The Changing Autonomy of the Rojava in Northern Syria

Elze Wilts

S1795503

University of Leiden

5854VTMES MA Thesis Middle Eastern Studies

Dr. Eldad Ben Aharon

10-6-2021

Word count: 19994

Abstract

There is a history of forgetting the Syrian Kurds when writing about the Kurds in general. Since the Syrian civil war and the subsequent militarization and politicization of the Syrian Kurds, they have entered the international arena with might. Many academics have in turn wrote about how the Syrian Kurds were able to take control over territory in Syria and establish their own non-state governmental area. However, there is a lack of situating the Syrian Kurds within their region. This thesis hopes to provide in-depth research into the ties that the Rojava and its government have with other state and non-state actors in neighboring countries. Through the use of self-determination theory and rebel governance theory, this thesis seeks to better understand the governance in the Rojava and explain the relations of the Rojava with its neighbors. A further discussion is held on these relations which is in turn used to portray different scenarios for the future of the Rojava. It can be concluded that the Rojava is safe from the Syrian government as long as there are more threatening enemies to its regime. Moreover, as long as the PKK-affiliated PYD controls the government in the Rojava, Turkey will not trust its existence and it will want it removed from its borders.

Keywords: Rojava – Syrian Kurds – Turkey – Rebel Governance – Democratic Confederalism

List of abbreviations

AANES:	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
DAA:	Democratic Autonomous Administrations
FSA:	Free Syrian Army (since 2018 SNA)
ISIS:	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also known as Islamic State or IS)
KDP:	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDP-S:	Kurdistan Democratic Party - Syria
KNC:	Kurdish National Council of Syria
KRG:	Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq
KRI:	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
PKK:	Kurdistan Workers Party
PUK:	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD:	Democratic Union Party
SAA:	Syrian Arab Army
SDF:	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA:	Syrian National Army
SNC:	Syrian National Coalition
TEV-DEM:	Movement for a Democratic Society
YPG:	People's Protection Units (male brigade of YPG-J)
YPJ:	Women's Protection Units (female brigade of YPG-J)

AUTONOMY OF THE ROJAVA

Table of Content

Introduction

In northern Syria, there are three autonomous regions governed by Syrian Kurds: Efrînê near the border with Turkey, Kobanî in the middle north of Syria bordering Turkey, and Cizîrê region bordering both Turkey and Iraq. Together, this region is officially known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) as of 2018. The Kurds themselves call this area the Rojava, which in Kurdish means West. In an ideal world, according to certain Kurds, there would be one Kurdistan, where the Syrian Kurds would be located West in this country.[1] As the Rojava has been the Kurdish name for this region since the beginning and the AANES has only been in place since 2018, this paper will always refer to this area as the Rojava. In January 2014, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish party, proclaimed autonomy over the Rojava. Since the establishment of the Rojava in 2014, the Syrian Kurds have grown in importance and international visibility.[2] Taking an important role in the war against ISIS and the protection of the Yazidi's, the Syrian Kurds gained international attention and consequently started working together with several Western countries in order to limit ISIS' power.[3] As the PYD is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in its border region with Syria put sudden pressure on Turkey. In order to control the rise of the PYD, Turkey invaded the border region in 2018 and has since taken control over much of the region.[4] This begs the question of how the level of autonomy has changed over the years for the Rojava, and how much of the self-gained autonomy is left for the Syrian Kurds.

Research on the Rojava regions has mainly focused on the establishment of the Rojava and its relationships with other international, regional and national actors. This study will

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[1] Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg. *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*. (London: I.B. Taurus, 2019), 89.
[2] Ibid, 89.
[3] David McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds,* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2021), 503.
[4] Ibid, 511.

examine how the levels of autonomy have changed in the Rojava between 2014 and 2019. 2019 is chosen as a cut-off point, since 2020 became the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a factor that may have had a significant influence on the living conditions of the Rojava. However, this has not yet been a widespread topic of research and it can currently be viewed as a complicated matter. Additionally, as of 2019, several Arab administrations have joined the Rojava.[5] Since the available literature is limited on the impact of this event, this paper will focus only on the original three cantons of the Rojava: Cizîrê, Kobanî and Efrînê.

This thesis will aim to investigate the following research question: How has the level of autonomy of the Rojava changed over time and what is in the future of the Rojava? The first sub-question is: How has the Rojava gained autonomy from the Syrian government? The second sub-question is: How do other neighboring state and non-state actors influence the autonomy of the Rojava? The last and third sub-question is: What can happen to the autonomy of the Rojava in the future?

The first chapter will set out a theoretical framework, inspired by theories of self-determination and rebel governance, to gain a better understanding of why the Syrian Kurds think they have a claim for autonomy and how they have attempted to get this autonomy from the Syrian government. The second chapter will go in depth into the historical background of the Rojava. It will discuss the changing relations between the Syrian Kurds and the successive governments that ruled them. It will start with the Ottoman Empire from the 1510s until the start of the French mandate from 1920-1946, to the Syrian government, until the declaration of the autonomous region of Rojava in 2014. First, the thesis will take a look at the authors that wrote about the general history of the Rojava Kurds. Some authors, among which McDowall; Tugdar and Al; Ünver; and Maisel can be found, focus on the whole of the region they describe as Kurdistan.[6] This region includes parts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Other authors, such as

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[5] Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, *Northern Syria*, 89.
[6] David McDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2021).

Yildiz; Tejel; and Allsopp, focus on Syria and tell the history of Rojava Kurds through this national lens.[7] A third group of authors analyzes the history of the Rojava itself. These authors include, but are not limited to, Schmidinger; and Knapp, Flach, and Ayboga.[8] Each of these authors go into different aspects of the Kurdish history. Some focus on politics or economy and other look at society or women's rights. I decided not to include sources about Syrian history as the aforementioned sources bring this up as well and provide the needed focus on the Kurdish view.

Chapter 3 will discuss the Rojava and its inner workings. The focus will be on its society, political landscape, economy and governmental challenges. Several authors go into the new political model that the Rojava uses to rule itself. This political structure is called democratic confederalism. This is based on views of Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, and promotes grassroots politics and direct democracy.[9] Hosseini looks at democratic confederalism from a political and philosophical point of view. She tries to avoid fitting the political model into existing structures, but instead uses these structures to analyze democratic confederalism.[10] Knapp and Jongerden approach democratic confederalism from a different angle. First, they dive into the views of Öcalan and position these views within existing ideas about governance. They continue by looking at the implementation of these ideas within the

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- Emel Elif Tugdar and Serhun Al, *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East: Actors, Ideas, and Interests* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017).
- H. Akin Ünver, "Schrödinger's Kurds: Transnational Kurdish geopolitics in the age of shifting borders" *Journal of International Affairs* 69:2, (2016).
- Sebastian Maisel, *The Kurds: An Encyclopedia of Life, Culture, and Society* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2018).

[7] Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).
- Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*. (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015).

[8] Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War, and the Future of Syria's Kurds* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).
- Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

[9] Michael Knapp and Joost Jongerden, "Communal Democracy: The Social Contract and Confederalism in Rojava" *Comparative Islamic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2014), 88-89.

[10] Anahita Hosseini, "The Spirit of the Spiritless Situation: The Significance of Rojava as an Alternative Model of Political Development in the Context of the Middle East" *Critique* 44, no. 3 (2016), 255-257, 259.

Rojava and how citizens participate in this new form of democracy.[11] Özcelik adds to this an analysis of the PYD and how they proclaim to want to rule and how they do in reality. He proceeds to argue that there are several reasons, such as war and intra-organizational factionalism, why certain aspects of their ideology are held onto and others were abandoned.[12] The influence of the rise of ISIS, an actor that often was, and sometimes still, is in direct combat with the Rojava Kurds in an effort to gain land, will also be discussed in this matter, as it influenced the development of the autonomy of the Syrian Kurds in the Rojava.[13] When looking at the level of autonomy in the Rojava, it is also important to consider the constitution published by the PYD in 2013.[14] Radpey adds an interpretation of the constitution in which he highlights several points and provides more context.[15]

Chapter 4 explains the relationships between the Rojava and other states and non-state actors in the neighboring states. Many countries and non-state actors have opinions about the establishment of the Rojava and act accordingly in their contact with the Rojava. To better understand the international and national relationships the Rojava has with other actors, this paper aims to investigate how these actors view the Rojava. The stance of Turkey towards the Rojava has been thoroughly researched as they have a significant influence on the Rojava. This relationship will be discussed in detail in this chapter.[16] In addition, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the government of the Rojava are often compared to each other

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[11] Knapp and Jongerden, "Communal Democracy", 87-109.

