **Rojavayî Perspectives**

“The martyrs of Rojava never die, they live in our souls, thoughts, and bodies, they are the light of our path.” -YPG Spokesman Nuri Mahmoud (2021)

Though the framework of the Rojava administration has been crafted around eliminating loopholes enabling hegemony, ethical questions have certainly been raised in some of its practices. Critics often claim that Kurdish ethnic hegemony has seeped through the cracks in some areas, particularly against Assyrian and Arab communities. Assyrian and Arab are official languages of Rojava, both populations granted their own decision-making powers in local and regional councils. Yet, occasional protests and reports on human rights abuses surely remain present. Reports on the Assyrian side (almost exclusively from the Assyrian Policy Institute, it should be noted) accuse the administration of closing dissenting Assyrian schools, limiting Assyrian autonomy to the Kurdish consensus, and appropriating Assyrian land (Joseph and Isaac, 2018). Reports on the Arab side claim arbitrary arrests, disappearances, and aggression against civilians, particularly in areas ISIS has been present (STJ, 2022). Conscription is also mandated in some cantons as part of the Self-Defense Forces, leading members of Assyrian and Arab communities to feel disenfranchised under a complex superstructure where Kurds form a majority. The largest protests against the Autonomous Administration have been held in Deir ez-Zor region and Raqqa, where the populations are predominantly Arab. Nonetheless, Assyrian and Arab communities in Rojava are divided on this matter, split between pro-PKK factions and anti-PKK factions (Joseph and Isaac, 2018).

Similarly, Kurdish communities are also divided on their perception of the Rojava revolution. Rojava’s main opposition within Kurdistan comes from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), a Western-backed capitalist faction which autocratically controls most of the Kurdistan Regional Government (officially within the Iraqi state) under the Barzani family. In Rojava, the KDP controls a proxy party called the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), which aims to extend the KDP’s power and oligarchy in Rojava. ENKS holds two seats in the Syrian Democratic Council (ANF, 2015). Relative to the structure of Rojava, ENKS and the KDP operate a far more unitary and centralized model backed by the US, coming in direct contradiction to that of the anticolonial Autonomous Administration. Ideological differences and security threats have manifested in suppression of ENKS in Rojava, sparking controversy (Hamou, 2021). The Autonomous Administration considers the KDP’s close alliance with the Turkish state a direct threat to its autonomy, and ENKS an extension of this threat (Horo, 2021).

The topic of conscription is also discussed within Kurdish communities in regards to Rojava's ethical flaws. Just across the eastern border, the KDP has its own military known as KDP Peshmerga. This force is under direct control of the party, has no autonomous components, and is a much more conventional centralized force. As of 2022, unlike the Syrian Democratic Forces, KDP Peshmerga does not require conscription. This is in part due to the fact that the KDP is subservient to regional powers and does not face existential crises to the same degree Rojava does, enjoying support from the US, Israeli state, Turkish state, and other imperialist powers in the region. Regardless, some cite this lack of conscription as an ethical advantage to one of the most ethically flawed factions in Kurdistan (Hamou, 2021). Though conscription may have a positive impact on Rojava's military strength, it may also have a negative impact on its legitimacy in the region.

I asked my interviewee Mahmoud two questions on the discussion of Rojava's framework. The first one: Do you believe the Syrian Democratic Forces' unconventional and decentralized structure has helped or hurt the resistance?

Mahmoud replied:

“At first the guerrilla method was more effective, especially in street fighting. But after controlling long geographical spots, the activation of internationally recognized army and police system will be in the interest of the cause so that we can be more credible for the world.”

My second question: If ENKS organized the Syrian Democratic Forces and its resistance to the Turkish state in a centralized and conventional manner, do you believe it would have seen greater success?

Mahmoud replied:

“You have two examples for the two different Kurdish sides, and the best political view of the two sides will be seen in a person's average outcome per month. 95% of Kurdish people in Rojava think about feeding their kids before making Kurdistan” (Mahmoud, 2022).

In this discussion, Mahmoud suggests that decentralized and unconventional resistance has been effective in resisting coercive actors, but may become obsolete as Rojava strives for legitimacy in the international system. For him, the topic of conventionality and centrality is more a sociopolitical one than a separatist one. Because the people of Rojava (and by extension Kurds in Turkish-occupied Kurdistan) have been existentially threatened with genocide, they have had no other choice but to fight unconventionally for their survival and immediate separation of power, adopting the model of Democratic Confederalism to ensure this. Only now that separation of power has been achieved in Rojava, there is time to contemplate conventionality. ENKS and the KDP on the other hand enjoy the support of large powers, and are not threatened to the same degree of Rojava, thus can implement a more conventional centralized force to accommodate this privilege. As Mahmoud implies, the ENKS and the KDP are too privileged and powerful to require a decentralized resistance for anything. People in Rojava are concerned “about feeding their kids” while the KDP and its supporters are concerned about expanding national power under the Barzani autocracy. Two different goals requiring two different models, largely determined by privilege (Mahmoud, 2022).

# ARTSAKH

Map of Artsakh region (also known as Nagorno-Karabakh or NKR), April 2022. Russian peacekeeper occupation is shown in red, Azerbaijani occupation in blue (LUAM, 2022). Prior to September 2020, virtually the entire region had been under administration of the Republic of Artsakh since 1991, a republic which is now in peril.

## Contextualizing Artsakh

Officially known as Nagorno-Karabakh to the international system, the land known to its ancestral Armenian inhabitants as Artsakh bears a socially piercing and bloody contestation over its name and ownership. Artsakh and earlier forms of the word have been used to refer to the region for millennia, beginning with proto-Armenian tribes. “Ar” refers to the Caucasus, while “tsakh” means forest or woods in Armenian (Avakian, 2021). Nagorno-Karabakh, on the other hand, is a strictly colonial term to describe the region which has been internalized by the international system and United Nations to the point where the Republic of Artsakh has been obligated to adopt it officially. The term is half-Russian and half-Azeri, “Nagorno” meaning “Mountainous” in Russian, and Karabakh meaning “Black Garden” in Azeri (NKR, 2022c). Use of this term is dehumanizing to the ancestral Armenian inhabitants of Artsakh, as it legitimizes their historical oppressors. It has been weaponized extensively against Armenians, especially in the era of neoliberalism where information warfare pervades communication.

Artsakh borders the Armenian state’s Syunik, Vayots Dzor, and Gegharkunik provinces to the west, the Iranian state’s East Azerbaijan and Ardabil provinces to the south, and the Azerbaijani state’s Aran region to the east and Ganja-Gazakh region to the north. Political organization in Artsakh dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, however proto-Armenian tribes had settled in the region thousands of years beforehand (Petrosyan et al., 2012). Turkic peoples would later arrive in the Caucasus around the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, intermingling with Armenians, Kurds, and other indigenous peoples. This intermingling created the Azeri ethnicity in what is today the country known as Azerbaijan. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and 1921 CE, Azeris made up less than 5% of Artsakh’s population, and the land was perceived and respected as the homeland of Armenians (Gorzaim, 2011). This perception among Azeris would change during Soviet occupation, however.

Much like Rojava, Artsakh lays at the crossroads of hostile states and empires, and is constantly subjected to militarized colonial threats. Since the last year of de facto Armenian sovereignty over Artsakh in 428 CE, Artsakh has frequently been thrown around and devoured by bordering empires, namely the Ottoman, Byzantine, Persian, and Russian empires, and more recently the Soviet Union (Yeghiazaryan, 2013). Despite facing onslaughts of aggression over many centuries, the Armenians of Artsakh have refused to leave their ancestral homeland. Armenians have secured their cultural and religious autonomy through centuries of self-defense, which forced these empires to grant them autonomy in the form of suzerainty and tributary sovereignty. In one example, following decades of war between Armenians and the Sasanian

Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, Armenians forced the Persian power structure into agreeing to the Treaty of Nvarsak in 484 CE, granting autonomy to Armenians including those in Artsakh (Khachatryan, 2020)(Frye, 1983). This suzerainty was subsequently continued by the Byzantines and Ottomans up until the Tanzimat Reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which would end the suzerainty system and eventually lead to the Armenian Genocide.

Nonetheless, it was the Soviet Union that arguably played the most significant role in exacerbating ethnic tensions that led to the necessity for Artsakhi resistance against foreign occupation, beginning with Soviet complicity in the Armenian Genocide. In 1920, the nascent Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin invaded the Caucasus and installed Armenian SSR and Azerbaijani SSR. Lenin aided Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in his continuation of the Armenian Genocide extensively, supplying the Turkish Army with 39,000 rifles, 327 machine guns, and 147,000 shells which were then used directly against the Armenian population, including many Artsakhis who had joined militias in defense of Western Armenia (Egorov, 2021). In March 1921, amid ongoing ethnic cleansing and massacres of Armenian communities, the fledgling Turkish state and Soviet Union signed the “Treaty of Friendship and Brotherhood.” Lenin was so determined to sustain the Turkish alliance that he was documented stating to Envoy Semyon Aralov in 1921: “We can help Turkey financially, although we ourselves are poor” (Egorov, 2021). Lenin stated the same year that Ataturk “is a good organizer, with great understanding, progressive, with good thoughts and an intelligent leader” (Boncuk, 2012).

