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## Rojava: a state subverted or reinvented?

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses how Rojava and its 'Autonomous Administration' simultaneously subvert and reinstate the state(s) they are fighting. Based on Abdullah Öcalan's (b. 1948) conversion to libertarianism after his imprisonment in 1999, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has been invested in presenting its political experiment as a 'stateless democracy', which has elicited both enthusiasm and suspicion from anarchists worldwide, and from large sections of the Western left. Far from trying to prove or disprove Rojava's own narrative, this article analyses how the construction of Rojava is a complex and often self-contradictory process, both at the rhetorical/propagandist level and in terms of actual military, political and social practices. By engaging many enemies (ISIS, al Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, the Assad regime, Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey), both discursively and in battle, and trying to obtain support from various potential and mutually conflicting allies (the United States, Russia, Iraqi Kurdistan, the EU, the Western left, the Assad regime) the PYD/YPG-J (People's Protection Units) are entrenched in a fraught space in which subversion and mimicry coexist in uneasy tension.

### KEYWORDS

Syrian War; Rojava Kurdistan; anarchism; democratic confederalism; propaganda

The ongoing Syrian Civil War provides a poignant and current example of the complexities and predicaments of postcolonial states. Created after the First World War as a tool of France's colonial expansion,<sup>1</sup> the Syrian state experienced a multidirectional process of disintegration (followed by reintegration) since 2011. Max Weber's idea that a state worth its name ought to retain '*das Monopol legitimen physischen Zwanges*'<sup>2</sup> that is, the monopoly of the legitimate use of coercive power does not apply to the current Syrian Arab Republic, which finds itself divided into multiple and conflicting sovereignties. The 'divided sovereignty' or 'fragmented sovereignty' that we witness in the Syrian case does not only apply to the legitimate or illegitimate use of coercive power but in fact to many other areas of governance and administration: tax collection, justice, and basic needs such as food, water and electricity.<sup>3</sup> As the Syrian polity split up into many different territories, locally administered by militias with a myriad of different ideologies and agendas, alternative sovereignties to Bashar al-Assad's Baathist government emerged. These spaces in which the Syrian state was or is still being subverted did not only pose a military/territorial threat to the Baathist regime but also represented a challenge to its rule in terms of legality, legitimacy and political imagination.

Although at the time of writing (April 2019) Islamist groups are by and large on the retreat or practically defeated, many of the more successfully organised and state-like sovereignties that emerged out of the Syrian conflict were accomplished by Islamist militias, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), Jabhat al Nusra (later renamed Hayat Tahrir al Sham) or Ahrar Ash-Sham, to mention but a few. In the territories that they controlled, these militias implemented alternative systems of governance based on differing interpretations of the Sharia, or Islamic legal system. Their relative success in articulating a framework of legality and jurisprudence to substitute and compete with the rule of the Baath party contrasts with the more secular sectors of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which often failed to provide a successful model of administration in the territories they held. A successful exception to religious dominance, as an alternative to the Assad administration, is the system originally implemented in the Kurdish areas of Northern Syria, or Rojava, the West of Kurdistan. Under the leadership of the PYD (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party) and its militias, the YPG (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, People's Protection Units) and YPJ (Yekineyen Parastina Jin, Women's Protection Units), all currently part of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), an 'Autonomous Administration' was set up in the vast swathe of land that stretches from the Iraqi/Turkish border in the north-east to the town of Manbij in the west, and to the town of Abu-Kamal in the south-east. Basically, the PYD and its Arab allies (SDF) hold the entire territory that spans from the east of the river Euphrates all the way to the Iraqi border. They also hold an enclave in the north-west: the town of Tall Rifat, north of Aleppo, jointly controlled with the pro-government forces. Unlike Islamist militias, which aimed to establish an Islamic state that could have redrawn the current borders of the Middle East, whether in the form of a Caliphate (ISIS), Emirate (Jabhat al Nusra) or a republic administered by a council of clerics (*Majlis al Shura*, as the Islamic Front proposed), the PYD is not only secular but is also trying to deconstruct or decentralise the state.

The aim of this article is to discuss how Rojava and its 'Autonomous Administration' simultaneously subvert and reinstate the state(s) they have fought, which in this context are the Baathist regime and the state-like rule of the various Islamist militias that have engaged them in a fierce confrontation since 2013. Although written from the perspective of developing events in April 2019, I focus mostly on the inception and early stages of the Rojava administration (2012–2015) before it merged into the SDF and became a major player in the Syrian war. This early period seemed animated by an intense propagandistic outreach and a utopian ethos that is less present in the group's current discourse, more centred on military achievements and securing autonomy after the war.

### **The glocalisation of a struggle: from a prison cell to *The Guardian***

Based on Abdullah Öcalan's (b. 1948) conversion to libertarian municipalism after his imprisonment in 1999, the PYD has been invested in presenting its political experiment as a 'stateless democracy',<sup>4</sup> which has elicited both enthusiasm and suspicion from anarchists around the world and from large sections of the Western left. In his writings, Öcalan does not only consider 'democratic confederalism' to be a way of articulating a Kurdish polity bypassing the state(s) but also a potential method for articulating a different,

stateless Middle East where Arabs, Turks, Turkmen, Kurds, Persians, Armenians, Assyrians and Jews can coexist peacefully.