[12] Burcu Özcelik, "Explaining the Kurdish Democratic Union Party's Self-Governance Practices in Northern Syria, 2012–18" *Government and Opposition* 55 (2020): 690-692.

[13] Murat Yesiltas and Tuncay Kardas, *Non-state armed actors in the Middle East*: *geopolitics, ideology, and strategy* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).
- Jonathan Spyer, *Days of the Fall: A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[14] "The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons", https://civiroglu.net/the-constitution-of-the-rojava-cantons/.

[15] Loqman Radpey, "The Kurdish Self-Rule Constitution in Syria", *Chinese Journal of International Law* 14, no. 4 (2015), 835-841.

[16] Seda Altug, "The Syrian uprising and Turkey's ordeal with the Kurds" *Dialect Anthropology* 37, (2013).
- Paul Antonopoulos, "Turkey's interests in the Syrian war: from neo-Ottomanism to counterinsurgency" *Global Affairs* 3:4-5, (2017).
- Serhun Al, "Human Security Versus National Security: Kurds, Turkey and Syrian Rojava" Chapter 3 in *Comparative Kurdish Policies in the Middle East: Actors, Ideas, and Interests,* edited by Tugdar and Al, (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 57-83.

in the literature and their connections are broadly discussed.[17] Others compare the Rojava with the Turkish Kurdish movement. They often focus on the relationship between the PKK and the Rojava.[18] Less has been written about the relationship between Hezbollah and the Rojava Kurds.[19] Another interesting relationship to look at is that of Iran, Iranian Kurds and the Rojava Kurds.[20] I limit my research to regional state actors and non-state actors and will not include other international actors such as the United States, France or Russia. This for the reason that I want to focus on regional relationships between the aforementioned actors and the Rojava Kurds. Moreover, I will also not go into great detail in the reality of Kurds living in other countries such as Iraq, Iran and Turkey. This because I want to solely focus on the Rojava Kurds and their level of autonomy and relationships with their neighbors. In this chapter, the relationship between the Rojava and Turkey will be highlighted, as Turkey, as of June 2021, is in direct or indirect control of considerable parts of the cantons. Chapter 5 will discuss the information provided in this thesis and aims to answer the third sub-question "What can happen to the autonomy of the Rojava in the future? At last, chapter 6 will provide the reader with a summary and conclusion of this research.

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[17] Joost Jongerden, "Governing Kurdistan: Self-Administration in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (2019).
- Till F. Paasche, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation" *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (2015).
[18] Michiel Leezenberg, 'The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016).
[19] Kristina Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances in the Middle East" *The International Spectator* 52, no. 3 (2017).
[20] Shahram Akbarzadeh, Costas Laoutides, William Gourlay & Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The Iranian Kurds' transnational links impacts on mobilization and political ambitions" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 12 (2020).
- Fred H. Lawson, "Syria's mutating civil war and its impact on Turkey, Iraq and Iran" *International Affairs* 90, no. 6 (2014).

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Introduction

In this theoretical framework, I will go into depth about the concept of self-determination, to be able to provide a framework that explains why the Rojava deem they deserve autonomy over the region. This will help answer this paper's research question on the autonomy of the Rojava. Moreover, this chapter will delve into the theory of rebel governance to be able to place the PYD and its governance in a larger framework of self-declared governances that rule over a section of a country. Understanding where rebel governance arises from, based on theories written on this subject, will support understanding for the steps the PYD has taken to gain autonomy and self-governance over the Rojava.

1.2. Self-determination theory

The question of self-determination is a central topic in international politics. It gained the attention of political theorists after World War I. Woodrow Wilson, the president of the United States between 1913-1921, was a fierce proponent of the right to self-determination for all people. He argued in his "Fourteen Points" address to Congress in 1918, that the subjection of one community under another was unjust. This idea to self-determination opened up the possibility for minorities that lived in colonized areas to regain control over their land and become independent from their colonizer. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, many minorities and peoples were asking for the right of self-determination. This led to many 'minority rights treaties' in which the existing states pledged to protect the rights of minority citizens. After World War II, the principle of the right to self-determination was used to decolonize states from their European colonizers.[21] It used a 'salt-water' principle. Whenever, there was salt water, such as an ocean, between the colonizer and the colonized, the indigenous

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[21] Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

people from that region would have the right to self-determination.[22] However, this phrasing limited many countries and peoples in their quest for self-determination as it did not take into account indigenous people living in the same country as their occupier. So, this United Nations (UN) resolution in particular targeted the European colonies. Moreover, the Soviets agreed with this formulation as it would not account for the territories they took over, such as Ukraine or the Baltics, who did want self-determination. Another issue with this formulation of self-determination was that it allowed other states, including former colonies, to prevent attempts at secession by other groups in their new territory. However, this formulation was still used as most lawyers thought this would bring the least chaos in the world.[23]

The fall of the Soviet Union in the '90s opened up self-determination for more peoples, for example in the Balkans and Ukraine. Despite this shift, there are still no clear guidelines of when you are eligible for self-determination. Kathleen Gallagher Cullingham explains how "Despite the absence of clear guidelines about self-determination (SD) groups, the historical development of the concept has led us to a point where many SD groups believe they have a legitimate basis for demanding it. The groups have defined (though often contested) territorial homelands, and many of them have a history of autonomy. Moreover, some groups are split between existing states […]. Where the disconnect between "peoples" and political borders is obvious."[24] She goes on to explain that there are many reasons for peoples to seek self-determination. Some groups want to protect their cultural identity, often language and education play a big part in this, while other groups seek more economic and political control. Some groups ask for complete independence, others want to remain a part of the country but seek more autonomy. This can even be the case within the same group. Some may want to gain full independence, other may want autonomy, and others may desire to remain part of the state.

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[22] Alan Patten, "Self-Determination for National Minorities", In *The Theory of Self-Determination*, ed. Fernando R. Tesón, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 126-127.

[23] Fernando R. Tesón, *The Theory of Self-Determination.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.

[24] Gallagher Cunningham, *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination*, 13.

Therefore, it is important to look at possible internal divisions as it has an impact on the ability to form a coherent front.[25] Both states and groups that want self-determination will want to limit the cost of lives and money in the quest for self-determination. When the demands of the SD groups are not met through political means, these groups will sometimes resort to violence. Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham explains: "Civil war can be avoided if the state offers accommodation that satisfies enough of the SD group that all factions in the groups choose not to violently rebel. The internal structure of states and SD groups affects their ability to reach agreement on accommodation that can prevent or end conflict."[26] The state will also use any chance of undermining and undercutting the cohesiveness of a SD group so it will break apart or diminish in strength, as granting peoples a right to self-determination means that the state will lose power over that area of land.

1.3. Rebel governance

Theory on rebel governance has been gaining more attention of academics in the last few years. Rebel governance means that there is a non-state actor who takes over the control in a part of a country instead of the national government. With the emergence of the Taliban, the Iraqi Kurds and Somaliland as examples, there is an increasing amount of territory controlled by non-state actors. Some of these rebel governments gain international recognition and are able to keep control of their territory for a long time, while others fall back into the control of the state which they were previously a part of. However, it is interesting to look at how these rebel governments work and why some fall and others are able to persist.