Given close ties between the Turkish and Azerbaijani nationalist movements, this also meant support for Azerbaijani nationalism in its common pursuit of subjugating Armenians. In 1923, the then secretary-general Stalin ceded Artsakh region to Azerbaijani SSR (Sargsyan, 2020). This action would create many festering social problems. During Soviet occupation, the Azeri population of Artsakh changed from 5% in 1921 to 23% by 1979 as a result of Soviet-sponsored resettling and favoritism toward Azeri power structures (Gorzaim, 2011). This led Azeris to construct a conception of Artsakh being rightfully Azerbaijani, even though it had never historically been Azeri land.

Similar to Rojava, Artsakh’s contemporary political climate can also be traced in part to the 1923 Lausanne Treaty. This treaty, signed and still upheld by Western powers to this day, legitimized the Armenian Genocide by recognizing the Turkish occupation of Western Armenia. It also legitimized Soviet occupation of the Caucasus by throwing out the original plan of independence for Armenia and Azerbaijan that had been agreed to in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres (Hovannisian, 2017).

Though Armenians and Azeris had generally coexisted peacefully during the Soviet administration, ethnic tension and violence in Artsakh increased exponentially during the Soviet Union’s collapse. In 1988, the predominantly-Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Republic Council voted overwhelmingly to cede Artsakh’s power to Armenian SSR. This vote was then vetoed by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, leading to mass protests in Artsakh (Sargsyan, 2020). Armenians began mobilizing to transfer the political power of Artsakh into the hands of its inhabitants, forming militias that would become the Artsakh Defense Army (ADA). Anti-Armenian pogroms and retaliatory anti-Azeri pogroms ensued across the region, subsequently devolving into the First Artsakh War (also known as the First Nagorno-Karabakh War).

In April 1991, Gorbachev approved Soviet intervention to keep Artsakh occupied by Azerbaijani SSR in an event known as Operation Ring. Ethnic cleansing was initiated directly by Soviet forces, thousands of Armenians expelled from their villages and deported. In July, Gorbachev



announced the completion of the operation and withdrew Soviet forces, believing the region would remain in the control of Azerbaijani SSR. Just months after the Soviet withdrawal, the Armenian, Artsakhi, and Azerbaijani states finally broke away from the Soviet Union and declared independence, their immediate priority to secure power over Artsakh (Sargsyan, 2020). Full-scale violence ensued in 1992. The Artsakh Defense Army, independent from but supported by the Armenian military, drove out the Azeri military and captured the entirety of Artsakh by early 1994 and forced a ceasefire (Papazian, 2008).

The period following the First Artsakh War was riddled with tensions and occasional flare-ups of violence. Though Armenians had secured their ancestral homeland, the international system generally viewed the conflict as a primordial ethnic feud that did not impact the Western oligarchy, and thus did not matter (Papazian, 2008). In 2003, Ilham Aliyev was appointed Prime Minister of Azerbaijan by his father, 3<sup>rd</sup> President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev, turning the Azerbaijani state into a nepotistic autocracy. Under Ilham, the post-Soviet Azerbaijani state has become increasingly authoritarian, externalizing domestic tensions against Armenians to create a racialized diversion. Over the past decades of a wavering Azerbaijani economy and deteriorating human rights, internal suffering in Azerbaijan has been channeled through its ultranationalism, state policy pointing toward Armenians as the culprits for most of Azerbaijan's problems.

Inevitably, over years of festering anti-Armenian hatred in Azerbaijan, Ilham was obligated by his ultranationalist support base and the Turkish state to step up Azeri aggression. In April 2016, the Azerbaijani state launched an offensive attempting to probe Artsakh's defenses in what would become known as the Four-Day War. Four years later in September 2020, this was followed by a full-scale invasion of Artsakh by the Azerbaijani state. This time, the Azerbaijani state took advantage of an unprepared Artsakh Defense Army, successfully overrunning major settlements such as Shushi and Hadrut. This forced the Armenian state into a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement in November that enabled Azeri occupation of the region once again. As an unrecognized state, the Republic of Artsakh was excluded from ceasefire negotiations and Artsakhis were denied a voice. Russian peacekeepers have since controlled areas in central Artsakh accompanied by a very limited Armenian armed presence. Though the Republic of Artsakh remains in administration of some areas including Stepanakert, Artsakhi autonomy is almost entirely extinguished, hanging on only by the thread of the Russian peacekeeper contingent.

A post-Soviet conflict unique to conditions in the era of neoliberalism, the Artsakh wars stand out as bloody reflections of the Soviet Union's failure to withstand this era. Coerced by an increasingly authoritarian and colonial Azerbaijani state connected to the Turkic megapole, the movement for Artsakh's self-determination itself was born out of the collapse of a state which failed to survive neoliberalism, that state being the USSR. Seen in these conditions, similar neoliberal problems impacting Rojava have also impacted Artsakh.

## **State Coercion of Artsakh**

### **Azerbaijani State Coercion**

Though the Azerbaijani state has recently invaded Artsakh in its practice of brutal counterinsurgency, the roots of Azeri coercion begin perhaps in the state propaganda engine. Anti-Armenian hatred systematized into rote learning has forged a narrative basis for crimes against the Armenian people, beginning in early childhood. Azeri kindergartens, for example, have been

observed teaching their students to view Armenians as their enemies, many of these students as young as 4-years-old. In one example, a kindergarten teacher was filmed in 2018 asking her students: “Who are our enemies?” to which the students reply in tandem “Armenians!” The teacher also points to Artsakh and makes the students tell her how the region is Azeri, not Armenian (Armedia, 2018). Many instances like this have been documented in the Azerbaijani school system, showing a pattern of indoctrination derived from and controlled by state policies. Additionally, denial of the Armenian Genocide is a key component of Azeri education, adding a layer of historical denialism to the Azerbaijani state’s engine of ethnic hatred. President Ilham Aliyev tweeted in 2014: “Turkey and Azerbaijan work in a coordinated manner to dispel the myth of the ‘Armenian genocide’ in the world” (Aliyev [@presidentaz], 2014).

From an instrumentalist viewpoint, anti-Armenian hatred has clearly been disseminated by Azeri elite from across the state and oligarchy alike. President Aliyev frequently weaponizes Azeri supremacist rhetoric. In one example, Aliyev tweeted in 2015: “Armenia is not even a colony, it is not even worthy of being a servant” (Aliyev [@presidentaz], 2015). This is the head of a UN-recognized state dehumanizing Armenians and implying the justification of genocide. The UN has remained characteristically silent about this Azeri ultranationalist vehicle of hatred which drives the conflict. Instead of addressing systemic hatred, the UN calls on both sides to end hostilities, even though the structural hostility objectively only derives from the Azerbaijani state (UN News, 2020).

As is the case across the international system in the neoliberal era, the elite control mainstream media structures in Azerbaijan, leading to flawed and selective channels of information. Antagonization of Armenians can be observed across the Azeri media system, with the Azerbaijan State News Agency at the head of this information warfare. AzerNews, for example, has a category on its homepage solely for “Armenian Aggression.” Many of the reports are composed of ultranationalist soundbites and fabricated claims of Armenian abuse (AzerNews, 2020). Similar propaganda efforts can be found in most Azeri outlets. The state sphere of consensus pervades Azeri access to information, as both dissenting and nonpartisan media are banned by the state. Azerbaijan was the 12<sup>th</sup> worst ranking recognized country in the world on the 2020 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index (CEO, 2021).

For those not exposed to critical thought in the country, this education and stream of information yields a perception of the Azerbaijani and Turkish states as a single immaculate entity that is unconditionally justified in its imperialist expansion of pan-Turkic state power structures, resultant in genocide or otherwise. Deemed the “One Nation Two States” doctrine, this doctrine uniting Turkish and Azeri ultranationalism under a single Turkic national identity was constructed during the Heydar Aliyev presidency and carried on by his son. It has been warmly accepted by the Turkish state, echoed by many Turkish diplomats and ministers, and integrated into a single Turkic megapole. This megapole is complete with an intersecting military-industrial complex and propaganda engine intended to occupy indigenous homeland and export Turkic power abroad (AzerNews, 2020).

NATO and Western institutions have shown characteristic complacency and occasional support of the Azerbaijani state’s coercion. In 2004, Armenian Lieutenant Gurgun Margaryan was murdered by Azeri officer Ramil Safarov, who broke into Margaryan’s dormitory and bludgeoned him to death with an axe during a NATO training exercise in Budapest. NATO initially made no official statement on the matter and attempted to cover it up. The Hungarian state arrested and charged Safarov but extradited him to Azerbaijan in 2012, where he was pardoned by President

Aliyev and hailed as a hero, then promoted. The European Court of Human Rights failed to intervene in this extradition, allowing the Azerbaijani state to get away with murder within a NATO state (Walker, 2020). NATO's creation of a space for anti-Armenian hatred and lack of penalty for the Azeri state's abuses have shown its complicity. This is just one instance in a long list of anti-Armenian crimes indirectly or directly supported by NATO.

It is only after understanding this rhetorical and political root of Azerbaijani state brutality that the Azerbaijani state's counterinsurgency can be realized with sufficient context. The Azerbaijani state's counterinsurgency during the Second Artsakh War, propelled by its rhetoric and policy, has prioritized terrorizing the Armenian population. Though the Azerbaijani military was unprepared for Armenian resistance in the 1990s, the introduction of drones and consolidation of the Turkic megapole contributed significantly to the Azerbaijani state's 2020 occupation.

While war crimes have been committed on both sides, those of the Azerbaijani state have proven particularly egregious, spawning disasters and crises on a regional scale. Many of these crimes have been designed to annihilate the Armenian population. (CEO, 2021). Extensive Azeri use of white phosphorus and incendiary munitions led to widespread ecoterrorism and agroterrorism in Artsakh, incinerating large portions of the ecosystem and crop fields often with Western-supplied munitions. All of this in the midst of a Covid-19 pandemic which certainly contributed to the Azerbaijani state's timely invasion, taking advantage of a vulnerable Armenian community to forcefully occupy their homeland. Azeri forces also enacted state terror by beheading Armenian civilians and collecting ear trophies from fallen Armenian bodies as a mechanism to encourage the Armenian population to flee (Arutyunyan, 2021)(Gerami, 2020). Reports have also confirmed instances of Azerbaijani soldiers forcing Armenians to convert to Islam or be executed (Hetq, 2022). Following the war, a military park and museum was opened in the Azerbaijani state capital Baku to celebrate the occupation, depicting Armenians as primitive and subhuman (Agha, 2021).

Much like in Rojava, weaponization of water was also abused against the Armenian people during the Second Artsakh War (Mejlumyan and Natiqqizi, 2021)(CEO, 2021). Water in occupied Artsakh has been diverted to Azerbaijan via new dams, leading to water insecurity across Armenia. This also impacts electricity. Artsakh lost the entirety of its hydroelectric power and the Armenian state lost roughly half. Because of this, the Armenians who remain in Artsakh under Russian occupation are now increasingly dependent on Russian resources. In the wake of the Second Artsakh War, the Republic of Artsakh has largely been nullified and the Armenian state has lost its influence in the region.

Similar to the Turkish state's invasions of Rojava, the Azerbaijani state's coercive efforts in Artsakh have been brutal, dehumanizing, and devoid of ethical consideration.

## **Turkish State Coercion**

Part of a single Turkic megapole, the Turkish and Azerbaijani states overlap considerably in their coercive actions surrounding Artsakh and Armenia. Beginning with the military-industrial complex, the Turkish state has interwoven itself into the Azerbaijani war effort. What sets apart the two states militarily is the fact that the Turkish state is a member of NATO while the Azerbaijani state is an observer state in NATO. Nonetheless, both receive direct and indirect support from Western states. Many of the weapons used against Armenians during the Second Artsakh War were not Azeri-made, but Turkish-made.

The Turkish-supplied TB-2 Bayraktar drone had a significant effect on the Second Artsakh War, able to detect and destroy targets while not being spotted. The Israeli-supplied Harop “suicide drone” also had a devastating impact on Artsakh communities in the Second Artsakh War, designed to terrorize its victims with a screaming noise before detonating (Newdick, 2021). The few air defense systems held by Artsakh were quickly overwhelmed and many of them destroyed. Turkish and Azeri drone pilots were able to take advantage of Artsakh’s open trench system to inflict significant casualties on the defending units of the Artsakh Defense Army. The drone attacks also killed many civilians and were not limited to the Artsakh Defense Army, however. The parts for these drones are sourced almost exclusively from corporations in NATO states, from France-based Eurofarad to Kansas-based Garmin Ltd, with the exception of Switzerland-based Faulhaber Minimotor SA (Sarukhanyan, 2021)(Garmin Ltd., 2020). Turkish international relations and NATO integration helped facilitate the flow of these drones into Azeri hands during the effort to both occupy and terrorize Artsakh.

Perhaps the Turkish state’s most harmful coercion in the Second Artsakh War was not its supply of drones, but its deployment of Syrian mercenaries. Following the invasion of Afrin, the Turkish state began to recruit members of its proxy force, the Syrian National Army (SNA), to fight for Turkish interests abroad. First deployed in Libya in January 2020 then to Azerbaijan in September 2020, SNA units have participated in trafficking sexually enslaved women from Afrin to where they are deployed. This has been confirmed during their deployment in Libya, and may very well have occurred during their deployment in Azerbaijan as well (The Renegade, 2022). This deployment of mercenaries was meant to create a tipping point in the conflict, given similar personnel numbers on both sides. A low estimate confirmed 1,000 Syrian mercenaries deployed to Artsakh, though later reports from SOHR put the number at 2,600 (Saradzhyan, 2020)(SOHR, 2020). Though this exporting of mercenaries is a clear violation of international law, it is also clear that few states tend to pay any attention to international law in the neoliberal era, and thus international law cannot be usefully included in any discussion of this thesis.

With the Turkic megapole in mind, it can be cogently argued that without Turkish backing, the Azerbaijani state would not have been able to occupy Artsakh in 2020. In fact, it may not have even come close.

## **State Co-Optation of Artsakh**

### **Armenian State Co-Optation**

From the formation of the Republic of Artsakh during the collapse of the USSR to the near-collapse of the Republic of Artsakh itself in 2020, Armenian state co-optation of Artsakh has been of existential importance and detriment to the movement. Artsakh has faced a dilemma in this regard. On one hand, Armenian backing has lent a channel of economic and military support as well as indirect representation in the international system. On the other hand, overdependence on Armenia has crippled Artsakh’s own capabilities. The Armenian state has taken advantage of Artsakh’s centralized unitary republican structure to maintain a tight grasp on the region.

Though an economic lifeline, dependence on the Armenian state has come with major consequences. Until the occupation, a significant portion of the Artsakhi economy was interconnected with the Armenian economy, to the extent where an independent economy was made impossible. Despite Artsakh’s full capability to attain self-sufficiency, the region’s extensive cultivation

and output was funneled directly into the Armenian economy instead of its own in nearly every sector from watchmaking to hydroelectric power. Before the Second Artsakh War, a whopping  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Artsakh's exports were sent to Armenia, then frequently relabeled "Made in Armenia" to be commodified and exported abroad (Martin, 2020). In this process, the Armenian state marginalized Artsakh and exploited it for the mainland economy, which is centered 200 miles away in Yerevan. With this in mind, impoverishment in Artsakh was and still is largely owed to the Armenian state's exploitation. Meager Armenian state attempts to uplift the Artsakhi economy and make it further dependent by subsidizing various sectors such as construction were obliterated during the Second Artsakh War (Martin, 2020).

From a military standpoint, in the years following the First Artsakh War, the Artsakh Defense Army became increasingly reliant on training and support from the Armenian military, and adjusted to emulate the conventional Armenian military structure. Inability to distinguish between Armenian military and Artsakh Defense Army in Armenian diplomacy has corroborated Azeri propaganda and created a series of problems for the movement (Sarukhanyan, 2021).

Armenian journalist Vahe Sarukhanyan (2021) points out in the wake of the Second Artsakh War:

"Pashinyan (Prime Minister of Armenia) signed a paper that creates big problems not only for the present but also for the future. What does the withdrawal of 'Armenian Armed Forces' mean? Is it about the RoA Armed Forces, and/or the Artsakh Defense Army? This is a point that is already being exploited by Azerbaijan. Second, Azerbaijan and Armenia are considered parties in the statement, which notes that both must remain in their November 9 battlefield positions. In other words, was it a case of Armenia and Azerbaijan fighting each other? If so, had Republic of Armenia forces invaded Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders? By signing the statement, Pashinyan basically strengthened the thesis expounded by Baku for years that this is a territorial conflict, and that Armenia has occupied a part of Azerbaijan. This statement, signed by Pashinyan, can be used by Baku as a 'confession' of the Armenian authorities to the above."

Armenian state diplomacy representing Artsakh has also been widely questioned. Armenian scholar Tamar Gharibian, states: "Although Artsakh and the Armenian communities that live therein are the primary stakeholders to the conflict who suffer the direct consequences of war, they are not represented by themselves on the negotiating table, but rather, by Armenia" (Gharibian, 2021, p. 59). The Republic of Artsakh was not a negotiating party during the Second Artsakh War, and the Armenian state did nothing to make it one. Instead, the Republic of Artsakh was expected to abide to PM Pashinyan's decisions, which it did.

## **Russian State Co-Optation**

The Russian state has made substantial efforts to regain what the USSR lost in the Caucasus. The Armenian state is a full member of the Russian state's three major regional organizations: Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Karenian, 2019). Both the Armenian and Azerbaijani state are members of CSTO and CIS, however Russian co-optation affects Armenia and Artsakh

disproportionately. Russia has taken advantage of the Artsakh conflict to pull both Armenia and Azerbaijan further into its sphere of influence and economic grasp.

As part of the November 2020 ceasefire agreement, roughly 2,000 Russian personnel have been deployed to Artsakh for “peacekeeping” operations. This does not include the 3,000 Russian personnel who are deployed in Gyumri within the borders of Armenia (Mgdesyan, 2021). The Russian state occupies Lachin Corridor, the main artery linking the Armenian mainland with Artsakh, and therefore effectively has full authority over what enters Artsakh and what does not (Nahapetyan, 2021). With an added layer of foreign bureaucracy in between Armenia and autonomous areas in Artsakh, the Russian occupation has widely exacerbated Artsakhi dependence on Russian aid.

Before the war, only a quarter of Artsakhi exports went to Russia. From the areas that still enjoy limited autonomy, the portion of exports to Russia may now exceed exports to Armenia (Martin, 2020). Facing a massive inundation of Russian tech companies in Armenia, Artsakh is threatened by a wave of Russian foreign-direct investment and further economic extraction particularly in its capital city Stepanakert (Massis Post, 2022). The Russian economic sphere of influence has acted as a safety net amid global sanctions against the Russian state following its invasion of Ukraine. Despite crippling sanctions, the Russian economy has stabilized in part due to Armenian and Artsakhi economic dependence on Russia, as well as dependence from other member states of the CIS. In 2021, the Russian and Azerbaijani megapoles made a series of timely gas-swapping agreements to the benefit of Russian oil giants Gazprom and Lukoil, subsequently extending Russian possession of Caucasian oil and increasing the state’s revenue (TASS, 2021).

The Armenian state has in recent years revealed its subservience to the Russian state’s power on many occasions, going to the extent of sacrificing its own national security to do so. In February 2019, the Armenian state sent a detachment of medics and demining personnel to support the Syrian Arab Army in the city of Aleppo, only nine months after major clashes had broken out between Armenian and Azeri forces in Nakhchivan region. In January 2022, the Armenian state was one of the first CSTO states to send a “peacekeeper” contingent to suppress protests in Kazakhstan despite ongoing Azeri shellings and ceasefire violations along the Armenian border (Kuzio, 2022). Despite these deployments for the sake of Russian relations and economic entwinement, some Russian sources have gone as far as claiming Armenia has not done enough for the Russian state, and should deploy more personnel to Syria alongside Russian personnel (Stronell, 2021). In this process of Russian co-optation of the Armenian state, resources have been diverted away from Artsakh and instead thrust into Russian imperialism.

The Russian state will decide on whether or not to renew its 5-year peacekeeping mission in 2025. Though the fate of dwindling Artsakhi autonomy remains unclear, what is clear is that the Russian state has effectively secured its Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast once again. Perhaps it was neither Armenia nor Artsakh nor Azerbaijan that truly won the Second Artsakh War, but rather the Russian state, which acts as a marionettist toying with its rival post-Soviet puppets, watching them fight with unilateral intrigue whilst expanding its regional hegemony.

## **Framework of the Artsakh Resistance**

Artsakh is perceivably an anticolonial movement, but not a Marxist one, and thus does not have a vanguard. It is a movement for an independent nation-state integrated into the interna-

tional system. Its presidential quasi-autocracy, however, does exhibit some characteristics of a vanguard. The top-down structure remains vertical across almost every dimension of Artsakh society, and communities have little autonomy to make decisions. Armenia at large has long struggled with authoritarianism in its political structures, and this has carried over into Artsakh. Though some of Armenia's authoritarian structures were dismantled in the 2018 Velvet Revolution, the post-Soviet political landscape of Armenia continues to manifest itself, and police state strategies are still exercised against dissenting members of the general population. Modeled off of the Armenian state structure but with even further concentrated power since 2017, the Republic of Artsakh has not been spared of this post-Soviet panopticon. The unitary rigidity of the Republic of Artsakh means strict state control of the Artsakh Defense Army with no questions asked, nor questions that can be asked to begin with.

### **Political Structure of Artsakh**

The political structure of Artsakh began largely decentralized, but has become increasingly unitary and vertical since its separation of power. In 1992, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)-driven Republic of Artsakh adopted a multi-layered model crafted in a series of conventions with the Nagorno-Karabakh and Shahumyan Councils of People's Deputies in the region. A central Supreme Council was held in check by a Council of Ministers, State Defense Committee, 75-seat People's Deputies chamber, and Standing Committees, producing a hybrid system where decisions could be made both vertically and horizontally. Political chambers at all levels were included in this process and activated in the nascent stages of the republic, with 82.2% of the population participating in the initial referendum and elections (Natl. Assembly). Local and regional chambers would lose their power beginning in 1995, however, when the multicameral Supreme Council was gradually replaced by a much smaller unicameral 33-seat National Assembly. The ARF's power waned to more conservative statist factions, spawning a period of political restructuring (Natl. Assembly).

Under the Arayik Harutyunyan administration in 2017, Artsakh's entire ministerial structure was wiped out in its new constitution, pushing the presidential office to the cusp of autocracy and eliminating most remaining local power (Rettman, 2017). Since 2017, at the top of the Republic of Artsakh's structure, a president is elected via popular vote and has full power over the Artsakh Defense Army as its commander-in-chief. The president also has the power to veto any legislation from the National Assembly. According to Article 113 of the constitution: "The president of the Supreme Court and other judges are appointed by the National Assembly at the recommendation of the President of the Republic" (NKR, 2022a). With such a small unicameral National Assembly that will almost certainly yield a majority in the president's faction, the president effectively has individual power to appoint the entire Supreme Court. Because of this concentration of power and erosion of checks and balances, the Republic of Artsakh can now be described as a quasi-autocracy.

### **Nationalizing Architecture**

Perhaps to the disgruntlement of the Armenian state, Artsakh has taken on a national identity of its own. In contrast to the nationless projection of Rojava, Artsakh is, in its essence, a national movement attempting to achieve national liberation. "We are our mountains" is the national

motto of Artsakh, and it comes with its own monument. The We Are Our Mountains Monument in Stepanakert serves as one of the major nationalizing devices of Artsakh. Depicting an elderly man and woman with tufa stone, the monument is pictured in Artsakh's coat of arms and aims to remind Artsakhis that they are fighting an ancestral struggle for their ancestral homeland without many friends in the neighborhood (Asbarez, 2014). This national narrative is driven largely by the republic, with the republic at the core of Artsakhi nation-building. Thus, the state itself co-opts the narrative to a degree. The republic forges a narrative of unitary statehood inseparably attached to the nation, producing a perception that decisions of the nation must be concentrated in the state, none localized nor regionalized, only nationalized, otherwise they are invalid.

## **Disaster Relief**

Artsakh's Soviet-era "Semashko" healthcare system depends on a vertical hierarchy from the Artsakh Ministry of Healthcare downward, and rations accessibility to health services based on population density (Gharibian, 2021). This seemingly left a serious gap in rural accessibility to medical support during the Second Artsakh War, with rural communities widely neglected from the central medical system. Lack of community medical structures and reliance on an overwhelmed Artsakh Ministry of Healthcare created inefficiency during the war. Responses to ecological and agricultural disasters were hampered by the rapid pace of the war and output of fleeing communities. The Artsakh Emergency and Rescue Service was overstretched and unable to function efficiently, even early on in the war. Because of these factors, disaster response was often ad hoc and initiated by Artsakh's citizens, but also outsourced to the Armenian state and aid organizations (Hovhannisyan and Bagirova, 2020)(CEO, 2021)(Connolly, 2020)(Gharibian, 2021).

## **Rise of the Artsakh Defense Army**

The discussion on Artsakh's collapse cannot solely surround its political environment and state structure, however. Flaws in the military structure must also be considered. Between the first and second Artsakh wars, the Artsakh Defense Army attempted a transition to conventionality that may have harmed the movement. Whilst Artsakhi political leaders made a pivot to transition the Republic of Artsakh into a UN-sanctioned presidential model, the Artsakh Defense Army also made a pivot to transition its model to that of a conventional nation-state army (Aysor, 2021). In the recent failure of both diplomacy and defense in the Second Artsakh War, some have questioned the conventionalizing structure of the Artsakh Defense Army after it failed to separate itself from the official ceasefire declared by the Armenian state. To arrive at a holistic answer on this, one must carefully observe the foundations of the resistance itself.