Far from trying to prove whether Rojava is an authoritarian ‘one party state’ or ‘an ideal representation of the human spirit’,<sup>5</sup> I analyse how the construction of Rojava is a complex and often self-contradictory process, both at the rhetorical/propagandistic level and in terms of actual military, political and social practices. By engaging many enemies (ISIS, al Nusra, the FSA, the Assad regime, Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey), both discursively and in battle, and trying to obtain support from various potential and mutually conflicting allies (the United States, Russia, Iraqi Kurdistan, the EU, the Western left, the Assad regime) the PYD/YPG-J occupy a fraught space in which subversion and mimicry coexist in uneasy tension.<sup>6</sup> This ambivalence is perfectly instantiated in the PYD’s claims to be both at the forefront of America’s War on Terror and at the vanguard of progressive humanity, creating a society free from patriarchy, capitalism, religious discrimination and, ultimately, the state itself.<sup>7</sup>

When analysing the rhetoric and actions of the Rojava administration, and how they inform each other, it is worth remembering Patrick Cockburn’s view that the Syrian conflict is a propaganda war as much as an actual war. The Syrian civil war has not only been fought on the ground but also, and very significantly, on the Internet, as Cockburn illustrates by quoting from a jihadi website: ‘Half of Jihad is Media’.<sup>8</sup> This is not only true of the struggles construed as jihad by Islamist militias but also of the PYD and its anti-statist, anti-terrorist fight. In order to understand the PYD’s propaganda, it is essential to approach it not only in terms of political ideology but also in terms of *realpolitik* and strategy. The many narratives that coalesce in Rojava (for example, religious pluralism/secularism, Kurdish nationalism, anti-capitalism, environmentalism, self-sufficiency, anti-terrorism, gender liberation and grassroots democracy) cater for different, sometimes conflicting, ideological preferences and seem aimed at garnering military and financial support and diplomatic and political recognition. It is worth mentioning that I am not using the word propaganda as necessarily synonymous with falsity or deception, but, in line with Shawn Parry-Giles, as ‘strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the purpose of generating action benefitting its source’.<sup>9</sup>

Although PYD propaganda about the achievements of Rojava comprise many areas, this discussion is focused on the issue of the state, or how the Autonomous Administration negotiates the thin line between functioning as a *de facto* sovereign body with all the trappings of an unofficial state while at the same time (cl)aiming to be a stateless bottom-up democracy. Arguably, it is through this that the ambivalences and contradictions of Rojava as a contested space become most evident, making it one of the most unique and interesting experiments in governance of the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, the statehood/statelessness of Rojava has featured prominently in polemics and apologetics written by numerous anarchists and leftists in general – in the Middle East, but particularly in the West. It should be noted that many of the debates and events analysed in this article are taking place, and changing shape, at the time of writing. Not only can we not foresee the outcome of the Syrian conflict, but its present and immediate past remain difficult to access and verify, making any conclusive analysis impossible. Nevertheless, and regardless of Rojava’s future after the war, it is an example of great significance as an enacted space of difference that might offer an alternative to current models of postcolonial statehood

and governance. Whether its significance lies in validating the PYD's claim that 'democratic confederalism' (and Rojava as its blueprint) holds the key to a more peaceful, egalitarian and stateless Middle East or, on the contrary, it proves to be a cautionary tale about how revolutions mimic and reinstate the oppressive systems against which they originally rebel remains to be seen.<sup>10</sup> However, by its very existence, whether as imagined utopia or as betrayed praxis, Rojava is already changing the way we talk about the postcolonial state, the future of the Middle East and non-Western democracy.

The globalisation of Rojava owes much to anarchist academic David Graeber's article 'Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Syria?' A careful reading of Graeber's polemic is helpful in understanding how Rojava has been construed in the Western media and in public opinion. Graeber begins his piece by framing Rojava as an anarchist experiment that echoes the social revolution that took place during the Spanish civil war (1936–1939). In this comparative framework, Rojava becomes anarchist Spain, their female militia, the YPJ, the equivalent of the *Mujeres Libres*, and their ISIS adversaries entwined with 'Franco's superficially devout, murderous Falangists'.<sup>11</sup> Graeber begins his article emotionally by recalling his father's involvement in the Spanish civil war as a volunteer in the International Brigades and ends it by rhetorically asking 'Is the world – and this time most scandalous of all, the international left – going to be complicit in letting history repeat itself?'<sup>12</sup>

Although Graeber is aware of some relevant differences, the emotional force of the comparison often betrays a lack of critical distance, leading to the singularity of the Kurdish struggle being at times eclipsed. In this way, Rojava could be, and in fact has been, turned into a symbol of the left as a means of galvanising support for the PYD. Although his intent is thus not academic but rather polemical, Graeber's analogy and his enthusiastic depiction of Rojava have not gone unquestioned.

Indeed, much of the international left to which he appealed has been locked in debates about Rojava since the publication of Graeber's article, and they often position themselves clearly either against or in favour of Graeber's appraisal. Although Graeber ought to be acknowledged for popularising the Rojava struggle among the broad Western left, the analogy with the Spanish revolution and his reading of the Rojava experience have also contributed to obscure the actual issue, with all its subtleties and ambivalences. The issue of whether Rojava is an example of a state reinvented or a subversion of the state is not only central to anarchist debates but also to the image of the PYD. Thus Western apologists who have chosen to defend the statelessness of Rojava have become, more or less consciously, propagandists for the PYD. It is far from my aim to elucidate why many Western leftists uncritically support the PYD, a tendency that can be further appreciated in many of the accounts of the December 2014 academic delegation (which included David Graeber) that visited Rojava, and in the reports of other journalists and activists who have travelled through the Kurdish-controlled areas. The fact that the voices of those foreigners who have been on the ground offer, more often than not, eulogies could be interpreted as a validation of the PYD's claims. However, it should not be forgotten that these visitors were invited, protected and guided in their travels by PYD officials and, presumably, also shielded from the more problematic aspects of Rojava. In these enthusiastic accounts, the voices of Kurdish and Arab subjects critical of the PYD have been silenced, as I will discuss at length later.