When rebel forces take over territory, they need to decide how they will interact with local residents. They can choose to recruit them, ignore them, rob them or they can try to govern them. When rebels decide to govern, there are a lot of things to consider. How to govern, what

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[25] Gallagher Cunningham, *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination*, 23-24.
[26] Ibid, 40.

the role of the civilians is, their position towards state government, etc. These rebel groups often pursue some form of self-determination. Some aim for separation, other will aim for more autonomy within the state apparatus.[27] Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly describe the consequences of violence. It has "deep consequences for political mobilization, polarization of social identities, militarization of local authority, transformation of gender roles, and fragmentation of the local political economy."[28]

Adrian Florea identifies two factors that limit the perceived threat level by rebels. The first factor is external military support, because it "helps de facto state leaders maintain mobilizations against the parent state, reduces the level of threat, and can motivate them to focus more extensively on governing the territory under their control."[29] The other factor is peacekeepers as their role is to prevent the continuation of violence. Their presence helps to solidify the authority of the rebel group because all their attention and funds can be focused on governing instead of fighting the state as well. Furthermore, he points out that fragmentation within the rebel government is an important factor in the institutionalization of the rebel government. If there is much fragmentation, often-scarce resources are spent towards factional infighting instead of the government which results in less consolidation of power. He further refers to extractable mineral resources as being an inhibitor of establishing governance as efforts will go more to extracting those mineral resources for monetary gain.[30]

1.4. Conclusion

A claim for self-determination can help minority groups in gaining autonomy over a piece of land that they feel they have a right to. However, as there is no leading definition of

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[27] Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.
[28] Ibid, 4.
[29] Adrian Florea, "Rebel governance in de facto states" *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 4 (2020), 1006.
[30] Ibid, 1006.

self-determination, it remains unclear when a people can apply for self-determination, which means that minority groups keep on falling back on the graces of the government they are living under. This feeling of powerlessness may also be the reason that some groups resort to rebel governance and simply take control over the land they feel they have a right to. However, this is not a legal way of gaining land and often, the tensions between the minority groups and the government only get worse because of this. This theoretical framework thus shows that, if a government is not willing to protect or cut loose minority groups, these groups can get stuck in a system where they have no legal leg to stand on and thus will resort to violence to protect themselves against the government. Understanding the theories behind self-determination can thus help fathom the historical background of the way the Syrian Kurds have lived in their area under different governments and why Syrian Kurds felt they had to resort to rebel governance under the Syrian government to gain the autonomy that they think they have the right to.

2. Historical background of the Syrian Kurds

2.1. Introduction

Scholars who write about the Kurds living in the Middle East often neglect to include Syrian Kurds because they did not constitute a big percentage of the Syrian population compared to Kurds in other countries. The Kurds make up about eight percent of the Syrian population and live primarily in the north of the country around the borders with Turkey and Iraq.[31] However, that does not mean that the Syrian Kurds are not important. Although their recognition on the international stage only started with their fight against ISIS and their declaration of autonomy in the Rojava in 2014, they have lived in the region long before declaration. So, it is interesting to look at the relationship between the Syrian Kurds and the governments they were ruled by. This chapter will look at the situation of the Syrian Kurds under the rulings of the Ottoman Empire, the French mandate and the former and current Syrian government.

2.2. Ottoman Empire (1516-1918)

The Ottoman empire ruled the region, now known as Rojava, from 1516 until 1918. For three hundred years, the Ottomans tried to increase their control over the region. They used the influence of local Kurdish leaders to their advantage. The Ottomans promised self-determination rights in exchange for the collection of taxes, soldiers and most importantly for political loyalty towards the Ottomans instead of the Persians, who were also attempting to gain power over the region. These Kurdish soldiers would be called upon in times of war.[32] The Ottomans cleverly used tensions between family members or tribes to have people in power working for them. Over time, these positions became hereditary, sons would follow their

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[31] McDowall, *Modern History*, 459.

[32] Martin Van Bruinissen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1992), 136.

fathers, who would then continue to provide stability and taxes for the Ottoman empire. Both parties were quite content with this division of power. The Kurdish leaders were able to go on about their lives without much intervention of the Ottoman empire, the Ottomans did not have to send soldiers to keep the region stable and they had someone else to collect the taxes. However, occasionally a Kurdish leader would not comply and instead rebel against the Ottoman empire. These rebellions could go one of two ways. They would either be replaced with another leader who was loyal to the Sultan, or the Ottomans would leave them be, meaning they would be able to stay in power and rule the region without paying the Ottomans.[33]

In what is currently the border region between Syria and Turkey resided a heterogenous ethnic population consisting of Armenians, Turkmen, Kurds and Yazidi's. There was a clear distinction between settled and nomad groups. Kurds often lived in the countryside while the cities were predominantly inhabited by Arab citizens.[34]

The land used to be cultivated together with a shared responsibility under a feudal lord. However, the Land Code of 1858 changed this. The Land Code required individual people to register their land, making the land private properties. [35] As Schmidinger explains: "Throughout the Ottoman Empire, villages and estates that had hitherto been regarded as collective property were registered by local notables as their private property. Small peasants who could not read or write either did not have their land registered or were simply taken advantage of by the aghas, leaders of tribes, and urban merchants."[36] The Land Code thus had far reaching consequences for the Kurds. Over a century later, there were still consequences from the Land Code. As agriculture became more mechanized in the 1950s, families who had lived and worked on the

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[33] McDowall, *Modern History*, 46-48.
[34] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 35-36.
[35] Van Bruinissen, *Agha,* 182-183.
[36] Thomas Schmidinger, *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in the Afrin Region of Rojava*. (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 30.

land for centuries were evicted as their labor was no longer necessary. Since the land was registered in the name of the agha, they had no legal foothold to stand upon.[37]

From the 1880s onwards, the importance of tribes had begun to dwindle. As the Kurds became more sedentary, they became more ingrained into the local population. Moreover, the aghas changed in social standard. Instead of a political figurehead, they became the landowner and provider of jobs. Whereas at first, they obtained their influence from their tribesmen through plunder, military insight and family relations, now the aghas controlled the lives of their tribesmen and money was involved.[38] As the Kurds transitioned from a nomadic life into a sedentary life, they increasingly came into contact with the Ottomans and later the French. Whereas at first only the top of Kurdish society, now everyone became a more direct part of the empire. It became easier for the Ottomans to keep track of who was living in their empire. Until the fall of the Ottoman empire, there were no separate states. There was free movement between the current territory of Turkey, Syria and Iraq and although there were principalities and fiefdoms, you did not need a passport in order to move somewhere.[39] Many nomadic tribes had summer and winter pastures on opposite sides of the new borders. However, with the fall of the Ottoman empire, the territory became divided between the states of Turkey, Syria and Iraq, forcing the Kurdish nomads to settle in one place, no longer allowed to cross the borders. Most of these nomadic tribes settled in Turkey. However, some tribes, such as the Miran, settled in Cizîrê out of fear of persecution by the Turks.

2.3. French mandate (1920-1946)

After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, there was a power vacuum in Syria. In the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, the Brits and the French wanted to divide the Ottoman empire

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[37] Van Bruinissen, *Agha,* 100, 184.
[38] Ibid, 98-99.
[39] Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: the Kurds of Syria in peace and war*, (London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 2014), 7.

between them into spheres of influence and mandates were the Ottomans to lose the war. Syria along with Lebanon would become part of the French sphere of influence.[40] However, the Arabs wanted something as well. They had fought together with the allies against the Ottoman empire.[41]

During the reign of the French, the Kurds enjoyed life without many limitations. As such, Syria became a safe haven for Kurds from other countries that participated in revolts against their government. The Kurdish national identity was not deemed that much of a threat compared to the Arab national identity. Thus, the Kurdish identity started to flourish in Syria. The Kurdish language was used and Kurds were recruited into both the governmental administration and the military.[42] The French used minority groups in order to control the Arabs. This led to increasing hostilities between the Arabs and the minorities in Syria.[43]

A region that changed drastically from the 1920s onwards was Cizîrê. As mentioned previously, many Turkish Kurds fled Turkey after a row of revolts for autonomy had ended in defeat. Some of them settled in cities. However, the majority settled in relatively unsettled, but highly fertile rural areas. With the Kurds, many Christians also fled the increasing persecution in Turkey. These Christian migrants generally settled in cities such as Qamishli, a newly build city by the French near the border with Turkey with access to the Baghdad railroad between Mosul and Aleppo. Moreover, many Iraqi Assyrians crossed the border after facing persecution in Iraq in 1933. Cizîrê had previously only been inhabited by small amount of people and it was a popular winter destination for several Kurdish nomadic tribes. Nonetheless, the ethnic composition had now changed drastically. Cizîrê was becoming a more important region as

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[40] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 37-38.
[41] Sirwan Kajjo, Kajjo, Sirwan. "Syrian Kurds: Rising from the Ashes of Persecution" In *The Syrian War: Between Justice and Political Reality* ed. Hilly Moodrick-Even Khen, Nir T. Boms and Sareta Ashraph (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 269-270.
[42] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere,* 9.
[43] McDowall, *Modern History,* 453.

agriculture flourished and cross-border trading and smuggling became more important.[44] As the region was now inhabited by a majority of non-Arabs, they were suspicious of the Arabization of the national politics. This prompted the desire to become autonomous. However, these demands were pushed aside by the French with the reasoning that the Kurds were not a religious minority and thus did not need autonomy.

