The No State Solution: Institutionalizing Libertarian Socialism in Kurdistan

written by Alexander Kolokotronis | November 2, 2014

In what many outside of the territory are referring to as the Rojava Revolution, a major shift in political philosophy and political programmatics has taken place in Kurdistan. Yet, this shift is not limited to the region of Rojava, or what many call Syrian or Western Kurdistan – a region where the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has taken an active part in this change. In "Turkish," or rather Northern Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been the foremost leader. In Eastern Kurdistan (lying within Iranian borders) the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) has taken to the change in ideological orientation as well. It is an expanding movement towards what is internally being described as a "democratic, ecological, gender-liberated society" – a collection of ideas, institutions, and practices that compose the political, economic and social outlook of Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism.

As stated in *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan* – a book written by a group from TATORT Kurdistan (a human rights advocacy organization based in Germany; "TATORT" translates to "crime scene") who ventured from Germany into Kurdistan for their research – the paradigmatic shift to Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism has meant renouncing the establishment of "a socialist nation-state and instead" seeking the creation of "a society where people can live together without instrumentalism, patriarchy, or racism – an 'ethical and political society' with a base-democratic, self-managing institutional structure" (TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, Porsgrunn, New Compass Press, 2013, 20). In short, "democracy without a state".

Contrary to what many might believe, the ideological shift did not take place in the last few months or even the last year. Rather, approximately a decade ago it forthrightly appeared when Abdullah Öcalan, long-time leader of the once Marxist-Leninist PKK, issued *The Declaration of Democratic Confederalism*. In it Öcalan disavowed the nation-state, deeming it an organizational entity that serves as an obstacle to self-determination instead of as an expression of it. Öcalan states, "Within Kurdistan democratic confederalism will establish village, towns and city assemblies and their delegates will be entrusted with the real decision-making." For Öcalan this means "democratic confederalism of Kurdistan is not a state system, but a democratic system of the people without a state."

This system of Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism is composed of overlapping networks of workers' self-managed enterprises, entities of communal self-governance, as well as federations and associations of groups operation according to principles of self-organization. Most, these assemblages function according to direct participatory democracy as well as with close-to-home delegate structures that are accorded through a council system.

The year 2005 wasn't only a period of theoretical or ideological shifts. It also marked the beginning of the construction of councils. In urban settings, this took place on concentric levels of the neighborhood, district and city. In 2008 and 2009 these councils were reorganized so as to include the input and power of various "civil society organizations, women's and environmental associations, political parties, and occupation groups like those of journalists and lawyers" (TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, Porsgrunn, New Compass Press, 2013, 26).

Yet, before venturing any further it is important to look discuss the ideological roots of Democratic Confederalism.

Theoretical Roots of Democratic Confederalism

Much has been said about the influence of the American eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin's influence on Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned since his arrest in 1999. In fact, through his lawyers, Öcalan contacted Bookchin. Unfortunately, Bookchin was too sick to enter into serious dialogue with Öcalan, but, Bookchin did send his wishes that the Kurds would be able to successfully move towards a free society. Yet, Bookchin's influence on the wider Democratic Confederalist movement can't be overlooked.

Bookchin is unheard of to many outside--and even inside--anarchist circles. Yet, the scale of his political involvement and writing was immense. As Janet Biehl denotes in her article “Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy,” upon Bookchin’s death in 2006 the PKK went as far to call Bookchin “one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century.”

Bookchin upheld what he called Social Ecology. Bookchin's view, as stated in his book *Remaking Society*, was that "the basic problems which pit society against nature emerge from within social development itself" (Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, Black Rose Books, 1998, 32) and that placing society and nature into an oppositional binary was both descriptively erroneous and prescriptively destructive. More elaborately and succinctly put, “the domination of human by human preceded the notion of dominating nature. Indeed, human domination of human gave rise to the very idea of dominating nature.”

With Social Ecology Bookchin sought to broaden the scope, nuance, and depth in the ways we look at systems of oppression and the ways in which they are intertwined with and often serve as a production of social hierarchy. Bookchin looked both at the roots of hierarchy and its various mutually supporting manifestations and institutionalizations, as well as at the conditions for its abolition and the founding of institutions based on non-hierarchical relations.

Like many anarchists, Bookchin saw the State as the highest manifestation of hierarchical organization. Why the opposition to the State? In Bookchin's own words from his book *Remaking Society*:

> Minimally, the State is a professional system of social coercion – not merely a system of social administration as it is still naively regarded by the public and by many political theorists. The word 'professional' should be emphasized as much as the word 'coercion.' Coercion exists in nature, in personal relationships, in stateless, non-hierarchical communities. If coercion alone were used to define a State, we would despairingly have to reduce it to a natural phenomenon –which it surely is not. It is only when coercion is institutionalized into a professional, systematic, and organized form of social control – that is, when people are plucked out of their everyday lives in a community and expected not only to 'administer' it but to do so with the backing of a monopoly of violence – that we can speak properly of the State (Bookchin, *Remaking Society*, Black Rose Books, 1998, 66).

In terms of identity, such coercion is utilized by the State for the purposes of molding a given manifold of cultures and ethnicities into what Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya refer to in their article “Democratic Confederalism as a Kurdish Spring: The PKK and the Quest for Radical Democracy,” from the book *The Kurdish Spring*, as the attempt to craft “a single identity population” (Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Spring*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers,

2013, 170.). More often than not, such ventures are violent ones. The Turkish State has been no exception to this.

Turkey does not allow the Turkish language to be spoken or taught within State-run institutions, including public schools, and raids are frequently carried out on an array of municipalities and civil society organizations. The treatment of Abdullah Demirbas is exemplary of Turkey's treatment of the entire Kurdish population. He was elected in 2004 as mayor of Sûr, a district in Amed. One of his promises was to conduct affairs in Kurdish, however, according to TATORT Kurdistan "three years later the Council of State removed him for using Kurdish, Assyrian, and English in providing municipal services." He was reelected in March 2009 by an even wider margin, but in May he was arrested again for supposed ties to the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK) as well as for "language crimes.'" For this he was sentenced to two years in prison.

While there are differences between Bookchin and the Kurdish people whom Bookchin has influenced, what has been most strongly imparted from the former to the latter are goals of building "dual power" and implementing a system of governance that is composed of varying forms of stateless, equalitarian, assembly-democracy.

With a strategy of building dual power one finds the goal of building, according to Janet Biehl in her aforementioned article, "a counterpower…against the nation state." This means building a parallel societal structure. Or rather, building a set of and network of alternative and counter institutions that are decidedly different from, and run in contradiction and opposition to, the dominant system. In this case, the nation-state and capitalism. This notion is not original to Bookchin, as one can find its explicit articulation in Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, and even earlier in the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Öcalan himself embraces this outlook of building dual power with his exhortation that "'regional associations of municipal administration' are needed, so these local organizations and institutions would form a network" and as such a "non-statist political administration."

Building a Solidarity Network

As a Democratic Society Congress (DTK) member denotes it is "not just about autonomy – it's about democratic autonomy." As such, this has meant organizing institutions outside of the State that are based and operation according to self-organization and self-management. The knitting together of a solidarity network is, in part, a macro-political production of a relationship between such institutions. These institutions are being built in numerous, and concentric, local levels.

In their article "Jongerden and Akkaya quote a chair of a neighborhood council in one of the poorer areas of the city of Amed asserting, "Our aim is to face the problems in our lives, in our neighborhood, and solve them by ourselves without being dependent on or in need of the state" (Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Spring*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2013, 183-184.). This best expresses the meaning of Kurdish communities seeking to establish Democratic Autonomy. As such, Jongerden and Akkaya define Democratic Autonomy as the "practices in which people produce and reproduce the necessary and desire conditions for living through direct engagement and collaboration with one another" (Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Spring*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2013, 171.).

Yet, it is the combination of Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism that constitutes "for or going beyond those of the nation state" (Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, The Kurdish Spring, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2013, 178.). This manifests "as a network model of localized small-scale self-organization and self-administration." With the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) such a network is given institutional shape and form. In 2005 the DTK was founded, with the intention of bringing together a diversity of groups.

The DTK contains a gender quota: the continuation of its operations contingent on meeting the requirement of at least 40% of attendees and positions being filled by women. The organizational structure of the DTK largely consists of the General Assembly, which meets at least twice per year, and the Standing Committee. The General Assembly holds at least 1,000 delegates, 60% of which come from the grassroots level, and 40% of which are elected officials such as representatives or mayors. The General Assembly elects a Standing Committee of 101 people. There is also a Coordinating Council, which consists of 15 people, and works in the areas of ideology, social affairs and politics. On all levels though, committees are frequently organized based on these three areas. The DTK itself holds numerous committees and commissions, which range from areas of ecology, women, youth, economy, diplomacy, culture and a whole of others.

The building of such a model is closely aligned to Bookchin's conception of confederalism which he defines as “a network of administrative councils whose members are elected from popular face-to-face democratic alliances, in the various villages, towns and even neighborhoods of large cities” (Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Spring*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2013,177.). Such administrative councils do not make policy, but rather are “strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves.” Administrative councils are just that: they administrate and do not constitute a system of representation which accords high levels of decision-making and policy-making power to representatives.