Journalists who were granted access, such as Vice News (September 2013) and BBC (November 2014) correspondents, gave voice to the PYD official party line, while also reporting in a more questioning and nuanced tone in the final, edited versions of their documentaries. Thus, the BBC documentary, though largely laudatory of the Autonomous Administration, shows two prisoners being taken blindfolded by armed guards out of a police station and comments: ‘The guards did not want us to film them and we do not know what happened to those men next’.<sup>13</sup> Analogously, Vice reporter Aris Roussinos mentions, as he is driven through a (Baathist) government-controlled quarter of Qamishli, the implicit cooperation between the Assad regime and the PYD, which had been widely denied by the PYD leadership in the early stages of the war.<sup>14</sup> In Roussinos’s words: ‘While the Kurds hold the city’s [Qamishli] outskirts, regime forces still control the city centre, evidence, the rebels [FSA] claim, of the tacit alliance between the two’.<sup>15</sup> However careful and qualified these statements were, they offered a critical distance absent in the reports of enthusiastic activists like Graeber, thus complicating the image of Rojava as a utopian realm disconnected from the authoritarianism of the Baathist regime.

### Stateless democracy in the shadow of the authoritarian state?

A brief discussion of the recent wartime context in which the Rojava administration emerged might help clarify the connection between the PYD and the Baathist regime, currently the two major players in the Syrian conflict. This fraught relationship needs to be understood within the highly complex and ever-shifting network of alliances of the seven-year-long conflict. During the summer of 2012, the Assad regime began to realise its vulnerability and, as the uprising gradually turned into a civil war, government forces withdrew from most Kurdish territories, enabling the PYD and its militia, the YPG-J, to take over large areas of Jazira province, the towns of Kobani and Afrin and their surrounding areas. Taking advantage of the apparent vanishing of the Syrian state, the PYD declared the Rojava administration and tried to implement ‘democratic confederalism’ by setting up local councils and other democratic structures. Whether this was a bottom-up revolution or a top-down takeover by a political party remains an issue of heated debate. The seamless transition between the Syrian regime and the PYD’s theoretically democratic system suggests the need for some form of cooperation between the Kurdish party and the Assad government.<sup>16</sup> Also, as the takeover unfolded there were instances of political repression: murders, kidnappings and arbitrary arrests of political opponents, in the context of an allegedly pluralistic Rojava revolution and libertarian PYD.<sup>17</sup>

Among these events, the Amuda massacre (27 June 2013) has been widely reported, providing as it did an example of the YPG acting in a way close to that of the Baathist regime it abhorred.<sup>18</sup> According to eyewitnesses who managed to film some of the incidents, the YPG-J opened fire on a crowd of largely unarmed demonstrators, who were linked to the Kurdish National Council and were protesting against the arrest of Kurdish activists opposed to the PYD. The shooting ended with seven protesters dead, and was followed by the raiding of hospitals and rival political offices the day after. Reports of political repression and assassinations continued afterwards and were thoroughly covered, with frequent updates from different areas under PYD control, until late 2016.<sup>19</sup> Many of these incidents concerned Kurds who belonged to political parties other than the PYD, and ethnic Arabs. These accusations have been discredited

as Turkish propaganda by YPG members and other independent sources who wish to remain anonymous,<sup>20</sup> but organisations such as Human Rights Watch, in a June 2014 report, seem to believe that they are not groundless: 'The Kurdish leadership in northern Syria could do so much more to protect the human rights of everyone in the areas it controls – Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, and others' and admonishing that 'it should govern inclusively in respect for critical views'.<sup>21</sup>

On 13 October 2015, Amnesty International published a report on the supposed displacement of Arab and Turkmen families and the razing of their houses by YPG fighters.<sup>22</sup> These occurred in villages that the YPG had conquered from ISIS in Eastern Syria (Hasakah and Raqqqa provinces). The reactions of the PYD and its Western sympathisers to the Amnesty report were swift from. YPG spokesman Redur Xelil dismissed the accusations as false although the report includes Ciwan Ibrahim's admission that these were 'isolated incidents'.<sup>23</sup> Further, the Facebook account 'Western Kurdistan' shared the news under the unsympathetic heading 'Daesh [ISIS] & its supporters can go to hell',<sup>24</sup> and within hours of publication, two Western sympathisers wrote blog entries pointing out the flaws of the report.<sup>25</sup> Many comments on Facebook and Twitter suggested that the information was simply Turkish propaganda and offered various rationalisations to the YPG's alleged actions.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, the report contained a supposed threat from a YPG fighter to a young villager, meant to coerce him into leaving his family house. In the young man's own words: 'We [local family] told him [YPG fighter] we will not leave, he said, we will tell the [US coalition] war planes to attack you'.<sup>27</sup> According to Lama Fakih, author of the report, this was not an isolated incident. Although it is impossible to verify the accuracy of the report, and the YPG and its Western sympathisers have been quick to refute it with a mix of counterclaims and some more or less convincing evidence. It is thus hard to categorically state how much the PYD and the YPG-J were acting as an established power structure or simply fighting back ISIS.<sup>28</sup>

On 22 October 2015, a short Vice documentary was posted showing similar claims from former Arab residents of Tal Abyad.<sup>29</sup> In this case, the refugees reported how some of their relatives had been murdered by the YPG and how their houses and personal possessions had been destroyed as they were forcibly displaced. Tal Abyad, right on the border with Turkey in the north of Raqqqa province, could not be more strategic. The Kurdish conquest of Tal Abyad in 2015 had great geopolitical significance and contributed to turning the YPG-J into a key military player in the Syrian conflict. Consequently, it would make sense that the YPG-J wanted to consolidate its control over the town by removing potential enemies (ethnic Arabs, ISIS sympathisers, Turkmen). However, if confirmed, the accusations of ethnic cleansing could be seen as Kurdish revenge, delivered fifty years later, for the creation of an 'Arab Belt' in Northern Syria (or Rojava Kurdistan), fostered by Hafiz al Assad in the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> Although the discriminatory and oppressive nature of Arabisation policies, which were instigated by a fully fledged militarised state and lasted, arguably, for four decades, could not be compared to whatever acts of oppression the PYD/YPG-J might have committed since 2012, the two examples of displacement seem to share the same structure and underlying logic. Thus, the Kurdish militias would not have only been rewriting history but copying some of the most oppressive and discriminatory practices of the Baath regime, which, paradoxically, have affected the Kurds more than any other minority in Syria.