In 1918, the transnational Kurdish political party Khoybun (literal meaning: Independence) was created. This meant the mobilization of Syrian Kurds into the international political arena. This political party instigated for example the Ararat uprising in Turkey between 1927 and 1930. However, this rebellion was short-lived and crushed by the Turks and Iranians. Although Khoybun might have failed to achieve to gain independence in Syria and Turkey, it did help in the spreading of concept of Kurdish nationalism among the Syrian Kurds. Moreover, even though the Syrian Kurds did not mobilize in order to join the armed struggle, Kurdish political and cultural activity were becoming more prevalent in the Syrian society.[45]

So, why were the Kurds not able to create a nation when there was a possibility for this in the plans of the British and French? There is no clear-cut answer to this. Turkey and Iran actively fought against a united Kurdistan by limiting the Kurdish identity in their own countries, to prevent a possible loss of their own territory to the Kurds. Other authors point to the Kurds themselves. They point out that the Kurds "did not simply lack the wish or will to have a national state, but that it [the Kurdish state] actively fought against the very conception."[46] It is argued that the Kurds did not want to fall under a state or be part of a state because they valued their independence and current structured society. They feared that this would be lost or changed of they would become a nation. Especially the aghas and shaiks, spiritual leaders of Sunni Muslims, feared that the centralization of power in a state would result

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[44] McDowall, *Modern History*, 460.
[45] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere,* 11-12.
[46] Schmidinger, *Rojava,* 39.

in the loss of their influence.[47] Lastly, although the Kurds worked with the French protectorate, they were not given autonomy like other regions in the mandate. Despite requests from Kurdish representative Nuri Kandy for administrative autonomy for all regions with a Kurdish majority population, these requests were never granted.[48]

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that not all Kurds or all Arabs thought the same way. There were many opinions on who wanted to work with who. There were Kurds that fiercely opposed a Kurdish state but did support the idea of an autonomous region in Cizîrê. They often worked with other Christian minorities who were also in favor of establishing an autonomous Cizîrê. Other Kurds wanted to work with the French as they feared that if the Arabs became too strong, they would be the ones to suffer. A third group of Kurds wanted to work with the Arabs against the French to rid themselves of Christian occupation. They instead focused on the shared Muslim identity with the Arabs. This cooperation between the Arabs and Kurds also was against working with Christian minorities which hurt the cooperation between the Kurds and Christian minorities for a shared autonomous region.[49]

2.4. Syrian government (1946-2012)

After World War II, the French retreated and Syria became an independent nation. Schmidinger describes how "the new entity formed a central state in which Pan-Arab and Syrian-Patriotic political groups competed with one another, but in which there was no room for the autonomy demands of ethnic or religious minorities anymore."[50] With the defeat of the Syrians in the war against the Israelis, any requests for autonomy were met with the suspicion of separatism. However, this did not mean that the Kurds left the political arena. During the French mandate, many Kurds were in the military and this continued to be the case after Syria

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[47] Schmidinger, *Rojava,* 39.
[48] Ibid, 42.
[49] Ibid, 46.
[50] Ibid, 48.

gained independence. During this time, the Kurds could choose to support one of three political camps, the Pan-Syrian forces, who aimed to unite Syria with Lebanon and Jordan, the Arab nationalist, or the Communist Party. The Communist Party obtained quite the following amongst the new proletariat that existed of peasants who had been forced off of their lands and move to cities as a result of the mechanization of agriculture. This political party provided the opportunity to separate oneself from Arab nationalism without supporting their former aghas or shaiks.[51]

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Kurds started to mobilize politically. Parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDP-S) were established, asking for the recognition of the Kurds as an ethnic group. However, the government responded by arresting Kurdish leaders and banning Kurdish publications.[52] Sister parties of the KDP-S were also present in Iraq, Iran and Turkey.[53] From its establishment until now, the KDP-S was never legalized and was never allowed to participate in elections.[54]

The Syrian government still viewed Kurdish identity, along with other religions other than Sunni Islam, and ethnicities, apart from the Arabs, as a threat to the homogeneity of the Syrian nation. Arabization and fear of Israel were used a legitimization for the authoritarian policies. As the Syrian government wanted to create a homogenous Sunni Arab state, they implemented harsh measures against the Kurds. A very important measure was the Census of 1962. It resulted in the stripping of Syrian nationality of about 20 percent of the Kurdish population. They would no longer allowed to apply for government jobs, receive education or vote in elections. They were not able to marry or register the birth of children. This resulted in a hereditary continuation of the stateless position of Kurdish people. There was a distinction made between people that could not provide documents proving that they had been living in

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[51] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 49.
[52] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere, 16*.
[53] Kajjo, *Ashes of Persecution,* 271.
[54] Schmidinger, *Rojava,* 52.

Syria before 1945 and people who could. The people who were not able to provide the required documents were called *ajanib* (foreigners). The group of people that could provide these documents maintained their Syrian nationality. There was also a third group. This group did not participate in the census out of fear for government taxes or military conscription. They are called (*maktumin*, meaning unregistered). Taken together, it was estimated in 2008 that these groups amounted to more than 300,000 stateless Kurds. However, after rising protests against the government, in 2011 Bashar al-Assad granted the *ajanib*, not the *maktumin*, the ability to apply for Syrian citizenship.[55] Another measure that impacted northern Syria very much was the Arabization process in the 1970s. Tens of thousands of Arabs were relocated from the Euphrates Valley to make way for the Euphrates Dam. These people were forcibly relocated to Cizîrê as part of the Arab Belt scheme.[56] Cizîrê became an important region of Syria. It had become the granary and cotton region of the country. Moreover, the discovery of oil made the region increasingly important and the Kurds were seen as a possible threat to accessing the region if they were to continue striving for autonomy.[57]

As a consequence of the fear against the Kurdish nationality, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the use of Kurdish in public life was further shrunken. This was only exemplified through laws prohibiting the printing of Kurdish books, speaking or studying in Kurdish and teaching in Kurdish, and prohibiting parents from giving their children Kurdish names. Moreover, many villages and towns got new Arabic names instead of Kurdish or Aramean names.[58] With the death of Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar al-Assad becoming president of Syria, the Kurds hoped for that the change in government would allow them more rights and political freedom. However, this was not the case.[59] As the Kurds in Iraq were creating an

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[55] Maisel, *The Kurds: Encyclopedia*, 282.
[56] Ibid, 283.
[57] McDowall, *Modern History,* 471.
[58] McDowall, *Modern History*, 472.
[59] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 74-75.

autonomous region in 2003, the Syrian government became afraid that this would spill over to Syria. This fear resulted in further restrictions for the Kurds. Tensions between the Kurds and the Arabs came to an explosion during a football match in Qamishli in 2004. Fans of the Kurdish-supported al-Jihad and supporters of al-Futuwa, which were known for their loyalties towards the Ba'ath party and Saddam Hussein, starting fighting and after the false rumor that three children had been killed, the fighting escalated. Syrian security forces began to shoot with live ammunition in an effort to break up the fighting, leaving nine dead. When protesters at the funeral started chanting and the Syrian security forces used live ammunition again, this escalated things even further. Demonstrations subsequently took place throughout the north of Syria, Aleppo and Damascus. Eventually, several Kurdish political parties and Arab human rights organizations called for an end to the violence together. This uprising left 33 people dead and in the following weeks between 1000 and 2000 people were arrested.[60]

2.5. The establishment of the Rojava (2011-2014)

In 2011, the region was swept up in many rebellions and protests against Arab governments. Syria was no exception. Both in the south and the north of Syria people protested against the government and called for the removal of Bashar al-Assad. In cities such as Amûdê and Serê Kaniyê located in Cizîrê many people took to the streets. The government tried to appease the protesters but was only met with limited success. All the while, the protests in other parts were also becoming bigger. No Kurdish political parties openly participated in these protests, but instead waited to see how things would develop.

In 2012, the Syrian regime pulled its military from the north of the region to be able to defend itself against the discontent that was growing in the south. Subsequently, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military counterpart (YPG-J, Peoples Protection Units) took control

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[60] Schmidinger, *Rojava,* 75-76.

of the area and became responsible for the protection of the inhabitants of the region. In January 2014, the PYD officially declared three cantons to be autonomous: Cizîrê, Kobanî and Efrînê. This de-facto autonomous region became known as the Rojava.[61]

2.6. Conclusion

From the 1510s until 2014, the Kurds of northern Syria have been governed by many different regimes. What stands out is that the Kurds throughout time have found self-determination to be very important. Even when the Ottomans ruled the region, the Kurds tried to find ways to keep their independence. The centralization of Ottoman rule in the 1850s and the subsequent Land Code had far reaching consequences for Kurds across the Middle East for it changed the dynamic between the aghas and their tribes. Communal land sharing changed into a feudal system where the agha held the power over the people who worked the land. The decline of the Ottoman empire and the subsequent emergence of the Turkish state and French mandate meant that cross-border movements became increasingly difficult. Connecting this to a deepening suppression of Kurds by the Turkish government, many tribes decided to move to Cizîrê. Consequently, Cizîrê became more important to the French as it was slowly becoming the granary of Syria.

