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# Rojava, the PYD and Kurdish self-determination

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**The Kurds of Syria, that is of West Kurdistan (Rojava), have now become key actors in the combined process of counter-revolution, civil war and self-determination underway in Syria. The PYD (Democratic Union Party) had already taken de facto control in the enclaves of Kobané first, then of Afrin and Jazira, following the withdrawal of the Assad regime's forces in July 2012, and it had declared autonomy in this region in January 2014 as a reaction to not being invited to the second Geneva conference. But it was mainly with the siege of Kobané by Islamic State and the audacious resistance of the Popular Protection Units (YPG), and particularly the women fighting in the ranks of the YPJ, that the forces linked to the PYD and the experience of self-determination in Rojava obtained legitimacy and enjoyed support at the international level.**

As we know, the siege of Kobané was finally broken, with the support of Kurdish and Turkish militants who forced their way across the Turkish-Syrian border, Iraqi peshmergas and of course US air strikes. Since then, the Democratic Forces of Syria (FDS) whose main military force is the YPG, supported by the US and to some extent Russia, have played a key role in the war against Islamic State.

In this article we will try to summarise briefly the political roots of the PYD, its place in the Kurdish national movement in Syria, its ideological line, its positions in the revolution, as well as the chief modalities and difficulties of the process of self-determination underway in Rojava.

## Kurdish nationalism under the Baath

Kurdish nationalism in Syria presents a very fragmented picture. The multitude of parties far exceeds what is seen in the other parts of Kurdistan. If it is difficult to follow the perpetual regroupings and splits, we can undoubtedly say that there are currently more than 15 active Kurdish parties. Most of these parties originated from the Democratic Party of Kurdistan of Syria (PDKS), founded in 1957 and rapidly dividing into "left" and "right" tendencies, which split to form distinct parties around 1965. The factional development in Iraq's Kurdish parties (taken as a model), the conditions of underground activity, and the accusations of collaboration with the regime and the infiltrations and interventions of the state security services perpetuated the splits. Political divergences stemming mainly from the tone employed towards the regime and political demands which stretched from the recognition of cultural, linguistic and citizenship rights to the constitutional recognition of the Kurds as a minority. Nonetheless it is important to stress that autonomy had practically never been demanded before 2011 (apart from the Yekiti party). We note however that citizenship is a crucial question, given that after the exceptional census of 1962 more than 120,000 Kurds had their nationality withdrawn and were classified as "foreign", deprived of a specific civil status certificate, as being "maktumin", non-registered, without identity card or rights.

From the 1990s onwards this multitude of parties regrouped. Thus the parties close to the Iraqi Kurdish current of Jalal Talabani regrouped in the Kurdish Democratic Alliance of Syria ("Hevbendi") while those linked to Mesut Barzani formed the Kurdish Democratic Front of Syria ("Eniya"). Among the parties not originating from the PDKS, we should certainly note first the PKK and its "brother party", the PYD, founded in 2003. The PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan as well as his organisation had enjoyed the support of Hafez al-Assad – in the context of his rivalry with his Turkish neighbour – until the end of the 1990s, with PKK camps installed in Syria since the early 1980s. Thus the Kurdish question in Syria was not on the PKK's agenda and it was only after the regime had ceased to shelter Öcalan and the foundation of the PYD that it began to take an interest in Syrian politics. Another important party was

that of Michel Temo, the Party of the Kurdish Future, founded in 2005, which emphasised cooperation with the Arab opposition at the beginning of the revolution, but his assassination dealt a severe blow to his movement, which split. The Party of the Kurdish Union of Syria, known as Yekiti and born out of the fusion of several groups– including a small Trotskyist current which had in the 1980s adhered to the Fourth International, led by the poet Marwan Othman [1], should also be mentioned as a left force on the Kurdish political spectrum. From 2002, immediately after the brief Damascus spring, the political intervention of Yekiti, more open and radical and seeking to mobilise the Kurdish community not only in Rojava but directly in the capital, with a “class struggle” programme, was important in terms of the confrontation with the regime and the politicisation which led to the “Serhildan” (revolt in Kurdish) of Qamishlo [2].

## From the Kurdish intifada to the Syrian revolution

A key event was then the revolt of Qamishlo in 2004, also known as the Kurdish intifada, where for the first time thousands of Kurds went onto the streets to affirm their Kurdish identity and demands their rights of citizenship, following confrontations with Arab nationalist supporters during a football match and severe repression by the police. The uprising was not limited to Qamishlo or the Rojava region, but rapidly reached the Kurdish neighbourhoods of Aleppo and Damascus. Statues of Hafez Al-Assad were overthrown, while police stations, public buildings and Baath centres were attacked.

It was then from this *serhildan* that we witnessed for the first time, for more than ten days, the mobilisation of a Kurdish radical youth independent of the traditional parties of Kurdish nationalism which would be seen again in the early days of the revolution. Alongside this radicalised youth, it should be said that it was above all Yekiti and the PYD which were the spearhead of the mobilisations (the television channel linked to the PKK, Roj TV, openly called for insurrection). But the regime’s repression was ferocious. Some youth organisations were formed immediately after the revolt, distancing themselves from the pacifism of the traditional parties – sometimes with an armed struggle orientation, although this was not put into practice. The perspective of autonomy gained ground in consciousness, as opposed to the demands for equal rights and citizenship defended by the Alliance and the Front.

The first spontaneous mobilisations in 2011 in Syrian Kurdistan took place in late March, mainly in the town of Amuda, then Serekaniye. If Bashar al-Assad tried to calm the situation by accepting the conferral of nationality on Kurds with the status of “foreigner” (but not to the “maktumine”) this was not sufficient to win over the Kurdish youth. As in the rest of the country, coordination committees were formed, the Kurdish Youth Movement (TCK), founded during the events of 2004, also played an important mobilising role.

The main parties were the Movement of the Future, Yekiti and the Kurdish Liberty Party (“Azadi”) which took part in the demonstrations from the beginning. The other parties only joined the movement during the summer. Michel Temo, leader of the Movement of the Future, was alone in participating in the Syrian National Council (SNC), founded during the Istanbul conference in July. This position would have allowed links to develop between the Syrian and Kurdish oppositions, if he had not been assassinated in October 2011. His funeral became transformed into massive demonstrations in Qamishlo. These mobilisations accelerated the attempts to regroup the Kurdish parties originating from the PDKS, which finally joined the revolt and formed, under the auspices of Mesut Barzani, the Kurdish National Council of Syria (ENKS), which Yekiti and Azadi also joined. Thus it was the broadest rallying of the Kurdish national movement in Syria.

Two parties only remained outside, that of Temo, still a member of the SNC, and the PYD. The latter, which kept at the margins of the uprising which was shaking the whole country, as well as the Kurdish region, had in September founded a coordination of different left Baathist Arab parties and a Christian Aramaic party. Their orientation was

rather to negotiate with the regime so as to obtain democratic gains, without any perspective of overthrowing it and – according to them – without risk of opening the way to a civil war. Hundreds of PYD activists were released from prison at the same time as the jihadist militants.

Criticising the ENKS, accused of playing the game of Turkey (because of the relations between Barzani and Ankara) and of the SNC which gave no guarantee for the rights of the Kurdish people, the PYD thus opted for a “third way”. Through its Movement for a Democratic Society (Tev-Dem) bringing together the parties and associations of civil society linked to it, it announced the foundation of the Popular Council of Western Kurdistan, which constituted the main administrative structure in the Rojava after the PYD and YPG had taken control following the withdrawal of the regime’s forces [3].

## The PYD and democratic confederalism

The foundation of the PYD resulted from a trend towards the decentralisation of the PKK, parallel to a radical change of political perspective by Aċalan. A little before his arrest in 1999, the PKK leader had abandoned the objective of an independent and united Kurdistan (which was henceforth in his view “conservatism”) and proposed a new strategic objective resting on the thesis of the “democratic republic”. Probably formulated with a view to opening negotiations, Aċalan here proposed a resolution of the Kurdish question through the democratisation of Turkey, without change of border. Thus the objectives were limited to the recognition of the Kurds by the state and the respecting of their cultural rights (as well as the liberation of prisoners and the authorisation of combatants to reintegrate into civilian life).

However, it soon proved that there was no question of negotiation on the part of the state. Also, with the consolidation of the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq following the US intervention, southern Kurdistan (in Iraq) and the PDK led by Barzani – the historic rival of the PKK – became a pole of attraction for the Kurdish people. Thus the perspective of a resolution of the Kurdish question limited to a democratisation of the Turkish regime carried a real political risk for the PKK. Aċalan thus had to again undertake a change of strategy taking into account all the parties of Kurdistan [4]. The foundation of the PYD in Syria (2003) and that of the PJAK in Iran (2004), as well as the political project which would later take the name of democratic confederalism, resulted from this new approach.

This project, as well as that of democratic autonomy which completes it at the local level, is strongly inspired by the work of the libertarian socialist theorist Murray Bookchin (who participated in the US Trotskyist movement in the 1930s). After a reconsideration of Marxism, Bookchin replaced the labour-capital contradiction with the capital-ecology contradiction and proposed an anti-capitalist struggle seeking a decentralisation of cities, a local production of food, and the use of renewable energies. In Bookchin’s “communalist” project, small autonomous towns administered through democratic councils would form confederal units for the resolution of problems which went beyond their own frontiers [5]. However, in the different programmatic texts of the PKK and the writings of Aċalan, what these notions would correspond to in practice remains fairly indeterminate: is it about the confederation of the parties and organisations linked to the PKK or is it a larger and more inclusive project? Is it a multi-ethnic project for all the peoples of the Middle East or a project for Kurdistan whose protagonist would be the Kurdish people? Does autonomy mean a strengthening of the existing local administrations or does it amount to a more subversive political project [6]? One can multiply the questions, notably at the level of the means to use to conquer autonomy and the relations with the states concerned, not to mention those with the capitalist mode of production.

As Alex de Jong stresses in his excellent article on the PKK’s ideological evolutions, the writings of Aċalan and the texts of the PKK (for whom Aċalan is “the supreme theoretical-ideological organ” according to its statutes) include a “potent vagueness” – thus it is possible to find all kinds of responses to these questions and, with all the inconveniences that this includes, the blurred and unfinished character of his political project can prove useful and

open itself to broader interpretations [7]. But outside of this, two key points emerge from these texts (and the practice of the organisations linked to the PKK). The rejection of the nation-state (replaced by the “democratic nation” a concept which again is vague) and the importance of ecology and the liberation of women (resting sometimes on a women-nature-life identification), which can be found in the Rojava Charter.

# Rojava, potentialities and contradictions

The model of administration presented in the charter or the “social contract” of Rojava (2014), which has henceforth taken the name of Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria and Rojava, is striking in the accent it places on the importance of democracy (“self-administration”), women’s and children’s rights, ecology, secularism and of course the multi-ethnic character of the region. In a territory where different parts are controlled by Islamic State, the jihadist gangs of Al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham and the bloodthirsty Al Assad regime, that is no small thing. The contract, which is said to be accepted by Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Syriacs (Assyrian, Chaldean and Aramaic), Turkmen and Chechens, rejects the nation-state, the religious and military state and the central administration and declares itself as a part of a parliamentary, federal, pluralist and democratic Syria.

The multi-ethnic dimension of the regime in Rojava, which has led to the modification of its name – Ā–calan had proposed that it be just “Federation of Northern Syria” [8] – is criticised by the nationalist currents present in the ENKS. Thus the general secretary of the Democratic Progressive Party, Ehmed Suleyman, said in an interview given in January 2015 that it was not a “project for the Kurds. Democratic autonomy has been founded with the Arabs, the Syriacs and the Chechens. We cannot resolve the Kurdish question in this way. Our people should understand that what they have founded does not belong to the Kurds”. Against this perspective of including the different ethnic groups in the process of construction of autonomy, some within the ENKS defend for example the displacement of the Arab population of Rojava in the context of the “Arab belt” policy of the 1970s [9].

If this contract is mainly limited to the administrative structure, the Charter adopted previously by Tev-Dem in 2013 is much more detailed and reflects again the Bookchinian libertarian spirit of Ā–calan’s ideas, which has strongly inspired the model of democratic confederalism. For example the communes are defined as “the smallest and most effective units of society. They are constituted according to the paradigm of society where the values of the freedom of women and ecological democracy reign on the basis of direct democracy”. The communal economic system is said to be dominated by the idea of social justice and seeks to eliminate all forms of exploitation. The “houses of the people” work for the “the birth of the culture of communal democracy”.

However it is unhappily not enough to repeat the term democracy for the latter to function without hindrance. Because for the moment we are talking about a democracy without elections. If pluralism is lauded at the level of the different ethnic groups, its political dimension is rather absent. That the social contract designates the YPG as the armed forces of Rojava reflects the fact that the PYD is not inclined to share the control of the territories it leads. The imposition of the ideology of Ā–calan is also visible at the level of education. All primary school teachers are obliged to undergo a training based on the texts of Ā–calan and, in the canton of Jazira for examples, primary school books features the speeches of Ā–calan and writings on the lives of PKK martyrs [10]. But apart from these examples of imposition of an official ideology from a very young age (strangely resembling the experience of Kemalism) the authoritarian practices with respect to the other Kurdish parties and ethnic groups not accepting the domination of the PYD have been denounced many times.

There have been movements of protest against the PYD and its practices, notably in Amuda and Derabissyat in 2013, and the security forces linked to the PYD (the “asayish”) have not hesitated to fire on crowds, causing the death of several demonstrators. More recently, in August 2016 the arrest of Hassan Salih, leader of Yekiti, was a deplorable act. Salih had already been imprisoned for a year and a half in 2003 by the Syrian regime, with Marwan

Othman, and their liberation had been met with a cortege 4 kilometres long made up of several thousand people [11]. Also, the fact that the regime withdrew (partially) from Rojava without any armed conflict, leaving behind much of its artillery and ammunition, while continuing to control the airport, railway station, state establishments, holding a military camp in the south of Qamishlo and continuing to be present in Hasseke, paying the wages of teachers (apart from those for Kurdish courses), is deemed by the Kurdish opposition as evidence of collaboration with the Syrian state. If it is not possible to exclude the thesis of a certain compromise concerning the withdrawal of the Syrian army between the PYD and the regime, concerned not to multiply the fronts of combat, it seems to us difficult to speak of an alliance properly so called between the two, as shown by recent conflicts between the forces (YPG and *asayish*) of Rojava and those of the regime supported by pro-Assad militias, as well as the bombardment of civilian neighbourhoods in Hasseke by Syrian planes.

The situation is all the more complex inasmuch as the PKK-PYD has for the first time obtained the chance to compete with its historic rival in northern Iraq by building its own “state”, a sovereign administrative structure with borders, for the moment always changing. The reality of an autonomous Rojava, reinforced by the heroic battle of Kobané (which now constitutes a new founding myth for the PKK), has allowed the organisation, mutilated by the imprisonment of its leader and years of fruitless negotiation with the Turkish state, to open a new sequence in its history.

## Campism and permanent revolution

Revolutionary Marxists do not have the luxury of succumbing to the temptation of comfortably adopting a campist analytical framework and the positions which flow from it. Campism in its classical sense designates support, in periods of geopolitical tension and conflict, for one of the existing camps, against the other, identified with an absolute evil, without taking into account the relations of class domination within it. The debate on campism mainly concerns the support by left forces during the Cold War to the Eastern or Western blocs, respectively in the name of anti-imperialism or democracy. Such a polarisation exists today concerning the Ukrainian conflict and above all the Syrian question between the USA/EU and Russia. The question in our case is, in the context of the combined process in Syria, the defence, following the same campist mentality, of one of the existing camps, namely the Kurds in their project of autonomisation or uprising against the regime, without taking into account the other process, by attributing to it a secondary importance or placing it in an adverse position.

Thus it is not possible for us to isolate the process of Kurdish self-determination from the dynamics of the Syrian uprising and to take an uncritical attitude to the PYD-PKK, deeming authoritarian practices and attacks on political rights which undermine the bases of its democratic project to be secondary. But nor is it conceivable to refuse to take into account the process underway in Rojava with its genuinely progressive dimensions – which are without parallel in the whole region – and to minimise the emancipatory potential they contain, on the pretext of the (permanently evolving) relations with the regime or with the US, which include their share of danger, as well as the contradictions that we have mentioned.

If the Rojava leadership is certainly responsible for its deeds and alliances, all its contradictions should be approached in the context of the inter-ethnic historic conflicts between Kurds and Arabs in the region and the rivalry between the various leaderships of the Kurdish people. We have no other choice than to take the question in all its complexity and elaborate an approach which is both critical and constructive [12]. This should rest on the community of interest of toilers of Kurdish, Arab or other origin in the region and thus the necessity of combining the processes of self-determination and revolution.

There is nothing new in this, it is the main argument of the strategic perspective of permanent revolution, formulated by Leon Trotsky after the Russian revolution of 1905, but having determined (above all by its absence) the course of

all revolutionary uprisings, from the French revolution to the “Arab Spring”. Revolutionary processes with the objective of national liberation and the installation of a democratic regime weaken and finally fail if collectivist, anti-capitalist measures are not taken, if the aspirations of the popular classes – whose support is primordial – are not taken into consideration and are disappointed. And when movements seeking a radical, egalitarian and libertarian transformation of society do not respect democratic principles on the territories they control, do not recognise the right of self-determination of other peoples, do not act with an anti-imperialist perspective with complete political independence of world and regional forces, their revolution becomes distanced from its initial objectives and is doomed to defeat.

Thus a principal task for the radical left which is active outside of the area of conflict, apart from the indispensable actions of solidarity, is to work for the development of this consciousness in our respective societies contaminated by this ideological scourge – re-emerging from its tomb – of campism, whose sole antidote still remains the tradition of proletarian internationalism borne by revolutionary Marxism.

\* This article initially appeared in the autumn 2016 issue of *Athawra Addaima* (“Permanent Revolution”), a magazine produced by revolutionary Marxists in the Arab region.

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[1] See Chris Den Hond, “Interview with Marwan Othman”, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article53>

[2] See Jordi Tejel, “Suriye Kürtleri. Tarih, Siyaset ve Toplum” (The Kurds of Syria. History, politics and society), ?ntifada yay?nlar?, ?stanbul 2015; Sirwan Kajjo, Christian Sinclair, “The Evolution of Kurdish Politics in Syria (1927-2011)”, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article38710>

[3] See Thomas Schmidinger, *Suriye Kürdistan’nda Sava? ve Devrim* (“War and Revolution in Syrian Kurdistan”), Yordam kitap, ?stanbul 2015

[4] Ergun Aydinoglu, *Fis Köyünden Kobané’ye Kürt Ã–zgürlük Hareketi* (“The Kurdish Liberation Movement in the village of Fis in Kobané”), Versus, ?stanbul 2014

[5] Murray Bookchin, *Gelece?in Devrimi, Halk Meclisleri ve Do?rudan Demokrasi*, Dipnot, Ankara 2015 (“The revolution of the future, popular councils and direct democracy – collection of articles”)

[6] Ã–calan says for example: “So that Turkey understands me well. I have nothing against the unitary state. I respect the flag. In my tomb three flags can be found. The flag of the European Union, that of the unitary state and the flag of confederalism symbolising democracy”. Cengiz Kapmaz, *Ã–calan’ın ?mral? Günleri* (“Ã–calan’s Days In Imrali”), ?thaki yayinlari, ?stanbul 2011

[7] Alex De Jong, “Stalinist caterpillar into libertarian butterfly? – The evolving ideology of the PKK” - <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3914>

[8] <http://www.demokrathaber.org/guncel/devlet-ocalan-la-en-son-25-haziran-da-gorustu-ortami-yumusatan-mektup-istedi-h71252.html>

[9] T. Schmidinger, see note 4

[10] Yasin Duman, *Rojava, Bir Demokratik Ã–zerklik Deneyimi* (“Rojava, an experience of democratic autonomy”), ?leti?im yay?nlar?, ?stanbul, 2016

[11] Tejel, see note 2, p. 250

[12] The document “In support of the Kurdish people’s struggle to live free and in dignity” adopted by the Bureau of the Fourth International under the mandate of its International Committee, can constitute an example for such an elaboration. See

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4398>