Thus, as Jongerden and Akkaya remark, "Democratic Confederalism can be characterized as a bottom-up system of self-government" (Mohammed M.A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish Spring*, Costa Mesa, Mazda Publishers, 2013,172.).

The City of Amed – North Kurdistan

Amed, one of the largest cities in region and by official estimates containing over 1.5 million residents, is part of the DTK. Similar to other cities in Kurdistan, Amed is composed of councils and assemblies on all levels. This includes street councils, neighborhood councils, 13 district councils, and a city council. The city council is comprised of 500 people, containing the mayor, elected officials, delegates from women's and youth organizations, NGOs political parties, and others.

The city council is organized along five different areas: social, political, ideological, economic and ecological. Within these five areas committees are formed, which all hold the aforementioned 40% gender quota as well. The political area holds a Coordinating Committee, which includes women's councils (there are strictly women's councils, which are self-organized, and mixed gender councils) youth councils, political parties, and others. The economic area concentrates on forming cooperatives. The social area concentrates on things such as education and health.

For juridical matters, committees handle conflicts and disputes. Their goal is to engage in conflict resolution so that the disputing parties can come to a consensus. This applies to issues ranging across a whole range of potential conflicts. In other areas of North Kurdistan, such as Gewer, legal committees do not purely hold lawyers, but also contain feminist and political activists.

The Town of Heseke – Western Kurdistan

Heseke in Rojava holds a similar institutional layout to Amed. Like Amed and the DTK carries a 40% gender quota. It contains a city council, however, it is comprised of 101 people, as well as five representatives each from five other organizations including the PYD, and the Revolutionary Youth. There is also a coordinating council, which is made up of 21 people. Heseke holds 16 district councils.

District councils hold anywhere from 15-30 people, which meet every two months. Anywhere from 10-30 communes comprise a given district, with 20 communes approximating to 1,000 people. This means that there is often 1 delegate for every 100 people in a district, which is far more direct than many other institutional structures across the world. It should be kept in mind though that what is most frequent is the convening of peoples' assemblies, a phenomenon that also spans across Kurdistan and serves as the base for Democratic Autonomy; many areas in Kurdistan have weekly peoples' assemblies.

In Heseke "communes have commissions that address all social questions, everything from the organization of defense to justice to infrastructure to youth to the economy and the construction of individual cooperatives." The commissions for ecology concern things such as sanitation and specific ecological problems. There are also "committees for women's economy to help women develop economic independence" (TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, Porsgrunn, New Compass Press, 2013.)

This structure also sends delegates to the general council of Rojava. Similar to many other areas in Kurdistan, resolutions and decisions are preferred to be made by consensus instead of simple majoritarian vote.

Embrace of Heterogeneity

In the *Charter of Social Contract*, a constitution formed by cantons in Rojava, begins its document with an embrace of pluralism:

> We the people's of the democratic self-determination areas; Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians (Assyrian Chaldeans, Arameans), Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens, by our free will, announce this to ensure justice, freedom, democracy, and the rights of women and children in accordance with the principles of ecological balance, freedom of religions and beliefs and equality without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, creed, doctrine or gender, to achieve the political and moral fabric of a democratic society in order to function with mutual understanding and coexistence with diversity and respect for the principle of self-determination and self-defense of the peoples.

This alone in the preface to the *Charter* contradicts the often oversimplified depictions of theMiddle East by Western media. According to the translation of Zaher Baher of the Kurdistan Anarchist Forum (KAF) from his eyewitness account titled "The Experiment of west Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) has Proved that People Can Make Changes" (Zaher Baher, "The experiment of West Kurdistan…, Libcom, August 26, 2014, www.libcom.org/news/experiment-west-kurdistan-syrian-kurdistan-has-proved-people-can-make-changes-zaher-baher-2), The *Charter* goes onto state in its first page that "the areas of self-management democracy do not accept the concepts of state nationalism, military or religion or of centralized management and central rule but are open to forms compatible with the tradition of democracy and pluralism, to be open to all social groups and cultural identities and Athenian democracy and national expression through their organization"

Yet, if one is to truly talk about an embrace of heterogeneity, this must involve the nonhuman just as much as it involves the human. This means going beyond the multilingualism and cultural diversity that many in Northern and Western Kurdistan have embraced – even institutionally – to looking at the ways in which the question of ecology is being tackled.

Ecology

For Aysel Dogan, an ecology activist and president of the Alevi Academy for Belief and Culture in Dersim, “the best way to create and ecological system is to build cooperatives” (TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, Porsgrunn, New Compass Press, 2013, 165.). Other eco-minded activities include the development of seed banks, protesting the simple notion of nuclear power plan development, and the disallowing the entrance of mining companies.

All of these are seen as a means to foster an ecologically geared social consciousness. Much of this also includes education, and as such is ecological schooling is part of the explosion of academies and other learning institutions that inhabit the region. The increase in academy and cooperative development has interlocked with other emancipatory efforts as well.

Education

A number of academies have opened across Kurdistan. This includes the founding of the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy in late August in Qamislo in the Cizîrê canton of Rojava, which operates according to “an alternative education model.” According to *Rojava Report*, in Cizîrê alone 670 schools with 3,000 teachers are offering Kurdish language courses to 49,000 students (Rojava Report, August 31, 2014, http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/08/31/first-new-university-to-open-in-rojava/).

Language, cultural and historical academies oriented towards preserving and building identity aren't limited to Rojava. They have taken off in North Kurdistan as well. As of July 2012 there are "thirteen of them, with various foci, including nine general academies, two women's academies and two religious academies, one for Alevis and one for Islamic beliefs." TATORT Kurdistan reports Kurdish youth public school students staging week-long strikes in response to the constraints placed on their language within those spaces and other assimilation policies.

Commenting on a number of schools run outside of the auspices of the Turkish State a representative of the Amed General Political Academy states, “These schools want to work out the essence of Islam and connect to the oppositional Islamic movements, which reject rulers and an Islamic state but nonetheless are connected to Islam.” (TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, Porsgrunn, New Compass Press, 2013.)

As indicated by the Amed General Political Academy, much of the politicized Kurdish population carries an anti-capitalist, anti-State outlook, including and especially at the grassroots level. TATORT Kurdistan reports in the academy's three-month course, “All participants reflect on what they have learned and formulate a critique of state and ruling class.” These political academies also teach things outside of class analysis, such as histories of women and the development of patriarchy, of which a critique of the latter is raised as well.

Also, in Amed lies a center that offers courses to women ranging from technical and practical skills, to those teaching the Kurdish language and literacy, as well courses in law and women’s rights. Other centers offer health and sexuality courses. There are also seminars offered on Democratic Autonomy.

Empowerment of Women

In multiple ways women are empowering themselves in Kurdistan, and as a result serving as the main thrust of the movement. In a few ways this has already been indicated, such as through the gender quota that is institutionalized on nearly all levels of society, and through learning sites and academies. Another great example of the latter is the Amed Women's Academy.

TATORT Kurdistan quotes leaders of this academy, “the liberation of women, and of gender, is as significant as the liberation of men in society.” They work on projects, such as transcription of oral histories and engaging in "female writing of history." They offer courses through a participatory discussion-based model.

Many from these academies and the Free Democratic Women's Movement (DOKH) also engage women by simply striving to empower many to step outside of their home. Some women within this movement take on a particularly radical perspective towards the State consigning to having a role in producing a hierarchical logic within the family unit.

Along with women's councils, academies and centers, there are women's cooperatives wherein the goal is to “help women create their own relations of production, where they can work and participate,” as TATORT Kurdistan quotes those involved in women’s cooperative development. Through women's cooperative development the altering of gender relations takes place on a number of levels: women's relation to the workplace (previously have very little of such, if at all), in relation to their husbands and male relatives (breaking culturally embedded taboos and gender roles), and in relation to the whole of society (inserting evermore in and through the program of Democratic Autonomy). Through these cooperatives many women have become economically independent, have engaged in individual capacity development as well, and through both are breaking female internalizations of patriarchy.

As Baher of the KAF specifically reports for the latter region, throughout Northern and Western Kurdistan there is “a system called Joint Leaders and Organizers” meaning “the head of any office, administration, or military section must include women.” Such organizational layouts are manifest in a number of the councils and committees mentioned throughout this article.

In addition, to this the women have their own armed forces. “Thus, within People's Protection Units (YPG), there has been the formation of Women's Protection Units (YPJ). The YPJ, a 7,000 strong military group have been on the frontlines against ISIS. As might be expected, the emergence of the YPJ has significantly punctured many conceptions of preordained gender roles, particularly ones that have filtered into notions and systems of male domination.

Empowerment of Youth, and Workers' Self-Management

With Democratic Autonomy, youth councils, both under-18 and over-18, have emerged. Like the other councils, the youth councils have say and power in the carrying out of initiatives and projects, e.g., in the building and modifying of recreational sites and spaces. Besides this though, some of the most radical perspectives have, with clear articulation and vision, come from the Kurdish youth.

To TATORT Kurdistan one Kurdish youth, between 16 to 26, remarked, “We don't consider ourselves nationalists. We're socialist internationalists.” There was also the statement by the same Kurdish youth that:

> At the moment we're moving into a new phase of the revolution through the construction of communes, collectives and cooperatives. Popular self-organization of the economy has the goal of laying the groundwork for comprehensive change in prevailing social relations… the movement is building village, youth and women's cooperatives… The different levels of self-management let us enter into the process of organizing more easily.

There are varying results with the federating of cooperatives and communes. According to a member of a women's cooperative in Baglar, anarchists in twenty-two communes in Gewer have gone as far as to abolish money as a means of exchange.

The Fight Against ISIS

The largely lackluster support given by the United States government to the Kurdish line of defense against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) should come as no surprise, especially when considering the close ties between the United States and Turkey. Given Turkey's extensive history of repressing the over 20 million Kurds that reside within its borders, and given that presently the Kurds are on the frontlines fighting against ISIS, the deficient response by Turkey to ISIS should not be a shock.

From 2009 to July 2012 over 8,000 people were arrested "for alleged membership in the Union of Kurdistan Societies, KCK, under the Anti-Terror Law" (TATORT Kurdistan, *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan*, Porsgrunn, New Compass Press, 2013.) More recent reports, as noted by TATORT Kurdistan, have asserted that as many as 10,000 people have been arrested in anti-KCK operations. The incarceration of Kurds is at such scales that one finds examples of thirty-five people thrust together in a single cell , with people being forced to sleep atop one another. The overcrowding of prisons has come to the point that Turkish built F-type cells, originally intended for solitary confinement, often hold four people at a given time.

Turkey's policy to expand its hydropower base through the building of dams has doubly served as a means to destroy Kurdish culture. As Aysel Dogan, the head of the Alevi Academy for Belief and Culture, states, "Since the holy places are endangered by the dams, the state sent [a] so-called scientist here who's supposed to provide expert opinion. He says that there are only stones here and no indication that it is a holy place. But these stones are sacred for us."

Yet, many in the mainstream trumpet their shock at Turkey's and the Obama administration's hitherto low level response to ISIS. On September 22, the BBC reported that Turkey closed a number of border crossings upon of tens of thousands of Kurdish refugees. This is consistent with Turkey's existing relationship with the Kurds, and so is the U.S. government's caution in carrying out a policy of bolstering Kurdish defense. Only of late has the U.S. government supplied arms to Kurdish forces in Kobane. Recent reports from Workers Solidarity Movement even show the Kurds gaining on ISIS. Yet, one wonders how far the U.S. government is willing to go in supporting Kurdish forces that carry strong anti-state, anti-capitalist tendencies.

Simultaneous to all of this, Turkey allowed the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga passage to Kobane in Rojava to take part in the fight against ISIS. At first this may appear to be a strong policy reversal on the part of Turkey, but amongst the four regions of Kurdistan it has by-far held the best relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, or what is otherwise known as South Kurdistan. The KRG, led by Massoud Barzani, has historically been in violent tension with the PKK, with Turkey naturally welcoming episodes of violence between the two camps. The KRG has also indicated a level of distrust and disavowal of the activities in Rojava, particularly with the PYD, which holds a cordial relationship with the PKK.

Conclusions

To any libertarian socialist the developments in Kurdistan over the last decade are strongly encouraging. Many of the Kurdish people assert that Democratic Confederalism can be positioned as a body with transnational capacity potential. Many within Kurdistan, including Öcalan himself, find Democratic Confederalism to be a means to bringing peace and emancipation in the Middle East. Proponents of Democratic Confederalism, as indicated by their apparent openness to cultural diversity, do not simply consider this a solution for the Kurdish population, but for the multiplicity of the groups and ethnicities that constitute the wider region. Öcalan has gone as far as to assert that

dual power must be built on a global scale, and that with such, a transnational body competing with the United Nations must be formed.

Not only does Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism constitute an ideological and institutional push away from the State and capitalism, but it is a system that is keen on increasingly moving away from representative political structures to those of autonomous and performative practices. Yet, if the institutions and practices that constitute Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism are to deepen inwardly and scale outwardly then a critique of all hierarchical social frameworks must be maintained, and the concretization of an anti-hierarchical and non-hierarchical societal outlook and vision must continue to be applied and actualized.

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