Dreams of an independent or autonomous state were squashed by the French. However, political participation of the Kurds grew over time. Whereas at first, there was a focus on creating a united Kurdistan, it gradually transitioned into the desire for an autonomous region in the north of Syria. When in 2012, the Syrian regime retreated from the region, the way opened to establish a Kurdish state. This resulted in the proclamation of autonomy by the PYD in 2014 in Cizîrê, Kobanî and Efrînê. Now that we have explored the history of the Syrian Kurds, it is interesting to look at the situation between 2014-2019.

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[61] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 129.

3. The Rojava in the Syrian state

3.1. Introduction

This chapter will give some insight into the inner workings of the Rojava between 2014 and 2019. The Rojava has changed throughout the last decade into a de-facto autonomous region in the north of Syria. The region is inhabited by people from different ethnicities, who follow different religions. Their way of living and their history with each other are important in understanding the current political and social situation in the Rojava. I will discuss their inhabitants, political structure, and their social and economic situation. Moreover, I will go into the aspirations of the political actors and how these aspirations have developed over time. The situation in Rojava is very complex as the Syrian government has been involved in a civil war since its establishment, resulting in changing territories and changing alliances. The founding of a society during wartime is an intricate process. This chapter will provide a better understanding of the workings of the Rojava over time since they have declared their autonomy. It will attempt to provide an answer for the first sub-question: How has the Rojava attempted to gain autonomy from the Syrian government?

3.2. Ethnicities in the Rojava

The Rojava is a place where people from many different ethnic backgrounds live together. The majority of its inhabitants have a Kurdish background. They speak predominantly Kurmancî, a Kurdish language spoken in Turkish-Kurdistan and in the north of Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan. Other Kurdish languages that can be found in the Rojava are Zazakî, from Turkish Kurdistan, and Soranî, which originates from Iraq. Apart from the Kurds, the main ethnicities that can be found in the Rojava are Turkmen, Chechen and Circassian minorities. Another significant minority are the Armenians. Some Armenian villages have been around for hundreds of years such as the Armenian village of Kesab near the current border with Turkey. However,

the majority of the Armenians fled from Turkey after the genocide of 1915 ore were forcibly removed and send to live to Deir az-Zor in today's Syria. Another noticeable minority are the Aramaic speaking minorities. They are descendants of Christians who were the majority of the population in the region before the Muslim Arab conquest. Over time, Aramaic has evolved into different varieties that are mutually unintelligible and are considered to be different languages.[62]

Another noticeable minority in the Rojava are the Arabs. They primarily speak Arabic. Some have lived there for centuries, others were brought by the Syrian regime for the Arab Belt program in the 1960s. A final important minority to note are the Nawar. They are a subgroup of the Dom who are a branch of the Roma. They have remained isolated from the Arabs and the Kurds and mostly live on the outskirts of cities and villages. They make their money as musicians and have played an important part in the preservation of Kurdish music.[63]

Important to mention is that the canton of Efrînê is more homogenous in its population compared to Cizîrê and Kobanî. Efrînê is populated by various Kurdish tribes. The main five tribes are the Amikan, Biyan, Sheikan, Shikakan and the Cums. There are some Dom, Arab and Armenian people living in the canton, but they do not make up a large minority in Efrînê. Although these minorities speak other languages as a first language, most of them speak Kurdish as a second or third language. Since the Syrian civil war, semi-nomadic tribes such as the Dom and the Büd are not able to cross the borders anymore resulting in a more sedentary life.[64]

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[62] Schmidinger, *Rojava,* 13-17.
[63] Ibid, 16-18.
[64] Schmidinger, *Rojava,* 15-16.

3.3. Religions in the Rojava

Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims. They follow the Shafi'i school of law in Cizîrê and in Efrînê the Sunni Kurds belong to the Hanafi school of law.[65] Another interesting religion that is present in Syria are the Yazidi (Êzîdî). They have been persecuted throughout history by both Christians and Muslims. They are strictly endogamous and have thus not integrated much into Kurdish society and have kept mostly to themselves. In recent years, they have been under threat by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) for their religious beliefs.[66] Other religions that can be found in the region are Alevi, Alawi and Druze. In addition, there are other variations of Islam, besides Sunni Muslims, such as Twelver Shia, Ishmaelites, Shia and Sufi variations that are also followed. However, besides these religions there used to be a large presence of Christians and Jews in the region. Over time, the Jews have mostly migrated to Israel, but they used to be an integral part of Kurdish society. As for the Christians, there are various variations as well: Greek Orthodox, Aramaic, Armenian, Syrian Orthodox, Maronites and the Catholic church among others. All these variations have a presence in the region on varying levels. Members of these Christian churches are mostly part of the ethnic minorities explained earlier. Only in some Evangelical churches can you find Kurdish Christians.[67]

3.4. Politics and military

3.4.1. Workings of the Syrian government

The political situation in the Rojava is a very complicated one. As previously mentioned, the Rojava claimed their autonomy at the start of a civil war in Syria. Additionally, in 2014 ISIS rose to power, causing the Rojava to have to defend themselves before they could even start to create their own society and government. To get a good understanding of the workings

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[65] Schmidinger, *Battle,* 7-8.
[66] Maisel, *The Kurds: Encyclopedia*, 59-60.
[67] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 19-29.

of the political system in the Rojava, it is necessary to start with a short explanation of the workings of the Syrian government. As written in chapter 2, Assad became the new leader of Syria in 2000. The Kurds hoped that this would cause a change in their situation in Syria, but Assad only started creating more restrictions for the Kurds, rather than granting them their wish for autonomy.[68] Assad is the leader of the Ba'ath party in Syria. This is a socialist party that has dominated the Syrian parliament since 1963.[69] The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) is the official military of Syria. They are loyal to Assad and to his political and military ambitions.[70] One of the main concerns of the Syrian government since 2018 is, besides the Turkish invasion, the establishment of a rebel zone in Idlib. Here, Islamist rebels from throughout Syria have moved to this province in the north of Syria near Efrînê. These rebels oppose Assad and try to oust him from power.[71]

3.4.2. PYD and KNC

Before the Rojava claimed its autonomy, two political parties were fighting for an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria: the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdistan National Council (KNC). The PYD describes their ideology as a stateless democracy with a democratic confederalism system.[72] Democratic confederalism is the theory from Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, which in turn is based on the theory of communalism by Murray Bookchin. This theory is based on a critique of nationalism and the nation state. It believes that society should be organized by direct democracy through the use of councils. It has a specific focus on preserving the environment and wants to create an ecological society with self-

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[68] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 74-75.
[69] Ibid, 63-64.
[70] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere,* 37.
[71] Zulfiqar Ali, "Who's in control of Idlib?" *BBC Reality Check,* February 18, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474.
[72] Knapp and Jongerden, "Communal Democracy", 93-95.

sufficiency in terms of food and energy.[73] Öcalan adds to this theory his understanding that state and government are not the same and that concept of self-determination should not be based on state establishment.

This ideal form of government is also reflected in the constitution of the Rojava cantons written by the PYD. It states: "In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society." And in Article 2 it says: "a- Authority resides with and emanates from the people of the Autonomous Regions. It is exercised by governing councils and public institutions elected by popular vote. b- The people constitute the sole source of legitimacy all governing councils and public institutions, which are founded on democratic principles essential to a free society."[74] Another important concept in the constitution of the Rojava cantons is that of gender equality (article 27 and 28). For example, article 47 states that the Legislative Assembly must be composed of at least forty per cent of either sex. The same conditions are set for the Judicial Council (article 65) and for all governing bodies, institutions and committees (article 87). Moreover, there is a great focus on the equality of all citizens regardless of religion, language, age or ethnicity (articles 6, 9, 17, 23 and 24).[75] In summary, the PYD is against the idea of creating a Kurdish nation-state but instead wants to create a grassroots-based type of governance where councils will have a major voice in how the territory is ruled. Another important ideal is the equality between men and women, and between different ethnicities and religions.

