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# **The experiment of West Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) has proved that people can make changes**

Zaher Baher

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Aug 26, 2014

Retrieved on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2021 from libcom.org  
An interesting report by Zaher Baher of Haringey Solidarity  
Group and Kurdistan Anarchists Forum who spent two weeks  
in Syrian Kurdistan, looking at the experiences of  
self-government in the region against the background of the  
Syrian civil war and rise of Islamic State.

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Aug 26, 2014



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and analyzing the experiences of nationalist movements, communist movements and their governments in the region and the world and why all of them failed and could not deliver what they claimed. The basis of all this is that he is convinced that the state, whatever its name and form, is a state and cannot disappear when replaced by another state. For this, Abdulla Ocallan deserves credit.

culture of tolerance and give not just take, a culture of being very confident and defiant, a culture of belief in working voluntarily and for the benefit of the community, a culture of solidarity and living for each other and a culture of, you are first and I am second. In the meantime, it is true that life there is very difficult, where there is a lack of many basic and necessary resources and the standard of living is low, but people there are pleasant, happy and, at all times, smiling and vigilant, very simple and humble and the gap between rich and poor is small. All these have, firstly, helped people overcome the difficulties in their lives and the hardships. Secondly, the events, their personal history and the present environment in which they currently live has taught people that, in the future, they will not put up with a dictatorship, they will resist suppression and oppression, they will try to maintain what they had before; they have a spirit of defiance and challenge and they will not accept other people making decisions for them any longer. For all of these reasons, people will resist surrender, stand again on their own feet, fight for their rights and resist the return of the culture they used to live with before.

The second point is that some people tell us that while this movement has Abdulla Ocallan, the PKK and PYD behind it, then, if the people try to divert this experiment, the experiment will end or a dictator will take power. Well this is possible and can happen. But even in this situation, I do not think people in Syria or in West Kurdistan can, any longer, tolerate a dictatorship or a Bolshevik-type government. I believe the days have passed when the government in Syria can, as before, massacre 30,000 people in the town of Aleppo in a matter of a few days. Also the world has changed and is not as it was.

All that is left to say here is that what happened in West Kurdistan was not Ocallan's Idea, as many people want to tell us. In fact this idea is very old and Ocallan developed these thoughts in prison, familiarizing himself with them through reading hundreds and hundreds of books, non-stop thinking

What you read below is the experience of my visit, for a couple of weeks in May this year, 2014, to North East of Syria or Syrian Kurdistan (West of Kurdistan) with a close friend of mine.

Throughout the visit we had the total freedom and opportunity to see and speak to whoever we wanted to. This includes women, men, youth, and the political parties. There are over 20 parties from Kurdish to Christian, of which some are in the Democratic Self Administration (DSA) or Democratic Self Management (DSM) of the region of Al Jazera. Al Jazera is one of three regions, (cantons) of West Kurdistan. We also met the Kurdish and Christian political parties who are not in the DSA or DSM. In addition, we met the top people from the Democratic Self Administration (DSM), members of the different committees, local groups and communes as well as businesspeople, shopkeepers, workers, people in the market and people who were just walking in the street.

## The background

Kurdistan is a land of around 40 million people that was divided between Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey after the First World War. Historically, the Kurds have suffered massacres and genocide at the hands of successive regimes, especially in Iraq and Turkey. Since then they have continuously suffered and been oppressed at the hands of the central governments of the countries Kurdistan was annexed to. In Iraqi Kurdistan, under Saddam Hussein's regime, the Kurdish people suffered chemical weapon attacks under Operation Anfal<sup>1</sup>. In Turkey, until recently, Kurds did not even have the basic rights of talking in

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<sup>1</sup> Operation Anfal, or simply Anfal, was a genocidal campaign against the Kurdish people in northern Iraq, led by the Ba'athist Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and headed by Ali Hassan al-Majid, in the final stage of the Iran-Iraq war.

their own language. Historically, they have been recognized as the Turkish who live in the mountains (a reference to the Kurdistan region as there are so many mountains there). In Syria, the Kurds' situation was little better than Turkey. In Iran they have some basic rights and are recognized as forming a different nation from Persians but have no autonomy.

After the first gulf war in 1991, the Kurdish people in Iraq managed to set up their own regional government, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). After the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Kurdish people took advantage of this to strengthen their local power. They managed to gain the right to having their own self administration, budget, parliaments and army. These have now all been recognized by the central Iraqi Government and, to a certain extent, are supported by the central government. This has encouraged and had a positive impact on the other parts of Kurdistan, especially in Turkey and Syria.

In the same year as the invasion of Iraq (2003), the Kurdish people in Syria set up their own party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD); although there were already a number of other Kurdish parties and organizations that existed in the region. Some of them are so old that they date back to the 1960s, but they were ineffective compared to the PYD which has developed and spread rapidly among the Kurdish people there.

## **The Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring reached Syria at the beginning of 2011 and, after a short time, spread to the Syrian Kurdistan regions /cantons of: Al Jazera, Kobany and Afrin. The protest among the Kurdish people in those three cantons was very strong and effective. This, to a certain extent, caused the withdrawal of the Syrian army in the Kurdish cantons apart from some areas of Al Jazera which I will explain further on.

will be a desire for authority, with it remaining within families, inside factories and companies, in schools, universities and many other places and institutions. This is in addition to the remaining differences between men and women and the authority of men over women within socialism. Moreover, a selfish and greedy culture will still remain, using violence with many other nasty habits which already exist in capitalist society. They cannot disappear or vanish in a short time. In fact, they are going to stay with us for a long, long time and could threaten the revolution.