Looking back to the success of guerilla forces in the First Artsakh War, the Artsakh Defense Army was able to defeat the Azerbaijani military and hold the region for over 25 years. Armenian journalist Avet Demourian (1997) attributed this success to the local population of Artsakh and its autonomy in defensive action. In the wake of the First Artsakh War, Demourain describes a "well-developed system of defensive fortifications and an armed garrison formed from the local population" from which regional units are "capable of extended military action – both defensive and offensive – Independent of the regular armed forces" (p. 83). In other words, the Artsakh Defense Army was constructed without direct control of the Armenian state, and thrived in the First Artsakh War due to its grassroots unconventional nature. A decentralized regional com-



mand structure allowed the Artsakh Defense Army to be internally fluid and to fully employ its potential power through a network of semi-autonomous units.

The initial unconventional nature of the Artsakh resistance is owed at least in part to the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), a revolutionary organization founded in 1975 aiming to attain retribution for the Armenian Genocide and liberate Western Armenia by asymmetric force through a decentralized network of cells. Following a deadly bombing in 1983, ASALA split into two factions, the Hagop Hagopian faction practicing indiscriminate violence abroad and Monte Melkonian faction organizing a more ethical asymmetric force intended to confront immediate threats to Armenia without targeting civilians (Topalian, 2010). Melkonian's faction saw the most influence during the formation of the Artsakh resistance. ASALA revolutionaries of the Melkonian faction were fundamental architects in this unconventional construction, Melkonian himself a regional commander for Martuni who fell in the 1993 Battle of Aghdam (Topalian, 2010).

Following the First Artsakh War, ASALA elements were nullified and replaced by conventional commanders, many of whom former members of the Armenian military. Initiated by conservative Armenian militarist elements through pressure from the Armenian state, this effort to suppress ASALA's influence is partly what contributed to the process of conventionalization in the Artsakh Defense Army, and by extension the Republic of Artsakh at large. By muting unconventional voices and homogenizing its command structure, the Artsakhi state sidelined an essential component of its defensive planning.

Since becoming prime minister in 2007 and subsequently president of the Republic of Artsakh in 2020, Arayik Harutyunyan has made it a marked priority to conventionalize the Artsakh Defense Army and rid it of its semi-autonomous foundations. During this undertaking, Artsakh Defense Army commanders who were critical of the Armenian state's Pashinyan government were fired and demoted, leading to further instability in the command structure just two years prior to the Second Artsakh War (Sanamyan, 2018). The Armenian state clearly reaps the benefits of this conventionalizing process while the Artsakh Defense Army has remained excluded from all joint military partnerships abroad.

## **Fall of the Artsakh Defense Army**

In August of 2020, one month prior to the Azeri invasion, Artsakhi presidential advisor Armine Grigoryan reported on the conditions leading up to the war. Though careful attention was paid to Azeri offensive tactics and Armenian defensive abilities in this report, there was no mention of drones to be found. Grigoryan stated on the trench system: "The recurrent escalations including the trench war enable keeping trench data current...The Defense Army implements unilaterally synchronized and agreed mechanisms for investigation of borderline incidents with ceasefire control devices along the borderline to nullify subversive warfare" (Grigoryan, 2020, p. 133). There is an important piece missing from this report: drone pilots do not care about trench bureaucracy. The Artsakh Defense Army relied heavily on its trench system not just for reconnaissance but also for communication. When the lines were breached by Azeri forces, a vital organ of the now centralized conventional military structure ceased its function. Given the loss of horizontal structure, there was now no alternative for Artsakhi forces but to follow the central ceasefire orders demanded by Pashinyan in November 2020. With this we have a man who has overseen the exploitation of the Artsakhi economy and refused to allow them

representation in the Armenian state, deciding for the entire nation of Artsakh that it needs to stop resisting occupation. So, while bureaucracy has flooded the Artsakhi resistance since its pivot to conventionality, this has not necessarily made it a more effective force.

I interviewed an Armenian officer in a NATO army who shall be called Andranik and inquired him on the matter. I asked Andranik (2022), do you believe the Artsakh Defense Army's increasing gravitation toward conventional warfare helped or hurt the resistance? Andranik gave his perspective as an officer in a NATO military:

“The Artsakh liberation movement was made possible by well experienced military commanders that served in the Soviet-Afghan War and revolutionaries like Monte Melkonian and Jirair Sefilian. I would say gravitating towards conventional warfare helped the state of Artsakh and believe that the Artsakh Defense Army did not gravitate towards conventional warfare quick enough. The Artsakh Defense Army would not be able to sustain itself in defense as a revolutionary and insurgent style force. The goal was to protect Artsakh and its inhabitants and to build a professional military. As we saw, an attempt of a professional military was what it got. For the Artsakh Defense Force to continue as a revolutionary style force it would be at an even worse position as it is today. I believe there is a place for militias and volunteer units but they should be behind a professional active and reserve army.

It is necessary for the Artsakh Defense Army to be experts in tactical and operational realms. A focus on small unit tactics, lightweight mounted units, armed aerial reconnaissance assets, and electronic warfare specialists to be able to be a formidable force against the wealthier and larger enemy such as Azerbaijan. To quote Jean Larteguy, ‘I’d like to have two armies: one for display with lovely guns, tanks, little soldiers, staffs, distinguished and doddering generals, and dear little regimental officers who would be deeply concerned over their general’s bowel movements or their colonel’s piles, an army that would be shown for a modest fee on every fairground in the country. The other would be the real one, composed entirely of young enthusiasts in camouflage uniforms, who would not be put on display, but from whom impossible efforts would be demanded and to whom all sorts of tricks would be taught. That’s the army in which I should like to fight.’

And myself an army officer, that’s the army in which I would also like to fight. I don’t think the separation of conventional and unconventional should continue in the way it is currently. The conventional combat arms force should be separated from the benign tasks that they’re given and only focus on being a fighting force. And for the unconventional there is always a need for that.”

I found some gaps in Andranik’s argument, however. If a few conventional commanders helped Artsakh secede back then, why did the presence of more conventional commanders and a more conventional command structure not keep Artsakh seceded in 2020? Though this pivot to conventionality was rushed, the context to the question of conventionality begins with the fact that Artsakh seceded unconventionally, and was lost conventionally, both in its military and political structures. Whether an increased integration of the conventional model would have turned the tides may really be a question of whether conventionality itself could have subverted

a Turkish-backed Azerbaijani military, not so much a question of whether the Artsakh Defense Army could have become more conventional than it already was. I also find, particularly when looking at the case of Rojava, that expertise in the tactical and operational realms is certainly not exclusive to conventional armies.

From a social ecologist standpoint one finds that, unlike in Rojava, it was only a limited portion of Artsakhi civil society that mobilized in the Second Artsakh War. The male population is conscripted at age 18 for a two-year contract, and this composed the bulk of the 2020 Artsakh Defense Army. Weaving patriarchy into conventionality, women were prevented from forming their own units and mostly constrained to auxiliary roles (Sarade, 2020)(Sargsyan, 2021). A decentralist would likely argue that limiting women's participation inherently weakened civil integration in the resistance, and therefore also weakened the capability of the movement at large. Given subordination of the Artsakh Defense Army to the Armenian state, the force's patriarchal centralization deterred Armenians from forming a separate asymmetric resistance to the Azeri occupation. Despite a burning desire to keep fighting Azeri occupying forces, Armenians were prevented from continuing their resistance because of a unitary Artsakh's subservience to a unitary Armenian state.

When asking what was lost in the original foundations of the Artsakh Defense Army, one finds a largely horizontal command structure replaced with a vertical one, and the subsequent integration of a defensive system planned by a small group of central brass rather than a system which involves the grassroots engagement of civil society at large. Artsakh lost this grassroots element to its defensive plan while Rojava sustained it.

## **Addressing Human Rights Abuses**

Comparing the First and Second Artsakh War, Armenian ethics improved while Azeri ethics deteriorated (HRW, 2022). Azerbaijani state crimes and massacres were considerably more frequent than those of the Armenian side both in the First and Second Artsakh War. This left a deeply traumatic impact on Armenian communities not just in the highlands but also in the diaspora, compounded with generational trauma collected during the Armenian Genocide. Nonetheless, human rights abuses from the Armenian side were certainly committed as well, leaving their own impact. Armenian crimes were far more isolated and less systematic in the Second Artsakh War than in the First Artsakh War, a major ethical improvement from the 1992 Khojaly massacre, which the Azerbaijani state has since widely utilized as a victimization device. The topic of Khojaly (also spelled Khojali) is especially sensitive in Armenian discourse. ARF politician and former minister Gerard Libaridian (2014) explains in a 2014 article:

“It is very difficult for an Armenian to write about Khojali. Khojali represents a case when Armenians have been accused of atrocities against others, in this case against Azeris. Armenians are not used to being victimisers; being the victim is more of a pattern for us...Still, Armenians do not speak about it and Azerbaijani sources are more interested in using Khojali for propaganda purposes than as a subject for serious study, thus they are unreliable.

When in 1999 and 2000 I was interviewing Armenian and Azerbaijani officials in Baku and Yerevan for my next book, Azerbaijani officials dismissed Sumgait and other cases of Azerbaijani atrocities, while Armenians ignored Khojali. I do hope

that someday scholars will find out what happened exactly with the cooperation of all parties concerned.

Regardless, something unacceptable did happen, something that involved killings and mutilation of Azeri civilians by Armenian forces in Karabakh. Armenians deny or explain it away just as Azerbaijanis do with what was done to Armenian civilians earlier in Sumgait, Baku and other Azerbaijani cities. It would have been very proper and useful if Azerbaijan had recognised the pogroms against Armenians in Sumgait and other Azerbaijani cities. But recognition by Armenians of the wrong done by Armenians should not depend on a corresponding recognition of Azerbaijani wrongs against Armenians...human suffering should not be a matter of haggling as if we were in a bazaar. This is a matter of what values we adopt for ourselves and what values we would want others to adopt regarding our own history.”

While there is an open discussion on Armenian crimes in Armenian discourse, the same cannot be said of Azeri discourse, which is often censored and confined to denialism. Azeris in Azerbaijan fear diverting from the state sphere of consensus and are forced to depart the country to dissent safely. Although a state sphere of consensus exists and is enforced in Armenia, dialogue is less censored. Libaridian’s perspective on the Khojaly massacre is tolerated in Armenia whereas claims corroborating Azerbaijani state crimes are censored and cracked down on in Azerbaijan (HRW, 2019).

Khojaly aside, the broader Armenian treatment of Muslim populations during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War was ethically questionable and has not been fully reconciled by the Armenian state nor the Republic of Artsakh. With the Artsakh resistance being an Armenian national movement, Azeris who chose not to flee were largely excluded from Artsakhi national politics and discouraged from participating beyond the local level. This discouragement was also rooted in pressure from the Azerbaijani state to delegitimize the Artsakhi political structures, diverting Azeri communities from pressing for increased political integration (Sarade, 2020). Azeri representation was entirely lost during Artsakh’s process of power concentration, leading to the appearance of Artsakh as an Armenian ethnostate.

Armenian discrimination of Muslims in Artsakh has not been limited to Azeris. The Sheylanli Kurds of Lachin region, for example, had lived in Artsakh for at least five centuries until their forced displacement and the subsequent repopulation of Lachin by Armenians in the 1990s (Krikorian, 2006). The Sheylanli Kurds have since been vulnerable to Azeri assimilation policies, of which a portion of its population has succumbed to. Many of the 24 Kurdish tribes that arrived in Azerbaijan and Artsakh in the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE have already been forcefully assimilated into the Azeri national identity, the Sheylanli Kurds being one of the last unassimilated Kurdish tribes in the Caucasus (Bidlisi, 1967). Armenian ethnocentrism in Artsakh has led to neglect for the cultural preservation of these populations. In Armenian discourse, most are either unaware of this displacement of Kurds in Lachin or dismiss it as an isolated incident. While the discussion on Lachin is not complete without Kurdish representation, Kurdish access to discourse surrounding ethnography in Lachin is unfortunately very scarce, and mostly limited to the works of the late Caucasian Kurdish scholar Shamil Asgarov.

## Armenian and Artsakhi Perspectives

“We do not believe in benevolent friends, the inevitable triumph of justice, or covertly and cleverly manipulating the superpowers. If we are to achieve national self-determination, then we ourselves, the Armenian people, will have to fight for it.” -Monte Melkonian (1990) in *The Right to Struggle*, (p. 60).

Even with its efforts to forge a cohesive national narrative, the Republic of Artsakh has run into problems unifying its population under a single national identity. A schism has emerged in Artsakhi politics between a faction which intends to be united with the Armenian state and a faction which intends to stay separate. This schism coincides with the progressive remnants of ASALA and ARF clashing with a Harutyunyan-led conservative bloc that yearns to expand the clerical power of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Evidently, the Armenian state’s political isolation of Artsakh from the mainland has worsened sectarian conditions within Artsakh, treating it as a satellite state while insisting the territory as its own and bringing its actual sovereignty into question. Meanwhile, Artsakhis have no representation in the Armenian state’s governing chambers. This has not impacted the popular drive to defend Artsakh, however, which is viewed throughout the Armenian nation as Armenian homeland.

The voting population of Artsakh tends to lean conservative, which entails trust in the post-Soviet republican model and elevating the power of the clergy. The conservative Free Motherland Party ruling class and its allies hold a supermajority in the National Assembly, with Harutyunyan at their head. Of 33 seats in the assembly, only eight are officially held by the opposition. ARF holds three of these opposition seats as of the 2020 elections, which saw a 72% turnout (Natl. Assembly, 2020).

During the outbreak of the Second Artsakh War, Armenian scholar Ohannes Geukjian (2020) recognized the separation of interests between the Armenian state and Artsakh separatists as a serious problem for the secession of Artsakh from Azerbaijan. Geukjian explains in a September 27, 2020 article: “Recognition of needs and dialogue are preconditions and for these to be met both parties have to be accepted as legitimate. Indeed, official negotiations often disintegrated because of a failure to involve representatives from the Karabakh leadership and from Azerbaijani inhabitants of N-K and address their needs. When asymmetry is reduced, negotiations may become successful.” That is, because of the Armenian state imposing its diplomacy on Artsakh and failing to consider Artsakhi interests, the Artsakh resistance has been constrained to the will of Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan. With this, it has been incapable of actually representing Artsakhis both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. The Republic of Artsakh and its Artsakh Defense Army had become too dependent on the Armenian state to function from their own interests, which is what Geukjian suggests led to their vulnerability.

Many Armenians feel that Artsakh was inextricably dependent on the Armenian state and thus could not exercise its own capabilities to a sufficient capacity, contributing to its collapse. This stance is not uncontested, however. According to Andranik, the Republic of Artsakh had some degree of autonomy from the Armenian state that was reflected in its dissent. I asked Andranik (2022): Do you believe Artsakh’s lack of diplomatic independence from Armenia affected its ability to remain seceded from Azerbaijan? How do you believe this affected its representation on the global stage?

Andranik replied:

“On a micro level I would say the Republic of Artsakh was ‘independent’ of Armenia, especially when it came to their local politics. Because in reality, the leaders of Armenia and the NKR (Artsakh) disagreed on quite a lot of things, but the general political course was the same. The ‘political course’ being heavy Russian pressure, keeping them from returning the seven adjacent districts and moving towards peace. On the international level the Republic of Artsakh was perceived as a puppet government of the Republic of Armenia. I believe it was Vartan Oskanian (Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1998–2008) who said that Artsakh’s independence only served foreign consumption and that Armenia controls the region, instead of the government of the Republic of Artsakh. It should be emphasized that prior to Oskanian’s leak, the NKR held a much stronger position when it came to its de facto independence, and Azerbaijani allegations were largely ignored. After the leak, what helped push Azerbaijan’s narrative was the willingness of Armenia’s negotiators to sideline the authorities in the NKR, which only fed the Azeris’ propaganda of the NKR being a front for heavy Armenian involvement... Where I see the problem being was the failure of Armenian diplomats to create the case of Artsakh being its own independent state free of foreign political involvement. Using the claim of defending the lives of ethnic Armenians living in the state to justify military support.”

Armenian approval of the Armenian state government headed by PM Pashinyan has wavered considerably since the Second Artsakh War. Armenian journalist Harut Sassounian (2022) states: “Ever since the catastrophic 2020 Artsakh War, I have been repeatedly saying that the prime minister is too incompetent to govern Armenia. He caused the loss of most of Artsakh and thousands of young Armenian soldiers. As a defeated and psychologically crushed leader, he is incapable of repairing the damage he caused to the country.” This sentiment of disaffection with Pashinyan is among the most commonly held in mainstream Armenian discourse. Geukjian explained in the aftermath of the war: “The authorities in Armenia are either not transparent on all the details of the ceasefire agreement or unwilling to reveal the realities to further avoid political tension and civil unrest in Armenia” (Avedian, 2020).

Because of the Armenian state’s role, Artsakhi governance is scarcely considered in this discussion, which can become problematic. Harutyunyan and the Free Motherland Party are rarely mentioned as extensions of Pashinyan’s grasp. Peace studies scholar Dr. Philip Gamaghelyan (2010) explained 10 years prior to the Second Artsakh War: “The Armenian leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh is often considered radical and uncompromising. But this is an assumption. The real problem is that they are primary stakeholders in the conflict and not present at the negotiating table. Their needs are neglected and their opinions are largely unknown” (Gamaghelyan, 2010, p. 16). This sentiment has since been echoed by many Armenian thinkers such as Tamar Gharibian (2021) in the wake of the war. Problems of governance in Artsakh are often conflated with the Armenian state, and this has negated dialogue on local and regional problems within Artsakh.

Russian state alignment is also a major discussion in Armenian politics, which creates yet another diversion from local visibility in Artsakh. Armenian stances on the Russian state’s influence are mixed. Perception of the Russian state in Armenian discourse is fused to decades of Soviet occupation in Armenia, some Armenians nostalgic of Soviet Armenia and others not. The Armenian oligarchy has close ties to the Russian state, and this relationship is reflected in favorable Armenian state policy which has encouraged the Russian occupation of central Art-

sakh (Karenian, 2019). Some Armenians perceive this occupation as beneficial to the remaining Armenian inhabitants of Artsakh while others perceive it as a power grab. On some occasions, these two perspectives overlap with one another (Khudoyan, 2022).

Looking at Armenian perspectives surrounding the collapse of the Artsakh resistance, the general consensus is that the failure of the Republic of Artsakh and Artsakh Defense Army can be attributed to ignorance and negligence of the Armenian state rather than overdependence on it.

# Analysis

## Effects of Neoliberalism and the State

The neoliberal era and its repercussions have yielded a considerable impact on the cases of Rojava and Artsakh, to the degree that their comparison is of utmost importance to conceptualizing separatism in the neoliberal era. Both movements have been born out of and shaped by this era in the world order, forced to accommodate to its rapidly changing political environments. The pattern of the “ethnic explosion” seen on the first graph closely pertains to each movement discussed in the case studies, the Rojava revolution’s roots in the mobilization of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party in 1984, the Artsakh resistance beginning during the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In both Rojava and Artsakh, the movements and their respective populations have been faced with many challenges unique to this era, from integration of drone warfare into military-industrial complexes to fighting mutual state-backed paramilitaries of the SNA to rampant digital information warfare enacted by aggressing states. Though Rojava is located in the Levant and Artsakh in the Caucasus, the two movements have faced coercion from similar actors, both of them in the Turkic megapole.

The Turkic megapole under the Turkish state’s sphere of influence is a crucial component of this research, as it is a coercing actor in both cases; Rojava invaded by the Turkish state and Artsakh by the Azerbaijani state. The Turkish and Azerbaijani states’ “two states one nation” policy has conveniently integrated much of their corporate and military sectors to pursue a shared national coercive effort, amalgamating the oppressive power of their hegemonies under a single megapole. The Turkic megapole is a leading power of military technology in West Asia, which has evolved and become increasingly lethal throughout the neoliberal era.

US and NATO backing of the Turkic megapole marks a renewal of Cold War behavior but with neoliberal characteristics, deriving from their obsession with contesting Russian presence. The US and NATO’s clear manipulation of and/or negligence toward coerced populations in both Rojava and Artsakh display in full view their unilateral interests which are funded by Western taxpayers. One megapole allying with another, NATO’s direct backing of the Turkish state and indirect backing of the Azerbaijani state have been funneled into acts of genocide. Likewise, the Russian state has pursued its own megapole, the Russian military-industrial complex a vital life-line to the Syrian state and a source of ignition for conflict in Artsakh. Russian state manipulation and exploitation of war in West Asia has resulted in a more powerful Russian megapole and more bloodshed, where conflict is perpetuated in a cycle of Russian power and revenue. The same can be said of every foreign megapole involved to some degree.

In the cases of Rojava and Artsakh, the legitimacy of UN-recognized nation-state power structures have deteriorated. The power of the Turkic megapole has become increasingly concentrated into the hands of its ruling classes, and it has chosen coercion to keep these state power structures upheld. As the neoliberal era has become deeply interlaced with marginalization and conflict



across the international system, it can be argued the Rojava revolution and Artsakh resistance alike have resisted the neoliberal era itself, as well as late-stage statism.

## **(Re)Structuring Resistance**

In both cases, one finds similar methods of coercion and similar coercive actors imposed on the movements, but varying challenges regarding state co-optation and internal structuring. Both cases are unique to the neoliberal era yet practice widely differing approaches to it, resulting in widely differing results in their struggles for liberation. Rojava maintains its separation of power from the Syrian and Turkish state while Artsakh has almost entirely lost its separation of power from the Azerbaijani state. Rojava was invaded three times by a much larger force which outnumbered the Syrian Democratic Forces considerably, while Artsakh was invaded by a force of a roughly equivalent size, possibly even smaller. Drones were used to a major extent in both instances, but had a more dire impact in Artsakh. The conventional defensive structure of Artsakh disintegrated in the face of this drone onslaught, while Rojava's underground tunnel systems and stealth-heavy guerrilla strategies have often impeded drone abilities.

The cases juxtapose an Autonomous Administration in Rojava which has become increasingly decentralized over time and a Republic of Artsakh which has become increasingly centralized over time. Through an unconventional decentralized model, Rojava has sustained itself despite being subjected to economic blockades on all sides and three invasions from NATO's second largest military. Rojava has also averted the existential threat of being stripped of water and crops by the Turkish state. Structural self-sustainability has allowed Rojava to resist co-optation, both in its administration and economy. Democratic Confederalism plays a mandatory role in all of these factors.

Rojava and Artsakh have responded differently to state-co-optation. Though Rojava was harmed by US co-optation, it has maintained enough of a distance to isolate and contain this co-optation. Artsakh, on the other hand, has been suffocated by an Armenian state co-optation enabled by its own unitary political structure, incapable of exercising autonomy in every political layer from the local to national level. This has prevented Armenians from converting the resistance into an asymmetric force to continue fighting Azerbaijani state occupation. Meanwhile in Rojava, parallel forces exist to confront Turkish occupation, such as the Afrin Liberation Forces. Perhaps this can be viewed in some dimensions as Artsakh succumbing to late-stage statism and Rojava actively resisting late-stage statism.

Contrary to the centralist assumption of effective disaster response, Artsakh was widely incapable of organizing one, relying on its communities to organize an ad hoc disaster response instead. Rojava, on the other hand, responded effectively through a localized disaster response system, exercising this system to avert major famine and water scarcity. This seems to disprove the idea that centralized movements are more capable of effectively organizing responses to disasters while decentralized movements are less effective. It is very much the opposite in this comparison.

Rojava and Artsakh have both struggled with state information warfare as unrecognized actors. The international system muffles their voices and uplifts their occupiers' voices. In spite of this, Rojava remains consistent in its digital presence, preventing occupying states from completely colonizing the discussion. A network of media cooperatives has facilitated the transition

of Rojava from a regional struggle into an international movement. Artsakh and its media structures, on the other hand, have been less successful in internationalizing their presence, remaining mostly limited to Armenian audiences.

In the ideational dimension, Rojava is a movement for a stateless and nationless confederation, Artsakh a movement for a unitary nation-state appended to a republic. Both the populations of Rojava and Artsakh have scarcely deviated from unity in their resistance to external coercers with rare exceptions, showing that a significant degree of popular unity can be attained in both decentralized and centralized movements, and that this is not just a characteristic exclusive to centralized movements. Rojava relies on its civil structures for this unity, whereas Artsakh relies on its nationalizing architecture. There is no Tekmîl and Hevaltî in Artsakh, but there is a collective national identity that has been forged over the course of millennia.

A strictly national approach in Artsakh has neglected other social and political approaches, however, leading to festering sectarianism. An early power struggle between Armenian progressive and conservative factions resulted in an exclusionary conservative monopoly on Artsakhi politics. Contrarily, the Rojava revolution did not attempt to assert its power over other local movements, but rather granted them increased representation and autonomy. This created a heterogeneous political environment where few voices were lost and coercive power was diminished collectively. Whereas, in the process of homogenizing power in Artsakh, Muslims and progressive Armenians were almost entirely excluded from the political process.

There is no consensus in Rojava nor in Artsakh on the ethics of these respective movements, with every community and political faction impacted differently than the next. While perspectives differ on internal problems, intersections can be found in popular grievances toward external actors. For example, ethnically associated leaders and elite in both cases have contributed to harmful actions without the support of their populations. Similar to how Kurds in Rojava feel betrayed by the Barzani family ruling class for supporting the Turkish state, many Armenians feel betrayed by PM Pashinyan for his submissive actions regarding Artsakh.

# Conclusion

## Navigating the Tide of Interference

In the neoliberal era, there is an unprecedented range of strategies that states abuse to keep their power structures in place while subjecting populations to the margins of society. Populations suffer as power and capital continue to concentrate exponentially, and they are forced to mobilize against the structures causing their suffering. Upon mobilizing, a separatist movement will likely face a duality of coercion and co-optation from occupying actors, foreign actors, and transnational actors, with states at the core of this duality. Separatist movements must then navigate this massively powerful tide of interference. When the movement navigates effectively, this results in a successful separation of power.

By looking at problems and responses to problems facing separatist movements in the neoliberal era, it is evident that decentralization is generally more capable of addressing and resisting these problems than centralization in a separatist movement. Decentralization seems to respond particularly well to internal discourse, providing adaptability to changing conditions. Increased internal fluidity and civil capability mobilizes a population to its fullest capacity, but in a manner that is resourceful and not inefficient nor impulsive.

From the two cases observed closely in this thesis, Artsakh has not been able to overcome the potent cocktail of neoliberal state aggression whereas Rojava has. Faced with a similar state torrent of ecoterrorism and agroterrorism, the structures of Rojava and Artsakh responded very differently to existential threats. Structurally, Rojava has positioned itself in a constant process of addressing its own flaws and restructuring accordingly, while unitary Artsakh is nowhere near having an inclusive process for civil dialogue to begin with. By looking at the affects of these dynamics carefully, it is apparent that centralization inherently discourages restructuring through localized dialogue whereas decentralization often relies on this for its very framework. While the outcomes of either case cannot be reduced to any single concept, centrality is certainly an important facet of the separatist picture that is not often discussed in international relations nor the military sciences. When decision-making is concentrated, decisions are not specialized nor localized, and this can lead to a series of structural problems that make the movement vulnerable. Looking at recent history, there are arguably no cases of a separatist movement finding success in a structural transition from decentralization to centralization, whereas there are clear observable cases of separatist movements finding success while transitioning from centralized to decentralized. With this in mind, if Rojava's SDF attempts to conventionalize and/or centralize while neglecting the local military councils, it may run into similar problems as the Artsakh Defense Army.

When social and political hierarchy is structurally nullified, women's power becomes accentuated and felt throughout society as a powerful force that is otherwise muffled by patriarchy-driven centralized structures. Rojava has tapped into this power while Artsakh has not. However, this does not mean Rojava has achieved complete abolition of hierarchy by any means. Ethical

blemishes in the Rojava model display that, even in a decentralized movement hoping to eliminate hierarchy, hierarchy still pervades some facets of society. There is perhaps no true decentralization in Rojava, but rather, an inherently imperfect decentralization that is more politically tangible than it is normative, struggling to deconstruct traces of social hegemony due to internal contradictions. This discussion requires separate research, however, and must include the Zapatistas and other horizontal movements in how they approach contradictions in eliminating hierarchy.

Artsakh does not exhibit the same characteristics of all centralized separatist movements, and it would be fallacious to assume so. However, the movement certainly displays the flaws in centralization that exist when resisting a state power, particularly when a movement is co-opted to the degree Artsakh has been. Given top-down decision making and enforced rigidity, centralized movements are far more vulnerable to co-optation and its negative impacts than decentralized movements. As seen in the case of Artsakh, when a single chamber at the top of the hierarchy succumbs to co-optation, so does the rest of its body. In Rojava, when a chamber is co-opted, that chamber is contained, and generally incapable of extending its co-optation to other chambers.

In the case of Artsakh, there arguably can be no centralized movement that is not inherently controlled by the Armenian state. In order for Artsakh to dismantle its subservience to the Armenian state, its popular resistance must operate in a decentralized and unconventional manner that does not answer to a conventional command structure. Through an autonomous network of popular resistance, coercive social structures such as patriarchy are also held in check as state norms are delegitimized. As of the Second Artsakh War, it appears Artsakh's conventional state and military model is woefully incompatible with its own national liberation.

Movements such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Polisario Front can be observed as centralized anticolonial movements which have seen some degree of success in separating power from an occupying state. Although, part of what separates these movements from the Artsakh resistance is the fact they are unconventional in nature and not strictly vertical. Both the TPLF and Polisario Front hold a hybrid system of horizontal and vertical structures, similar to those seen in the first years of the Republic of Artsakh. This applies especially to the TPLF. These examples still bear many of Artsakh's problems, however. In the TPLF, one finds an exclusionary ethnic Tigrayan structure that depends on a coalition with other ethnic movements for collective power. In the Polisario Front, one finds similar problems of co-optation from the Algerian state.

Given the mutual factors impacting Rojava and Artsakh, I felt these examples provide a credible contrast between decentralized and centralized responses, and by extension of this unconventional and conventional responses. State coercion and state co-optation are challenges to virtually every separatist movement in the neoliberal era, and movements must take these factors into consideration when considering methods of resistance to occupying states. The cases of Rojava and Artsakh show the breadth of tactics states use to coerce and co-opt populations attempting to achieve self-determination in the neoliberal era. By dissecting these two cases, we find a myriad of common challenges and responses to these challenges facing separatism in the neoliberal era. Though there are many commonalities in the factors impacting separatism globally, each separatist movement responds differently to these factors per its dialectic conditions, and no universal generalization can be made of overall conditions that shape separatist movements at large.

## Potential Problems in the Research

I found some vulnerable parts of the research to include light attention on conventionality, small sample size for case studies, situational questionability, accessibility of dialogue, and my own position as an external perspective.

From an organizational standpoint I found that conventionality could be explored more closely in its relation to centrality. Concepts such as defense and asymmetric warfare apply more to the discussion of conventionality, whereas centrality applies more to political structures. With this in mind, the discussion of conventionality is an essential component to the broader discussion on internal dynamics of a movement. Though I include this as an additional idea adjoined to the discussion of centrality, research focused on centrality may consequently neglect some aspects of conventionality as an alternative explanation.

Regarding the case studies, the problem when closely observing only two cases in a broader study on separatism is the fact that other movements are neglected. Though I briefly mention movements such as the centralized Tamil Tigers or decentralized Zapatistas, these are separate cases that would benefit from more of a spotlight in the research. Given the small sample size in this thesis, more extensive research is required to encompass movements in other continents and regions beyond West Asia. The fact that both movements analyzed in this thesis are located in West Asia and struggle with similar regional megapoles may also detract from understanding unique dialectic problems in other regions and continents.

Regarding comparison of these case studies, differing timelines, landscape, and population size are not considered as essential factors. At the time of this research, Rojava has not yet existed as an autonomous region for 30 years while Artsakh has. That said, this does not detract from the comparison given that both movements were invaded at a similar frequency and force by the Turkic megapole within a mutual timeline (2016–2020), resulting in very different outcomes. Difference in population size is also a factor not closely observed in this thesis. Artsakh is smaller than Rojava both in size and population: the territory of Artsakh 4,457 square miles with a population of 145,000, the territory of Rojava roughly 23,500 square miles with a population somewhere between 2–5 million (NKR, 2022b)(Arraf, 2022). I did not find these factors to substantially impact the outcomes of each movement given the relative size and force of the actors involved, though a social geographer may disagree on this dimension.

Particularly in the case of Artsakh, critical theory explanations in general are hard to come across in the discourse. Discussions of conventionality and centrality are not part of mainstream discourse in either Armenia nor Artsakh, and thus it is difficult to find regional perspectives on the matter. If I were to present these ideas at a bazaar in Stepanakert, they would probably be perceived as esoteric and abstract compared to mainstream discussions, which are situated mostly around Pashinyan, the Armenian government, and Azeri aggression. Being a grassroots journalist, I am used to making information accessible and condensed. Even though I make an effort to break down ideas and concepts here, this thesis brings me a sense of discomfort knowing that it may serve the academic circle jerk to some extent. Nonetheless, the ideas can certainly be broken down further with more effort.

The explanatory discourses surrounding Rojava and Artsakh vary widely. Rojavayî discourse often takes a more critical social approach while Armenian discourse is more often state and governance oriented. While explanations from my external perspective are not part of the mainstream Armenian discourse and are less trafficked, they do not serve to detract from Armenian

discourse on the collapse of the Artsakh resistance, but rather to elevate and expand it. Though defeatist and alarmist narratives along the lines of “everything is gone and we are defeated, Armenia is next” have been common in the Artsakh discourse since 2020, these narratives are self-traumatizing and do not elevate any dialogue, and thus I do not find they should be included in any serious discussion on Artsakh. These so-called “doomer” narratives are especially harmful when they are peddled by supposed international experts and allies of the Artsakh resistance. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this thesis is written from an external internationalist perspective as opposed to a domestic one.

## **Our Standing in the Anthropocene**

As late-stage statism and its sibling of late-stage capitalism continue to affect the international system in this era of neoliberalism, separatist movements around the world are faced with intersecting challenges. In an Anthropocene with uncertainty at every corner, every step, and every blink, the struggle to corrode the chains of statism remains one of the most pressing international dilemmas of our time. One that must be answered with the collective power of all underclasses and allies, whereby the neoliberalizing architecture is turned against itself. It is in this pursuit of unconditional internationalism that the human condition may bloom in the collapse that surrounds us. It is in this pursuit that the human condition may germinate amid the ashes, empowering itself under a plane of indifferent stars whilst shaking off its own structural parasites. The human condition bears no exoskeleton against itself nor against the universe, yet it bears communication. Within this, a boundless renewability found in its own uplifting. Those who sacrifice for this social vehicle breathe among an eternal core which catalyzes the evolutionary path before us.

We are our mountains, after all.

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