Still, reality does not represent the ideals as written down in the constitution. Schmidinger explains how the Human Rights Watch (HRW) has found multiple occasions

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[73] Hosseini, "Spirit", 255.
[74] The Constitution of the Rojava Cantons
[75] Ibid.

where political opponents have been kidnapped and mistreated. Moreover, there has been some credible proof of the existence of child soldiers in the YPG-J, which is the military branch of the PYD. There have not been general elections. However, there have been regional, municipal and communal elections. There is some dispute between scholars about the legitimacy and the actual power that the councils hold in relation to the general governance of the region. Some scholars, like Flach, Ayboga and Knapp, idealize the system as direct democratic council system, whereas Schmidinger claims that although there is evidence that the YPG-J has a final say in decisive decisions, the council system plays an important role in the daily administrative decisions. Schmidinger also highlights the fact that the Rojava is mostly still in a state of war with the FSA (Free Syrian Army) and Turkey among others. This makes that the YPG-J has a lot of influence over the government as it is instrumental in the defense of the region.[76]

The KNC (Kurdistan National Council) was established in 2011 by the KDP-S along with several other Kurdish political parties following the start of the civil war in Syria. Their aim is to present a united Syrian Kurdish front and become the political voice of the Kurds in Syria. Over time the composition of the KNC has changed a lot. Many parties left or were expelled and other parties joined or merged with the KNC.[77] The KNC is a proponent of a federalist state. It wants to see Syria divided into several federal states of which the Kurds would govern one. However, it does not recognize the government system implemented by the PYD and it condemned the declaration of federalism in 2016 by the Autonomous Administration. They said that this should be decided on a national level and unilaterally by the Rojava.[78] Since the KNC wants to be the sole representation of the Syrian Kurds, it often comes head-to-head with the PYD. Moreover, parties within the KNC that work together with the PYD

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[76] Schmidinger, *Rojava,* 129-136.
[77] Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg. *Northern Syria*, 54.
[78] Ibid, 83.

are often expelled. The constant divisions and changes in composition mean that the KNC is not able to present a united front as a voice for the Kurdish people and opposing the PYD.[79]

The KNC has also established links with the SNC (Syrian National Coalition). They are the Syrian opposition and are acknowledged as such by several Western countries. Since their establishment in 2012, their aim is to oust Assad to from his presidency and they want to reform the Syrian government. The SNC has found refuge in Turkey and is also backed by Turkey. It has established it headquarters in Istanbul.[80] The SNC has always supported decentralization, but is not specifically enthusiastic about a possible autonomous Kurdish region in Syria as supporting it would go against the interests of Turkey. Like the PYD with the YPG-J, and the Syrian government with the SAA, the SNC has a military wing called the FSA (Free Syrian Army, since 2018 also known as the SNA (Syrian National Army)). The FSA consists of several bigger and smaller militias that want Assad to be removed from power, so they will fight against the SAA.[81] These militias are not bound to the FSA in any way and as such will sometimes choose to fight for another cause.[82]

The KNC also has a military wing called the Rojava Peshmerga. They have been trained in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) by the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq).[83] Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg explain how the Rojava Peshmerga does not want to ally themselves with any other military group. They have been invited by the SNC to join the FSA. The KNC does not want the Rojava Peshmerga to join because it would increase the risk of them fighting directly with the YPG-J on the battlefield. Similarly, they refuse to join the YPG-J and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as they accuse them of working with Assad.[84]

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[79] Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg. *Northern Syria*, 56-57.
[80] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 103-105.
[81] Antonopoulos, "Turkey's interests", 408-409.
[82] Schmidinger, *Battle*, 85.
[83] Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, *Northern Syria,* 59.
[84] Ibid, 59.

As the KNC joined the SNC it received much backlash from Syrian Kurds. They felt as though the KNC has betrayed them by working with the SNC who has such close ties with Turkey.[85] Moreover, it opened rifts within the KNC as some parties were not willing to work with the SNC, so they left the KNC. It also widened the gap with the PYD. Since the KNC has joined the SNC, and the SNC has been acknowledged as a representative of the Syrian people, it has garnered international legitimacy. The KNC has been a part of international talks about the future of Syria. Nonetheless, the KNC and the SNC do not agree on everything. The KNC believes that Kurds are underrepresented and are not included enough in talks about the future of Syria.[86] All the while, the PYD is banned from these international talks as Turkey uses its influence to prohibit the PYD from attending. Turkey does not want the PYD, which it views as an extension of the PKK, to be a part of the future plans for Syria as that would officially recognize their power in the Rojava and legitimize their influence in Syria.[87]

When it comes to views about the Kurdish state, the KNC and PYD hold two different ideas. The KNC wants to establish something to the likes of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is defined territorially by the Kurdish identity and history. It should hold the name Kurdistan and it should also include people from other ethnicities and religions. The PYD want to create a non-state, instead of the nation-state that the KNC views as ideal, and it should not be defined as Kurdish. The identity of the non-state should be from all ethnic and religious groups instead of just Kurdish. Although the KNC and PYD agree on the importance of keeping Syria intact and recognize the importance of a multicultural and multi-ethnic society, the way to a federalist state and what it should contain is different.[88]

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[85] Jongerden, "Governing Kurdistan", 65.
[86] Ibid, 60-61.
[87] McDowall, *Modern History*, 507.
[88] Ibid, 82-83.

3.4.3. The retreat of the Syrian government from the Rojava

The Syrian government forces retreated from the north in 2012 when they were faced with rising tensions throughout the country. By retreating from the north, they hoped to avoid that the Kurds would rise up as well. However, they held control over majority Arab cities and remained in control of the airports as well. With an agreement reached between the Syrian government and the PYD, the Syrian government could now focus on fighting Islamist militias and crushing revolts. This meant that the PYD gained the daily control over the Rojava, while the Syrian government still had the official authority over this area. However, quickly after the Syrian forces retreated, the PYD claimed autonomy over the Rojava.[89] Because there was a lot of unrest in the south of Syria, Assad did not have the means to prevent the PYD from creating autonomy in the Rojava and therefore did not retaliate against this claim.

3.4.4. Governmental structure Rojava

Through the establishment of various councils, such as the Tevgera Civaka Demokratik (Movement for a Democratic Society or TEV-DEM), the PYD has tried to institute a form of grass-roots governance in the region.[90] The TEV-DEM represents and connects all the administrative regions and its councils. In 2015, international pressure increased towards the PYD and the YPG-J, as Turkey considered both parties to be terrorist organizations, through their alliances with the PKK. In an attempt to create a more neutral party that still protected the Kurds in Syria and could help international actors in their fight against ISIS, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) was created, which now functions as the executive body in the Rojava. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was formed as a military wing of the SDC.[91] Through elections and the establishment of councils, the SDC tries to find representatives to

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[89] McDowall, *Modern History,* (2021), 503.
[90] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere,* 110-112.
[91] Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, *Northern Syria,* 121.

govern the region. Despite these elections, Turkey still considers the TEV-DEM and the SDC as an extension of the PKK and the PYD and will therefore still view the Rojava as a threat.[92]

The name of the government of the Rojava has been changed many times over the years. When the autonomous region was proclaimed in 2014 it bore the name of Democratic Self-Rule Administration-Rojava. It was also known under the names of Democratic Autonomous Administrations (DAA) and Rojava. In 2015, its name was changed to the Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava and in 2016 to the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. In 2018, the name changed again to Autonomous Administrations in Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES). Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg explain: "these changes in names and organization reflected various attempts to alter the external appearance of the Administration, de-ethnicize it, widen its appeal and meet pressures and satisfy concerns that inevitably arose from forming alliances, securing external support and building legitimacy."[93]

3.4.5. The rise and downfall of ISIS

In 2014, a new player entered the international stage, named the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also called IS or Daesh. ISIS is an Islamist organization with the sole aim of establishing a caliphate where Sharia law is practiced. In order to achieve this goal, they acted ruthlessly against minority groups and other religions. They would murder and capture everyone except Sunni Muslims that agreed with their point of view. As previously discussed, people in the Rojava came from all different kinds of ethnic and religious backgrounds. As a result, many people fled the places where ISIS arrived. Especially, the Yazidi and Christian communities were hit hard and ISIS also posed a threat for the Shia Muslims.

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[92] Allsopp and Van Wilgenburg, *Northern Syria,* 99-100.
[93] Ibid, *Northern Syria*, 89.