So, changing the economic infrastructure of society and achieving victory over class society can neither give any guarantee that the revolution happened nor of maintaining it for a long time. I, therefore, believe that there must be a revolution in social life, in our culture, education, the mentality of individuals and individual behavior and thought. The revolutions in the above areas are not just necessary, but indeed, must happen before or alongside the changing of the economic infrastructure of society. I do not believe we are done, following the revolution in the economic infrastructure of society. It must reflect in all aspects of the life of society and its members. For me, people resent the current system and believe in changing it. They desire the tendency for rebellion, the consciousness of being used and exploited and, in addition, the mentality of resistance are extremely important to maintain the revolution.

## **How do I connect the above point to the experiment of the people in West Kurdistan?**

In reply, I say this experiment has existed for over two years and there are generations who are witness to this. They are rebels or already have the tendency to rebellion, they live in harmony and a free atmosphere and are accustomed to new cultures: a culture of living together in peace and freedom, a

sary materials for the people or just simply store it for later when needed. If the communes do not step up to these tasks and maintain what they do now, obviously, their tasks will be uncompleted.

## **The Conclusion and my final words**

There are so many different views and opinions from the right wing, left, separatists, Trotskyists, Marxists, communists, socialists, anarchists and libertarians about the future of the experiment in West Kurdistan, and, indeed, more deserves writing about it. For me, as an anarchist, I do not see the events as black or white, I do not have a ready solution for them and I also never go back to the old books to look for the solutions either to the events which, are now taking place or for the outcome of these current events I believe that the realities, the events themselves and the situation create the ideas and thoughts, not the opposite. I look at them with an open mind and connect them to so many, factors and reasons for their happening.

However, I must say a couple of things about every uprising and revolution, as they are very important for me. Firstly, the revolution is not expressing anger, is not created by order or command, is not something that can happen within twenty-four hours and is not a military coup, Bolshevik coup or the conspiracy of politicians. Also, it is not only the dismantling of society's economic infrastructure and the abolition of social class. The above are all the views and opinions of lefties, Marxists and communists and their parties. These are their definitions of revolution. They look at the revolution in this way because they are dogmatic and see the relationships of existing classes in a mechanistic way. For them, when the revolution happens and abolishes class society, that is, the end of the story and Socialism can be established. In my opinion, even if the revolution succeeds, there are still possibilities that there

In the meantime, the people there, with the support of the PYD & PKK, formed the Tev-Dam, (the Movement of the Democracy Society). This movement quickly became very strong and popular among the region's population. Once the Syrian army and administration had withdrawn, the situation became very chaotic, (I will explain why). This forced the Tev-Dam to implement its plans and programs without further delay before the situation became worse.

The Tev-Dam's programme was very inclusive and covered every single issue in society. Many people from the rank and file and from different backgrounds, including Kurdish, Arab, Muslim, Christian, Assyrian and Yazidis, have been involved. The first task was to establish a variety of groups, committees and communes on the streets in neighborhoods, villages, counties and small and big towns everywhere. The role of these groups was to become involved in all the issues facing society. Groups were set up to look at a number of issues including: women's, economic, environmental, education and health and care issues, support and solidarity, centers for the family martyrs, trade and business, diplomatic relations with foreign countries and many more. There are even groups established to reconcile disputes among different people or factions to try to avoid these disputes going to court unless these groups are incapable of resolving them.

These groups usually have their own meeting every week to talk about the problems people face where they live. They have their own representative in the main group in the villages or towns called the "House of the People".

The Tev-Dam, in my opinion, is the most successful organ in that society and could achieve all the tasks they have been set. I believe the reasons for its success are:

1. The will, determination and power of the people who believe that they can change things.
2. The majority of people believe in working voluntarily at all

levels of service to make the event/experiment successful.

3. They have set up an army of defence consisting of three different parts: the People's Defence Units (PDU), the Women's Defence Units (WDU) and the Asaish (a mixed force of men and women that exists in the towns and all the checkpoints outside the towns to protect civilians from any external threat). In addition to these forces, there is a special unit for women only, to deal with issues of rape and domestic violence.

From what I have seen, Syrian Kurdistan has taken a different route (and, in my opinion, the right one) from the "Arab Spring" and the two cannot be compared. There are a couple of major differences between them.

1. What happened in the countries that were part of the "Arab Spring" were great events and many kicked out tyranny in those countries. The "Arab Spring" in the case of Egypt, produced an Islamic State then a military dictatorship. Other countries fared little better. This shows that people are powerful and can be the heroes of history at a particular time but they were not in a position to achieve what they wanted in the long term. This is one of the major differences between the "Arab Spring" and the "Kurdish Spring" in Syrian Kurdistan where the latter could achieve what they wanted long term — or, at least, so far.

2. In Syrian Kurdistan the people were prepared and knew what they wanted. They believed that the revolution must start from the bottom of society and not from the top. It must be a social, cultural and educational as well as political revolution. It must be against the state, power and authority. It must be people in the communities who have the final decision-making responsibilities. These are the four principles of the Movement of the Democracy Society (Tev-Dam). Credit needs to be given to whoever is behind these great ideas and the efforts being made to put them into practice, whether it's Abdulla Ocallan and his comrades or anybody else. In addition, people in Syrian Kurdistan set up many local groups under different names to make their revolution work. In the other "Arab Spring" countries,

that people have and put in their leader and are scared of him, it is very frightening and the consequences will not be good. For me, nothing should be sacred and everything can be criticized and rejected if they need to be. Worse than this, there is the House of Children and Youth Centers. In the House of Children and Youth Centers, children are taught about new ideas, the revolution and many positive things that children need to be raised with in order to be useful members of society. However, besides, these children are taught the ideology and the ideas and principles of Ocallan and how great he is as the leader of the Kurdish people. In my opinion, children should not be brought up believing in ideology. They should not have teaching on religion, nationality, race or colour. They should be free of them and leave them alone until they become adult when they can decide for themselves.

## **The Role of the Communes**

In the previous pages I explained the communes and their roles. The communes' duties have to be changed as they cannot just be involved in the problems where they have been set up and make decisions about the things going on there. The communes must increase their roles, duties and powers. It is true that there are no factories, companies nor industrial sections. But Al Jazera is an agricultural canton involving many people in villages and small towns and wheat is the major product in Al Jazera. This canton is also very rich in oil, gas and phosphates, although many of the oilfields are not in use due to the war and lack of maintenance even before the uprising.

So these are further areas for the communes to involve themselves in by controlling them, using them and distributing produce to the people according to their need for free. Whatever is left, after distribution, the members of the communes can decide and agree to deal with it; sell it, exchange it for neces-

The question here is: While that is the task and the nature of Tev-Dam and that is the structure of the PYD and PKK, how can a compromise happen? Does Tev-Dam follow the PYD and PKK or do they follow the Tev-Dam, or who controls who?

This is the question that I cannot answer and have to wait and see. However, I believe the answer is probably in the near future.

## **The fear of Ideology and Ideologists that can become sacred**

Ideology is a view. Looking at or seeing anything from the ideological perspective can be a disaster as it gives you a ready solution or answer, but does not connect with the reality of the situation. Most of the time, ideologists are looking at the words of old books that were written a long time ago to find the solution while those books are not relevant to the current problem or situation.

Ideologists can be dangerous when they want to impose their ideas taken from what has been written in the old books, on the present situation or on the rest of us. They are very narrow-minded, very persistent, stick with their ideas and are out of touch. They do not have respect for other people who do not share the same opinion as themselves. Ideologists have many common points between them from religious people to Marxists and Communists. In short, the ideologists believe that Ideology, or thought, creates uprising or revolutions but for non-ideologists, people like me, the opposite is true.

It is very unfortunate that I found many ideologists among the PYD and Tev-Dam members, especially when it came to discussions about Abdulla Ocallyan's ideas. These people are very stuck with Ocallyan's principles, making them refer to his speeches and books in our discussions. They have total faith in him and, to a certain extent, he is sacred. If this is the faith

people were not prepared and knew only that they wanted to get rid of the current government but not the system. Also, the vast majority of the people thought that the only revolution is the revolution from the top. Setting up local groups was not undertaken except by a tiny minority of anarchists and libertarians.

## **The Democratic Self Administration (DSA)**

After a lot of hard work, discussions and thought, the Tev-Dam has reached the conclusion that they need a DSA in all three Cantons of Kurdistan (Al Jazera, Kobany and Afrin). In the middle of January, 2014, the People's Assembly elected their own DSA, with autonomy, to implement and execute the decisions from the "House of the People" (the main Tev-Dam committee) and to take over some of the administration work in the local authorities, municipalities, education and health departments, trade and business organizations, defence and judiciary systems etc. The DSA is made up of 22 men and women with each of them having two deputies (one a man and the other a woman). Almost half the representatives are women. It is organized so that people from different backgrounds, nationalities, religions and genders can all participate. This has created a very good atmosphere of peace, brother/sisterhood, satisfaction and freedom.

In a short space of time, this administration has done quite a lot of work and issued a Social Contract, Transport Law, Parties Law and a programme or plan for the Tev-Dam. In the Social Contract, the first page states, "the areas of self-management democracy do not accept the concepts of state nationalism, military or religion or of centralized management and central rule but are open to forms compatible with the traditions of democracy and pluralism, to be open to all social groups and cultural identities and Athenian democracy and national expres-

sion through their organization ...” There are many decrees in the Social Contract. A few are extremely important for society, including:

- A. Separation of state from religion
- B. Banning marriages under the age of 18 years
- C. Women’s and children’s rights must be recognized, protected and implemented
- D. Banning female circumcision
- E. Banning polygamy.
- F. The revolution must take place from the bottom of society and be sustainable
- G. Freedom, equality, equal opportunity and non- discrimination.
- H. Equality between men and women
- I. All languages people speak must be recognized and Arabic, Kurdish and Syrian are the official languages in Al Jazera
- J. To provide a decent life for prisoners and to make prison a place for rehabilitation and reform.
- K. Every human being has the right to seek asylum and refugees may not be returned without his/her consent.

## **The economic situation in Al Jazera Canton**

The population of Jazera is over one million people. This population consists of Kurds as well as Arabs, Christians, Chechens, Yazidis, Turkmens, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Armenians. 80% percent of the population is Kurdish. There are many Arab and Yazidis villages plus up to 43 Christian villages.

The size of Al Jazera is bigger than Israel and Palestine combined. In the 1960s, the Syrian regime implemented a policy in the Kurdish area called the “Greenbelt” which the Ba’ath party continued when they came to power. This stated that condi-

as long as the power of the DSA increases the power of Tev-Dam decreases and the opposite could be right too.

I have raised this point with the comrades of Tev-Dam. They disagreed with me as they believe the more powerful the DSA becomes, the more powerful Tev-Dam will be. Their reason for this was that they look at the DSA as the executive body, executing and implementing whole decisions made by Tev-Dam and Tev-Dam organs. However, I cannot agree or disagree with them because the future will show the direction the whole movement and society will take.

## **The PYD and its party structures**

The PYD , United Democratic Party and PKK are behind the mass democracy movement there and are political parties having all the conditions that a political party needs in that part of the world : hierarchical organization, leaders and lead people, and all orders and commands from the leaders coming down to the bottom of the party. There has not been much consultation with members when it comes to making a decision on big issues. They are very well-disciplined, have rules and orders to go by, secrets and secret relationships with different parties, either in power or not, in different part of the world.

On the other hand, I can see Tev-Dam as being exactly the opposite. Many people inside this movement have not been members of the PKK or PYD. They believe the revolution must start from the bottom of society and not from the top, they do not believe in state powers and authority and they come together in meetings to make their own decisions about whatever they want and whatever is in the best interests of the people where they are based. After that, they ask the DSA to execute their decisions. There are many more differences between the PYD and PKK and the Movement of Democracy Society, Tev-Dam.

There is a very close relationship between the PKK and PYD who are behind this experiment in West Kurdistan and have been very supportive. I mentioned previously that there has been a history of bloodshed between the PKK and KDP and also a sharp dispute between them over the Kurdish leadership.

However, for some time, Abdulla Ocallan, in recent books and text /messages, has denounced and rejected the state and authority. But until now I have not heard that he has rejected his own authority and denounce those people calling him a great leader and who work hard to give him a sacred position. Ocallan's attitude cannot be correct unless he also rejects his own authority and leadership.

At the moment, the situation is getting worse and the KRG's relationship with the PYD and PKK is deteriorating, so there is a possibility of fighting between them especially as the KRG is, day by day, getting closer to Turkey. Once this war starts there is no doubt that Isis/IS and others will take part in fighting on the side of the KRG and Turkey. The only way to stop this happening is through mass protests, demonstrations and mass occupations in Iraqi Kurdistan and by friends of Syrian Kurdish elsewhere.

## **Tev-Dam becomes weak**

As explained above, it was Tev-Dam that created this situation, with its groups, committees, communes and the House of the People which is the soul and mind of the mass movement. Tev-Dam was the major force in setting up the DSA. In general, it is the existence of Tev-Dam that makes the difference to forcing the outcome of what might happen there and to be the inspiration to the rest of the region.

It is hard for me to see the balance between the power of Tev-Dam and the DSA in the future. I got the impression that

tions for Kurds would be worse compared to those for Syrian people with regards to political, economic and social life and also education. The main point of the Greenbelt was to bring Arabs from different areas to settle in Kurdish areas and to confiscate Kurdish lands which were then distributed amongst the recently-arrived Arab people. In short, Kurdish citizens under Assad came third, after Arabs and Christians.

Another policy was that Al Jazera should only produce wheat and oils. This meant that the government made sure that there would be no factories, companies or industry in the area. Al Jazera produces 70% of Syrian wheat and is very rich in oils, gas and phosphates. So the majority of people were involved in agriculture in the small towns and villages, and as traders and shopkeepers in the bigger towns. In addition, many people were employed by the government in education, health and local authorities, in military service as soldiers and as small contractors in municipalities.

From 2008, the situation deteriorated as Assad's regime issued a special decree to ban construction of any big buildings justified by the situation arising from the war (referring to continuous war in the region) and also because the area is remote and on the border. Currently, the situation is bad. There are sanctions imposed by both Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraqi Kurdistan (I will explain this in other sections). Life in Al Jazera is very simple and living standards are very low but they do not have poverty. The people, in general, are happy giving priority to what they have achieved in order to be successful.

Some of the necessities any society needs to survive exist in West Kurdistan which is important, at least for the time being, to avoid starvation, stand on their own two feet and resist the boycotts sanctions by Turkey and KRG . These necessities include having lots of wheat to make bread and pastries. As a result, the price of bread is almost free. The second thing is that oil is also cheap and, as people say," its price is like the price

of water”. People use oil for everything; in the home, driving vehicles and making a little equipment needed for a range of industries. To facilitate this dependence on oil, the Tev-Dam reopened some of the oil wells and refining depots. At the moment, they are producing more oil than they need in the region so they are able to export some and also store any excess.

Electricity is a problem because most is produced in the neighboring region under the control of Isis (currently is IS The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant or Islamic State). Therefore, people only have electricity for about 6 hours a day. But it’s free as people are not charged for it. This has partly been resolved by the Tev-Dam by selling diesel, at a very low price, to anybody with a private generator on the condition they supply power to local residents at a very cheap rate as well.

In terms of phone communication, all mobile phones are either using the KRG line or Turkey’s line; depending on where you are. Land lines are under the control of the Tev-Dam & DSA and seem to be working well... Again, this is free.

The shops and markets in the towns are normally open from early morning until 11pm at night. Many of the goods from neighboring countries are smuggled into the region. Other goods do come from other parts of Syria but they are expensive due to heavy taxes payable to Syrian forces or terrorist groups who allow goods into the Al Jazera region.

## **The Political Situation in Al Jazera**

As mentioned, most of Assad’s army withdrew from the region but some still remain in a couple of towns in Al Jazera. The regime still has control over half of the main town (Hassaka) while the other half is in the hands of the PDU (The People’s Defence Units).

We can see here the double standards and hypocrisy of the US, Western countries and the rest. They launched a war on terror while the Kurdish people in Syria are the only ones fighting the terrorist organizations seriously, but the above countries do not support the Kurds there. The major reasons for this, in my opinion, are:

1. They are not serious in fighting the terrorists and terrorism because they themselves or their alliance created and supported them
2. They fight the people who believe in Islam rather than fighting the religion itself and its holy book, Quran.
3. They may need this organization again in the future.
4. They do not want to alter their foreign policy or review it.
5. The US and UK support, financially and morally, all reactionary faiths under the name of equal opportunity, freedom and recognizing different cultures. We can already see more than one hundred Sharia Courts in the U.K.
6. The main point is that the mass democracy movement in Syrian Kurdistan, including the DSA, did not create religions or nationalist or liberal power. They know that people in this part of the world have given birth to people power, that they have proved that they can rule themselves through direct democracy without government and support from the US, Western countries and global financial institutions, like the IMF, WB and CBE (Central Bank of Europe).

## **The Internal Factors**

By internal factors I mean whatever could happen inside West Kurdistan itself. This includes the following:

The civil war among the Kurdish people. Here I do not mean just a war among the political parties inside West Kurdistan but the war between the KRG in Iraqi Kurdistan and the forces of the PDU, WDU and PKK.

of Kurdistan, whether in Syrian Kurdistan, Iraq, Iran or Turkish Kurdistan. They never had a positive view on the Kurdish question and never, genuinely, wanted to resolve this question, but they had a positive view on the Kurdish nationalist political parties when these parties were working and fighting in their interests.

## **The Role of China and Russia**

Although Russia has become much smaller and less powerful than before, it still has weight and power, in competition with the US and Western countries, over its interests. It is no surprise that we now see that Russia cannot reach agreement with the West over Assad's regime. There is also the fact that Syria, even when Assad's father was in power, was always in the Soviet camp. This is in addition to Russia being close to Iran which is the main ally of Syria.

With regards to China, China too has its own interests in the region, especially with Iran. Therefore, China tries to protect that interest as it is not to their benefit to see Assad go because it knows that next it will be Iran. So Russia and China's interests and support for Syria make the war longer than expected. From the above, we can see how two powerful countries would deal with the Kurdish question in Syria, especially with the DSA and Tev-Dam. In my opinion, business and profits decide, in the end, whether or not they will support the Kurdish people in the future.

At present, there is no support for the DSA and Tev-Dam from China, Russia or from the US and Western countries while the Kurds in Syria are the main opposition and fighters against terrorist forces like Isis/IS, through the forces of the PDU and WDU. These units are constantly fighting these terrorist groups in the Kurdish regions of Al Jazera and Kobney.

Government forces remain in the second town in the region (Qamchlo) where they control a small area in the centre of town. However, in the occupied area, the vast majority of people do not use the offices and services centers. The number of the regime's force in this town is between 6 and 7,000 and they only have control over the airport and the post office.

Both sides seem to recognize the position, power and authority of one another and refrain from clashes or confrontation. I call this situation, the policy of "no peace, no war". This does not mean there have not been clashes between them in either Hassaka or Qamchlo. Clashes do happen causing the deaths of many people from both sides but, so far, the head of the Arab tribes makes the two sides coexist.

Both sides have taken advantage of the withdrawal of the Syrian army and not fighting with the Kurdish protesters and its military forces saves a lot of cost and expense. Further, the government does not have to protect the area from other opposition forces, as the Kurdish forces do this instead. Also, by withdrawing from Kurdish lands, Assad has freed up forces which can be used elsewhere against other opponents. Secondly, with Assad's forces leaving Kurdistan, it is protected and defended by the Kurdish people. Indeed, the units defending the people and women protect their own people from any attack or any force, including Turkey, much better than the Syrian army.

The Kurdish people have also benefited in the following ways:

1. They have stopped fighting the government and this has protected their land and property, saving many lives and leaving people in peace and freedom. This has created an opportunity for everybody to live in peace and without fear when running their own business.
2. The government still pays the wages of its old employees although almost all of them, at present, are working under the control of the DSA. This obviously helps the economic situa-

tion there.

3. This situation has allowed people to manage their own lives and make their own decisions. It also means that people are allowed to live under the authority of the Tev-Dam and DSA. The longer this happens then the more chance they have to firmly settle and make themselves stronger.

4. This gives the People's Defence Units and Women's Defence Units opportunities to fight terrorist groups, especially Isis/IS, as and when necessary.

In Al Jazera, there are more than twenty political parties among the Kurdish and Christian people. The majority of them are in opposition to the PYD, the Tev-Dam and the DSA for their own reasons (a point I will come back to later on) as they do not want to join either Tev-Dam or the DSA. However, they have total freedom to carry out their activities without any restriction. The only thing they cannot have is fighters or militias under their own control.

## **Women and the Role of Women**

There is no doubt that women and their roles have been greatly accepted and they have filled both high and low positions in the Tev-Dam, PYD and DSA. They have a system called Joint Leaders and Joint Organizers. This means that the head of any office; administration or military section must include women. In addition to this, the women have their own armed forces. There is total equality between women and men. Women are a major force and are heavily involved in every section of the House of the People, committees, groups and communes. Women in West Kurdistan do not form just half of society, but are the most effective and important half of that society to the extent that if women stop working or withdraw from the above groups, Kurdish society may well collapse. There are many professional women in politics and the military

## **The role and the influences of neighbouring countries in the region**

It was very clear that ordinary people in Syria started the uprising due to existing suppression, oppression, lack of freedom and social justice, corruption, discrimination, lack of human rights, and no rights for ethnic minorities like Kurdish, Turkmen and others. Life for the majority of people was terrible; low incomes, the cost of living continuously rising, homelessness, and unemployment all served as inspiration for the "Arab Spring".

However, the protests, demonstrations and uprising on the ground have been diverted by neighbouring rulers into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey with the support of the US and Western countries on one side and Assad's regime, Iran and Hezbollah on the other. The Iraqi government has not announced their support for Assad's regime but they wanted, and still want, Assad to stay in power because of the close relationship between Shias and Alawites and also because Iran is Iraq's closest ally, while Iran is also extremely close to Syria. What was left from the neighbouring countries was the KRG's attitude towards what happens in Syria, due to KRG closeness, and, particularly, its President, Massoud Barzani, to Turkey in every respect. They announced, from the beginning, their support for the Syrian opposition to Assad's regime. We must note here the double standards and hypocrisy of the KRG as, on the one hand, they are against Assad whilst supporting the opposition but, on the other hand, against the Kurdish in Syria and their popular mass movement while they are one of the main and constructive forces against Assad.

Obviously each country has a big impact as some of them are supporting Assad's regime and others support the Syrian opposition. What is important here is to know that none of these countries are friends or close to the Kurdish nation in any part

thousand in the Al Jazeera region as I explained previously. Obviously, a part of the reason for withdrawal was due to pressure from the Kurdish protesters.

Secondly, he opened the Syrian border to terrorist organizations to do what they wanted. We all know by now what happened then. By doing this, Assad managed to weaken and isolate the protestors against his regime and also sent a message to the so-called “international community” to tell them that there was no alternative to him and his regime except the terrorist groups. Do the US, UK, Western countries and the rest really want that? Of course, to a certain extent, the answer is No. It all depends on their interests. These policies have worked very well and changed the direction of the battle completely.

So, there was a possibility of Assad remaining in power, at least for a short time after negotiating with the US, UN, UK and their agents until the next election. In that case, he might have learnt a lesson to change his policy towards the Kurdish people but on his own terms and conditions and not in the way the Kurdish people want.

If Assad was defeated in the war by the terrorist groups with the support of the US, UK, EU and the “International Community”, and they came to power, certainly there wouldn't be any future for either the DSA or Tev-Dam. If the modern forces, like the parties or organizations making up the Free Syria Army (FSA) are still not in power, then there is very little chance for the Kurdish people as they do not have a positive opinion of or a good solution for the Kurdish question, let alone when it comes to power. Of course, there are other possibilities of ending Assad's power including assassination or through a military coup...

who were with the PKK in the mountains for a long time. They are very tough, very determined, very active, very responsible and extremely brave.

The importance of the equal participation of women in rebuilding society and in all issues/questions has been taken seriously by Abdulla Ocallan and the rest of the PKK / PYD leaders to the extent that women in West Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) are considered sacred. It is part of Ocallan's idea, dream and belief that if you want to see the best of human nature then society must return to the state of the Maternal Society but, obviously, in an advanced stage.

Although this is the position of women and although they have freedom, love, sex and relationships among the women involved in the struggle are extremely rare. The women and men we spoke to believed that the above (love, sex, relationships) are not appropriate at this stage as they are involved in revolution and have to give everything to the revolution in order to succeed. When I asked, if two people in military service or sensitive positions are in love with each other, what would happen, I was told that, obviously, nobody can prevent this but they must be moved to more suitable positions or sections.

This may be difficult for Europeans to understand. How can people live without love, sex and relationships? But, for me, it's perfectly understandable. I believe it is their choice and, if people are free to choose, then it must be respected. However, there is one interesting observation which I made and which was outside military service, the Tev-Dam and other parties. I have not seen a single woman working in a shop, petrol station, market, café or restaurant. But, women and women's issues in Syrian Kurdistan are miles ahead of those in Iraqi Kurdistan where they have had 22 years of their own Self Rule and so much more opportunity. Saying that, I still cannot say there is a special or independent movement of the women in Syrian Kurdistan.

## The Communes

The Communes were the most active cells in the House of the People, and have been set up everywhere. They have their own regular weekly meeting to discuss the problems they face. Each Commune has their own representative in the House of the People and in the neighborhood, village or town where they are based.

Below is the definition of the Commune from the Tev-Dam manifesto and translated from Arabic:

“Communes are the smallest cells and the most activist in society. They are formed practically in society and there is freedom of women and ecology and the adoption of direct democracy.

“The Communes form on the principle of direct participation of people in the villages, on the street and the neighborhoods and the towns. These are the places that people willingly organize themselves with their opinion, create their free will and initiate their activities in whole residential areas and open the door for discussion about all the issues and their solution.

”Communes work on developing and promoting the committees. They talk and search for solutions of social matters, political, education, securities and self-defending & self-protection from its own power, not from the state. Communes create their own power through building organization in the form of agricultural communes in the villages and also communes, cooperatives and associations in the neighborhoods.

“Forming the Communes on the street, villages and towns with participation of all the residents.

## Expectation and fears

It is very difficult to know what direction the mass movement of people in West Kurdistan will take, but that does not mean restricting us from expectation and analyzing what may affect the direction of this movement and its future. The complete victory or defeat of this big event/experiment that the region, at least for a long time, has not seen depends on so many factors that can be divided into internal ( internal issues and problems inside the movement itself and with the KRG ) and external factors.

However, whatever happens in the end we have to face it, but what’s important is: the resistance, defying and challenging, not surrendering, confidence and believing in making changes. Rejecting the current system and grabbing the opportunities are more important, in my opinion, than temporary victory, because all these are the key points needed to reach the final goal.

### The external factors

The direction of the war and the balance of the forces inside Syria:

It was quite clear in the beginning of the people’s uprising in Syria, that, if it was to benefit the Syrian people, then the expected ending of Assad’s regime would not take that long when people united with great support both inside and outside the country. However, after a while, the terrorist groups got involved and changed the direction of the people’s uprising as we all have seen and still see this through the media. This happened because Assad was very clever in implementing a couple of policies which directly affected the direction of the people’s uprising and making his regime strong.

Firstly, he withdrew all his forces in the three Kurdish regions/cantons of Afrin, Kobany and Al Jazera except for a few

else from the DSA entering this part of Kurdistan. Secondly, the trench will increase the effectiveness of the sanctions used against West Kurdistan in an attempt to strangle and pressurize them to the point of surrender so as to give into KRG conditions. However, given the choice between surrender and starvation for the Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan, I feel they may choose starvation. This is the reason why the majority of Kurds, wherever they live, call the Trench the “shameful trench”...

There is no doubt that the sanctions have crippled Kurdish life in Al Jazera as the people need everything including medicine, money, doctors, nurses, teachers, technicians and expertise in industrial areas, especially in the oilfield and refining industry to make them work. In Al Jazera, they have thousands of tons of wheat which they are happy to sell for \$200 to \$250 a ton to Iraqi’s government but it pays \$600 to \$700 for each ton of wheat elsewhere.

There are people in West Kurdistan who do not understand why the KRG, as a Kurdish self rule government, and its President, Massoud Barzani, (who calls himself a great Kurdish leader) want to starve their own people in another part of Kurdistan.

In Qamchlo, the Tev-Dam called a large, peaceful demonstration on Saturday, 9<sup>th</sup> of May, 2014. A few thousand people took part against those who dug the shameful trench. There were many powerful speeches from different people and organizations, including the House of the People and many other groups and committees. None of their speeches created more tension between them. People mainly concentrated on brotherhood, good relationships and co-operation between both sides of the border, reconciliation between all the disputed parties and peace and freedom in their speeches. In the end it became a street party with people dancing happily and singing, particularly anthems.

Communes have a meeting every week. In the meeting Communes make all its decisions openly by people who are in the Commune and are older than 16 years-old.”

We went to a meeting of one the communes based in the neighborhood of Cornish in the town of Qamchlo. There were 16 to 17 people in the meeting. The majority of them were young women. We engaged in a deep conversation about their activities and their tasks. They told us that in their neighborhood they have 10 Communes and the membership of each Commune is 16 people. They told us “We act in the same way as community workers including meeting people, attending the weekly meetings, checking any problems in the places we are based, protecting people in the community and sorting out their problems, collecting the rubbish in the area, protecting the environment and attending the biggest meeting to report back about what happened in the last week”.

In response to one of my questions, they confirmed that nobody, including any of the political parties, intervenes in their decision making and that they make all the decisions collectively. They mentioned a few things that they had recently made a decision about. They said “One of them concerned a big piece of land in a residential area we wanted to use for a little park. We went to the Mayor of the town to tell him about our decision and asked for financial help. The Mayor told us that would be fine but they only had \$100 to offer us. We took the money and collected another \$100 from the local people to build a nice little park”. They showed us the park and told us “many of us collectively worked on it to finish it without needing more money”. In another example they told us, “The Mayor wanted to initiate a project in the neighborhood. We told him we cannot accept it until we get opinions from everybody. We had a meeting where we discussed it. The meeting unanimously rejected it. There were people that could not

make the meeting so we went to see them in their houses to get their opinion. Everybody in the commune said no to the project”

They asked us about local groups and communes in London. I told them that we have many groups but we are unfortunately not like them- united, progressive and committed. I told them that they are miles ahead of us. From their faces I could see their surprise, disappointment and frustration to my answer. I could understand their feelings because they think how, in a very backward world like theirs; can they be ahead of us, while we live in the country that had the industrial revolution centuries ago!!!!

## **The Kurdish and Christians opposition parties**

I said before that there are more than 20 Kurdish political parties. A few have joined the DSA but sixteen didn't. Some have withdrawn from politics while others have joined together to set up a bigger party. There are now twelve parties set up under an umbrella name, The Patriotic Assembly of Kurdistan in Syria. This organization, more or less, shares the same goals and strategies. The majority of the parties under this umbrella support Massoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, (KRG), who is also the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan.

There is a bloody history between the KDP and PKK that dates back to the 1990s. There was heavy fighting between the two groups in Iraqi Kurdistan which left thousands dead on both sides and this is a wound which has yet to heal. I must mention that Turkey's government had a hand in the fighting as they were close to the KDP and helped attack PKK force on the Iraq/Turkey border for their own reasons.

The members of the other political parties agreed and acknowledged all these facts.

Before we left the region we decided to speak to shopkeepers, businessmen, stall holders and people on the market to hear their views which were very important to us. Everyone seemed to have a very positive view and opinion of the DSA and Tev-Dam. They were happy about the existence of peace, security and freedom and running their own business without any interference from any parties or sides.

## **The Shameful Trench**

Last year the KRG and Iraqi government agreed, allegedly for security reasons, to dig a 35-kilometre long trench, over two meters deep and about two meters wide, on the Iraqi/Syrian border of Kurdistan. The Trench separates Al Jazera in West Kurdistan from Iraqi Kurdistan in the south. The Tigris river covers five kilometers of this border so there was no need for a trench there. The next twelve kilometers were constructed by the KRG, with the final eighteen kilometers built by the Iraqi government.

Both the KRG and Iraqi government say that the Trench was a necessary measure because of fears over peace and security within Iraqi lands including the Kurdistan region. But there are big questions people always ask about these fears. What fear? From whom? From Isis/Is? It is impossible for groups like Isis/Is to get into Iraq or KRG through that part of Syria as it has been protected by PDU and WDU forces and also Al Jazera has been cleared of Isis/Is completely. However, the majority of Kurdish people know that there are a couple of reasons for digging the trench. Firstly, it is to stop Syrians fleeing the war from reaching Iraqi Kurdistan. Also, the head of the KRG, Massoud Barzani, as explained above, is worried about the PKK and PYD and therefore he and the KRG want to stop them or anybody

Most of the time they were silent and had no response to our suggestions.

A few days later we also met representatives from a couple of Christian political parties and the Christian Youth Organization in Qamchlo. None of these parties have joined the DSA or Tev-Dam for their own reasons but admitted that they get on well with the DSA and Tev-Dam and are fine with their policies. They also appreciated that their safety, and protection from the Syrian army and terrorist groups was due to the forces of the Defence of the People and Defence of Women who have sacrificed their lives to achieve all of the above for everybody in the region. However, the people from the Christian Youth Organisation in Qamchlo were not happy with the DSA and Tev-Dam. Their complaint was about not having enough electrical power and not much for the youth to do or be involved in within the town. Because of this they said they will seek an alternative to the DSA and Tev-Dam, so that, if the situation remains the same, then they will have no choice but to emigrate to Europe. The head of one of the political parties who was present in the meeting responded to them by saying

what are you talking about Son? we are in the middle of a war, can you see what happened in the rest of the main towns in Syria?, Can you see how many women, men, elderly and children are killed daily?!!! There is an important issue which is very important in life. Power in this particular situation is not very important; we can use other means instead. What is important right now is: sitting at home with no fear of being killed, leaving our children on the streets, playing with no fear of being kidnapped or killed. We can run our business as usual, nobody restricts us, nobody assaults or insults us... there is peace, there is freedom, and there is social justice....

There is another dispute between Barzani and his family with the former head of the PKK, Abdulla Ocallyan, which is about the Kurdish leader's position as the Kurdish national leader. While the Kurdish people in West Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) have managed to collectively organize their society, protecting it from war and setting up their own DSA, they are still not on very good terms with the KDP.

The PKK and Democratic Union Party (PYD) have been very supportive of the changes happening in Syrian Kurdistan. But, this is certainly not beneficial to either Turkey or the KRG. Meanwhile Turkey and the KRG remain extremely close.

The above is an explanation as to why the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan are unhappy about what happened in West Kurdistan and are opposed to both the DSA and Tev-Dam. The KDP looks at what happened there a big business and, either this business should not run at all or, if it does run, then the KDP must have the biggest share of this business. The KDP still helps some Kurdish people in West Kurdistan financially and with weapons training in an attempt to set up militias for some of the political parties in order to destabilize the area and its plans. The Patriotic Assembly of Kurdistan in Syria, set up by the twelve political parties mentioned before, is very close to the KDP.

Our meeting with the opposition parties lasted for over two hours and the majority of them were present. We started by asking them how they got on with the PYD, DSA and Tev-Dam. Do they have freedom? Have any of their members or supporters been followed or arrested by the PDU and WDU? Do they have freedom to organize people, demonstrate and organize other activities? Many more questions were asked. The answer to every single question was positive. No arrests were made, no restrictions on freedom or organizing demonstrations. But all of them shared the point that they do not want to take part in the DSA.

They have three disputes with the PYD and DSA. They believe that the PYD and Tev-Dam have betrayed the Kurdish

people. Their reasons for this included the fact that half of Hassaka is under the control of the government and that the government's forces are still in the town of Qamchlo although they admitted these forces are ineffective and only control a small amount of land. Their view is that this is a big problem and the PYD and Tev-Dam compromised with the Syrian regime badly.

We told them that they should think that the PYD and Tev-Dam's policy is the policy of "No peace, No war" to balance the situation. It has been successful and benefited everybody in the region including all the opposition parties and because of the other reasons already mentioned above. We also said they should know better than us that kicking out Assad's army from both towns is easy for the PYD with the sacrifice of a few of their fighters but what will happen after that?! We told them we know that Assad does not want to give up Hassaka and, therefore, the war will start again with killing, persecution, bombardments and the destruction of towns and villages. Also, this opens a door for Isis/IS and al-Nusra to launch an attack on all of them. There would be the possibility of Assad's army, the Syrian Free Army and the rest of the terrorist organizations all fighting each other in the region with the consequence of losing everything achieved so far. They had no response to this.

The opposition does not want to join the DSA and the next election of this body will take place in a few months time if the situation remains the same. Their reasons for this are, firstly, that they accuse the PYD of co-operating with the regime, while they did not have any evidence to prove this accusation. Secondly, the next election won't be a free election as the PYD is not a democratic party, but a bureaucratic party. But we know that the PYD has almost the same numbers and positions as any other party in the DSA so statement is incorrect. We told them that if they believe in the election process they should participate if they want to see an administration with more democracy and less bureaucracy. They said that the PYD had withdrawn from the Kurdish National Conference

of the KRG, which took place last year in the town of Irbil, to discuss the Kurdish issue. But when we checked this later on with people in the PYD and Tev-Dam, they told us they have evidence of a written document which shows that they committed to the pact but that the opposition did not commit.

The opposition wants to establish their own army, but they are not allowed to by the PYD. When we took this issue back to the PYD and Tev-Dam we were told the opposition could have their own fighters but they must be under the control of the units of the Defence of the People and Defence of Women.. They told us the situation is very sensitive and very tense. It may cause fighting between one another and that this is our great fear and we cannot afford to let it happen. The PYD simply said they do not want the same failure repeated in West Kurdistan. By failure experiment, they were referring to the experiment of Iraqi Kurdistan in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which lasted to the end of the century where there were so many fights between different Kurdish organizations at the time. In the end, the PYD and Tev-Dam asked us to go back to the opposition parties with the authority to offer them, on behalf of the PYD and Tev-Dam, anything except letting them have military forces under their own control.

A few days after that we had another meeting for almost three hours in Qamchlo town with the head of the three Kurdish parties: The Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (Al Party), the Kurdistan Party for Democracy and Equality in Syria and The Kurdish Patriotic Democracy Party in Syria. In the meeting, they more or less repeated the reasons for their colleagues, in the previous meeting, not joining the DSA and Tev-Dam to build and develop Kurdish society. We had a long discussion with them, trying to convince them that, if they wanted the Kurdish issue to be resolved, a powerful force in the country and to avoid war and distraction, then they should be independent from the KRG and KDP and work in the interest of nobody but the people of West Kurdistan.