More recently and, perhaps, more relevant is the 2013 battle of Tal Abyad. This was a particularly violent confrontation between the YPG-J, which controlled the town at the time, and jihadi militias like ISIS, Al-Nusra or Ahrar-ar-Sham. After the jihadi forces took over Tal Abyad, there were reports of ethnic cleansing, mass killing of Kurdish civilians, kidnappings, rape and demolition of houses. However, these claims were largely raised by pro-regime or Russian media outlets and later taken to the UN by the Russian administration. The narrative and the extent of the massacre were also contested in counter-reports from non-jihadi Syrian opposition websites, yielding a highly disputed picture.<sup>31</sup> It is far from my aim to settle the facts about the Tal Abyad massacre, but the symbolic and emotive force of the Kurdish retaking of the town in 2015 from ISIS might further explain the YPG-J's alleged abuses as vengeful mimicry.

As well as bringing into question its democratic and libertarian principles, the alleged humans rights violations problematise the conception of Rojava as a stateless society, where the people are directly in control of their governance and the state has been replaced by a horizontal confederation of councils. It also presents the Rojava administration mimicking the coercive nature of the regimes it is fighting, such as the Syrian government and ISIS. Furthermore, the fact that the YPG fighter used the Kurds' current military alliance with the United States to exert power over the villager, even if this is to be regarded as an empty threat unlikely to be realised, shows that the Autonomous Administration was enacting state-like power, if not its own alone, then that of one of the most powerful states in the world. Resorting to the United States as a proxy coercive force would not only compromise the PYD/YPG's anti-statist ideology but would also complicate their relationship to US imperialism in the region. Finally, the rhetoric employed by YPG fighters and commanders, both in interviews featured in Fakhri's report and in later statements, mimic a logic common to many authoritarian states, as they claim to have displaced some families for their own safety in order to protect them from ISIS.<sup>32</sup>

Even before reports such as the one published in 2015 by Fakhri, scholars of Kurdistan,<sup>33</sup> some of them in close contact with the PYD leadership (for example, Michael Gunter<sup>34</sup>), had remained suspicious of the PKK's conversion to libertarian municipalism and had pointed at the pyramidal structure of the party, with a revered leader at the apex and a personality cult around him. Analogously, some anarchists and communists have reflected on the irony of a horizontal system being implemented from the top down, through a policy formulated by the imprisoned leader (that is, Abdhulla Öcalan) and communicated to his followers through his letters and pamphlets.<sup>35</sup> The omnipresent image of the imprisoned leader in Rojava and the frequent references to him and his ideology in comments by YPG and YPJ fighters resembles the way ISIS fighters often referred and publicly swore allegiance to their (possibly defunct) Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and Jabhat al Nusra fighters spoke of al-Golani. Even though these leaders, and their political thinking, could not be more different, the way in which their followers use their names in war cries, public rituals and casual comments signals a troubling structural resemblance.<sup>36</sup>

### **The geopolitical chessboard: 'frenemies' and neocolonial ambitions**

The PYD has been trying to gain Western support since its early and relatively quiet border with a Syrian regime that wished to appease the Kurds was gradually replaced by a more uneasy and unpredictable border with the FSA (Autumn 2012–Spring 2013).



The border was eventually taken over by jihadi groups, first Jabhat al Nusra (Spring 2013) and then ISIS (Summer 2013), which further threatened the position of the Kurdish militia.<sup>37</sup> The United States acceded to help the Kurdish resistance at Kobani by striking the assailant, ISIS, from the air and occasionally dropping extra weapons into YPG-J controlled territory, but refused to either provide soldiers on the ground or offer full diplomatic recognition. The United States and most of its Western allies have reluctantly but consistently offered political or military support to the Kurdish militias, with the notable exception of the Turkish invasion of Afrin in January 2018. Operation Olive Branch, the official name of the Turkish intervention, represented an exception to the pattern of American and Russian support for the YPG-J, as both superpowers allowed the Turkish army to enter and take over most of the formerly Kurdish-controlled region.

Notwithstanding this, the SDF has overall enjoyed a fruitful relationship with Russia, which has also openly supported the Syrian government throughout the war.<sup>38</sup> Even before Donald Trump's election in 2016 and his warming up to the Russian leadership, the Kurdish militias and their allies received training and logistical help from the Kremlin, which crucially contributed to the SDF's and the Baathist regime's advance against ISIS in the East through an intensive bombing campaign, starting October 2015. Not coincidentally, the two factions that have received Russian support and have benefited either from support (SDF) or no direct aggression (Syrian government) from the US are winning the war. The Syrian government and the SDF control about 80–90% of Syrian territory and every single large city/provincial capital with the exception of Idlib, which at the time of writing is still in the hands of Islamist militias.

The problematic cooperation with powerful states has also divided non-Kurdish sympathisers of the PYD/SDF, some of them arguing that a temporary alliance with the Americans or the Russians is a strategic necessity and some others pointing out that military help is likely to translate into political subservience. The fragile and shifting alliances of the Autonomous Administration, a defining feature of the Syrian war, further highlights how Rojava mimics other postcolonial states in the region. Moreover, it confirms Gilbert Achcar's statement that Kurdish political movements have a history of forging alliances with 'the oppressors of their own people across the border'.<sup>39</sup> Although neither the United States nor Russia have directly oppressed the Kurdish people, they certainly have contributed to oppressing many other communities that the PYD aims to liberate by implementing 'democratic confederalism' across the Middle East.<sup>40</sup> Russia's role as proxy ally to the Baathist Syrian regime and the United States' overall role in the Middle East in the last five decades could not be more problematic.