ISIS rose up during the civil war in Syria and controlled much territory in Syria and Iraq. They originated from the desert south of Syria and quickly conquered territory in Syria and Iraq. When ISIS arrived in Kobanî in 2015, the YPG-J decided to fight the Islamists. Syria had not yet been successful in its fight against ISIS, so the PYD felt they had to protect themselves. As a group, the Kurds were one of the first groups able to successfully withstand ISIS and fight back. This meant that the Kurds were now becoming instrumental in the fight against ISIS. Their fight to protect Kobanî from ISIS also gained the Kurds immense international recognition and several Western countries started to coordinate their attacks with the Kurds. So, in fighting ISIS, the YPG-J, and thus the PYD, became more powerful as they were supported by other countries and received weapons and intelligence to fight ISIS. In 2015, two years after the loss of their territory to ISIS and other Islamist militias, the YPG-J was finally able to reconquer the territory of the Rojava and link the cantons of Kobanî and Cizîrê with each other. Moreover, they were able to break the supply route of ISIS from Mosul to Raqqa. Additionally, they as they found a common enemy in ISIS, the YPG-J formed a new, stronger, military front together with FSA groups that decided to split from the FSA, Assyrian, Suryani Christian and Turkoman militias. Thus, the SDF was formed.[94]

Although ISIS and the SDF were fighting to have control over the north of Syria, there was also trade between the two parties. Schmidinger describes how trucks left from government-controlled territory through ISIS-held territory towards the Rojava. Each party taxed the goods, but still products were transported through the country. This trade did not happen in areas which were fought over, but in territories that were firmly held by the actors there was cross-trade.[95] This shows that although there was a big ideological difference, the importance of trade and economic benefits were still able to supersede those differences.

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[94] McDowall, *Modern History*, (2021), 506.
[95] Schmidinger, *Rojava*, 121.

With the SDF fighting on the ground and Western countries providing intelligence and arial support, ISIS had lost its major strongholds and territory in 2018. From 2014 until 2018, ISIS had been a major influence on the PYD and YPG-J. One can argue that because of the threat of ISIS, the Kurdish rule in the Rojava was solidified and acknowledged by neighboring states, because of the bigger threat that ISIS represented. However, Turkey still viewed the Rojava as a major threat to its border security for their connections with the PKK. Once ISIS was defeated, Turkey invaded the north and west of the Rojava in December 2018.[96]

3.4.6. Invasion of Turkey in the Rojava

Turkey had taken an active role during the Syrian civil war. It had taken in many refugees that fled from ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other militias. Moreover, it hosted Syrian opposition to the Assad regime and supports the FSA in its fight against Islamist militias and the SAA.[97] In, 2016, with the threat of the unification of Efrînê with the Kobanî and Cizîrê cantons, Turkey moved against the YPG-J and took over the territory between Efrînê and Kobanî so that they could not unify.[98] With the end of the war with ISIS, Turkey increasingly felt threatened by the number of Kurdish people living at its border. To strengthen its borders with Syria and Iraq, Turkey wanted to control the border area. In order to do so, Turkey had to invade the Rojava and they did so in 2018 with Operation Olive Branch.[99] When the Turks crossed the Syrian border, the PYD and the Syrian government entered into a conversation to work together in defending themselves against the Turks. So, the Syrian government and the PYD now work together in fighting against the Turks and recovering their territory.[100] The consequences of this invasion will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

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[96] McDowall, *Modern History,* 510-512.
[97] Antonopoulos, "Turkey's interests", 408.
[98] Ibid, 414.
[99] Schmidinger, *Battle*, 83.
[100] Ibid, 94.

3.4.7. Current governmental challenges

As a result of the war within Syria and the Turkish invasion in the border region with Turkey, there is a massive movement of internally displaced people (IDP). Between 2015 and 2017 many Kurds from other parts of the country returned to their places of origin. Since the fall of cities such as Raqqa, an increasing number of Arabs and Christians fled to the Rojava for safety against ISIS. Up to half a million IDPs from other parts in Syria now live in the Rojava besides the original population.[101]

Another governmental challenge are the prisoners of war against ISIS. The captured fighters and their families mainly live-in guarded camps with their families such as the Al-Hol camp. About 1 in 8 of the people living in these camps are not from Syria or Iraq. They are from Europe, North America and Central Asia among others. They joined ISIS to fight or to be part of the caliphate. They now live in these camps as their countries of origin refuse to let them return. The SDF takes care of these prisoners on top of needed to provide for their citizens. As the people in these camps remain a potential security threat, they still need to guard these camps while these soldiers could be used in the war against Turkey.[102] It can therefore be concluded that the Rojava have yet to experience a true feeling of autonomy, as there has always been a threat from one or more parties within their territory.

3.5. Conclusion

As discussed, the process of state-building is quite difficult in the Rojava. The influence of the PYD and the YPG-J on the Rojava is very substantial. However, it is important to remember that there are many other actors, Kurds and non-Kurds, that have an influence on the inner workings of the Rojava. The constitution of the Rojava proclaims it to be a place where

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[101] Schmidinger, *Battle*, 123-124.

[102] Neil J. Saad, "The Al Hol camp in Northeast Syria: health and humanitarian challenges" *BMJ Global Health* 5 (2020), 1-3.

every ethnicity and religion is welcome and can be a part of the decision-making process. This does not mean that everyone wants to be a part of the Rojava. As the war rages on in Syria, the Rojava is faced with many challenges: Islamic radicalism in the form of ISIS, the economic legacy left behind by the Syrian government and the refugees streaming in from across the country are but a few of these challenges. Political unity would be helpful in addressing these challenges. However, there is disagreement between several Kurdish groups and all the actors present in the political sphere have alliances with other state and non-state actors which makes the situation even more complex. As the Rojava strives for democratic confederalism in their society with grassroots politics in the form of communes, the situation of war and occupation makes it difficult to realize this idealized society.

4. State and non-state actor

4.1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an answer for the second sub-question: How do other neighboring state and non-state actors influence the autonomy of the Rojava? First, the relationship between the PKK and the Rojava will be discussed since the PKK is the sister-party of the PYD, which has control over the region. Then, we move over to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The economic and political alliances between the KRI and Turkey are crucial in understanding the position it takes with regards to the Rojava. Subsequently, the relation between Turkey and the Rojava will be discussed in much detail. Understanding why Turkey has issues with the PYD and the existence of the Rojava, helps us explain why Turkey invaded the Rojava in 2018 and what the consequences are. Lastly, the connections between Iran and Hezbollah with the Rojava will be discussed and how this relates to the Syrian government.

4.2. PKK

The PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Öcalan. The initial aim of the PKK was to establish an independent Kurdish Marxist state on Turkish territory. Since the end of the 1990s, the PKK has changed its objective and they fight for the recognition of Kurdish culture and rights within a decentralized Turkey. Since the 1980s, when Öcalan found refuge from the Turkish government in Syria, the PKK has had a significant presence in northern Syria. Especially in the Kobanî and Efrînê canton, the PKK was quite influential. In the Cizîrê canton, the presence of the PKK was historically not that immense because of its ties with Iraqi Kurdistan. Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir Van Wilgenburg explain how the PKK was very influential in the promotion of Kurdish cultural identity in the region. Moreover, the PKK used northern Syria as a training ground for their resistance against Turkey.

Many Syrian Kurds consequently joined the PKK in their fight for Kurdish independence.[103] However, the PKK needed to avoid any nationalistic or pan-Kurdish ideas for the Syrian Kurds as it could threaten the safe position in Syria. This meant that Syrian Kurds could join the fight of the PKK in Turkey, but that the PKK would not try to establish a Kurdish state for the Syrian Kurds in Syria.[104] In 1998, the PKK was banished from Syrian territory. The Turkish and Syrian governments entered into the Adana Agreement which prevented the Syrians from allowing the PKK access in their territory. In 1999, Öcalan was arrested in Kenya.[105] No longer being allowed in Syria and with its leader in prison, the PKK shifted their focus from a Kurdish state on Turkish territory to one where all Kurdish areas, no longer limited to Turkey, should be grassroots democracy regardless of national borders. This change in thought also included absolute gender equality and an approach that includes all religions and ethnicities. Instead of a state, the Kurds should now aspire towards autonomy within their respective countries.[106]

As discussed in chapter 3, the PYD was created as a political offshoot of the PKK in Syria in 2003. The PYD wants to appear separate from the PKK as the PKK has been brandished a terrorist organization. Because of its decades-long armed fight for Kurdish rights in Turkey several countries, the United States and the European Union among them, have declared the PKK to be a terrorist organization.[107] Therefore, formal association and participation with the PKK could impede the political possibilities of the PYD. Nonetheless, the PKK still holds significant influence over the PYD and also fights together with the YPG-J.

Both the PKK and the PYD hold the same values and ideology in regard. They want to establish a multi-ethnic government in a multi-ethnic society. They want to do so through a decentralized form of government with grassroot politics. However, there are still some

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[103] Allsopp and van Wilgenburg. *Northern Syria,* 61-62.
[104] Paasche, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds", 79.
[105] Schmidinger, *Battle*, 43.
[106] Paasche, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds", 80.
[107] Ibid, 78-79.

differences between the ideologies of the PYD and the PKK. One place where the PYD and the

PKK differ is that the PKK is more focused on creating a Kurdish entity, while the PYD claims

it wants to be completely multi-ethnic. Another difference between the PKK and the PYD, as

Paasche explains, is that the PKK "has always been an elitist organization that tolerates little or

no deviation from its official line."[108] While the PYD "is active in large heterogeneous urban

and rural areas where it operates in alliance with various other political parties, religions and

ethnicities."[109] The PYD works within a parliamentary system and is governing over a million

people who do not all support them. This makes that the PYD is comfortable to compromise

more than the PKK and is thus easier to work with.[110]

Some authors have argued that the PKK controls the government of the Rojava while

others say that the PYD holds all the power. To put it simply, the PKK and the PYD are highly

interlinked. Because of its shared history, many Syrian Kurds have fought for the PKK and

many members of the PKK have resided in Syria.[111] This makes that arguments about the

involvement of the PKK within the Rojava are difficult to make. However, one can assume that

the PKK at least holds informal power in the governance of the Rojava through the PYD as

many members of the PYD at some point have been fighting with or have been a member of

the PKK.

4.3. Kurdistan Region of Iraq

In Iraq, the Kurds have been able to establish a Kurdish autonomous region known as

the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). It is located in the north of Iraq and shares a border with

Syria, Turkey and Iran. The KRI was established in 1992 and formally acknowledged by the

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[108] Paasche, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds",, 78.
[109] Ibid, 78.
[110] Ibid, 78.
[111] Kajjo, *Ashes of Persecution,* 274.

Iraqi government in 2005.[112] The KRI is formally governed through the Kurdistan Regional

Government in Iraq (KRG) in which the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan

Democratic Party (KDP) technically hold equal power. However, in the national Iraqi

government the PUK and the KDP vie for influence. Whereas the PUK tends to be stronger in

the national government of Iraq, with strong ties with Iran and Syria, the KDP is more

influential within the KRG, with strong ties with Turkey and Saudi Arabia.[113]

The KDP has a sister party in Syria, known as the KDP-S.[114] This is an influential

political party within the KNC, which makes the political decisions of the KNC closely

interlinked with the political ideals of the KDP. The PUK also helped establish the KNC in the

Rojava as a legitimate political party.[115] However, the PUK would rather not cooperate with

Turkey. Thus, after the KNC became allies with the KDP and through them with Turkey, the

PUK started working together with the PYD.[116] So, when it comes to the future of the Rojava,

the PUK and the KDP aim for a different outcome. Whereas the PUK supports the PYD and

wants the Rojava in its current governmental structure to succeed, the KDP denounces the

federal system of the PYD under the guise of the KNC and wants to establish warmer

relationships with Turkey.[117]

As the KDP has the most influence in the government of the KRI and because of its

good relationship with Turkey, the KRI has established strong economic ties with Turkey.

Turkey and the KRI entered into several oil deals and the Turkish government also invests

heavily in the KRI.[118] Moreover, the oil is transported through Turkey to the port of Ceyhan.[119]

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[112] Cengiz Gunes, "Approaches to Kurdish Autonomy in the Middle East", *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 2 (2020): 327.
[113] McDowall, *Modern History,* (2021), 636-637.
[114] Kajjo, *Ashes of Persecution*, 276.
[115] Ibid, 276.
[116] Ibid, 285
[117] Bayram Sinkaya, "The Kurdish question in Iran and its effects on Iran-Turkey relations." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 45, no. 5 (2018): 858.
[118] Paasche, "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds", 83.
[119] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere,* 50.

This means that, in the battle between Turkey and the PYD over the Rojava, the loyalty of the KRI lies with Turkey rather than the PYD, even though both parties are Kurdish, as the access to the oil pipelines and the Turkish port is very important for the economic structuring of the KRI.

There are two border checkpoints between the KRI and the Rojava. Although they are not recognized by the Iraqi government, they are used to transport goods across the border from the Rojava to the KRI. Furthermore, many people either fled the ISIS attacks and were supporters of the KNC and wanted to escape the PYD dominance in the Rojava. Both these groups resorted to the KRI. Moreover, the Rabia-Yarubiyah border crossing, which is the only official border checkpoint recognized by the Iraqi and Syrian governments, has been closed since 2013 as the Iraqi government does not want to anger the Syrian government by giving international legitimacy to the Rojava.[120] Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour explain how the KDP uses the border checkpoints to exert influence over the PYD and in exchange for opening the border checkpoints, the KNC should be given more influence in the Rojava. This makes that in times of conflict between the KDP and the PYD, the border checkpoints are often closed and people from the Rojava are no longer able to travel into the KRI. The political use of the border checkpoints and increased tariffs by both the KRG and the Rojava made that some people resorted to smuggling. Hasan and Khaddour describe how oil, electrical equipment and people cross borders and that the Autonomous Administration uses the old smuggling routes to smuggle items that have been prohibited to cross borders by the KDP.[121]

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[120] Harith Hasan and Kheder Khaddour, "The Making of the Kurdish Frontier: Power, Conflict, and Governance in the Iraqi-Syrian Borderlands" *Carnegie Middle East Center"* (March 2021). 9.
[121] Hasan and Khaddour, "Kurdish Frontier", 10-14.

4.4. Turkey

4.4.1. History between Turkey and the Kurds

The relationship between the Turks and the Kurds has been challenging ever since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, western countries had sought to divide the territory amongst each other. However, the Turks did not agree, and with pivotal help from Turkish Kurds, they were able to establish the Turkish Republic. The Kurds had initially helped the Turks in this conquest as they feared that them being ruled by Christian forces would severely impact their lives and their religion. As most of the Kurds were Sunni Muslim, they did not want to live under the rule of Christians. Hence, they supported the Turks in their fight.[122] However, when the Turkish republic was established, its founder, Mustafa Kemal, a former Ottoman officer, wanted to create Turkey as a secular, modern, but most of all a Turkish country. This meant that the Kurds became an ever-increasing security risk.[123]

Over the years, the Turkish Kurdish population clashed frequently with the Turkish government over demands of autonomy and the curbing of the Kurdish language and culture in Turkish society. These tensions between the Kurds and the Turks came to explosion during several revolutions and revolts against the Turkish government in the late 1920s and early 1930s.[124] As the Kurds were about 20 percent of the Turkish inhabitants and primarily live in the southeast of Turkey near the border with Iraq and Syria, the Turkish government feared that the Kurds would want to secede and form their own country with Kurds from Iran, Iraq and Syria. This fear emanates from the Sèvres treaty in which a big part of current Turkey would have been a part of Kurdistan.[125]

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[122] McDowall, *Modern History,* 142.
[123] Van Bruinissen, *Agha*, 274-276.
[124] Gunter, *Out of Nowhere,* 35-36.
[125] McDowall, *Modern History*, 145-147.

4.4.2. Border disputes

The borders with Iraq and Syria were largely disputed as the Turks wanted to control a larger territory. Disputed territories were for example the Sanjak of Alexandretta in Syria and the province of Mosul in Iraq.[126] Kurds mostly live in these border regions. As discussed in chapter 2, the Kurds had been able to cross these newly established borders for centuries before. However, the increasing importance of border security and limiting cross-border movement to establish sovereignty and control over the border region, made it increasingly difficult to cross borders and visit family on the other side of the border. Still, Kurds from Turkey and Syria crossed borders frequently. Smuggling became an important way of being able to provide for their family. So, in order to increase their control of the border region with Syria and Iraq, Turkey wanted to control the area. However, the population in this area, of which the majority is Kurdish, did not always agree with the Turkish government and would from time-to-time call for their independence or autonomy.[127] The Turkish Kurds had strong ties with Kurds in other countries. As a result, Turkey has always looked with a wary eye to the Kurds in other countries. They feared that if there would be a Kurdish country or entity in other countries, the Turkish Kurds would be bolstered in their claims and more conflict would ensue.[128]

This situation went on for several decades until the Arab Spring in 2011. