

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Democratic Confederalism in North and East Syria (Rojava):

The Contradictions of Non-State Sovereignty

By

Michael Clevenger

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Faculty Advisor: Ryan Jobson

Preceptor: Victoria Gross

ABSTRACT

Since the revolution emerged in North and East Syria (NES) in 2012, there has been much scholarly attention on democratic confederalism and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES, Rojava). Much of this literature has focused on its exceptional nature. Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot I ask, what is being obscured or masked when we assume and focus on the AANES as exceptional? To that aim, I uncover what North and East Syria (NES) reveals about sovereignty as an ideal and the production of what we recognize as a coherent hierarchical state system. Building on the analyses of Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank, I examine the constraints that decades of development of underdevelopment have placed on North and East Syria and on the Autonomous Administration. I ask four primary questions: *[1] Can sovereignty exist beyond the state? And if so, what are the contradictions that emerge in a hierarchal state system? [2] How has this hierarchical state-system structured the counterhegemonic worldmaking project of democratic confederalism in NES? [3] How has the AANES sought to increase their legitimacy, to what audiences, and why? Upon what justifications, discourses, and venues do their bids rest? [4] What does this project reveal about sovereignty, the state, and the production of a coherent hierarchical state-system?* Methodologically, I conduct semi-structured interviews with twelve people in NES and triangulate these interviews with current fieldwork and research being produced. This thesis is written in three sections. The first provides a genealogical background to the revolution. The second looks at the political economy and ecology of the Jazira. The third turns to three areas of investigation: the international peace process; international aid in a global pandemic; and the repatriation of ISIS fighters and their families. I argue that NES demonstrates that sovereignty beyond the state is possible. However, embedded in a hierarchical state system, this assertion of non-state sovereignty produces contradictions.

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KEY TERMS AND ACRONYMS

REGIONS

Bakur: Means ‘North’ in Kurmanji. It is the region recognized as Turkey.

Başur: Means ‘South’ in Kurmanji. It is the region recognized as Iraq.

Rojava: Means ‘West’ in Kurmanji. It is the region recognized as Northern Syria.

Rojhilat: Means ‘East’ in Kurmanji. It is the region recognized as Iran.

Greater Kurdistan: All of the territory making up Bakur, Başur, Rojava, and Rojhilat

KURDISH MOVEMENTS

AANES (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria): Also known as the **Autonomous Administration (AA)** for short. The name of the autonomous government in Northern Syria. Previously known as Rojava and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS). At the time of writing, it is the political body governing Qamislo (Jazeera), Kobane, Afrin, Manbij, Tabqa, Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor.

KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan): Association of Communities in Kurdistan: Originally the **KKK (Koma Komalên Kurdistan – Council of Associations of Kurdistan)** founded in 2003, the **KCK** replaced it in 2007. It is a coordinating body for all democratic confederalist political parties.

Kongra Star: (formerly Yekîtiya Star, founded in 2005), Kongra Star was formed in 2012. An umbrella organization for organizing women’s institutions—communes, assemblies, academies, cooperatives, foundations, associations, parties, etc.

North East Syria (NES): Refers to the territory of the region. Formerly known as **Rojava**. **PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) – Kurdistan Workers Party:** Founded on November 27, 1978; formerly a Marxist-Leninist organization seeking national liberation. Beginning August 15, 1984, the PKK engaged in armed guerrilla struggle against the Turkish state which has resulted in at least 40,000 deaths (mostly Kurds). Since the 1990s, the PKK has sought a political solution with multiple unilateral ceasefires. Since 1997, the PKK has been listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey and its allies.

PYD: Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat): Founded in 2003, it is the largest democratic confederalist political party in Northern Syria that advocates democratic autonomy. It is a member of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (**KCK**).

SDC – Syrian Democratic Council: Founded on December 10, 2015. It is the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces. Its emphasis is on Syrian-to-Syrian dialogue and diplomacy. In

2016, the SDC was invited to Geneva III Peace Talks, however they refused as TEV-DEM members were barred from attending.

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces: Founded on October 11, 2015. It is a multi-ethnic force with Kurdish, Arabic, Christian, Yezidi and Turkish fighters. It is allied with the United States in the war against the Islamic State. Roughly one-third of land in what is recognized as Syria is under SDF control.

YPG: People’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*): The primary defense force in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; formed in 2004.

YPJ: Women’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê*): The women’s defense force in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, founded in 2013.

INTRODUCTION

“In terms of the Autonomous Administration, I think this is the first time that this sort of stuff has been put into practice at such a scale. So, say in Bakur, when they were doing the communes, when you're just organizing a village, getting people to farm and work together and build relationships with other villages that are doing the same, you don't start building anything that looks too much like a state, and so you don't have to grapple with these sorts of problems. Whereas, in Rojava and North and East Syria, what we're building does look like a state on a lot of levels. It fulfills a lot of functions that people normally expect of the state in terms of security in terms of provisions of food, resources, health care, taxing, all of these things. I think this is an ongoing discussion without solid answers yet, is, "What makes a state a state and how can we avoid it?" – Charlie Qerecox¹

MC: Where do you see things going? You said earlier that the revolution is over, or maybe that it might be?

SARA It's over. At least, from what I can see. I have no idea, but currently it feels very much like a state.

MC: Interesting. What do you mean by that?

SARA: I don't feel any different from other places in the Global South that I've been to or lived in.²

In July 2012, a revolution erupted on the wave of the Arab Spring and in the vacuum of the Syrian Civil War.³ Independent of the Arab-opposition and the Syrian government, the Kurds, led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units—the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)—carved out a third way, declaring autonomy from the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR). In the retreat of the Syrian state, the informal governance councils of democratic confederalism filled the gaps, consolidating into the skeleton of an autonomous administration. This counterhegemonic worldmaking project of democratic confederalism—inspired by the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan and founded on the pillars of women's autonomy, ecology, and direct democracy—was being formed in the late 1990s throughout all Greater Kurdistan (what is recognized as Turkey,

¹ From an interview I conducted with Charlie Qerecox on June 4, 2021.

² Sara is a pseudonym. From an interview I conducted with Sara on March 27, 2021

³ Samir Amin, *The Reawakening of the Arab World: Challenge and Change in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring* (New York City: Monthly Review Press, 2016); Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013)

Syria, Iraq, and Iran). While this worldmaking project continues today across all of ‘Greater Kurdistan’, in Northern Syria, it has achieved its greatest success and attention.

Beginning in the city of Kobanê, in the center of Northern Syria, the revolution spread to Afrin in the West, and Jazira to the East.⁴ In nine years, the territory under the control of the Autonomous Administration—through the territorial defeat of Daesh (ISIS)—

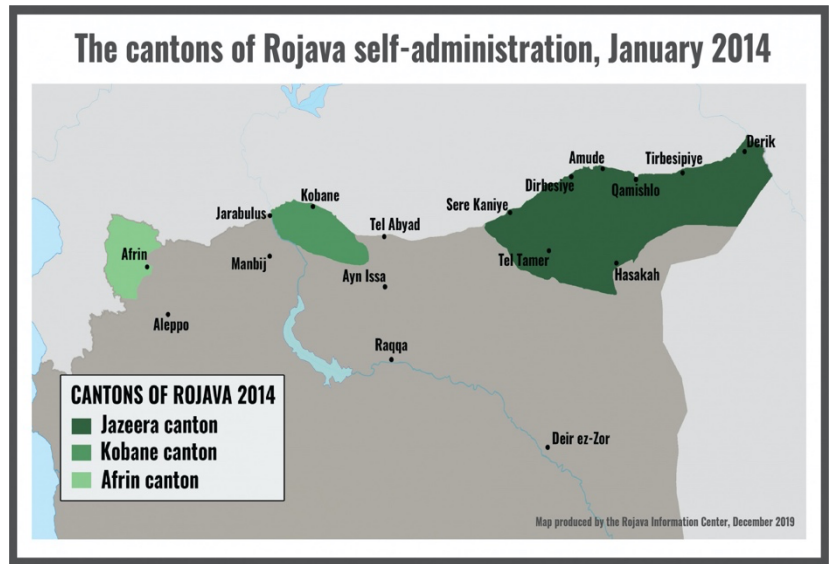


Figure 1: Rojava Information Center, 2014

spread from the initial three cantons (regions)

to seven.

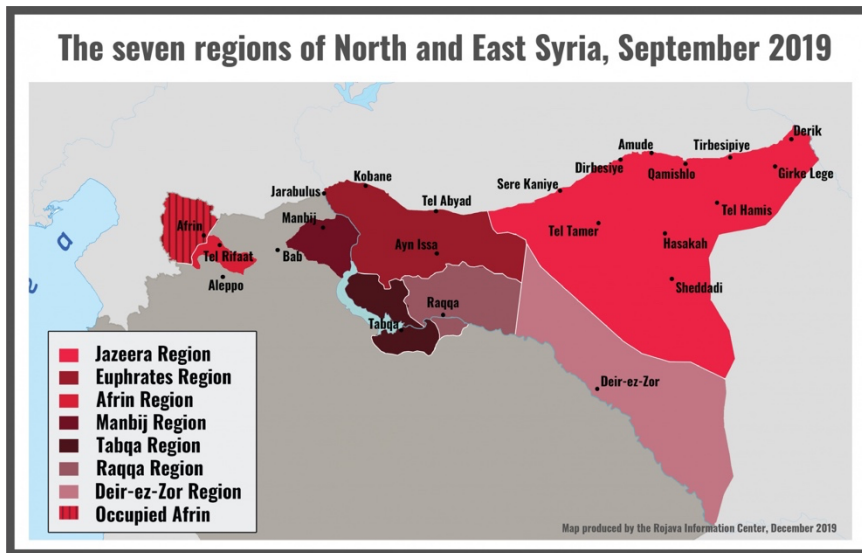


Figure 2: Rojava Information Center, 2019

This noncontiguous region in the North East of Syria was called ‘Rojava’, meaning West in the Kurdish dialect Kurmanji, and was later renamed North and East Syria (NES).⁵ The Autonomous Administration

⁴ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019): 4; For background on this process see, Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga, “The Liberation,” in *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women’s Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, eds. Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga, (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 47-60; Meredith Tax, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2016).

⁵ The name Rojava was a function of a historic memory of a ‘Greater Kurdistan’. Its renaming to North and East Syria reflects both the multiple nations living in the region and their commitment to not challenge current borders.

of North and East Syria (AANES), now has de facto political jurisdiction over four to five million people, controls one-third of what the international community recognizes as Syria, and yet, is not politically recognized by the international community in the form of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) nor other nation-states. This nonrecognition is rooted in the AANES' commitment to non-statehood and produces contradictions that have lethal implications for the region, their political project, and the Middle East.

The first quote in the epigraph is from a conversation I had with Charlie Qerecox about the Autonomous Administration's commitment to non-statehood. Charlie is an international volunteer from the UK who fought with the YPG in 2017. He is currently working in civil society in the Jazira canton and is one among a dozen of my interlocutors. According to Charlie, because of the scale of their project, they start to "look like a state" and must grapple with all sorts of problems. This statement, which was an aside remark in our broader conversation about the administration's commitment to non-statehood, is crucial to my argument. Regardless of the normative claims of the AANES for rejecting statehood—that is not the focus of this paper—it is their success that forces them to perform statelikeness and the functions of a state.⁶

This thesis has three interlocking theoretical commitments, is driven by four overarching questions, and is grounded in three areas of investigation. Rather than presuming what Santiago Castro-Gomez calls a 'point-zero epistemology' I find it useful to name these commitments which are: global historical materialism, an analysis of political economy which rejects 'methodological nationalism' and recognizes its *embeddedness* in critical human geography and ecology.⁷ This is to say that you cannot understand what is going on in NES without a concrete

⁶ While there are important differences between performing the functions of a state and functioning like a state, that will not be the focus of this paper.

⁷ Castro-Gómez, Santiago. "La Hybris del Punto Cero: Biopolíticas imperiales y colonialidad del poder en la Nueva Granada (1750-1810)." Unpublished manuscript. Bogota, Colombia: Instituto Pensar, Universidad Javeriana, 2003,

analysis of concrete conditions. You must be attentive to its embeddedness and position in a world economy, within global/regional nodes in commodity chains; the constraints that geography places on their political project being landlocked on all sides and artificially landlocked through blockades and sanctions; and ecological patterns—from droughts to flows of water—that influence labor, industry, and migration.⁸

In addition to these commitments, I have four overarching questions driving my research: First, can sovereignty exist beyond the state? And if so, what are the contradictions that emerge in a hierarchical state-system? Second, how has this hierarchical state-system structured the

as quoted in Ramón Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality,” *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1) (2011): 1-37, at 5; on ‘global historical materialism’ see, Samir Amin, *The Law of Value and Historical Materialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978); Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven, “Samir Amin: A Dependency Pioneer,” in *Dialogues on Development Volume 1: Dependency*, eds., Ushewedu Kufakurinani, Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven, Frutuoso Santana, Maria Dyveke Styve (New York: Institute for New Economic Thinking, 2017): 12-17; Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment Vol 1, 2* (New York City: Monthly Review Press, 1974); on ‘political economy’ I draw a genealogy that draws on multiple traditions from Karl Marx, to John Maynard Keynes, to Karl Polanyi, to Andre Gunder Frank, to the *Monthly Review School*, to Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and the Dependency and World-Systems Theory school(s), to various neo-Marxian schools, see Andre Gunder Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment,” *Monthly Review* 18, no. 4 (September 1966): 17-31; Bassam Haddad, Omar Dahi, Ziad Abu-Rish, Joel Beinin & Sherene Seikaly, eds., “What is Political Economy? Political Economy Project Series, No. 1,” *Jadmag* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 1-46; Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021); on ‘methodological nationalism’ I draw on Marcel van der Linden who argues “methodological nationalists ‘naturalize’ the nation state...consider[ing] the nation state as the basic, self-evident analytical unit for historical research...[in which] cross-border or border-subverting process are perceived as distractions from the “pure” model.” see, Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays in Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 7; Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301-334. On ‘embeddedness’ see, Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944, 1957, 2001); Roger Owen, “The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914 (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993); Matěj Vančura, “Polanyi’s Great Transformation and the Concept of the Embedded Economy,” *Institute of Economic Studies* (2011): 1-47; Paul A. Kramer, “Embedding Capital: Political-Economic History, the United States, and the World,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15 (2016): 331-362.

⁸ Peter H. Gleick, “Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria,” *Weather, Climate, and Society Vol 6*, no. 3 (July 2014): 331-340. On global commodity chains (GCC), Terrence Hopkins and Immanuel define global commodity chains as “a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity.” See, Terrence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Commodity Chains in the World-Economy Prior to 1800,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 157-170, 159. Intan Suwandi, *Value Chains: The New Economic Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019): 31-32; Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz, eds., *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1994); Giovanni Arrighi and Jessica Drangel, “The Stratification of the World-Economy,” *Review* 10, no. 1 (1986): 9-74.

counterhegemonic worldmaking project of democratic confederalism in NES? Third, how has the AANES sought to increase their legitimacy, to what audiences, and why? Upon what justifications, discourses, and venues do their bids rest? Fourth, what does this project reveal about sovereignty, the state, and the production of a coherent hierarchical state-system? In my use of hierarchical state-system, I am situating this analysis in conversation with Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system’s analysis and his synthesis of Fernand Braudel’s world-economy (*économie-monde*) as a capitalist world-economy.⁹ Both Wallerstein and Braudel—along with Murray Bookchin—have been described as “the three greatest influences on the democratic, women-led social revolution” in NES.¹⁰ Instead of hierarchal state-system, I could have said ‘international state-system’ but the former has a specificity that I find integral, emphasizing that the states that comprise this system are not equal in strength, as understood as economic and military capabilities and the ability to get legal decisions carried out, nor in their contradictions, their relationship to imperialism, and their location in global commodity chains in the capitalist world-system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the declaration of autonomy in 2012, there have been hundreds of articles—popular and academic—and books on the subject of Rojava/NES. These sources can be placed in three fields. The first is primary source literature from Abdullah Öcalan.¹¹ Öcalan is the representative

⁹ Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*: 15, 23-24.

¹⁰ Christopher Chase-Dunn, Jackie Smith, Patrick Manning, Andrej Grubačić, “Remembering Immanuel Wallerstein,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 26, no. 1 (2020): 1-8, at 7.

¹¹ In order of publication: Abdullah Öcalan, *Declaration on the Democratic Solution of the Kurdish Question* (London, Mesopotamian Publishers, 1999); Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization*, trans. Klaus Happel (London: Pluto Press, 2007); Abdullah Öcalan, *War and Peace in Kurdistan* (Cologne, International Initiative, 2009); Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st Century* (London: International Initiative Edition, 2011); Abdullah Öcalan, *Prison Writings III: The Road Map to Negotiations* (Cologne, International Initiative Edition, 2012); Abdullah Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Women’s*

for millions of Kurdish people. In 1978, he cofounded the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*; Kurdistan Workers Party), a Marxist-Leninist Party that formed in resistance to oppression under the Turkish state. They aimed to create an independent Kurdistan through revolution. Prior to 1998, the PKK and Öcalan had a strategic relationship with Hafez al-Assad, the General Secretary of the Ba'ath Party and the president of Syria for thirty years, who benefited from their presence as a bulwark against Turkey to the north. This partnership gave refuge to Öcalan and the PKK allowing them to train in Syria. In October of 1998, Turkey exploited its geological—and specifically, hydrological—advantage, forcing Öcalan and the PKK out.¹² In search of asylum, Öcalan embarked on an odyssey fleeing to Moscow and the CIS, (Commonwealth of Independent States), Rome, Athens, and Nairobi.¹³ Eventually, he was granted asylum in South Africa by Nelson Mandela.¹⁴ However, on February 15, 1999, while en route to South Africa, Öcalan was abducted by the Turkish Special Forces (MİT), with assistance from the CIA, and

Revolution (Cologne, International Initiative, 2013); Abdullah Öcalan. *Democratic Confederalism* (Cologne, Transmedia Publishing, 2015); Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume I: Civilization, the Age of Masked Gods and Disguised Kings* (London: International Initiative Edition, 2015); Abdullah Öcalan. *Democratic Nation, Second ed.* Cologne, International Initiative, 2017; Abdullah Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan* (London, Pluto Press, 2017); Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume II: Capitalism, The Age of Unmasked Gods and Naked Kings* (London: International Initiative Edition, 2017); Abdullah Öcalan, *Manifesto of the Democratic Civilization Volume III: The Sociology of Freedom* (London: International Initiative Edition, 2020); Abdullah Öcalan, *Building Free Life: Dialogues with Öcalan* (Oakland: PM Press, 2020).

¹² Michael Knapp, “The Roots of Democratic Autonomy in Northern Syria – Rojava,” in *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds*, ed. Michael M. Gunter (New York: Routledge, 2019), 382-395, at 388; Berna Süer, “Ripeness Theory and Coercive Diplomacy as a Road to Conflict Resolution: The Case of the Turkey-Syria Showdown in 1998,” in *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, eds., Özlem Tür and Raymond Hinnebusch (New York: Routledge, 2013): 13-26, at 13-14.

¹³ For background to the abduction see, Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 269-285; Meredith Tax, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2016): 146-148; Jeffrey Miley, “The Council of Europe and the Death of the Peace Process in Turkey,” (2017) *The Region*. <http://theregion.org/article/11108-the-council-of-europe-and-the-death-of-the-peace-process-in-turkey;>

¹⁴ Berna Özgencil, “Judge Moosa: Öcalan is the Undisputed Leader of Majority of Kurds,” *ANF News* (December 16, 2015) accessed on March 16, 2021 <https://anfenglish.com/features/judge-moosa-ocalan-is-the-undisputed-leader-of-majority-of-kurds-13375>.

subsequently arrested and imprisoned.¹⁵ While in prison, he has produced a dozen or so texts that have been disseminated via members of his legal team. These texts have served three purposes: first, a defense to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for the actions of the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s. The second purpose is grounded in shaping the direction and ideology of the PKK. The third is to achieve a democratic—and importantly nonmilitary—solution to the Kurdish question in peace talks with Ankara and the ruling ANK party.¹⁶

The second set of sources are on the revolution in NES.¹⁷ This journalistic literature focuses on key moments and dates, the structure of the political system, and the theoretical groundings of the PKK in their shift from Marxism Leninism to democratic confederalism or, said differently, from seeking an independent state to a counterhegemonic project of unmaking the state.¹⁸ Rather than attempting to smash the state apparatus and its borders, they attempt to

¹⁵ Tim Weiner, “U.S. Helped Turkey Find and Capture Kurd Rebel,” *New York Times* (February 20, 1999): <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/20/world/us-helped-turkey-find-and-capture-kurd-rebel.html>.

¹⁶ Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, “The PKK in the 2000s: Continuity Through Breaks?” in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, eds. Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (New York: Routledge, 2011): 143-162, at 151-53.

¹⁷ In order of publication: TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan: The Council Movement, Gender Liberation, and Ecology*, trans. Janet Biehl (Norway: New Compass Press, 2013); Meredith Tax, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2016); Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women’s Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016); Dilar Dirik, David Levi Strauss, Michael Taussig, Peter Lamborn Wilson, *To Dare Imagining: Rojava Revolution* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2016); Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity, and Conflicts* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019); Thomas Schmidinger, *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleaning in the Afrin Region of Rojava*, trans. Michael Schiffman (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019); Schmidinger, ed., *The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria*; Thomas Jeffrey Miley, “The Kurdish Freedom Movement, Rojava, and the Left,” *Middle East Research and Information Project* (Summer 2020): <https://merip.org/2020/08/the-kurdish-freedom-movement-rojava-and-the-left-295/>.

¹⁸ On the internal structure see, Rojava Information Center, “Beyond the Frontlines: The Building of the Democratic System in North and East Syria,” *Rojava Information Center* (December 19, 2019) accessed January 17, 2021: 1-62. <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2019/12/report-beyond-the-frontlines/>; Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden, “Peace Committees, Platforms and the Political Ordering of Society: Doing Justice in the Federation of Northern and Eastern Syria,” *Kurdish Studies* 8, no. 2 (October 2020): 297-312; Pinar Dinc, “The Kurdish Movement and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria: An Alternative to the (Nation-)State Model?” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 1 (2020): 47-67; On the theoretical underpinnings of democratic confederalism see, Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden, “Communal Democracy: The Social Contract and Confederalism in Rojava,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2014): 87-109; Nazan Üstündağ, “Self-Defense as a Revolutionary Practice in Rojava, or How to Unmake the State,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115, no. 1 (2016): 197-209, at 198..

render its power obsolete. It is the express aim of the Kurdish-led project to be under a decentralized federal Syrian State.¹⁹ The third set of literature focuses on the broader ‘Kurdish Question’, the history of the PKK and its Cold War trappings, and on the gendered nature of the YPJ (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê*), and their historic fight in Kobanê in 2014 as the first military force to defeat Daesh (ISIS).²⁰ These three fields of historiographies—Öcalan, North and East Syria (Rojava), and the PKK—all justly assume NES as an exceptional space, which dominates the discourse.

Slavoj Žižek’s convocational lecture at Kobanê University in April 2021 is a perfect example: “The Kurds,” he opines, “you established an actually existing utopia with an intellectual community. You are a symbol not only to resist but to establish a new order.”²¹ In 2018, the late David Graeber claimed that democratic confederalism in Rojava, “should be

¹⁹ Dinc, “The Kurdish Movement and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria: 48.

²⁰ In order of publication: Henri Barkey and Graham Fuller, *Turkey’s Kurdish Question* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998); M. Hakan Yavuz and Michael M. Gunter, “The Kurdish Nation,” *Current History* (January 2001): 33-39; Michael M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2004); Marcus, *Blood and Belief*; Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya and Joost Jongerden, “Born from the Left: The Making of the PKK” in *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, eds. Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden (New York: Routledge, 2011): 123-142; Ragan Updegraff, “The Kurdish Question,” *The Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 1 (2012): 119-128; Dilan Yildirim, “The Kurdish Question in the Context of Turkey and Middle East Politics: An Interview with Noam Chomsky,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (2013): 183-189; Paul White, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountain*, (London: Zed Books, 2015); Ofra Bengia, ed. *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2015); Samir Amin, “The Kurdish Question Then and Now,” *Monthly Review* 68, no. 5 (October 2016): 18-24; Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef, Eds., *The Kurdish Question Revisited* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017); Sarah Cansiz, *Sarah: My Whole Life Was a Struggle*, trans. Janet Biehl (United Kingdom, Pluto Press, 2018); Arianna Shahvisi, “Beyond Orientalism: Exploring the Distinctive Feminism of Democratic Confederalism in Rojava,” *Geopolitics* (2018): 1-26; Michael Gunter, *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Joanna Palani, *Freedom Fighter: My War Against ISIS on the Frontlines of Syria* (London: Atlantic Books, 2019); Deniz Duruiz, “The Kurds: A Stateless People, Turkey’s Enemies, or the Colonized Other?,” *POLaR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (January 2020): <https://polarjournal.org/2020/01/22/the-kurds-a-stateless-people-turkeys-enemies-or-the-colonized-other/>; Guney Yildiz, “The Kurdish Movement’s Disparate Goals and the Collapse of the Peace Process with Turkey,” *Middle East Research and Information Project* (Summer 2020): <https://merip.org/2020/08/the-kurdish-movements-disparate-goals-and-the-collapse-of-the-peace-process-with-turkey/>; Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, *The Daughters of Kobani* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021).

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, “Slavoj Žižek Teaches at Kobane University,” *Bianet* (April 21, 2021): <https://bianet.org/english/world/242693-slavoj-zizek-teaches-at-kobane-university>

considered one of the most important events in recent world history.”²² I do not deny that the revolution in NES and their commitment to non-statehood is exceptional. However, my project intervenes in this burgeoning literature by shifting the focus from NES as the exception to what it reveals about the production and maintenance of the quotidian.²³ Said differently, once we move beyond the exotifying and sensationalist discourses of a feminist revolution in the Middle East, we can see what the political system in NES—and the reactions to their system—reveal about sovereignty as an ideal and the production of what we recognize as a coherent hierarchical state-system, a system shaped from and by and in resistance to empire.

My intervention into this broader literature follows the works of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Danilyn Rutherford, and Yarimar Bonilla. Drawing on Trouillot, I am asking, what is being obscured or masked when we assume and focus on the AANES as exceptional?²⁴ Following Rutherford, I interrogate the “uneasy relationship between sovereignty and audience” and argue that sovereignty “is a more or less unattainable ideal.”²⁵ Lastly, drawing on but going beyond Yarimar Bonilla, I interrogate sovereignty, the state, and a coherent hierarchical state-system as mutually constitutive concepts, norms, and imaginaries that have been “shaped by the institutional, epistemic, and ontological orders of empire” and its afterlives.²⁶

I recognize that sovereignty is one of those words that can be a minefield to navigate. Rather than a mechanical definition of sovereignty, I argue, along with Joanne Barker, that ‘sovereignty is historically contingent’ and embedded in social relations that must be

²² David Graeber, “Majority Report with David Graeber on Democratic Confederalism in Northern Syria,” July 10, 2018, Video 12:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iWCXQR92v8>.

²³ Yarimar Bonilla, “Ordinary Sovereignty,” *Small Axe* 17, no. 3 (2013): 152-65.

²⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the World,” *Cimarrón: New Perspectives on the Caribbean* 3 no. 2 (Winter 1990): 3-12.

²⁵ Danilyn Rutherford, *Laughing at Leviathan: Sovereignty and Audience in West Papua* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3, 248.

²⁶ Yarimar Bonilla, “Unsettling Sovereignty,” *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (2014): 330-339, 331.

historicized.²⁷ For the purpose of this paper, I argue that sovereignty is an aspirational claim toward supreme authority within a territory.²⁸ Of course, this is not an all-encompassing definition (I do not think that is possible which is itself a function of sovereignty's aspirational claim).

In *Non-Sovereign Futures*, Bonilla observes and theorizes the labor movement in Guadalupe as a form of non-sovereign politics. Here, I am arguing that democratic confederalism is a form of non-state sovereignty. While the former is a non-sovereign political project, democratic confederalism is an assertion of sovereignty beyond the state. When we move beyond the lens of exceptionalizing, the ways that this hierarchical state-system confines the paths of non-state assertions of sovereignty, the contradictions that limit their horizons, and the webs in which they are embedded come into view.

I have three primary arguments. First is that regardless of the normative claims of the AANES for rejecting statehood; their success forces them to perform statelikeness and the functions of a state. While each movement has its own particularities, contradictions, and contexts, this performance of statelikeness is a common feature for any worldmaking project that achieves a certain scale of development in a hierarchical state-system. Second is that this statelikeness is an assertion of non-state sovereignty within a world-system structured by hierarchical state relations and this non-state sovereignty produces contradictions. Third is that this non-state sovereignty is an attempt to appeal to internal and external audiences. Externally, to be legible among what Darryl Li calls “a world of sovereigns.”²⁹ I build on Li's conception by

²⁷ Joanne Barker (Lenape), “For Whom Sovereignty Matters,” in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2002): 1-32, 26.

²⁸ This synthesizes theories of sovereignty from Jean Bodin to Thomas Hobbes to Emmer de Vattel to Jacques Rousseau to Carl Schmitt.

²⁹ Darryl Li, *The Universal Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020): 94.

specifying that this is a world of *unequal* sovereigns. While internally, this appeal is made toward minority nations and groups in what is recognized as the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR).³⁰ This appeal is required because recognition and legitimacy are the currency of sovereignty—they are how sovereignty is operationalized. I argue that the AANES appeals to these audiences in an attempt to make themselves legible, to increase their legitimacy through what Michael Bobick calls ‘performative sovereignty’ and to be recognized among a world of unequal sovereigns.³² Following Immanuel Wallerstein, I argue that at its essence, sovereignty is “a claim, and claims have little meaning unless they are recognized by others.”³³ Said simply, if others do not recognize your claim to sovereignty, you are not sovereign.

METHODS

I employed two intersecting methods in the production of this research. I conducted a dozen semi-structured interviews over Zoom with academics currently conducting fieldwork, advisors to the administration, people in civil society, and international volunteers who fought with the YPG/YPJ. These interviews varied in time from 1-hour to 4-hours depending on my interlocutors and the direction of our conversation. Several were interviewed multiple times. I then supplement these interviews with interviews already conducted by journalists and

³⁰ I recognize that adding “what is recognized” can be clunky, but this precision is integral to my argument of denaturalizing these territorial boundaries. By nations, I refer to the Marxist definition as: “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” See, J.V. Stalin, “Marxism and the National Question,” *Collected Works, Vol. 2* (January 1913): <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm>.

³² Michael Bobick, “Sovereignty and the Vicissitudes of Recognition: Peoplehood and Performance in a De Facto State,” *PoLAR* 40, no. 1 (2017): 158-170, at 159.

³³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004 [2007]: 44.

academics.³⁴ My aim is to get a grasp of the on-the-ground analysis. Given NES' non-state recognition, it is difficult to visit and get reliable information out. This means that most of the current literature draws on the same academic delegations and are outdated given the quick-paced nature of the developments in the region.³⁵ There is a limitation in my methods as my interlocutors are all foreigners from the Global North (the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland, and the U.S.), and as foreigners, generally supportive of the movement. This limitation is a function of language barriers and the restriction of movement during a global pandemic. I intend to visit the region to conduct fieldwork, to conduct ethnographically rich interviews with local people from diverse perspectives.

This essay is written in three sections. The first section aims to provide a genealogical background to the revolution. I begin with a brief analysis of the functions of a state. Then, engage the AANES' rejection of the state. Lastly, I provide an overview of democratic confederalism and its implementation in North and East Syria both in theory and practice. The second section turns to the political economy and ecology of North and East Syria. The final section turns to three areas of investigation: the international peace process; international aid in a

³⁴ A couple examples of interviews, see "ANF, "SDF: If Attacked, We Will Defend Ourselves and our People," *ANF English* (January 20, 2018): <https://anfenglish.com/rojava-syria/sdf-if-attacked-we-will-defend-ourselves-and-our-people-24295>; Maher Hamden, "A Conversation with Syrian Democratic Council Co-Chair Riad Darar," *MARI* (February 5, 2020): <https://mari-sy.org/a-conversation-with-syrian-democratic-council-co-chair-riad-darar/?lang=en>; ANF, "Aldar Xelil: The Occupied Regions will be Liberated in 2021," *ANF English* (January 1, 2021): <https://anfenglish.com/features/aldar-xelil-the-occupied-regions-will-be-liberated-in-2021-49034>; Janet Biehl, "Rojava's Communes and Councils," *New Compass* (January 31, 2015) accessed January 17, 2021 <http://new-compass.net/articles/rojavas-communes-and-councils>; Schmidinger, *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds*, 115-117; CrimethInc, "One Year Since the Turkish Invasion of Rojava: An Interview with Tekoşîna Anarşîst: On Anarchist Participation in the Revolutionary Experiment in Northeast Syria (October 9, 2020): <https://crimethinc.com/2020/10/11/one-year-since-the-turkish-invasion-of-rojava-an-interview-with-tekosina-anarsist-on-anarchist-participation-in-the-revolutionary-experiment-in-northeast-syria>

³⁵ Since I began following this revolution its name has changed five times. At the start of its de facto autonomy in July 2012, the region was known as Rojava, meaning "West" in Kurmanji. In 2013, it was known as the Interim Transitional Administration. On March 17, 2016, it became the Democratic Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria. In December of 2016, it became the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS). In September of 2018, they changed the name to reflect the numerous nations and ethnic groups in the region to North and East Syria (NES)..

global pandemic; and the repatriation of former ISIS fighters and their families.³⁶ By turning to each of these areas, I aim to ground these conceptual questions in a concrete analysis rather than remaining in the abstract.

SECTION I:

THE FUNCTIONS OF A STATE

The hierarchical state-system is organized around what Richard Falk describes as a “state-centric, sovereignty-oriented, and territorially bounded global order.”³⁷ This brief section defines the state under international law and then turns to the functions of the state to understand the AANES’ performance of statelikeness. According to customary international law, statehood is defined by the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (from hereafter Montevideo Convention), signed on December 26, 1933. Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention codifies four rules of statehood: “a) a permanent population; b) a defined territory; c) government; and d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states.”³⁸ There are two primary schools of interpretation of the Montevideo Convention: the declaratory theory and the constitutive. The declaratory theory of statehood holds that if you meet these four requirements, you qualify as a state. The constitutive theory requires *recognition* by other States. Both have their exceptions. For example, there are entities that meet all four criteria—Taiwan, the Moldovan territory of Transnistria, and Kurdistan—and yet are not recognized as a state by the

³⁶ This list could have looked different, but these areas repeatedly came up by my interlocutors. With a commitment to theorizing with my interlocutors, I pursue these areas.

³⁷ Richard Falk, “Revisiting Westphalia, Discovering Post-Westphalia.” *The Journal of Ethics* 6, no. 4 (2002): 311-352, at 312.

³⁸ “Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States.” In *International Law Documents*, edited by Jan Klabbers, 2-4. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

international community in the form of the United Nations.³⁹ Exceptionally, Palestine meets the four requirements and has been recognized as a state by over 70 percent (138 of 193) of the member states of the United Nations and yet is not recognized as a state by the international community in the form of the UN. This opens the analytical question of how many states—or *which* states—are required to recognize you before you achieve the status of statehood.⁴⁰

The historiography of the state is immense.⁴¹ Rather than unpacking the state as a bureaucratic system of relations, an ideal-type, and a set of effects, let us look at the functions of the state. To do so, I draw on two unlikely bedfellows: Charles Tilly and Immanuel Wallerstein. Tilly famously argues that the state has four functions: war making, state making, protection, and extraction.⁴² Each function reinforces the other. Immanuel Wallerstein argues that there are seven principal arenas of the state that is of interest to entrepreneurs and firms operating in a capitalist world-economy; they are:

- (1) states set the rules on whether and under what conditions commodities, capital, and labor may cross their borders.
- (2) They create the rules concerning property rights within their states.
- (3) They set rules concerning employment and the compensation of employees.
- (4) They decide

³⁹ Joseph William Davids, "What Makes A State?" (Feb 2012) (accessed on March 17, 2021).

<https://thenewinternationallaw.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/what-makes-a-state/>.

⁴⁰ According to Samir Amin, the 'international community' is nothing more than a signifier for "the G7 plus Saudi Arabia, which has surely become a democratic republic." With the G7 comprising: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, and the US). I do not go so far as to specify which countries have determining power in the world-system because to do so analytically would require much more data and research; however, I share the broader critique. See, Samir Amin, "Contemporary Imperialism," *Monthly Review* (July-August 2015): 23-36.

⁴¹ While not exhaustive, there are classical theories from Marx to Weber, to Durkheim. And there are theorists who have built on this foundation such as Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Philip Abrams, Clifford Geertz, Charles Tilly, Pierre Bourdieu. See, Clifford Geertz, "What Is a State If It Is Not a Sovereign?: Reflections on Politics in Complicated Places," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 5 (December 2004): 577-593; Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (March 1988): 58-89; Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, eds. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: UK, Cambridge University Press, 1985): 169-191; Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State: Genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field," in *State/Culture: State-formation After the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France 1989- 1992* (UK: Polity Press, 2014); Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, eds., *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

⁴² Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," 181- 186. In drawing on Tilly, I acknowledge the eurocentrism in his analysis on 'whose wars count' and the silences his account of state formation produces. Nevertheless, his account is a useful starting point and well-engaged interlocutor. As of June 2021, 'War and State Making as Organized Crime' has been cited 5,244 times.

which costs firms must internalize. (5) They decide what kinds of economic processes may be monopolized, and to what degree. (6) They tax. (7) Finally, when firms based within their boundaries may be affected, they can use their power externally to affect the decisions of other states.⁴³

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria performs all eleven of these functions (of Tilly's and Wallerstein's schemas). With these functions of the state in mind, let us proceed to the AANES' commitment to non-statehood.

WHY NON-STATEHOOD?

The commitment to non-statehood is rooted in the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan. In the 1980s, Öcalan and the PKK upheld an orthodox Marxist position on the national question and national liberation through people's war. They were part of what Paul Chamberlin calls "a sprawling constellation of revolutionary networks," in dialogue with revolutionaries "in Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba, and a dozen other locales."⁴⁴ In fact, from 1980-1982, in preparation for the start of their insurgency, PKK guerrillas trained in Lebanon's Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley with the PPDFLP (Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine).⁴⁵ This vision of national liberation has its roots in Lenin's declaration of the right for self-determination for oppressed nations and this call for national independence against imperialism was taken up throughout the Global South.⁴⁶ Guinea-Bissau's Amilcar Cabral is one of the most lucid thinkers on national liberation, according to Cabral:

⁴³ Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis*, 46.

⁴⁴ Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ Paul White, *The PKK: Coming Down from the Mountain*, (London: Zed Books, 2015), 20; for a look into the relationship between the Palestinian and Kurdish struggles see, Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "The 'Palestinian Dream' in the Kurdish Context," *Kurdish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2015): 47-65.

⁴⁶ V.I. Lenin, "Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination," *Collected Works* 22 (February 1916): 143-156.

It is often said that national liberation is based on the right of all peoples to decide their destiny freely and that the aim of this liberation is to gain national independence. Although we might agree with this vague and subjective way of expressing a complex reality, we prefer to be objective. For us the basis of national liberation, whatever the formulas adopted in international law, is the inalienable right of every people to have their own history; and the aim of national liberation is to regain this right usurped by imperialism, that is to free the process of development of the national productive forces.⁴⁷

According to speeches at the PKK's third congress in 1986, Öcalan had "begun searching for a 'new socialism' based on a societal transformation coming from below."⁴⁸ By the turn of the twentieth century, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Öcalan's abduction and imprisonment, this search became an open critique toward the viability of the nation-state as the vehicle for liberation of the Kurdish people.⁴⁹ This rejection of the state was rooted in four areas: a critique of capitalist modernity; a critique of state-civilization; a critique of nationalism in the form of the nation-state; and an analysis of the Kurdish Question.

In his most cited pamphlet, *Democratic Confederalism*, Öcalan argues that capitalist modernity—interchangeable with the modern world-system—is constitutive of a 400-year process of the rise of global capitalism through the vast accumulation of capital on the one hand and unhindered exploitation of the majority of the globe on the other.⁵⁰ Öcalan's critique of state-civilization reaches back five-thousand years to the first known civilization in Mesopotamia. He makes a Braudelian argument of the *longue durée* in which "the order of capital is not the product of four hundred years of capitalism but a product of five-thousand-year-old state civilization."⁵¹ In this critique of state-civilization, Öcalan locates its origins in the Sumerian

⁴⁷ Amílcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings of Amílcar* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1979): 130.

⁴⁸ Joost Jongerden and Cengiz Gunes, "A Democratic Nation: The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the idea of nation beyond the state," in Ilker Cörüt and Joost Jongerden, eds., *Beyond Nationalism and the Nation-State: Radical Approaches to Nation* (London: Routledge, 2021): 3-22, at 8-9.

⁴⁹ It should be mentioned that this transition led to a split in the party and now the PKK represents one among a dozen political parties on the left in Greater Kurdistan.

⁵⁰ As of June 11, 2021, there are 215 citations. Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, 9-10.

⁵¹ Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization Volume II*, 308-309

temples, the *Ziggurats*, which he describes as “the womb of state institutions.”⁵² This critique echoes Carl Schmitt’s idiom that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”⁵³ For Öcalan, it is in this first known society that the twin roots of the state—patriarchy and hierarchy—were founded and that “the chain remains unbroken.”⁵⁴

Öcalan’s critique of nationalism is that it is a trap and an iron cage for society.⁵⁵ He is quick to qualify that nationalism does not equal patriotism. For Öcalan, love for one’s community or homeland is a sacred thing, however, capitalism, when linked to nationalism, is the building block of fascism.⁵⁶ This critique of nationalism is a critique of the wedding of the nation and state in the form of the nation-state which can be broadly defined as an attempt to create a territorially bounded state with a homogeneous population. In his critique, Öcalan writes,

the homogenic national society is the most artificial society to have ever been created and is the result of a ‘social engineering project’...[it is] generally accomplished by the use of force or by financial incentives, and have often resulted in the physical annihilation of minorities, cultures, or languages, or in forced assimilation.⁵⁷

Öcalan argues that the history of the past two hundred years is one of repeated attempts—whether pretenses or in good faith—at creating a nation corresponding with the imaginary of a true nation-state.

⁵²; Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Roots of Civilization*, 6.

⁵³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005 (1922)), 36.

⁵⁴ Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The Root of Civilization*, 12-13.s

⁵⁵ Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan*, 31; Nick Danforth, “An Imprisoned Nationalist Reads Benedict Anderson,” *Dissent* (March 7, 2013) Accessed May 15, 2021 <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/an-imprisoned-nationalist-reads-benedict-anderson>.

⁵⁶ Öcalan, *Prison Writings: The PKK and the Kurdish Question in the 21st century*, 104.

⁵⁷ Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan*, 34-35.

Lastly, the rejection of the state is in response to the two-hundred-year tragedy of the Kurdish question.⁵⁸ It is through an analysis of the promise and repeated betrayal of a state of their own. Ultimately, Öcalan's rejection of the nation-state is rooted in the belief that it does not increase freedom but rather, increases suffering. Summarizing his critique, Öcalan writes:

Over the last decades the Kurds have not only struggled against repression by the dominant powers and for the recognition of their existence, but also for the liberation of their society from the grip of feudalism. Hence it does not make sense to replace the old chains with new ones or even enhance the repression. This is what the foundation of a nation-state would mean in the context of capitalist modernity. Without opposition against capitalist modernity there will be no place for the liberation of the people. This is why the founding of a Kurdish nation-state is not an option for me... The solution to the Kurdish question, therefore, needs to be found in an approach that weakens capitalist modernity or pushes it back.⁵⁹

The political system Öcalan and the PKK propose to push back against capitalist modernity, and to break this unbroken chain, is democratic confederalism.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM

Democratic confederalism is both a political line and political project that seeks to build a democratic society beyond the state. As a political line, it was adopted by the PKK in January 2000 in their seventh congress based on Öcalan's defense to the European Court of Human Rights.⁶⁰ As a project, democratic confederalism operates through four units: the commune, the neighborhood council, the district, and the canton (region). In this section, I discuss democratic confederalism and the structure of the council system and the parallel women's institutions. I begin with how democratic confederalism is supposed to function in theory and then how it

⁵⁸ Stansfield and Shareef, eds., *The Kurdish Question Revisited*.

⁵⁹ Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan*, 38-39.

⁶⁰ Personal communication with Joost Jongerden, April 9-11, 2020. Additionally, see Akkaya and Jongerden, "The PKK in the 2000s," 148-153; White, *PKK*, xii-xv. Thus far, they have had fifteen congresses: 1978, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, (March) 2005, (April) 2005, 2006, 2007, 2015.

functions in practice. Rather than power being centralized far away in Damascus, it is localized in the most local level: the commune.

At the commune level, which encompass anywhere between 15 to 200 households, is where the day-to-day decisions are made.⁶¹ Most communes have their own committees for self-defense, education, reconciliation and justice, families of the martyrs, arts and culture, and the economy; while all have education, reconciliation and justice, and self-defense committees.⁶² If an issue exceeds the capacity of the commune, it goes to the neighborhood council.

The neighborhood councils are comprised of recallable delegates that are sent from various communes. On average, a neighborhood council will be comprised of seven to thirty communes, depending on the size of the population in that area. Unlike the commune, which is built on direct participation, the neighborhood, district, and canton levels are representative institutions. Representative delegates function as mouthpieces for the decisions made at the commune level. In an interview from an academic delegation in 2015, Çınar Sali, the co-chair of the Jazira Canton, explains how it works in the Jazira:

Our system rests on the communes, made up of neighborhoods of 300 people. The communes have co-presidents [one male, one female], and there are co-presidents at all levels, from commune to canton administration. In each commune there are five or six different committees. Communes work in two ways. First, they resolve problems quickly and early—for example, a technical problem or a social one. Some jobs can be done in five minutes, but if you send it to the state, it gets caught in a bureaucracy. So, we can solve issues quickly. The second way is political. If we speak about true democracy, decisions can't be made from the top and go to the bottom, they have to be made at the bottom and then go up in degrees. There are also district councils and city councils, up to the canton. The principle is 'few problems, many resolutions.' So that the government doesn't remain up in the air, we try to fill the bottom of it.⁶³

⁶¹ Variations based on the specifics of the region and population. Michael Knapp, "The Roots of Democratic Autonomy in Northern Syria – Rojava," 385. The committees for the family of martyrs (*Malbata şehidan*) are connected to the culture of Şehids, which is to honor the sacrifice of those who have died fighting for life and the struggle for liberation. See, Kongra Star, "Women Defend Rojava," (October 2, 2019): <https://womendefendrojava.net/en/2019/09/27/meaning-of-sehid-culture-and-women/>

⁶² Rojava Information Center, "Beyond the Frontlines," 23.

⁶³ Biehl, "Rojava's Communes and Councils."

Previous diagrams are outdated; however, this system can be visually represented by concentric circles.⁶⁴ Parallel to each level are autonomous women's structures. For a meeting to have quorum, 40% of attendees must be women. There is a principle of dual leadership (*hevserok*). Additionally, the women's council, gets a veto on any women's issue. These principles are instituted at all four levels.⁶⁵

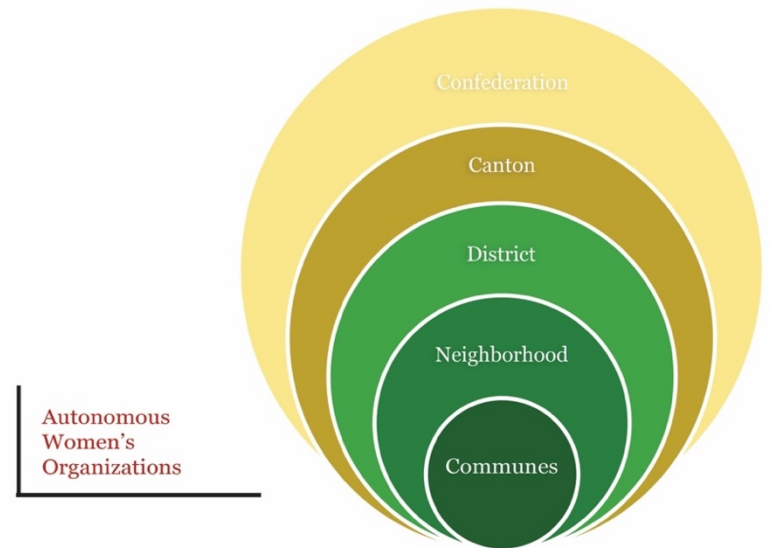


Figure 3: Democratic Confederalism as Concentric Circles

This policy reflects the genealogy of both the revolution and democratic confederalism as rooted in the Kurdish Freedom Movement and the Woman's Movement which goes back to the 1980s in Bakur.⁶⁶ It also reflects the influence of Öcalan, who consistently argues that “the level of woman's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society.”⁶⁷ He goes so far as to say, “it should have priority over the liberation of homelands...woman's revolution is a revolution within a revolution.”⁶⁸ Flipping Maria Mies' thesis on women as the last colony, Öcalan sees women as the first colony from which hierarchy and the state is instituted and inscribed; with its origins in the violent process of

⁶⁴ These concentric circles aren't one-to-one. To be more precise, the image would have more circles as you descend. For example, there are not one commune per confederation but theoretically could be hundreds.

⁶⁵ Knapp, Flach, Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava*, 69.

⁶⁶ According to Thoreau Redcrow, this goes back to earlier to Öcalan's sister, Havva, who was sold off to marriage young for a few sacks of wheat per month. See, Thoreau Redcrow, "The Importance of Abdullah Öcalan's Alternative Paradigm in Resolving the Kurdish Issue, *Civil Diplomacy Center - North and East Syria, Zoom Panel* (April 17, 2021): 24:00-41:00

https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1213675475713669&ref=watch_permalink;

Öcalan, *Liberating Life*.

⁶⁷ Öcalan, *Liberating Life*, 57-59.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

‘housewifization’ in the Neolithic era.⁶⁹ To achieve this woman’s revolution, Öcalan calls for autonomous woman’s organizations: political parties, committees, non-governmental organizations, and defense forces.⁷⁰

In 2005, prior to the official declaration of autonomy in 2012, Yekîtîya Star, an autonomous women’s organization, was founded. It is now known as Kongreya Star.⁷¹ Kongreya Star serves as the umbrella organization for organizing all women’s institutions—which run parallel to the council system and include assemblies, academies, cooperatives, foundations, associations, parties, etc.—to empower women throughout all of NES.⁷² In addition to Kongreya Star are the *Mala Jin* (or women’s houses). These houses are open at all times of day as spaces for women to seek support or safety for resolutions to domestic disputes.⁷³ Each village, in theory, should have at least one *Mala Jin* which should be accessible at all times. These institutions, play an active role in defending, empowering, and liberating women in an attempt to delink from the patriarchal foundations of the state.

The idea driving the philosophy of democratic confederalism is to empower and democratize society to lessen the dependence on the state, and therefore increase freedom. Guney Yildiz captures the philosophy well when he writes, “The confederal system Öcalan envisions is not a confederal arrangement between states but a model where sub-state ‘democratically autonomous’ administrations are linked in a loose political arrangement.” It is

⁶⁹ Maria Mies, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Claudia Von Werlhof, *Women: The Last Colony* (London: Zed Books, 1988); on housewifization see, Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour, Third ed.* (London: Zed Books, 2014), chapters 3, 4: 74-144.

⁷⁰ Abdullah Öcalan, *Liberating Life*, 59.

⁷¹ Michael Knapp, “The Roots of Democratic Autonomy in Northern Syria – Rojava,” 389-90.

⁷² “Kongreya Star and its Committees,” *The Diplomatic Relations Center of Star Congress* (2018): 1-64, at 9.

⁷³ Specifically forced marriage, divorce, and domestic violence, see Tîrêj Fatma and Lisa Michel, “Hidden Battlefields: Rehabilitating ISIS Affiliates and Building a Democratic Culture in their Former Territories,” *Rojava Information Center* (2020): 1-53, 44.

this vision of decentralized power through democratically autonomous sub-state administrations that the AANES is building for a future Syria.

What I have described above is how democratic confederalism is set up to work in theory. Below are transcriptions from conversations with my interlocutors living in NES. I asked each of them the same questions: *“How does the council system actually operate? Do meetings happen consistently or are most decisions made from a centralized source due to the astringencies of war and then implemented down?”* These were their responses. First is Chloe from Rojava Information Center:

CHLOE: At the local commune level, it is not happening on a regular basis at all. Right now, most communes are not having real meetings. Why? Because there’s criticism that a lot of power have been taking out of the communes and has been given to the councils of the district or subdistrict depending on areas if it’s a countryside or city. But these councils, whether at the district level or subdistrict, are meeting on a really regular basis. There, you have people that are going to work every day in the same place every day that see each other.

The thing to keep in mind is that commune system is not like if you’re in the US or Europe, where the 100 people living around you, you probably don’t know their name, no? In the villages, they are in a permanent meeting. Talking to each other, already fixing problems, communicating what’s already happening. For many villages, where maybe the communes may not formally meet often, they are still meeting and talking. The people that do meet and talk at the commune level are those with the responsibility of co-president. They will meet and talk and visit people, deal with problems, and bring the necessary people together when they’re needed.⁷⁴

Posing the same questions to Charlie Qerecox, he explains:

With the council stuff, sadly I’m still very confused with how it works. And I feel that every time I start to get a grasp on things, things get re-organized.

MC: That’s reassuring.

CHARLIE: (Laughter). Yeah, so, the communes meet every week. The idea is for them to be the center of the community, where people go for help. Where they go to if there’s a justice problem that needs dealing with. And for them to be not just something that people come to if it’s a big thing but a part of everyday life.

Each one is designed to be a meeting space. So, in the city you’ll often find big squares in the neighborhoods where people can come in meet. In villages, they’ll often build a little house. And these are meant to be for community functions as well so it’s not just an extra political thing on the side but very much integrated into the daily life of the community. I know people will send

⁷⁴ From an interview I conducted with Rojava Information Center on February 18, 2021.

delegates up. I know at the national level, there are delegates from trade unions, committees and other groups.

The new thing is that there will be professional organizations sending delegates, but I'm not really clear what that means. I'm afraid that's as much detail that I can actually give on this. It's something that I want to have the opportunity to learn more about, but it hasn't come up sadly.

Posing the same questions to Sara, a researcher living east of Qamishli, she explains:

Sara: No one goes to the communes that I know. I didn't have time the last couple weeks, so I sent my interpreter to go. She tried to go five times. Every time the guy wasn't there. For example, she took his number, made an appointment, she went at 10 and they told her he's there at 9. She went the next time at 9 and he wasn't there. Finally, she asked around and everyone told her he doesn't know how to talk and so he doesn't want to talk with you that's why he's avoiding you. Then she went again, and they told her she needs a permit. So, we went to the council to get a permit. They told her, no, you don't need a permit, we'll go to the commune meeting with you. Long story short, I've actually never been to the commune and at least here, they don't meet. They randomly ask the people to be the co-president of the commune. They asked my friend's aunt if she wanted to be the co-president of the commune. They told her, "You don't have to do anything, you just have to attend a meeting once a month."

MC: So, do they not vote on co-presidents?

SARA: No voting is going on, at least in this village. There are supposed to be elections soon; so, we will see.⁷⁵

I provide these anecdotes because I am interested not in how the system operates in theory but in practice. I do not see any of this as an indictment on the administration, but rather, the reality of the conditions in which they are trying to wage their democratic struggle in and the messiness of any world-making project that reaches a certain scale within a hierarchal state-system. What gets lost in most reports on NES is this messiness, patchiness, or inconsistencies in practice. With this basic understanding of the Autonomous Administration's rejection of the state and democratic confederalism in theory and practice, we can turn to the political economy and ecology of North and East Syria.

⁷⁵ From an interview I conducted with Sara on March 27, 2021.

SECTION II: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY

One cannot understand the contradictions and dynamics of North and East Syria without an analysis of its political economy and ecology. To understand its political economy and ecology, we must recognize its embeddedness and late integration in a global economy, its history as a periphery of the Syrian Arab Republic, the intertwining sectarian networks of ethnicity, religion, tribe, and class, and the structural constraints placed on the region and the administration by geography and ecology.⁷⁶ As of now, there is a lacuna of data on the political economy of the administration and of NES. There are several reasons for this. First, it is due to the nature of war-economies, where it is difficult to keep up with the vast amount of money being overtly or covertly spent.⁷⁷ Second, there is a lack of publicly available official information, which has to do with the decentralized nature of the political system of the AANES. Third, given the extraordinary nature and events of this revolution—and the orientalist approaches to the topic—a concrete analysis of the political economy of NES has yet to emerge.

Understanding the political economy and ecology of NES is crucial, however, because the contradictions that emerge are not just that the AANES has a commitment to non-statehood within a capitalist world-system structured by hierarchical state relations. Regardless of their ideological commitments, the AANES is embedded in a world of unequal sovereigns, geographically and artificially blockaded, and embedded in topographical and infrastructural particularities that affect its decisions and institutions and claim as sovereign. By not factoring

⁷⁶ By class, I do not mean income bracket, but rather, the relationship between people around the processes to produce the needs of society; on the late integration compare foreign direct investment (FDI) in Syria compared to neighbors. In 2000, at the transition from Hafez to Bashar, FDI to Syria was around \$270 million. In Jordan, FDI was \$815 million, Tunisia, \$725 million, Egypt \$1.25 billion, World Bank, World Development Indicators Database.

⁷⁷ Samer Abboud, “Syria’s War Economy and Post-War Reconstruction (Video),” *Jadaliyya Reports* (May 4, 2021): <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42702/Syrias-War-Economy-and-Post-War-Reconstruction-with-Samer-Abboud-Video>; Alex De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War, and the Business of Power* (UK: Polity Press, 2015).

political economy and ecology we misassign what is ‘doing the work’. Following Ryan Jobson’s description of the state as “a fiction endowed with magical faculties that obscure its dependence on ancillary actors and infrastructures,” I argue that merely an analysis of ‘the hierarchical state-system’ masks fundamental processes and constraints placed on the Autonomous Administration that an analysis of political economy and ecology empirically name.⁷⁸

To examine the political economy of NES, I spoke to experts, advisors to the Autonomous Administration, and triangulated these conversations with the few extant official reports and reports from third parties.⁷⁹ At this point, this should be the most detailed account of the political economy of NES. This section is organized in four parts: First is a discussion of the topography and the longer metropole-satellite relationship between NES and the Syrian Arab Republic solidified under Hafez al-Assad.⁸⁰ Second is an analysis of the oil economy and a discussion on currency. Third are various sectors of the private economy. Fourth is a look at cooperatives.

The first thing we must comprehend is that when speaking about NES, we have to resist the tendency to homogenize. We must recognize that these cantons are separate regions with

⁷⁸ Ryan Cecil Jobson, "Road Work: Highways and Hegemony in Trinidad and Tobago," *The Journal of Latin America and Caribbean Anthropology* (2018): 457-477, at 460.

⁷⁹ Sinan Hatahet, "The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," *European University Institute* (2019): 1-23; Jihad Yazigi, "Is the Kurdish Autonomist Project Economically Viable in Syria?" (in French), On Syria, The Syrian Economy And A Few Other Issues, *Blog* (November 1, 2015) Accessed April 24, 2021: <https://jihadyazigi.com/2015/11/01/le-projet-autonomiste-kurde-est-il-economiquement-viable-en-syrie/>; Rojava Information Center, trans., "Annual Report of the Executive Council for North and East Syria – 2020," *Rojava Information Center* (February 6, 2021): <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2021/02/annual-report-of-the-executive-council-for-north-and-east-syria-2020/>; Rojava Information Center, "Annual Report of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," *Rojava Information Center* (July 22, 2020): <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/07/annual-report-of-the-autonomous-administration-of-north-and-east-syria/>.

⁸⁰ On Metropole-Satellite, I am drawing on Andre Gunder Frank who writes, “these capitalist contradictions and the historical development of the capitalist system have generated underdevelopment in the peripheral satellites whose economic surplus was expropriated, while generating economic development in the metropolitan centers which appropriate that surplus—and, further, that this process still continues.” See, Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies in Chile and Brazil* (London: Monthly Review, 1967), 3.

different histories, climates, geographies, and particularities. Even within each canton, there are different villages, cities, and conditions. In a conversation with Chloe, she explained to me that in Jazira they grow wheat. As you move westward, to Kobane, you get a mixture of wheat and olives, and in what is now occupied Afrin, are olive fields.⁸¹

The Jazira, which is the easternmost part of North and East Syria and contains al-Hasakah and Qamishli, was a highly strategic area for Hafez and Basher al-Assad and also the poorest region in Syria.⁸² In 2007, half of the Syrian poor were located in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hasakah.⁸³ This concentration of production and poverty was not accidental but foundational to the extraction of wealth from the peripheral region and its movement toward the center (Damascus).⁸⁴ By peripheral, I mean “a region that do[es] not have local control of the process of accumulation, which is therefore mainly shaped by external constraints.”⁸⁵ In this case, the external constraints are the policies of the SAR. The deleterious effects of these policies were heightened by a decade-long drought, which began in 1999, and intensified from 2007 to 2010 to become the most severe three-year drought on instrumental record.⁸⁶ Additionally, intensive monocultural farming devastated the already impoverished region, resulting in 75 percent of households experiencing total crop failure, the abandoning of an estimated 160 to 220

⁸¹ From an interview I conducted on February 18, 2021.

⁸² Myriam Ababsa, “The End of a World Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria (2007-2010),” in *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Vol. 1: Political Economy and International Relations*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015): 199.

⁸³ Hatahet, “The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria,” 15.

⁸⁴ Samir Amin, “Accumulation and Development: A Theoretical Model,” *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 1 (Aug-Nov. 1974): 9-26. This process extends beyond the borders of the Syrian Arab Republic but spills over regionally as NES is a net exporter of grain, cotton, and oil.

⁸⁵ Samir Amin, *Delinking: Toward a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1985), 10.

⁸⁶ Colin P. Kelley, Shahrzad Mohtadi, Mark A. Cane, Richard Seagar, and Yochanan Kushnir, “Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112, no. 11 (2015).

villages, and nearly 300,000 families forcibly displaced to industrial cities such as Aleppo and Damascus.⁸⁷

Historically, the northeast region of Syria, from Amuda to Dirik down south to Hasakah was the breadbasket of Syria.⁸⁸ For perspective, this is all within Jazira, which I argue, was a periphery of the Syrian Arab Republic. The topography of the Jazira is flat, conducive for growing grain, and is responsible for two-thirds of Syria's grain (70 percent of which is wheat) and cotton production and for three quarters of its hydrocarbons.⁸⁹ This region produces the tripartite gold of what Samuel Dolbee notes as the white gold of cotton, the black gold of oil, and the wheat gold of grains.⁹⁰ While responsible for 80% of oil production, grains, and cotton, the region was left dependent on Damascus; not even permitting the mills to grind the wheat, let alone the construction of refineries.⁹¹ Speaking to Charlie Qerecox, he describes this metropole-satellite relation as such:

Economically, the situation is still one inherited from the old regime. It was deliberately designed so there wouldn't be a complete economic system in the North, particularly in Rojava, because there were concerns about future attempts at political autonomy. The idea was if economic autonomy wasn't possible, then political autonomy wouldn't be.⁹²

This is the situation that the administration inherited after declaring autonomy in 2012. Here, I am not suggesting topographical determinism, but I am arguing that the decades of extraction of

⁸⁷ Wadid Erian, Bassam Katlan, and Ouldbdey Babah, "Drought Vulnerability in the Arab Region: Special Case Study: Syria," *Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction* (Geneva: United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2010), 15.

⁸⁸ From an interview I conducted with Thoreau Redcrow on April 22, 2021.

⁸⁹ Ababsa, "The End of a World Drought and Agrarian Transformation in Northeast Syria, 200-201.

⁹⁰ Samuel Dolbee, "After ISIS: Development and Demography in the Jazira," *Crown Center for Middle East Studies* (August 2018): 1-8, 3.

⁹¹ The Syria Report, "Factsheet: The Economy of North-East Syria," *The Syria Report* (October 16, 2019): <https://www.syria-report.com/library/economic-data/factsheet-economy-north-east-syria>; Rojava Information Center, "EXPLAINER: Cooperatives in North East Syria — Developing a New Economy (November 8, 2020): <https://rojivainformationcenter.com/2020/11/explainer-cooperatives-in-north-and-east-syria-developing-a-new-economy/>.

⁹² From an interview I conducted with Charlie on March 4, 2021.

capital, commodities, and the soil, coupled with a devastating drought, set the Autonomous Administration on a path that will take time to delink from.

Given decades of what Andre Gunder Frank calls the ‘national and regional development of underdevelopment’ the AANES has inherited an extractivist, primarily oil-based economy.⁹³

Map 1: North-Eastern Syria Oil fields and Cross-Border Points (15 November 2019)

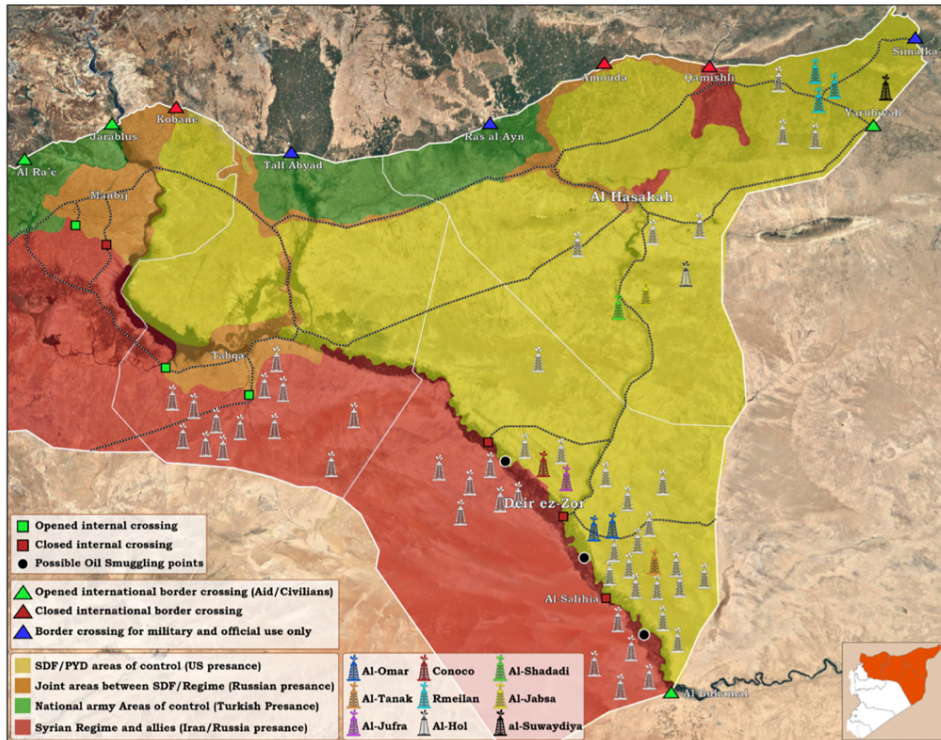


Figure 4: Hatahet, *The Political Economy of the AANES*, 2019

As of 2019, most oilfields in Syria are under the control of the AANES in al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor. These were areas liberated by the YPG/SDF from ISIS. The oil fields in this region were a key source of income for the

Islamic State, producing nearly 50,000 barrels of oil a day, at an estimated \$380-480 million per year.⁹⁴ According to sources in the Energy Authority in the Jazira canton, the autonomous

⁹³ Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment,” 22.

⁹⁴ Quy-Toan Do, Jacob Shapiro, Christopher Elvidge, Mohamed Abdel-Jelil, Daniel Ahn, Kimberly Baugh, Jamie Hansen-Lewis, Mikhail Zhizhin, Morgan Bazilian, “Terrorism, Geopolitics, and Oil Security: Using Remote Sensing to Estimate Oil Production of the Islamic State,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 44 (2019): 411-418, at 416; Keith Crane, “The Role of OIL in ISIL Finances,” *Rand Corporation* (December 2015): 1-8, 3; Rim Turkmani, “ISIL, JAN and the War Economy in Syria,” *London School of Economics and Political Science* (July 30, 2015): 1-32, 16-17.

<http://www.securityintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ISIL-JAN-and-the-war-economy-in-Syria1.pdf>.

administration controls about 1,400 oil wells.⁹⁵ In al-Hasakah, there are four oil fields: Rmelan, al-Suwaydiya, al-Jabsa, and Youssoufia. In Deir ez-Zor, 140 miles to the south, they control four more oil fields: al-Omar, al-Tanak, al-Jufra, and Conoco.⁹⁶

Despite this high concentration of oil wells and extractive activities, there are no refineries in NES. This was a strategic decision by the Syrian Arab Republic that is connected to the policy of maintaining dependency. According to Charlie:

On the oil question, we have very little refining capacity. I think there are some small refineries being set up in the North. But under Assad, the policy was to refine in the south and produce in the north. In order that there would never be an economically viable breakaway state. There is a big refinery in Deir ez-Zor, but I am fairly certain it is destroyed. It's been used as a military base since the start of the war. I think it's just been shelled to crap by everyone. There's also a lot less now, but there used to be localized (primitive) refining which consisted literally of lighting fire under tanks of oil and rendering it down to the thicker fractions. But I believe there was a law passed against that, so it's a lot more limited now simply because it was so horrifically bad for the health of the workers involved and the surrounding area. A large portion of the administration's budget is importing refined Petro products in the same way that large proportion of their income is exporting crude ones. I think that a lot of that does come from Iraqi-Kurdistan, possibly some of it comes from the regime as well. I think most of the exported oil goes to the regime, although they do not want us to be economically viable, like you say, they do still want to have oil so that takes a higher priority. Other things can sometimes be exported to Iraqi-Kurdistan, depending on whether or not that border is open and what sort of traffic its open to.

Ultimately, our relationship to global capital is very dependent on trade. Very dependent on imports for a lot of things. And at the same time, it's very hard to get those things because obviously everything coming from Turkey has to be smuggled. Generally, by the Turkish FSA (Free Syrian Army) factions who are just head-over-heels about any way they can make money.⁹⁷

According to Rojava Information Center, there are currently four relatively stable crossings for trade: Simalka which goes to Başur (Iraqi-Kurdistan); Manbij which goes to areas controlled by Turkish-affiliated Free Syrian Army (FSA groups); Tabqa; and Deir ez-Zor which goes to the SAR.⁹⁸ Given proximity, the AANES sells primarily to Başur (Iraqi-Kurdistan), then

⁹⁵ “The 'Qasd' holds the "Richest...North oil to Kurdistan and the Regime – 2019,” “قصد” “الأغنى” تمسك بـ “قصد” “نفت الشمال إلى ..” *al-Arabiya* (January 8, 2019) accessed April 24, 2021: <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2019/01/08/قصد-تمسك-ب-الأغنى-نفت-الشمال-إلى-كردستان-والنظام>

⁹⁶ Specific details on how much is produced can be found in Hatahet, “The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria,” 9.

⁹⁷ From an interview I conducted with Charlie on April 26, 2021.

⁹⁸ The Syria Report, “Factsheet,” 3.

the Syrian Arab Republic, and lastly to some rebel-held areas.⁹⁹ As a result of not having large refineries, nearly all of the crude oil produced in NES has to be driven to border crossings, sold unrefined, to then be bought back and used domestically. According to Charlie, “Because we are not a ‘real state’ and we have constant embargos, we get very bad prices for oil. Somebody told me once, for every liter of oil that we sell, we can buy less than one liter of pure water.”¹⁰⁰ For Charlie, statehood implies a legitimacy which grants equal footing for trade as well as access to networks that could ease the severity of embargoes. Additionally, there is a concern of longevity with the over-reliance on oil. On July 27, 2007, Abdallah al-Dardari, former deputy prime minister for economic affairs and now UNDP Representative in Afghanistan, warned that Syria is “running out of alternative sources” of revenue and “can no longer depend on oil revenues as we once did.”¹⁰¹ Unless major reserves are found, analysts from NGOs and IFIs project that oil production in Syria will end around 2030.¹⁰² This means the administration is racing the clock to delink and diversify their economy along an independent and popular auto-centered model of development rather than submitting to the ‘imperatives of globalization.’¹⁰³

Another related issue facing the AANES is currency. The administration uses the Syrian lira, which means what affects the Syrian government affects the Autonomous Administration.

⁹⁹ From an interview I conducted with Rojava Information Center, April 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ From an interview I conducted with Charlie on February 20, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012): 31.

¹⁰² See Economist Intelligence Unit, “Syria Country Report,” 8; International Monetary Fund, “Syrian Arab Republic: IMF Article IV Consultation Staff Report,” February 2009, 7 as quoted in Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria*, 30.

¹⁰³ By delinking, I do not mean autarky. Rather, prioritizing the needs of internal development over the demands of external actors. See Samir Amin, “A Note on the Concept of Delinking,” *Review X*, no. 3 (Winter 1987): 435-444, 435-36, 442-43; Max Ajl, “Auto-centered Development and Indigenous Technics: Slaheddine el-Amami and Tunisian Delinking,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 6 (2019): 1240-1263, 1245.

For example, when the U.S. placed an embargo in 2019 via the *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019*, this strangled the Autonomous Administration as well.¹⁰⁴ According to Charlie,

The currency question, still as it is, is the Syrian Pound. Although if you're in the border areas around Dirik, you can pay for things in Iraqi Dinar, as it's cheaper. If you know the right people and you're nearer to Turkey, you can pay for things in Turkish Lira. Some economists explained to me that it would be beneficial for us to create our own currency, but politically speaking it would be a bad move because one of our whole things is not being separatists and wanting to be an autonomous region and wanting to integrate with the rest of the country and just inflect democracy on all of it. Obviously because of that we can't do things like declaring our own currency. At the moment this is a bit of a problem because of U.S. sanctions. Although our areas are technically not part of the sanctions regime, it still affects the exchange rate which affects us quite strongly. And all of the cross-border trade happens in U.S. dollars. So, if you go to Dirik especially, there's dozens of exchange shops and at the end of the day, all of the shop keepers will change their Syrian pounds into dollars, use the dollars to buy imports, and use that stuff for more Syrian pounds. So, effects like changes in exchange rate between the Syrian pound and the dollar have a massive effect on the prices in Syria generally.

Despite whatever benefit the administration may receive in creating their own currency, given their commitment to non-statehood, they have forfeited that option.

I had a longer discussion with Thoreau Redcrow on the various sectors in the economy of NES. Thoreau wrote an 890-page dissertation on NES and was embedded with the PKK for fieldwork from July to December 2014. He regularly visits the region and serves as an advisor to the administration. We discuss an ad hoc trucking industry, a denim industry, and a growing poultry industry. Redcrow explains:

THOREAU: One of the main jobs that everyone does is being a trucker. It is the one job that is almost endless. At any given day, on the roads in Rojava, you'll literally see something like 500 semi-trucks in a row drive by, or you'll come to a roadblock with 600 semi-trucks lined up just holding everything up. Because there is no rail line, there is no real way to transport everything, so it is done by truck. And because Petro is subsidized by the administration, it sort of makes sense to do it that way. What I tried to explain to them is that you need a railroad system because this is not efficient to have every single person driving a truck. On that case, it's a matter of infrastructure, not having the foreign investments to build those railroads.

MC: Which is a function of a geographic and artificial blockade, right?

THOREAU: Exactly. If you let the price of Petro go up to its quote-unquote "natural state", you would not have as much trucking because it would be too expensive to drive giant Petro trucks. And generally, people just pay the driver per trip, not by the hour; it makes sense to just have a

full truck of goods from Kobane to Qamislo arrive every day. So, the internal functioning of the economy is based on trucking.

There is also a huge denim market. They're doing their own denim making. Because of that, everyone is wearing jeans which was not part of the local style, historically.

MC: Fascinating. What were the conditions that allowed for that?

THOREAU: The conditions were that certain areas, especially around Kobane, grew a lot of cotton. And there was already a history of clothes-making in the region. It morphed into a proletarian style because it was practical, long-lasting, and inexpensive to make. Sort of like with farmers in the United States a century ago. Of course, the guys try and do the skinny jeans thing to make it stylish. So, if you go to the bazaars, you'll see really cheap high-quality jeans.

MC: How do you know about the denim, wheat, oil, etc. Was it from being there or have you read reports?

THOREAU: From being there. To my knowledge, there are not reports on this.

Oh, also, they're adding poultry production. They're not huge but they have large barns where you can go in and there's, I don't know, 10,000 chickens running around? They're starting to do that really well.¹⁰⁵

While the private sector and the Autonomous Administration itself are the largest employers in NES, the AANES is building up a communal economy through cooperatives. The cooperatives are developed by three institutions in each canton: Cooperatives Bureaus, economic committees of local Women's Council, and *Aboriya Jin*, the economy branch of Kongra Star.¹⁰⁶

In our discussion on cooperatives, Redcrow explained:

On political economy, they do have cooperatives in NES, but they are small. They're not fully ready to take on a socialist position. And so, they're trying to do a blend of cooperatives and a private industry. For instance, they'll even sell stock into the cooperatives and workers can buy shares into the cooperatives themselves. What it would usually be is one share per person. Let's say twenty people have one share in a yogurt factory. And at the end of the month, we pull everything together, pay the overhead, taxes, and expenses, and then divide the earnings by twenty. They have sort of kept the market model, a quasi-for-profit model, but horizontalized the ownership out among the workers themselves.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ From an interview I conducted with Thoreau Redcrow on April 22, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Rojava Information Center, EXPLAINER: Cooperatives in North East Syria — Developing a New Economy (November 8, 2020).

¹⁰⁷ From an interview I conducted with Thoreau Redcrow on April 22, 2021.

There are two types of cooperatives in NES: worker cooperatives and service cooperatives. Worker cooperatives produce goods (such as wheat, olives, cotton, spices, clothing) in which the profits are distributed among members. Service cooperatives are for collective consumption, such as purchasing diesel-powered generators for a neighborhood or village.¹⁰⁸ The agricultural (worker) cooperatives make up the majority of cooperatives in NES; however, there are other cooperatives such as bakeries, dairy production (like yogurt), small manufacturing, and even a salt mine.¹⁰⁹

The largest concentration of workers cooperatives is between Sera Kaniye (Ras al-Ayn) and Tal Abyad, a seventy-five-mile strip between Kobane and Jazira cantons. However, due to the Turkish invasion and occupation of Afrin in October 2019, most of these cooperatives have been either destroyed, abandoned, or looted.¹¹⁰ While there are not any concrete numbers, especially after the Turkish operations, an educated guess would say there are about one hundred cooperatives in NES. According to Rojava Information Center's 2020 report, the Cooperatives Bureaus actively support forty worker's cooperatives in Jazira through providing startup capital and/or the tools needed for the enterprise (twenty-three in Qamishlo and seventeen in Hasakah) while the *Aboriya Jin* support over fifty worker's cooperatives across all of NES.¹¹¹

In my discussion with Charlie, he discusses working on a coriander farm and the function of the cooperatives in society:

But in terms of where things are going now, all I know is that there's a focus on doing it through cooperatives. The women's movement, particularly, is involved trying to break down the gendered divisions and the division between the reproductive and productive labor within the economy. In order that women are economically empowered as equal participants.

¹⁰⁸ Rojava Information Center, EXPLAINER: Cooperatives in North East Syria — Developing a New Economy (November 8, 2020).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

There has not been a direct getting rid of capitalism as some people have expected. The old system has been allowed to continue. There's been a reliance on it because it controls the productive forces needed for the survival of people in the region. The attempt has been to undercut and undermine capitalist relations with the creation of the cooperatives. One thing that's been cracked down or attempted to be removed is the old feudal elements. A lot of the agricultural lands were owned by the state and then given with very long leases to local loyalist families. Then those families would rent it out to individual farmers. The Administration has declared that those rents are no longer enforceable and in many cases, they've taken the land and given it to the cooperatives to farm.

For example, I helped with the coriander harvest at a village called Çarudi which was previously state-owned land that has been given to them to grow crops on. The coriander they grew was largely for export, but they also have a lot of land that they want to grow wheat on. And they have other projects that create a greater diversity of food; stuff like fish farming or an orchard for fruits.¹¹²

Given the estimated four to five million citizens in NES, cooperatives are marginal when compared to the demands of consumption and production across the region. However, cooperatives play an important role in the revolution in the attempts to diversify the inherited extractivist economies, to delink through enterprises that meet the needs of the people in NES, to lessen the role of capitalism and class antagonisms through communalizing land and industry, and in assuring women's economic and social independence.¹¹³

SUMMARY

Through triangulating interviews with the few reports published on the political economy of North and East Syria, it becomes clear that the AANES finances its budget primarily through crude oil production, taxes, and duties through crossings and checkpoints. Most people are employed by the private sector, followed by the Autonomous Administration itself, and lastly, the cooperatives. Along the countryside is agricultural production, wheat, cotton, olives, poultry, trucking and in the cities are family-run shops and some light industry.

¹¹² Personal communication with Charlie on March 4, 2021.

¹¹³ For an example of this in Raqqa see, "Margherita Orsini, "The Women of Raqqa Are Rebuilding their Future," *Jacobin Mag* (May 30, 2021): <https://jacobinmag.com/2021/05/raqqa-women-blooming-in-the-desert-film/>.

The AANES itself is the single largest employer in NES. According to interviews with officials in the administration by *The Syria Report*, the number of its employees range between 200,000 and 230,000, 100,000 of whom are in the armed forces.¹¹⁴ According to Chloe, many people in NES are also employed in the humanitarian sector, which offers some of the best salaries.¹¹⁵ The monthly budget of AANES is around \$100-110 million, or around \$1.20-1.30 billion per year.¹¹⁶ This budget is spent primarily on security, running institutions such as schools and hospitals, and post-conflict reconstruction such as repairing irrigation canals, dams, and buildings.

In tracing the contradictions that emerge out of a commitment to nonstatehood in a hierarchical state-system, it imperative to foreground this analysis in the political economy and ecology of NES because these are the material conditions that the administration is operating in and constrained by. The AANES is embedded in a world of unequal sovereigns, geographically and artificially blockaded, and has inherited a dependent-extractivist oil economy from decades of regional development of underdevelopment. These webs of embeddedness and dependency limit the administration's autonomy and claim as sovereign. However, if the AANES, and more importantly, the producing masses in NES, can make the decisions concerning the processes to meet the needs of society, the administration can, as Max Ajl argues, "fill the shell of formal sovereignty with social substance" and this can be done beyond the state.¹¹⁷ With the political

¹¹⁴ The average salary for these fighters are SYP 60-70,000 per month, which is equivalent to around \$100 see, The Syria Report, "Factsheet: The Economy of North-East Syria, 2. According to official reports from the Administration elsewhere, the number is higher at 250,000, see, RIC, "Annual Report of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," *Rojava Information Center* (July 22, 2020): <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/07/annual-report-of-the-autonomous-administration-of-north-and-east-syria/>

¹¹⁵ Personal communication with Rojava Information Center on April 25, 2021.

¹¹⁶ The Syria Report, "Factsheet," 2.

¹¹⁷ Ajl, Auto-centered development and indigenous technics: Slaheddine el-Amami and Tunisian delinking," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 6 (2019): 1240-1263, 1246.

economy and ecology factored in, let us turn to our first area of investigation: the international peace process.

SECTION III: THREE AREAS OF INVESTIGATION

AREA 1: INTERNATIONAL PEACE PROCESS

The Syrian Civil War has raged for a decade. According to Staffan de Mistura, the UN Envoy for Syria from 2014 to 2019, an estimated 400,000 people have died, 6.6 million have been internally displaced, and 80 percent of the population are living in poverty.¹¹⁸ As the conflict became increasingly entrenched, so have the many failed attempts at a political solution through peace talks. In this section, I begin with a brief account of the main actors and the history of the multiple peace talks. Then discuss with my interlocutors why the AA has not been invited. Lastly, I look at ways that the AA has utilized the framework of the peace talks to increase their legitimacy.

The main protagonists of the peace talks have been the Syrian government, the opposition, the UN Security Council, and what I am referring to as the Big Four (the U.S., Russia, Turkey, and Iran). For the opposition, there is an international and national component. The most widely recognized international opposition—made up of prominent Syrians and intellectuals who left/fled the country—is the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and

¹¹⁸ UNHCR, “Syria Emergency,” (April 2018): <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html#:~:text=Over%205.6%20million%20people%20have,continues%2C%20hope%20is%20fading%20fast>; al-Jazeera, “Syria Death Toll: UN Envoy Estimates 400,000 Killed,” *al-Jazeera* (April 23, 2016): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/4/23/syria-death-toll-un-envoy-estimates-400000-killed>; “‘We Can’t Continue Like This’: UN Envoy’s Grim Assessment of Syria Peace Process,” *UN* (January 29, 2021) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1083412>. According to a May 2020 report by the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, there has been an estimated 384,000 to 586,100 casualties, with over 100,000 being civilians, see Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, “Syrian Revolution Nine Years On: 586,100 Persons Killed and Millions of Syrians Displaced and Injured,” (May 15, 2020): <https://www.syriaohr.com/en/157193/>

Opposition Forces (or Syrian Opposition Coalition; SOC).¹¹⁹ From within Syria, there was the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) and the “Building the Syrian State” (BSS). In 2016, both the international and national components formed the High Negotiations Committee (HNC). The HNC is now the umbrella organization representing the opposition. Regarding the UN Security Council, it is the veto power of the P5 (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US) that has remained the biggest opposition to a negotiated peace. Lastly, the Big Four (U.S., Russia, Turkey, and Iran) who are all militarily involved in Syria, hold the most decision-making power in the negotiations.

The first attempt to manage the crisis was a regional effort led by the Arab League in November 2011. They drafted a thirteen-point plan which was rejected by the Syrian government. In June 2012, the UN picked up the mantle with their Geneva I process. From February 23 to August 31, Kofi Annan, served as the UN and Arab League Envoy to Syria. Under his tenure, he attempted a six-point plan that demanded a ceasefire by all parties, the facilitating of humanitarian aid, freeing all detainees, freeing all political activists, ensuring the right to peacefully assemble, and permitting the freedom of the press. However, Geneva I failed after demands for a transitional government without Assad was rejected by Russia (among the P5).¹²⁰

Under Annan’s tenure, French President Nicolas Sarkozy formed a “Friends of Syria Group,” which began as a coalition of seventy countries—eventually incorporated 114—whose aim was to form the basis of a future transitional government.¹²¹ They met four times in 2012 in Tunisia, Istanbul, Paris, and Marrakesh. In the end, however, their demands were vetoed by

¹¹⁹ Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying A Nation: The Civil War in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 144.

¹²⁰ Sinem Cengiz, "Assessing the Astana," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7, no. 2 (2020): 200-214, 205-206.

¹²¹ Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, 142.

Russia and China. In August 2012, Kofi Annan stepped down as UN Envoy and Lakhdar Brahimi replaced him. Brahimi maintained a similar approach to the peace process. However, he aimed to solve the conflict under the auspices of the U.S. and Russia.¹²² After two years of stalled negotiations over who is welcome to the negotiating table and increased fragmentation among the opposition on the battlefield, Geneva II failed.

In July 2014, Brahimi stepped down and was replaced by Staffan de Mistura. De Mistura formed the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), a group of twenty states and international organizations, attempting to build international pressure and momentum. Beyond the ISSG, talks were held in Vienna, Austria, Lausanne, Switzerland, Astana, and Doha. The Vienna talks, in 2015, brought together the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran.¹²³ The Lausanne talks, in 2016, brought together ministers of Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Iran. The Astana talks, in December 2016, brought together Russia, Turkey, and Iran.¹²⁴ It is the Astana Process that has received the most commentary, with the recognition that as the three actors that are militarily involved in Syria, they have the material ability to enact their version of peace.¹²⁵ By 2018, de Mistura resigned and was replaced by Geir Pederson who is the current UN Envoy.

The most recent additions to the peace talks are the Doha talks and the Syrian Constitutional Committee. The Doha Talks, held in March 2021, brought together Turkey, Russia, and Qatar and are essentially the Astana Process minus Iran in what appears to be an

¹²² Samer Abboud, "Making Peace to Sustain War: the Astana Process and Syria's Illiberal Peace," *Peacebuilding* (2021): 1-18, 9.

¹²³ Cengiz, "Assessing the Astana, 206.

¹²⁴ Charles Thépaut, "The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (April 28, 2020): <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/astana-process-flexible-fragile-showcase-russia>

¹²⁵ Abboud, "Making Peace to Sustain War: the Astana Process and Syria's Illiberal Peace." Hawar News, "Astana Meetings Further Complicate Syrian Crisis," *Hawar News Agency* (February 27, 2021): <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/astana-meetings-further-complicate-syrian-crisis-h23174.html>;

attempt to sideline Iran from future negotiations.¹²⁶ The Syrian Constitutional Committee, convened on October 30, 2019, is along the UN track. The Syrian Constitutional Committee is made up 150 seats: fifty granted to the Syrian Government, fifty to the UN, and fifty to the Syrian Opposition. Thus far, the scope of the peace talks has been limited to orchestrating ceasefires or creating de-escalation zones. After four UN envoys, over thirty official meetings, and a decade later, none of the talks have achieved the overarching aims of reaching a political solution to the crisis.¹²⁷

The guiding framework across all the peace talks, since December 2015, is UN Council Resolution 2254.¹²⁸ This resolution is invoked by all parties. The resolution begins by reaffirming “its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic,” and argues that “the only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people...”¹²⁹ However, for the AANES, a non-state actor with de facto control over a third of what the international community recognizes as Syria, it has

¹²⁶ Amber Zaman, "Turkey, Russia, Qatar push for Unlikely New Syria Peace Track," *al-Monitor* (March 11, 2021): <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/03/turkey-russia-qatar-push-syria-resolution.html#ixzz6otKHaqvU>; Turkey, Russia, Qatar to push for political resolution in Syria," *Reuters* (March 11, 2021): <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-qatar-aid/turkey-russia-qatar-to-push-for-political-resolution-in-syria-idUSKBN2B31QH>; Hawar News, "Astana Meetings Further Complicate Syrian Crisis," *Hawar News Agency* (February 27, 2021): <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/astana-meetings-further-complicate-syrian-crisis-h23174.html>.

¹²⁷ Kofi Annan: February 23, 2012 to August 31, 2012; Lakhdar Brahimi: September 1, 2012 to May 31, 2014; Staffan de Mistura: May 31, 2014 to October 31, 2018; Geir Otto Pedersen: October 31, 2018 to the present.

¹²⁸ "UN Security Council Resolution 2254, (December 18, 2015): <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>; ANF, "New Round of Syria Talks in Geneva," *ANF English* (August 24, 2020): <https://anfenglish.com/news/new-round-of-syria-talks-in-geneva-46166>

¹²⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015 (Accessed April 7, 2021): https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf

been unable to receive a seat at the table.¹³⁰ Speaking to my interlocutors, I ask five of them the same sets of questions:

Why hasn't the Autonomous Administration or the Syrian Democratic Council been recognized at international peace talks? Is it because they are stateless? Who are the spoilers? Is there a bloc or a group arguing for their inclusion? And tangentially, to your knowledge, what do you know about the Syrian Peace Process? Since there's a Geneva Track, an Astana process with Turkey, Iran, and Russia, and appears to be new ones appearing every few months.

According to Charlie:

CHARLIE: I've not really put in the effort to keep up with the detail and the minutia of the peace processes because there's a lot of it and also because I don't see any of it coming to fruition anytime soon. My understanding of it is that nobody involved in that is to make peace. Everyone's aim is rather to see that their group of proxies gets the best result and that therefore they get the best position in terms of control over Syria after the war. Within that, everybody is working in their own interests. And I think that's a big reason why the AA has not been recognized within that yet. Because our only real sponsor at the talks is the US; and the United States does not want to further split with Turkey.

Turkey obviously being a key part of NATO; a key provider of airbases to the Americans; and a key bulwark against Russian influence in the region. To recognize the SDC at the peace talks is to cross a red line with the Turkish state. Obviously, the Russians don't want to recognize us because their goal is to have Assad in control of the whole country. Much as they play nicely with us sometimes.

Turkey and Iran don't like us that much. We lack a state guarantor and I think that is really what has stopped us from being part of those talks. My understanding is that a lot of the Islamist factions in Idlib are recognized there. Although they have claims of statehood, they are not considered a state and don't have that legitimacy internationally, but because they are the chosen proxies of one of the actors at those peace talks, Turkey, they still get included.¹³¹

Wladimir, an academic who researches Kurdistan explains:

WLADIMIR: The spoiler is Turkey. Turkey has opposed it and even Russia and the US gave some promises that they would include them but in the end, they didn't. I feel the main real reason is Turkey because if Turkey isn't supporting the opposition to join the peace talks then there will be no peace talks. Even the UN is making concessions to Turkey in this regard. So, either they say they are part of the regime or an opposition delegation but the SDF and the PYD and the SDC and the AA don't want to be part of either the regime or the opposition because they have their own project, but this is not accepted.¹³²

¹³⁰ ANF, "Astana Talks will Fail," *ANF English* (January 15, 2017): <https://anfenglish.com/kurdistan/astana-talks-will-fail-18016>; Mazlum Abdi, "Mazlum Abdi: Autonomous Administration Must be Recognized," *ANF English* (February 17, 2020): <https://anfenglish.com/rojawa-syria/mazlum-abdi-autonomous-administration-must-be-recognised-41683>.

¹³¹ From an interview I conducted with Charlie on March 4, 2021.

¹³² From an interview I conducted with Wladimir on February 10, 2021.

According to Chloe and Sasha from Rojava Information Center:

CHLOE: On the one side you have this government (Turkey) that is pushing for them not to be invited because you don't want legitimacy to be recognized to this region. On the other side, you have the opposition that is also not willing to recognize this government (the AA) and having lots of antagonisms between the two forces. So, the compromise was just to bring Kurdish individuals as individuals. The reason they aren't recognizing the AA is because they know if they invite the AA as an entity, it will give them legitimacy.

MC: That's how I see it as well from my distance. Sasha, is there anything you want to add?

SASHA: No, the point you made earlier was very good. Everything that is being done now is being done, what's the word...to have an excuse later on to dismiss this entire project later on.

MC: Do you know if the AA has been invited as part of the opposition bloc or turned down? I've been searching but haven't found it.

CHLOE: Umm

SASHA: I've never heard it.

CHLOE: I remember at one point a few individuals were invited but they refused because they demanded to be recognized as the AA and the SDC. They don't want to be invited as the AA but as the SDC whose aim is to achieve a democratic solution for Syria.¹³³

In a conversation with Jake, a researcher on the SDF and on conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa:

JAKE: Turkey is more than willing to have HTS representatives, but they are terrified of this project getting any legitimacy. For valid reasons, I know why they're scared. I think they're blocking it. They don't want people to see a third way in Syria.¹³⁴

Confirming Jake's point, in a later conversation with Charlie, he adds:

CHARLIE: Regarding the talks, I think both Geneva and Astana have representatives that have stateless people that are basically Islamist factions. I think they're called the Syrian National Conference, which effectively are an attempt to form a government in exile and to give legitimacy to the whole thing. I don't know if HTS is involved because they are diplomatically problematic, even for Turkey. I think that direct involvement of them would be pushing it for the other countries.¹³⁵

According to all five of my interlocutors, the unanimous spoiler for the inclusion of the SDC is Turkey. This is a function of a hierarchy present within the Big Four. As my interlocutors

¹³³ From an interview I conducted with Rojava Information Center on February 18, 2021.

¹³⁴ From an interview with Jake on February 10, 2021.

¹³⁵ From an interview I conducted with Charlie on April 26, 2021.

suggest, Turkey is the primary spoiler, over and against the most powerful state in the world-system, the United States. What accounts for this dynamic? I do not claim this to be exhaustive but below I sketch three factors at work. The first is refugee politics and the EU-Turkey ‘refugee deal.’ Within the backdrop of widespread nativism and panic across Europe, the European Union and Turkey struck a deal in March 2016. This refugee deal offers concessions and benefits to Turkey for hosting displaced refugees with the aim to stop the flow of refugees to Europe. For Turkey’s compliance, the EU has agreed to resettle Syrian refugees on a one-to-one basis, to pay €6 billion in aid, to reopen Turkey’s case for ascendency to the EU, and to grant visa liberalization to Turkish citizens for free movement through the Schengen area.¹³⁶ Speaking to Wladimir about Turkey’s influence, he explains:

WLADIMIR: Many members of the international coalition want to have a relationship with Turkey because of the refugees. Turkey is using refugees as a tool of manipulation against European countries. And this deal is a cheaper way for European countries to keep refugees out. So, they don’t want to risk upsetting Turkey by recognizing the Autonomous Administration.¹³⁷

This fear That Wladimir hints at is not unfounded. On November 16, 2016, speaking to EU officials, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hinted, “We can open the doors to Greece and Bulgaria anytime and we can put the refugees on buses ... So, how will you deal with refugees if you don’t get a deal? Kill the refugees?”¹³⁹

Second is the strategic importance of the Incirlik Air Base. Since 1956, Incirlik was a crucial base for the U.S.’ ambitions in containing the USSR. In the early 2000s, it was a central

¹³⁶ Kyilah Terry, “The EU-Turkey Deal, Five Years On: A Frayed and Controversial but Enduring Blueprint,” *Migration Policy Institute* (April 8, 2021): <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/eu-turkey-deal-five-years-on>; Beken Saatçioğlu, “The European Union’s Refugee Crisis and Functionalism in EU-Turkey Relations,” *Turkish Studies* (2019): 1-19. The Schengen Area is a passport-free zone across the shared borders of twenty-six European countries.

¹³⁷ From an interview I conducted with Wladimir on February 10, 2021.

¹³⁹ Reuters Staff, “Turkey’s Erdogan Threatened to Flood Europe with Migrants: Greek Website,” *Reuters* (February 8, 2016): <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-eu-turkey/turkeys-erdogan-threatened-to-flood-europe-with-migrants-greek-website-idUSKCN0VH1R0>.

hub for U.S. deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since 2014, Incirlik air base has been used in operations against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. Lastly, it holds at least fifty B61 nuclear bombs on behalf of NATO.¹⁴⁰ In short, Turkey has made itself geopolitically necessary.

The third factor is that each sovereign has what they want to gain and what they want to block from other would-be sovereigns. Charlie explains this factor:

CQ: Turkey has a lot of things going for it geopolitically. Everyone has not just the things their wanting to gain but things they're wanting to deny to competitors, particularly with the US and Russia. So, it's not that the US wants to keep those military bases and nuclear points into the doorway into the Middle East. It's that Russia wants to remove those bases and therefore reduce US influence in the Middle East and increase their influence primarily through Iran.¹⁴¹

When I began this research, I had assumed the reason the SDC had not been invited was because they were not a recognized state and that this was an example of the contradictions of non-statehood in a hierarchical state-system. However, according to Charlie and Jake, there are stateless groups who have been invited, specifically the HTS and other stateless groups from Idlib. The reason the SDC has not been invited to the negotiating table is not that they are stateless. Instead, to be invited to the peace talks requires the backing of a recognized state. The U.S. is the most likely candidate to sponsor the SDC. However, doing so risks crossing a red line with Turkey who sees the project of democratic confederalism along their border as a threat to their security. While statehood makes recognition among unequal sovereigns easier, it is not a prerequisite.

¹⁴⁰ TRT Staff, "Why are US Military Bases in Turkey so Crucial to Washington?," *TRT World* (December 16, 2019: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-are-us-military-bases-in-turkey-so-crucial-for-washington-32243>).

¹⁴¹ From an interview I conducted with Charlie on March 4, 2021.

Invoking UN Security Council Resolution 2254 has been a discourse of legitimation for the Autonomous Administration. In January of 2018, the General Command of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) released a statement invoking Council Resolution 2254:

We in the Syrian Democratic Forces are a peaceful movement focused on defeating Daesh (ISIS) and bringing stability to Syria consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. We seek a unified Syria, at peace with its neighbours. We harbour no hostility towards anyone other than Daesh, which, thanks to our heroic fighters, has one foot in the grave.¹⁴³

Here, we see the SDF connecting their historic sacrifices and fight against Daesh—in which they are partnered with a global coalition of 77-nation states—to the broader aims of the Security Council Resolution 2254 as an act of legitimizing themselves and positioning themselves as a necessary component of the international legal framework of the peace talks. Similarly, Mazloum Abdi, the commander-in-chief of the SDF, critiques the latest development of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, arguing that its composition does not comply with its own Security Council Resolution 2254 in which “relevant groups must be represented in this committee. That is why we say that there must be a Syrian solution, a Syrian constitution and dialogue for Syria.”¹⁴⁴

Similarly, Ilham Ehmed, the co-president of the executive council of the AANES argues:

Undoubtedly, this work and the constitutional committee are carried out not by the Syrian peoples, but by the alliance between the states. Therefore, the work of the constitutional committee will also be an agreement between states. Without Turkey's consent there is no inclusion in this committee. They did not include neither the MSD (Kurdish for SDC) nor the Autonomous Administration. There is no progress so far in the constitutional committee talks. All Syrian public components and opposition representatives should participate in such a strategic and important work. On this basis, general principles should be observed, and a common constitution should be achieved, not a referendum. The right of a nation cannot undergo a referendum. If a constitution is created with the existing committee, it will not serve the Syrian peoples.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ ANF, “SDF: If Attacked, We Will Defend Ourselves and our People.”

¹⁴⁴ Mazlum Abdi, “Mazlum Abdi: Autonomous Administration Must be Recognized”.

¹⁴⁵ Mustafa Çoban, Ilham Ehmed: Our Goal in the New Year is to End Occupation, *ANF News* (January 2, 2021): <https://anfenglish.com/rojava-syria/ilham-ehmed-our-goal-in-the-new-year-is-to-end-occupation-49062>

So far, the attempts of the SDF have not led to an invite and unless something drastic happens, they will remain sidelined. This exclusion is because no other sovereign has the political will nor sees it in their interest to have the AANES there. While statehood is not a prerequisite to inclusion, the AANES' assertion of non-state sovereignty has complicated their access to make their claim of sovereignty.

AREA OF INVESTIGATION II: INTERNATIONAL AID

SASHA: Syria has three or four worlds within it. Living here is not the same as living in other parts. And as we all know, they're completely different systems. And yet, according to the international community, there is one state because there is one government. If you want to do anything, you talk to this one government.

I think aid is a very important issue. A lot of projects can't be realized simply because that aid would have to go through Damascus. Corona especially...I haven't been here for the worst of it; I don't know how it was. But I imagine a lot of relief couldn't get here. Whenever there's a vaccine, I don't know how that is going to happen.¹⁴⁶

The second area of investigation is international aid, heightened in a global pandemic.

The basic issue is that intergovernmental organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) have a policy to work through recognized channels. For NES, this means that any aid must first come through Damascus. Historically, however, this is a state that, at best, has treated its predominately Kurdish areas as an afterthought, and at worst, actively exploits as subjects.

Recall in 1962, 120,000 to 350,000 Kurds had their citizenship stripped during the Arabization of Syria under Decree no. 93 which carried over to their descendants.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ From an interview I conducted with Sasha on February 18, 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Eval Zisser, "The Kurds in Syria: Caught Between the Struggle for Civil Equality and the Search for National Identity," in *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*, ed. Ofra Bengia (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015): 193-214, 200-201; Marcus, *Blood and Belief*, 61; Bill Berkeley, "Stateless People, Violent States," *World Policy Journal* 26 (2009), 3-15; David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds, Revised ed.* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2014), 474-475.

Being in a peripheral non-state in the Global South during a global pandemic, where access to personal protective equipment (PPE), vaccinations, and the infrastructure for treatment are scarce, has resulted in catastrophe.¹⁴⁸ As of May 5, 2021, in NES, there have been a reported 16,319 COVID cases, 1,673 people have recovered, and 636 have died.¹⁴⁹ The WHO has delivered its first batch of 256,800 COVID-19 vaccines to Syria.¹⁵⁰ However, according to Ciwan Mustaf, the co-chair of the Health Committee in NES, out of the 256,800 vaccines, only 645 doses were delivered to NES which he described as “an insult to the (five million) people of the region” and “contrary to the values and principles of the WHO.”¹⁵¹ Given the embargos, lack of resources, and recognition, this data is under-representative of how dire the situation is.

According to Charlie,

CHARLIE: It’s been a big problem with Corona. Early on, we were not getting any tests because all of the tests that were being shared internationally were being sent to Damascus. And the regime actually transferred people into areas under our control who had Corona and the WHO was aware of this but saw no need to tell us because they saw it only as an intrastate transfer. Like, they didn’t recognize any borders being crossed so they thought it was fine.¹⁵²

A recent Rojava Information Center report explains the contradictions well:

The pandemic has exposed the severe consequences of not having a state. The international nation-state system has proven utterly inefficient in providing for those whose status falls short of the only accepted political form, even when that means abandoning entire societies to the mercy of pandemics or dictatorial regimes. Instead of fulfilling its impartial humanitarian role, the UN and its agencies have catered to regional and global powers who get to decide which populations are allowed self-determination—and with it, access to the rights and benefits that come with an internationally recognized status. As Salih Muslim, a prominent politician in the AANES, described the situation, “the UN chooses to work with governments and not with peoples.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suwandi, “COVID-19 and Catastrophe Capitalism,” *Monthly Review* (June 1, 2020): <https://monthlyreview.org/2020/06/01/covid-19-and-catastrophe-capitalism/>; COVID-19 Response Team, “Report 12: The Global Impact of COVID-19 and Strategies for Mitigation and Suppression,” *Imperial College* (2020): 1-18, 3-4, 11 <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/medicine/mrc-gida/2020-03-26-COVID19-Report-12.pdf>

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ ANF, “WHO Sent Only 645 Doses of COVID-19 Vaccines to North-East Syria,” *ANF News* (May 5, 2021): <https://anfenglish.com/rojava-syria/who-sent-only-645-doses-of-covid-19-vaccines-to-north-east-syria-51845>

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² From an interview I conducted with Charlie on March 4, 2021.

¹⁵³ Rojava Information Center, “Open Democracy – Rojava Statelessness in a Time of Pandemic,” May 19, 2020: <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2020/05/open-democracy-rojava-statelessness-in-a-time-of-pandemic/>.

In my discussion with Sara, she argues:

SARA: The aid thing is a huge problem. I spoke to the Red Cross in Switzerland, and they say we know that this is a problem. We know that Damascus isn't letting anything through. But this is our policy.

MC: Right. And I haven't been able to find out a precise reason why.

SARA: They say they have always only worked with a state. And since it's not a state, they cannot work with them.

MC: And I haven't been able to locate a reason why beyond, 'this is how we've always done it. Everyone else does it so this is our policy.' So, then my question is, what does this do for other movements and groups that do not want statehood but want to seek self-determination. It constrains them or forces them to function like a state.

SARA: And that's totally what the administration has done.¹⁵⁴

Given the level of development the Autonomous Administration has achieved in its revolution, it is the de facto sovereign over North and East Syria. This means the people under its de facto jurisdiction expect it to provide health care. However, given the AA's lack of recognition, its ability to provide this function is hindered and their claim as sovereigns has been ignored. The policies of IGOs to work solely with representatives of states function to discipline movements to take up the mantle of the state rather than asserting and enacting sovereignty beyond the state.

¹⁵⁴ From an interview I conducted with Sara on March 27, 2021.

AREA OF INVESTIGATION III: REPATRIATION OF ISIS FIGHTERS

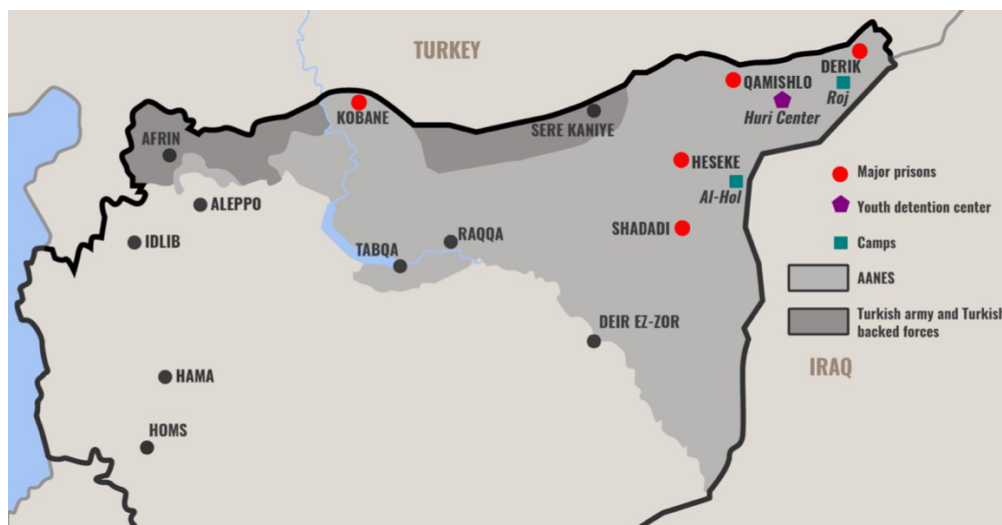


Figure 5: Major Detention Centers for Suspected and Affiliates, November 2020, RIC

The third area of investigation is the repatriation of ISIS fighters. On March 23, 2019, the SDF declared victory over the Islamic State. After the battle in Baghouz, thousands of ISIS fighters surrendered. In two months, from January to March 2019, the number of ISIS fighters in AANES detentions skyrocketed from 1,500 to 11,000. Additionally, 72,000 women and children were brought to camps in al-Hol, a refugee camp in Hasakah (in Qamishlo).¹⁵⁵ Hol was originally designed to support 20,000 people but is now at triple-capacity resulting in horrid conditions. In a report by the WHO from May to June 2019, there were reports of leishmaniasis, measles, acute malnutrition, and acute diarrhea.¹⁵⁶

According to an interview with camp authorities from the AA, it costs \$10 per person, i.e., over \$700,000 a day, or over \$250,000,000 annually.¹⁵⁷ In a conversation with Chloe, I asked her

¹⁵⁵ Rojava Information Center, “Bringing ISIS to Justice: Towards an International Tribunal in North East Syria,” Rojava Information Center (2019): 1-44, 13.

¹⁵⁶ WHO, “Syria Crisis – WHO’s Response in Al-Hol Camp, Al-Hasakeh Governorate,” *Issue 8* (May 25-June 7, 2019): <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crisis-whos-response-al-hol-camp-al-hasakeh-governorate-issue-8-25>

¹⁵⁷ Rojava Information Center, “Bringing ISIS to Justice: Towards an International Tribunal in North East Syria,” Rojava Information Center (2019): 1-44, 13.

the ways that she has seen the Autonomous Administration seek legitimacy. In her response, she brought up the fight against ISIS and the repatriation of ISIS affiliates:

CHLOE: I think the first and the most important was always emphasizing the role the Kurdish fighters the SDF/YPG/YPJ played into defeating ISIS. And changing the war from defeating terrorism blah, blah, blah. Sorry, maybe I shouldn't say 'blah, blah, blah' (laughter). This aspect of the roles being played here by people who have given their lives in this fight. I think, because of this, in general, people know the Kurds. Most of the people have heard about here; know about the Kurdish women who fought against crazy jihadists and defended Kobane.

There are also the thousands of foreign national fighters of ISIS fighters that are now detained in camps in NES. Through these talks for repatriation, where delegations of government actors come from other countries to NES to get the children. When you have a stateless actor that is desperately looking for recognition and legitimacy; just the fact that people are coming from outside, crossing your border, and sitting in your office is big. Trying to get people to come to NES for repatriation is another.

Another way of gaining this legitimacy is the idea of an international tribunal court. This idea came up after a realization that these countries aren't coming back and it's crazy expensive to keep the people alive and provide their daily needs and provide security.

MC: Is anyone helping with money/security while they're just waiting?

CHLOE: For security; yes. The US-coalition is partially providing for but not fully, even if it's not officially said here. But in al-Hol camp which has 60,000 people, there are some NGOs that are working there but they're underfunded. And who would want to donate to an NGO supporting children of Daesh? They would like to help but if they discuss it, they lose donations.

So, why an international court? Because you'll never get repatriation. So, you hold your own international court and get support from countries, hoping that this court happening here with the help of international lawyers and international state actors, would help you to gain legitimacy. This idea started two years ago [2019]; after the end of the territorial fight and territorial defeat of ISIS. For two years, this thing has been spoken about and there's been delegations in Europe; and there are states that have given support like recently Sweden. But it has not gained traction.

The Autonomous Administration is in a vicious circle of trying to gain international support but also not doing much and starting to lose the support of the people locally. We even suggested, as Rojava Information Center, that they should just start trying people. Once they place one English, one American, one French, one Swedish foreign fighter in a tribunal, these states would have to say something. But there's this fear that if they don't act according to international law and how diplomatic relations usually go; this could blow-up in their faces.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ From an interview I conducted with Rojava Information Center on February 18, 2021.

The AANES is caught in a double bind: Step out of international norms to resolve the impasse by trying ISIS fighters, and risk ostracizing itself from the international community. Or continue to wait on the international community, at \$700,000 a day, and lose internal support for not taking action. An even more harrowing alternative is: continue waiting on the international community, risk a security breach, and ISIS reemerges. According to authorities at al Hol Camp, in 2020, they have stopped over 800 escape attempts.¹⁵⁹ It is a tinder box waiting to light.

On March 25, 2019, the AANES held a commission to decide how to proceed. According to Emel Dada, the co-chair of the Foreign Relations Bureau of the AANES, delegations from France, Russia, and Sudan have visited the region and repatriated a couple children of fighters. Regarding the tens of thousands of fighters and their families, she declared, “the responsibility is not only for us, but for the whole world. At the moment, we have jihadists from 54 countries, excluding Arab states, imprisoned in our territory.”¹⁶⁰ The AANES have repeatedly proposed hosting an international congress in NES territory before an international court. According to Dr. Abdulkarim Omar, the co-chair of the Foreign Affairs Bureau for the AANES, “The crime scenes are here, the ISIS members have been arrested here. Therefore, we think that these persons should be tried here before an international court.”¹⁶¹ However, an international court in NES faces unprecedented legal hurdles. First and foremost being non-recognition among a world of unequal sovereigns. Zozan Allush, co-chair of the Humanitarian Affair Council of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, puts it like this:

As a result of our negotiations, we have seen that no state is serious about this issue. They all say, “do what you feel appropriate according to your own state.” But it does not work like that. The reality is not this, they are your citizens, you have to take and judge them in your own country.

¹⁵⁹ Fatma and Michel, “Hidden Battlefields,” 10.

¹⁶⁰ ANF, “Autonomous Administration Proposes Congress on ISIS Prisoners,” *ANF News* (April 6, 2019): <https://anfenglishmobile.com/rojawa-northern-syria/autonomous-administration-proposes-congress-on-isis-prisoners-34132>

¹⁶¹ ANF, “ISIS Prisoners Will Either Be Returned Home or Tried Here,” *ANF* (April 20, 2019): <https://anfenglish.com/features/jailed-isis-members-will-either-be-returned-home-or-tried-here-34430>.

How can we try and judge these people? They [the foreign governments] have not recognized our administration so far. So, on this point we are discussing the alternative of an international court.¹⁶²

In a conversation with Sasha and Chloe from Rojava Information Center, Sasha discusses the way that the AA has tried to leverage diplomatic delegations as a means of increasing their legitimacy:

SASHA: The number of delegations that have come is important. But most of these delegations make very clear that they're just there for the children; and not going to be engaging in any other political talks while there. The talks are limited to the conditions of the children and how to physically transfer them to their government and logistics to get them back to their country. And most of these envoys are not high-target individuals but like the undersecretary of the ministry of 'blahblahblah'.

On one side, the countries don't want to repatriate these people. For example, in France, there was a plan to bring back 400 captured fighters; tickets purchased, and planes prepared, but at the last moment they canceled everything because of political questions. The optics of being a country that brings back all these terrorist fighters.

MC: Sounds like the optics was too much for them.

SASHA: Yes, it's the optics; but also, it's hard to try someone unless you have a ton of evidence. And depending on where you are, it's near impossible to try someone in a foreign country when they've only done something there.

MC: Yeah, when it's not in your jurisdiction.

SASHA: Exactly.¹⁶³

While being a state would not solve all the legal questions of jurisdiction and international law, the Autonomous Administration's commitment to non-statehood has complicated an already ambiguous process. Despite these difficulties and legal ambiguities, representatives of the administration have attempted to leverage the crisis in such a way as to increase their legitimacy among a world of unequal sovereigns.

¹⁶² Beritan Sarya, "DAESH Prisoners Exist, They Are People and A Solution is Needed," *ANF News* (March 13, 2019): <https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/daesh-prisoners-exist-they-are-people-and-a-solution-is-needed-33555>.

¹⁶³ From an interview I conducted with Rojava Information Center on February 18, 2021.

CONCLUSION

The four questions driving my research were: *Can sovereignty exist beyond the state? And if so, what are the contradictions that emerge in a hierarchical state-system? Second, how has this hierarchical state-system structured the counterhegemonic worldmaking project of democratic confederalism in NES? Third, how has the AANES sought to increase their legitimacy, to what audiences, and why? Upon what justifications, discourses, and venues do their bids rest? Fourth, what does this project reveal about sovereignty, the state, and the production of a coherent hierarchical state-system?* I argued that there can be assertions of non-state sovereignty, and that this is a framework for understanding democratic confederalism in NES. However, if a movement achieves a certain level of success, due to the contradictions of the hierarchical state-system, they will need to grapple with problems that force them to perform statelikeness and the functions of a state.

To answer the rest of the questions, I theorized with my interlocutors, attentive to the affective melancholia of non-statehood, and following them to three areas of investigation: the international peace process; international aid; and repatriation. In the international peace process, we see representatives of the AA appealing to the General Assembly of the United Nations as a venue to address other sovereigns according to the language of international law, consistently invoking UN Security Council Resolution 2254 to increase their legitimacy. On the question of international aid in a global pandemic, we see the structural limitations that emerge with a commitment to non-statehood. The policy of IGOs such as the World Health Organization to, as Salih Muslim says, “work with governments and not people,” disciplines movements that would

otherwise seek to assert non-state sovereignty.¹⁶⁴ On the question of repatriation, we see the contradictions that emerge with non-recognition. We also see how representatives of the AA attempt to leverage the crisis to increase their legitimacy. Through the retelling of the YPG/YPJ/SDFs role in defeating ISIS on behalf of humanity, they seek to solidify themselves in the eyes of the international community as a progressive and democratic force in the region. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria demonstrates that non-state sovereignty is possible. However, in a hierarchal state-system, the nonrecognition of this claim produces contradictions. Despite these contradictions, democratic confederalism in North and East Syria is a revealing case study of non-state sovereignty and an inspiration to anti-systemic movements trying to delink from capitalist modernity.

¹⁶⁴ Anya Briy, "Rojava: Statelessness in a Time of Pandemic," *Open Democracy* (May 19, 2020): <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/rojava-statelessness-time-pandemic/>.

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