### Mimicry and the politics of death

The mimicking of neighbouring power practices by the Autonomous Administration is not confined to diplomacy or alliance-making, but most significantly and troublingly it extends to a necropolitics. An innovative feature of the Syrian war is the performative power of necropolitics in the form of public/filmed executions, the abuse of corpses and other forms of ritual humiliation located along the line between bare life and death. Achille Mbembe's dictum that 'To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power' certainly applies to the Syrian civil war.<sup>41</sup> Not only are the different militias that control the Syrian territories

exercising their sovereignty through a necropolitics, they are also performing state power through countless videos and photographs of executions and dead bodies. Although ISIS's visual propaganda in this respect is well known in the West, the phenomenon is by no means limited to the now beleaguered Islamist militia. With the exception of the Syrian government, most militias are posting online images of their enemies being killed or their disfigured corpses after the battle. These images do not only function as (counter-)propaganda, aimed at taunting or demoralising the enemy, they also work as a performance of state sovereignty. By showing the dead body of the enemy the relevant militia is not only making a statement about its power to decide over the life and death of its adversaries but also claiming sovereignty over the dead body as a war trophy. Even though ISIS's theatrical sadism and proficient editing is unrivalled among fighters in Syria, the YPG-J, among many others, have engaged in similar depictions of death as a celebration of their power.

The (often censored and now reopened) Facebook page 'The Lions of Rojava', a site aimed at recruiting foreign fighters for the YPG-J, posted many pictures of disfigured dead bodies in the months during the spring and summer of 2015.<sup>42</sup> However, they were all removed within a matter of hours or days. The images also featured YPG-J fighters proudly posing next to the bodies and occasionally stomping on or abusing them in some way. This attempt to counteract ISIS propaganda paradoxically made the YPG-J resemble ISIS in their celebration of the dead body as a site of power. It must be noted that the YPG-J does not publish videos of executions, only footage of ISIS fighters being killed in battle or their dead bodies being abused or exposed after battle. The rationale behind these practices is different in both groups but the similarity of the practice itself brings into question the moral or political high ground claimed by the YPG-J. ISIS's extremely organised, deliberately slow and solemn approach to administering death contrasts with the passionate, celebratory and revengeful tone of YPG-J propaganda. For instance, a video posted in August 2015 showing the killing of ISIS militants in clashes with the YPG-J, and depicting corpses and scattered body parts, is accompanied by the fast and cheerful tune of Queen's song 'Another One Bites the Dust'.<sup>43</sup> The video begins by quoting ISIS visual and musical propaganda, but the sound of a jihadi *nasheed* is suddenly replaced by Queen's song and the clips of romanticised life in the Caliphate by images of American airstrikes, black flags burning, ISIS fighters being shot and their dead bodies being abused and exhibited. What was meant to be a contestation of ISIS power, depicting not only their military defeat but also a subversion of its ideology (Western popular music, non-religious joy and desecration of the jihadi corpse), ended up mirroring the power practices of the jihadi group.<sup>44</sup>

Analogously, by engaging ISIS's rhetoric for counter-propaganda, the YPG-J mimics ISIS's construction of both martyrdom and dishonourable death. Both groups acknowledge their dead as martyrs (Kurdish, *şehid*; Arabic, *shahid*) and claim to be sending their enemies to hell. Whereas for the YPG-J the common cry '*şehid namirin*' (martyrs never die) does not connote an afterlife in Paradise and the claim to send 'ISIS terrorists to hell' simply involves killing them, the structural parallelism between the Jihadi and the YPG-J's narratives is striking.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the jihadi construction of the YPG-J as atheists or apostates (Muslims who have forsaken their religion) is mimicked by the idea that 'Our enemy [IS] does not recognize humanity. They do not know what humanity is', which legitimises their killing in the eyes of the YPG-J.<sup>46</sup> Whether the totemic abstraction is godlessness or 'humanity', both ISIS and the

YPG-J construct their enemy as a legitimate target and, paradoxically in the case of the Kurdish militia, as seemingly not part of the ‘humanity’ they are fighting for. Another example of this pattern was the revenge beheading of an ISIS fighter by a Christian militia fighter allied with the YPG-J, which was not shown on social media, but which clearly reproduced the ritual performance of ISIS’s power.<sup>47</sup> It seems evident that in contesting the power and narrative of the self-proclaimed Caliphate, the YPG-J has exercised sovereignty over life and death in a way too similar to ISIS, which complicates its claim to be fighting for a stateless society.

Furthermore, the relationship between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian government is a highly ambiguous one, and not only at a symbolic or rhetorical level. It seems needless to point out that the kidnappings and murder of political opponents mimics the Assad regime and its feared *mukhabarat*, whose brutal techniques were experienced first-hand by many PYD militants before the Syrian Uprising. Symbolically, the old police stations have retained their function under the new PYD administration and they still seem to be the locus of torture and arbitrary arrests. The Amuda massacre (2013) discussed above is a small-scale but clear example of how the YPG-J has dealt with dissent in an identical manner to the Baathist regime.

## Conclusion

However ideologically removed the PYD/YPG-J might be from both ISIS and the Syrian government, and however more humane their military and political practices might be, it seems undeniable that there are also numerous troubling similarities between them. The reports of human rights abuses (numerous enough and ongoing not to be simply dismissed as Turkish propaganda) do not only complicate any ideal view of Rojava but also hint at the fact that ‘The PYD and its militia [YPG-J], currently exercise state-like power in Syria’s Kurdish regions’.<sup>48</sup> Statements such as Eva Savelsberg’s here, which are common among scholars of Kurdistan, contrast, for instance, with Graeber’s sympathetic account, based on first-hand observation, that the Rojava administration simply appears to be a government but is not really one: ‘They created a dummy government. It looks just like a government, except it lacks any access to mechanisms of coercive power’.<sup>49</sup> If the ‘dummy government’ has no ‘access to mechanisms of coercive power’ the abovementioned instances of political repression would have to be dismissed as mere propaganda or as the acts of individuals with no connection to the ‘state’ or ‘ruling party’, which considering their number and magnitude seems, at the least, doubtful. Furthermore, Graeber’s celebration of the Rojava police and the military training given to many individuals, since its ultimate aim is to ‘abolish the police’ by getting rid of specialists, also contrasts with reports of underage teenagers being conscripted by the YPG-J.<sup>50</sup> These contradictory visions beg the question: did the Rojava revolution set up a dummy government to function diplomatically or did the PYD set up dummy councils to create the illusion of direct democracy?

Although the Rojava councils are a remarkable and unprecedented democratic development, representing all ethnic and religious communities and being based on the premise of gender equality, it remains to be seen how much actual power they have over the Autonomous Administration. This issue has been partially addressed by Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga, who nevertheless offer a eulogistic

appraisal of the council system.<sup>51</sup> A critical and thorough examination would be desirable, but it falls outside the scope of this article.

Whereas the Rojava administration is invested in promoting religious and ethnic pluralism, its tolerance of political dissent and organisations outside its sphere of influence seems suspect. In this respect, it is worth noting how Rojava does not only subvert the states that surround it but also reinstates them by copying some of their oppressive practices. Although in terms of gender equality, ethnic/religious diversity and the creation of participatory structures (however powerless) Rojava represents a radical departure from the Baathist regime and the current rule of various opposition factions (for example, ISIS, FSA), the PYD/YPG-J also display some of the authoritarian features of their enemies, complicating the self-proclaimed image of Rojava as a stateless democracy.

When analysing the peculiar entity that Rojava currently is, it is important not to limit our discussion to ideology or to the claims of the actors involved. In times of war (if not always!) the production of information and political rhetoric has an increasingly propagandistic and strategic dimension that cannot be ignored. Rojava, as a contested frontline, is no exception and, therefore, the claims of the Autonomous Administration to be crafting a stateless society or deconstructing the state need to be seen in the context of war agendas and support-seeking. The relative truth of such claims, however, will have to be fully examined once the Syrian war ends and a freer and wider inquiry into PYD/YPG-J's governance can be conducted. Rojava seems a unique experiment in the context of Syria's 'fragmented sovereignties', perhaps the most democratic and pluralistic of these micro-sovereignties but, nonetheless, it is one that is also articulated and functions in most regards as a (warring) state.

## Notes

1. For a detailed account of the Sykes-Picot agreement which divided the post-Ottoman Middle East in the different states that make it up today see James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle that Shaped the Middle East*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2011, pp 31–37.
2. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1921, p 29.
3. Carmen Pavel, *Divided Sovereignty: International Institutions and the Limits of State Authority*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p xiv. Nicholas Barker, 'Who Will Rule in Syria? Fragmented Sovereignty and the Problems of Transition', *Strife*, 21 March 2014. Available at: <http://strifeblog.org/2014/03/21/who-will-rule-in-syria-fragmented-sovereignty-and-the-problems-of-transition/> (accessed 15 February 2018).
4. This responds to a double need to turn Rojava into a symbol of the international left, in the same vein as the Zapatistas were enshrined in the 1990s, and to reassure the Syrian government and the international community that the PYD does not aim to create an independent Kurdish state.
5. The expression 'one party state' is used in the 2013 BBC documentary, which calls Rojava a 'mini-state' and mentions how 'their enemies say that it is an atheistic one-party state with links to terrorism', BBC, 'Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution', *YouTube*, 14 November 2014. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKhjJfH0ra4> (accessed 15 February 2018). Although the portrayal of Rojava as 'atheistic' might come from its more religious adversaries, the criticism that it is a 'one-party state' has come from many quarters. The PYD seems to be the only political party in charge in Rojava and its tolerance of political dissidence and plurality seems suspect as I will presently explain. In their defence, the PYD often presents the view that other Kurdish political parties refused to take part in their democratic

experiment and therefore they were not in a position to be coerced to join in. In another example, in June 2015 the American right-wing libertarian cyber-activist 'Brave the World' posted a video of herself celebrating Rojava as 'an ideal representation of the human spirit' and 'a sincere revolution'. Her highly idealistic and eulogistic commentary represents Rojava as 'a place that has given birth to its own freedom', BraveTheWorld, 'Rojava: A Sincere Revolution', *YouTube*, June 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcLPyfgXBak> (accessed 26 April 2019).

6. As explained in the previous section, the YPG is the male and the YPJ the female militia of the PYD. Since both organisations function as one body I refer to them as one entity through the acronym YPG-J, which also reflects its gender diversity.
7. For instance, the website 'Lions of Rojava', aimed at recruiting both civil and military foreign volunteers with some leftist sympathies, makes an appeal to 'Help Liberate a Changing World' and presents Rojava as an inconvenient experiment that regional and world powers wish to silence (e.g. 'just imagine for a second what a mess would emerge if Palestinians adopt Democratic Confederalism', Lions of Rojava, 'Media Analysis by AMARGI: The Ongoing Information War Against Rojava', *Lions of Rojava*, August 2015. Available at: <http://thelionsofrojawa.com/index.php/2015/08/26/rojava-media-war/> (accessed 26 October 2015)). The website was also very critical of the United States and its involvement in the Middle East. However, other websites linked to the PYD or YPG-J have presented themselves as fighting America's War on Terror and being its best ally on the ground, especially after the YPG-J military success in June 2015 and before hostilities with Turkey were initiated in July of the same year. Many of these posts were removed by October 2015. Nevertheless, as a counterpoint to the revolutionary leftist discourse, the Facebook account 'Western Kurdistan' ('Western Kurdistan', *Facebook*. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Western-Kurdistan-800636946635265/> (accessed 15 December 2017)) used to share articles from the conservative British press (e.g. *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*), which has highlighted ISIS atrocities and the danger they represent for the West. The account has recently been shut down by pro-Turkish hackers. Analogously, the anti-capitalist rhetoric used in the more leftist portrayals of Rojava, and also featured in the 2013 BBC documentary, are balanced by the following statement by Sheikh Nafas, from the same source: 'Rojava is a new territory – and a new market. And everyone can play a role here, including the Americans'.
8. Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, London: Verso, 2015, p 27.
9. Shawn Parry-Giles, *The Rhetorical Presidency, Propaganda and the Cold War, 1945–1955*, London: Praeger, 2002, p xxvi.
10. The term 'stateless democracy' is Öcalan's, and is defined in his own words as 'a non-state political administration or a democracy without a state' which is 'open towards other political groups and factions. It is flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented. Ecology and feminism are central pillars'. Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, London: International Initiative, 2011, p 21.
11. David Graeber, 'Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Syria?', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2014. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis> (accessed 15 February 2018).
12. Graeber, 'Why is the World Ignoring the Revolutionary Kurds in Syria?'.
13. BBC, 'Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution'.
14. Jamie Dettmer, 'Syria Falls Apart: Kurds Declare Self-Rule, Assad Besieges Aleppo', *The Daily Beast*, 14 November 2013. Available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/syria-falls-apart-kurds-declare-self-rule-assad-besieges-aleppo> (accessed 30 April 2019).
15. Aris Roussinos, 'Rojava: Syria's Unknown War', *Vice News*, December 2014. Available at: [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/video/rojava-syrias-unknown-war](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/video/rojava-syrias-unknown-war) (accessed 15 February 2018).
16. This issue is discussed in more detail in Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, Oxford: Routledge, 2013, pp 79–81; Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, London: Hurst & Company, 2014, pp 105–107; and

- Diana Darke, *My House in Damascus: An Inside View of the Syrian Revolution*, London: Haus Publishing, 2014, pp 194–195.
17. Harriet Allsop, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2005, pp 211–212; Eva Savelsberg, ‘The Syrian-Kurdish Movements: Obstacles Rather than Forces of Democratization’, in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (eds), *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp 99–103; and *KurdWatch*, [www.kurdwatch.org](http://www.kurdwatch.org) (accessed 15 February 2018).
  18. For a comprehensive account on the incident, which includes videos and eyewitness’ statements see Andrea Glioti, ‘Syrian Kurdish Group Linked to PKK Kills Protesters’, *Al Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East*, 1 July 2013. Available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/syria-kurds-pyd-amuda-protest.html#ixzz2ajPxtsPC> (accessed 15 February 2018).
  19. *KurdWatch*, [www.kurdwatch.org](http://www.kurdwatch.org) (accessed 15 February 2018).
  20. There are many instances of pro-PYD/YPG-J Twitter accounts denouncing *KurdWatch* as Turkish propaganda, for instance see Hevallo, *Twitter*, 13 August 2013, 5:55 a.m. Available at: <https://twitter.com/hevallo/status/367268124699410432>. Also, a private source that wishes to remain anonymous explained to me in more detail how *KurdWatch* is funded by Turkish and American money and is operated by a pro-Turkish Syrian Kurd and his Western girlfriend living in Europe. However, no substantive evidence was provided and I could not verify such claims.
  21. Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Abuses in Kurdish-Run Enclaves: Arbitrary Arrests, Unfair Trials; Use of Child Soldiers’, *Human Rights Watch*, 18 June 2014. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/18/syria-abuses-kurdish-run-enclaves> (accessed 15 February 2018).
  22. Lama Fakih, ‘Syria: US Ally’s Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes’, *Amnesty International*, 13 October 2015. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/Web> (accessed 15 February 2018).
  23. Reuters, ‘Amnesty Accuses U.S.-Backed Syrian Kurdish Group of Demolishing Homes’, *Reuters*, 13 October 2015. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKCN0S62A620151012> (accessed 26 April 2019).
  24. ‘Western Kurdistan’, *Facebook*, 13 October 2015. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Western-Kurdistan-800636946635265/> (accessed 15 December 2017).
  25. Two good examples are Macer Gifford, ‘Open Letter to Amnesty from UK YPG Volunteer’, *Kurdish Question*, 14 October 2015. Available at: <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/open-letter-to-amnesty-from-uk-ypg-volunteer/1173-open-letter-to-amnesty-from-uk-ypg-volunteer.html> (accessed 15 February 2018) and Bill Weinberg, ‘Amnesty Charges Syrian Kurds With Ethnic Cleansing’, *World War 4 Report*, 13 October 2015. Available at: <http://ww4report.com/node/14372> (accessed 15 February 2018).
  26. Many of these rationalisations rely on framing the issue as ethnic cleansing and defend the YPG-J by stating that many of its fighters are ethnic Arabs and Turkmen. While it is a fact that many Arabs, Turkmen and Syrians are enlisted in the YPG-J, such counterclaims neither prove nor disprove that the abuses reported by Amnesty International.
  27. Translation from Arabic into English by Lama Fakih, author of the report.
  28. Refutations such as Gifford’s or Weinberg’s offer a more thorough critique of the Amnesty report by analysing and deconstructing the evidence provided (techniques used and information selection) by Lama Fakih, however, they do not offer any conclusive evidence that the report was fabricated or untrue.
  29. Vice News (reporter not mentioned), ‘Caught Between the Islamic State and the Kurds: Exiled from Tal Abyad’, *Vice News*, 22 October 2015. Available at: <https://news.vice.com/video/caught-between-the-islamic-state-and-the-kurds-exiled-from-tal-abyad> (accessed 15 February 2018).
  30. Discussed at length by Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, Oxford: Routledge, 2009, pp 59–68; and Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People*, London: Pluto Press, 2005, pp 36–38.

31. 'Tal Abyad Massacre', *A Closer Look on Syria*, 18 September 2016. Available at: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Tal\\_Abyad\\_massacre#Context\\_Discussion](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Tal_Abyad_massacre#Context_Discussion).
32. In Lama Fakih's video-report Rojava security official Ciwan Ibrahim states that 'because of the presence of terrorism some of the [suspect's] families were asked to leave the area. Folks, please pack your things and come back when the area is safe and the war is over'. Fakih also writes that the 'YPG has justified the forced displacement of civilians by saying that it was necessary for the civilians' own safety'. The same claims have been made throughout a lengthy refutation: YPG General Command, 'General Command of the People's Defense Units in Response to Amnesty International Oct. 8th Report', *YPG: People's Defense Units*, 19 October 2015. Available at: <http://yppgrojava.com/en/index.php/statements/809-statement-by-the-gen-comm-of-the-people-s-defense-units-in-response-to-amnesty-international-s-october-8th-report> (accessed 26 October 2015).
33. See Allsop, *The Kurds of Syria*, pp 208–222; Savelsberg, 'The Syrian-Kurdish Movements', pp 102–103; and Robert Lowe, 'The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria', in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (eds), *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp 238–239.
34. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*.
35. An anarchist critique to this aspect of the Rojava revolution can be found at The Anarchist Federation, 'Anarchist Federation Statement in Rojava', *Anarchist Federation*, 1 December 2014, Available at: <https://afed.org.uk/anarchist-federation-statement-on-rojava/> (accessed 26 October 2018).
36. The omnipresent image of Öcalan is visible in many photographs and videos about Rojava. For instance see the abovementioned 2014 BBC documentary and Roussinos's 2013 report for Vice News in which banners with Öcalan's face feature prominently in many public rituals and scenes of daily life in Rojava.
37. The situation is far more complex, as the areas originally controlled by the FSA were gradually infiltrated and taken over by jihadists from Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS. However, I have tried to provide a simplified and approximate overview of the shifting relationship between the Kurds militias and its rebel/jihadi neighbours.
38. Reuters, 'Kurdish YPG Welcomes Russian Troops to Syrian Military Base', *Middle East Eye*, 20 March 2017. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurdish-ypg-welcomes-russian-troops-syrian-military-base> (accessed 29 April 2019); Rudaw, 'YPG Receiving Training from Russia in Afrin, Says Spokesman', *Rudaw*, 20 March 2017. Available at: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/20032017> (accessed 29 April 2019).
39. Gilbert Achcar, 'Kurdish Struggle & Arab Uprising: A Complex Relation', SOAS – University of London, London, UK, 24 April 2015, Conference Presentation.
40. In his writings Öcalan does not only consider 'democratic confederalism' to be a way of articulating a Kurdish polity bypassing the state(s) but also a potential method for articulating a different, stateless Middle East where Arabs, Turks, Turkmen, Kurds, Persians, Armenians, Assyrians and Jews can coexist peacefully.
41. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', Libby Meintjes (tr.), p 12. Available at: <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~lhc/docs/achillembembe.pdf> (accessed 15 February 2018).
42. 'The Lions of Rojava', *Facebook*. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/TheLionsOfRojavaOfficial?fref=ts> (accessed 15 February 2018).
43. 'Shame The Sheep', 'Islamic State F\*ck Your B\*llshit' [sic], *YouTube*, 15 August 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlaPkBY7ril> (accessed 26 October 2015).
44. The video entitled 'Islamic State, F\*ck your Bullsh\*t' was made and uploaded by the Twitter/YouTube user 'Shame the Sheep', whose relationship to the YPG-J is unclear, but whose videos have been widely shared and celebrated through the social media accounts of Kurdish fighters. In another similar anti-ISIS video, 'A Message to the People of the So-Called Caliphate', Shame the Sheep sends a threat to ISIS and concludes with George W. Bush proclaiming: 'We will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated', which again shows the problematic relationship of Kurdish anti-Jihadist rhetoric vis-à-vis American imperialism in the region. 'Shame The

- Sheep', 'A Message to the People of the So-Called Caliphate', *YouTube*, 12 May 2015. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWurOg0\\_ykw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWurOg0_ykw) (accessed 26 October 2015). 'Shame the Sheep's account has since been removed from *YouTube*.
45. Both slogans could be found in websites like 'Western Kurdistan', *Facebook*. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Western-Kurdistan-800636946635265/> (accessed 15 February 2015), before it was hacked by pro-Turkish supporters in early 2018.
  46. Aris Roussinos, 'Kurds Assert Control of Hasakah: The Battle for Rojava (Dispatch 3)', *Vice News*, 13 August 2015. Available at: <https://news.vice.com/video/kurds-assert-control-of-hasakah-the-battle-for-rojava-dispatch-3> (accessed 15 February 2018).
  47. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'ISIS Fighter Beheaded by Syrian Christian: Was It An Act of Revenge?' *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 31 May 2015. Available at: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=18973> (accessed 29 April 2019).
  48. Savelsberg, 'The Syrian-Kurdish Movements', p 98.
  49. David Graeber, 'David Graeber on Rojava Social Revolution', *YouTube*, Posted by 'Rico Suave', 24 January 2015. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWgPWL7hT7M> (accessed 15 February 2018).
  50. Many such reports can be found at *KurdWatch*. Available at: [www.kurdwatch.org](http://www.kurdwatch.org) (accessed 15 February 2018).
  51. Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*, London: PlutoPress, 2016.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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