

Rojava

# Rojava

Revolution, War, and  
the Future of Syria's Kurds

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## The Long Struggle for Autonomy

The border guards do not yet dare to put their stamp right in my passport. “Komara Sûri Kantona Cizîrê,” it reads in Kurdish above the Arab variant of “Republic of Syria, Canton Cizîrê,” which for now is still stamped on a separate piece of paper here at the border checkpoint of Semalka. Very close to the border triangle between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, Kurdish fighters have taken a border station under their control. Obviously, anyone entering this part of Syrian territory from Iraq is no longer coming to the “Arab Republic of Syria,” as the country had called itself after its withdrawal from the “United Arab Republic” of 1961, but to a “Republic of Syria,” which for now is still imaginary, but whose Kurdish cantons are already in existence.

The above snapshot given in the first German edition of the current book had already changed in 2016, when, after a few sojourns in parts of Syrian Kurdistan located further to the West, I passed the same border for a second time. Since March 2016, the traveller at this point enters the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava (Federasyona Bakurê Sûriyê – Rojava).

Considering the war going on in large parts of Syria and the shutdown of the border by Turkey, the border with Iraq offers the only more-or-less legal way to travel to Rojava. Since January 2014, Rojava, as most of the Kurds call Syrian Kurdistan, has consisted of three cantons that in theory are directly adjacent to each other, but were in fact separated for quite some time by territories largely under the military control of the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria.” Only in June 2015 did the military units of the Kurds, the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), the Women’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ), and their allies succeed in unifying two of the three cantons with each other.

Finally, on 17 March 2016, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava was proclaimed as the joint autonomous administrative structure of the Kurdish regions and the adjoining predominantly Arab regions, which were by now also under the control of said forces.

In December 2016, the name Rojava was finally dropped. This move was strongly opposed and criticized by the Kurdish opposition parties, particularly by those close to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. They considered the dropping of “Rojava” a betrayal of the Kurdish character of the region.

The meaning of *roj* – the “j” is pronounced the same as the “s” in delusion – is both “sun” and “day.” The sun has long played a central role in Kurdish national mythology. It is right in the midst of the Kurdish flag, and until its prohibition, the best-known TV station of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) also carried the name Roj TV. Literally, Rojava could be translated as the “land of the sunset.” Nationalist Kurds, who often reject any terminology that reflects the division of Kurdistan among different nation states, generally translate Rojava as “West Kurdistan.” Geographically, however, this concept makes little sense, as there are many Kurdish settlement zones in Turkey that are considerably to the west of Rojava. In geographic terms, Rojava is situated not in the west, but at most in the southwest of the Kurdish areas of settlement.

Even though unloved by both Arab and Kurdish nationalists, the term Syrian Kurdistan would probably be much more precise, all the more so since such terminology does not really pass judgement on whether one supports or criticizes the idea that these territories belong to Syria. Rather, the term refers to the fact that after the reordering of the Middle East after World War I, these territories were considered under international law as parts of Syria. This may be unjust and controversial, but it is no less true than the fact that Iraqi Kurdistan is a part of Iraq, that Iranian Kurdistan is a part of Iran, or that Turkish Kurdistan is a part of Turkey. For that reason, I will use the terms “Rojava” and “Syrian Kurdistan” as synonyms in this book.

The stamp that the Kurdish border guards place on a separate sheet of paper already says a lot: The “authorities” of the new Kurdish parastate in Syria, which is dominated by a sister party of the PKK, subscribe to a “Republic of Syria” and regard their canton as an autonomous region – a region that is, however, by no means an autonomous region of the Kurds only. Since the proclamation of the canton of Cizîrê (Jezira) in January 2014, people travelling there are no longer entering

Rojava but this canton. The stamp itself makes no mention of either Kurdistan or Rojava. This entry stamp thus reflects the self-conception of the cantonal authorities as a supra-national, autonomous area in a supra-ethnic Syria. The designation Rojava was added as a byname only in 2016 after the declaration of the Federation of Northern Syria. Even here, however, we still find a reference to Syria, whereas Kurdistan is not directly mentioned at all. The supra-national claim of the autonomous areas thus remained unchanged.

This change in the self-conception of the Kurdish actors in Rojava also mirrors developments in Syria, namely, from a revolution to a civil war. Over the course of 2012, hopes for a non-violent revolution on the model of Tunisia increasingly had to make room for an armed revolution, which within a year evolved into a civil war of a more and more sectarianized and ethnicized character. As the regime released high-level jihadist cadres, the character of the opposition also changed. New military actors such as Jabhat al-Nusra or the “Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria”<sup>1</sup> gained in military and political influence, thereby discrediting the Syrian opposition in the eyes of international opinion.

Syria became the destination of jihadist adventurers, among whom were an increasing number of female jihadists, and fell more and more into the hands of multifarious warlords and criminal gangs. Even among veteran oppositionists, many over time lost their belief in the possibility of success. In the depth of their hearts, more than a few now even regretted having stood up to the regime, concluding that this had thrown them from the frying pan into the fire. Since May 2014, with the re-conquest of cities in central Syria and particularly with the fall of the rebel stronghold Homs, the government’s army has succeeded in retaking the offensive.

While the outcome of the Syrian civil war was still undecided when the first German editions of the present book went to print, since then the balance of forces has shifted considerably in favour of the regime thanks to its Russian and Iranian support. Many observers regard the reconquest of the rebel-held eastern part of the town of Aleppo in December 2016 as a particularly important, maybe even decisive battle. Since then, it has not only been the various rebel militias who were clearly in retreat; the same was also true for the jihadist project of “Islamic State.” The reconquest of Mosul by the Iraqi Army and the liberation of the “capital” of IS, Raqqa, by the troops of the Syrian Democratic Forces (in Kurdish: *Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk*; in Arabic:

Qūwāt Sūriyā ad-dīmuqrāṭya), among which the Kurdish YPG and YPJ played a decisive role, did not yet destroy the terrorist organization called “Islamic State,” but it did destroy the existence in the region of a para-state called by that name. Although jihadism did not disappear from Iraq and Syria, Kurdish fighters, both in Iraq and Syria, played an important role in fighting the self-proclaimed Caliphate and liberating a territory much larger than the Kurdish-inhabited territories of Syria and Iraq.

The attack of Turkey against Efrîn and the conquest of East Ghouta by the regime indicate a second – more internationalised – stage of Syria’s civil war. What seems to have been clear since early 2018 is the fact that the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad will stay in power, at least in the most important parts of Syria. Whether we like it or not, the Syrian Kurds will have to negotiate and deal with the government in power in Damascus if they want to secure their autonomy within the future Syrian state.

The goal of this book is not a prognosis on the future of Syria, but rather an up-to-date portrayal of the evolution of the second Kurdish para-state. The first one developed in the Kurdish areas of Iraq after the Second Gulf War of 1991. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein and the development of sectarianized conflicts in Iraq, the “Kurdistan” region of Iraq was regarded as a haven of relative stability and economic development in an otherwise crisis-ridden country. Its economic development, however, was based on the development model of the Arab Gulf states that is rooted in the appropriation of oil rent and has little to do with a modern tax-collecting state. Furthermore, the attacks of “Islamic State” on important Kurdish strongholds since August 2014 served to show how fragile this stability continues to be. On the other hand, one effect of the successful defence of Kobanê, at the price of the complete destruction of the town, has been that it has garnered the Kurds mounting recognition at the international level.

Despite all dreams of a great Kurdish nation state, the two Kurdish para-states have so far not accommodated each other politically. On the contrary: It is exactly the existence of two Kurdish para-states that has brought intra-Kurdish rivalries and conflicts into a sharper relief than ever before. Since the takeover of Rojava by the Kurds, for the very first time there was a border *within* Kurdistan under the control of Kurds. All nationalist announcements notwithstanding, this intra-Kurdish border

continued to exist until Iraqi forces took over the Iraqi side of the border once more in October 2017. But just like other border crossings, the one across the Tigris had repeatedly been closed for political reasons. While east of the Tigris, in Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous government led by Masud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) directs an economic boom based on a neoliberal oil rent economy, in the west a party is in charge that is still prone to revolutionary slogans. It has its roots in Abdullah Öcalan's formerly Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) and, despite some ideological transformations, still regards itself as a leftist national liberation movement.

In both parts of Kurdistan, the rule of these competing power blocs is controversial and is challenged by Kurdish opposition groups. This book does not therefore present "the Kurds" as one singular actor and does not want to blind itself to intra-Kurdish political and economic conflicts. Because of this, the following narration is basically a social and political history and not a national history.

In fact, throughout their history the Kurds have never acted as a unified political subject. Yet what nationalist intellectuals and political parties often – and even, in a manner that amounts to self-orientalization, exclusively – regard as a flaw is by no means necessarily a sign of any inferiority or even subjectlessness of Kurdish society. Actually, the Kurds did not enter history as subjects of political action any later than the actors whose national states today rule over their territory or at least lay claim to such a rule. But while Turkey, Syria, and, to a certain extent, Iran constituted themselves as national states in the course of the twentieth century, the Kurds have so far been prevented from making this step. As a fragmented and strongly tribal society, to this day the Kurds have never formed a unified national movement, but have rather developed a diversity of different actors with differing loyalties and scopes of action. But this must be in no way understood as a deficiency or the lack of the capacity to build a state – it should rather be regarded as a political decision *against* the state. If there is anything detectable as a kind of a red thread in Kurdish history, it is the permanent rejection of and even rebellion against centralist state projects and the insistence on the largest possible amount of autonomy with regard to family, tribe, and region.

Attentive readers will have noticed that this last sentence didn't even mention *individual* autonomy. The modern concept of individual

autonomy represents a novelty for all parts of Kurdistan, a concept that has gained ground only in recent years among certain urban elites and that often clashes with traditional family- and tribe-based collectivities, in particular when such demands for individual autonomy are raised by women.

This phenomenon is based on the fact that survival as a marginalized, politically and economically disadvantaged minority was often made possible only by very closely knit family networks. That meant that any latitude for individuals was frequently quite limited.

In all parts of Kurdistan, movements for political autonomy and independence have repeatedly looked to progressive, Marxist, and socialist ideologies that also champion freedom and equality. In some Kurdish guerilla organizations, women have actively participated in armed struggle. Others have at least regarded some amount of lip service to the equality of the sexes as a necessary element of their modernist development discourse. In the PKK and its sister parties, gender discourse has played the role of a central constant of its political ideology and practice right to this day. Yet even here, and contrary to the example of the liberal middle classes of Europe and North America who regard it as a central goal in life, individual freedom is much less of a concern than the collective emancipation of “the women” with regard to patriarchy. In the PKK and its sister parties, women have formed their own female collectives, a special women’s party, and finally even a women’s army, all of which are fighting collectively and separately from the men and in which the women are expected to refrain from sexual relationships. A situation where young women fight in the mountains together with their husbands and in part even with their children, as was the case in the Iraqi Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the 1980s, would be unthinkable in the case of the women of the PKK. Here, one collective was simply replaced by another.

Critics of the PKK/PYD draw a connection between this kind of collectivism and the authoritarianism of the PKK, which often shows itself both in the behaviour of the PYD towards other Kurdish opposition parties and its behaviour towards grassroots initiatives in Rojava. This book will also address such intra-Kurdish conflicts and authoritarian tendencies, which are of course only fostered by the war situation.

Kurdish society finds itself in the midst of a process of change in all parts of Kurdistan, a change that remains contradictory and whose final destination is by no means fixed. On the one hand, there is throughout

a certain amount of urbanization, which creates, particularly for the younger generation of self-confident women, new spaces, but on the other hand, there are also patriarchal counterforces, especially within the younger generation. They manifest themselves in various currents of political Islam, some of which feature extremist young people who, for example, travel from the Iraqi part of Kurdistan to Syria in order to join the ranks of “Islamic State” in its fight against the PYD-dominated YPG.

But even among the modernist and secularly oriented parties of the Kurdish national movements in the different parts of Kurdistan, there is no unity with regard to the road to “modernity” they want to take. Most of these parties agree with an analysis according to which Kurdistan is “backward” and has to be “developed.” But the goal of this developmental discourse is controversial. Whereas for the PDK ruling the Iraqi part of Kurdistan, “development” means the triggering of an economic boom conceived in accord with the ideas of neoliberal economists, the formerly Marxist-Leninist PKK has been promoting a libertarian socialism that is sometimes diffuse, but on the whole aims at collectivist forms of economy. How this socialism is supposed to look in practice, the PKK’s sister party PYD will still have to prove, should it succeed in retaining the areas currently under its control.

Quite apart from these ideological differences, however, both roads to modernity will not work independently of their economic base. The model of the Iraqi-Kurdish economic miracle is for the most part based on an oil rent economy, and for that reason it is not all that unrealistic when Iraqi Kurds praise the model of Dubai as their own development model when talking to their visitors.

On which economic basis could Rojava work, and what consequences would this have for politics and society? A large part of Syria’s sparse oil reserves is located in a Kurdish area, namely, in the canton of Cizîrê. But the region is also relatively rich in water and is therefore quite suitable for agriculture. The canton Efrîn in the west of Rojava has been known since ancient times for its excellent olive harvests. Vegetables are grown in the cantons of Kobanê and Cizîrê. This region used to supply half of Syria with vegetables and wheat, and even during the civil war in Syria there have been repeated attempts to export onions or tomatoes to Iraq. In the meantime, encircled by fighters of the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” on the one side, and by an equally hostile Turkey on the other, the economy in the canton of Kobanê at one point almost came to a standstill, and in the larger cantons of Efrîn and Cizîrê the population

also suffers from the consequences of the war and the economic blockade by Turkey. Under such circumstances, survival is possible only through a shadow economy and through smuggling. Although valid data for this are of course very hard to come by, the economic problems and their effects will also be topics of the present book as far as the possibilities for research allow.

After an introductory overview of the region, its religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse populations, and the history of Kurdistan, I will also give an overview of the Kurdish political actors in Syria, particularly their parties and political movements. In the process, Rojava is not considered in isolation, but is embedded in the histories of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan, and the state of Syria. In particular, it must not be forgotten that in addition to the parts of Rojava currently administered by the Kurds themselves, there are also old Kurdish districts in Damascus and Aleppo which are all the more relevant as they are the original home of several culturally and politically important Kurdish actors in Syria. The Kurdish quarter in Damascus reaches back to a colony of soldiers who went with the famous Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin) in the twelfth century when he promoted the liberation of the Levant from the crusaders. Salah ad-Din, himself of Kurdish origin, was accompanied by Kurdish fighters who first settled in the Suq al-Saruja in Damascus before the Kurdish quarter moved in the direction of Jebel Qāsiyūn, that is, to the foot of a mountain of a height of 1,150 metres right before the gates of Damascus. Today, the two Kurdish quarters Hayy al-Akrad (district of the Kurds) and al-Salhiyya are still located on the slopes of that mountain on which, according to the legend, Cain is supposed to have slain his brother Abel.

While these settlements in Damascus today are still under the control of the regime, the inhabitants of the two Kurdish quarters in Aleppo, Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafieh, were able to liberate themselves in 2012 by effectively declaring their quarters a neutral zone between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the army of the government. Since that time, they existed as a kind of buffer zone between the frontlines and were protected by Kurdish militia. Yet even here, since autumn 2012, there have been repeated battles both with the FSA and the army of the government. Even though Ashrafieh was lost again, Kurdish units have retained control over Sheikh Maqsood since 2012. Given that background, the Kurdish districts of Aleppo cannot be entirely excluded from an analysis of Syrian Kurdistan.

Nevertheless, the real focus of the book is on the core area of Rojava and its inhabitants. They, or at least some of their representatives, will be able to speak for themselves in the second half of the book. This will make the various perspectives of political and social actors in Rojava visible – a necessary addition, as the ultimate goal of this book is not to offer a closed narrative or analysis of the situation in Rojava, but rather, an attempt at a multi-perspectival approach to a current conflict.

## Background and Methods of Social Science Research in War

This book is based not just on an extensive literary study, but also on interviews and my own field research in Rojava. Under the existing conditions of war, such field research is no simple matter. Moreover, the security conditions do not allow for a longer sojourn in the region: The risks of western observers attracting attacks against themselves – and therefore also against their escorts – or becoming kidnapped are just too great. Therefore, at present field research is possible only for brief periods and when accompanied by local people. Of course, in a highly politicized society this also means being in constant danger of adopting the particular views and perspectives of some concrete actor, for example the respective escort, and therefore to end up pursuing, in analogy to embedded journalism, “embedded research.” I was particularly conscious of this danger during my five research trips between January 2013 and September 2016. I cannot exclude the possibility that I have occasionally fallen into that trap because, just like other researchers, I, too, could travel only in the company of Kurdish activists. However, I have tried to minimize that danger to the best of my abilities.

For one thing, in 2013 and 2014 I travelled with different political actors. In 2013, I had the opportunity to travel to Rojava via Turkey, together with my Syrian-Kurdish friend Jamal Omari, who has lived in Austria since 2001 and whom I met in 2004 when he was looking for support for protests against the Syrian regime. At the time of our trip, Omari, whose brother took us secretly across the border and to his home town Amûdê under the cloud of night, belonged to Mustafa Oso’s Partiya Azadî ya Kurdi li Sûriyê, one of the four parties that would go on to found a unified sister party of the Iraqi-Kurdish governing party PDK

in 2014. Already in 2013, his party strictly opposed the Partiya Yekîtiya Dêmkokrat (PYD) that had assumed control over most Kurdish areas in 2012 and that at present rules these areas as the sister party of the PKK. Thus in 2013 I was able to talk mostly to opponents of the PYD who belonged to various parties and initiatives, and to interview them. In February 2014, however, I travelled to Rojava on the invitation of Salih Muslim, the party leader of the PYD, which put me in a position to mostly interview politicians, fighters, and functionaries of the PYD and organizations close to it. For security reasons, I was accompanied by an old cadre of the party, who not only served as a driver, but also always carried his Kalashnikov with him and who told us very much about a region that he knew like the back of his hand. In 2014, I succeeded only once, for a couple of hours, to escape the watch of the PYD and to meet oppositionists from other Kurdish groups, among them a couple of men who had been arrested and tortured by PYD fighters in 2013. Yet even our escorts from the PYD were quite prepared to bring us in contact with persons who were not exactly representatives of the party line, such as the members of the Naqshibandi order of the Khaznawi, whose representatives, as far as they have remained in Syria at all, are often regarded as friends of Turkey.

Since the publication of the first German edition of this book, I have undertaken additional trips under the protection of the YPG/PYD to Efrîn and Kobanê, as well as one journey organized individually without any help from any party to Cizîrê, Kobanê, and the town of Tal Abyad – which is located between the two cantons – in September 2016, where I met people from different political currents. This should serve to further round out the picture and bring up to date the information garnered previously.

The information gathered directly from the scene was time and again supplemented by telephone conversations and Facebook chats with different politically active persons both in Rojava and in exile. Quite independently of the various political perspectives of my escorts, all this yielded a multi-perspectival picture of the situation in Rojava that I try to reflect in this book. In order to make the original voices of some of my interview partners immediately accessible to the reader, interviews with different Kurdish activists constitute a substantial part of this book. These interviews provide a direct introduction into the various views of the interviewees of the conflict and their own commitment.

This publication is a snapshot of a development happening in real time. Such a snapshot can, however, never be up-to-the-minute. Writing

the history of the political development of Rojava must thus remain a project of the future. The aim of this publication is to enable readers to understand current developments. Therefore, the book is consciously not conceived as a detailed scientific study, but was written with the goal of being as intelligible and accessible as possible. Nevertheless, it also claims to satisfy scientific criteria. I have tried to the best of my abilities to include only verifiable facts in the book, to analyse them from the perspective of social and political science, and to refrain from writing a piece of propaganda. Therefore, the various Kurdish readers will probably find only a small part of their own respective perspectives reflected one-to-one in the book. The reason is again that my goal was not to write a propaganda tract in any form for any party or group, but to retain a critical gaze from the outside, one that is not only politically committed and interested, but also aloof enough to avoid being co-opted by any particular political party.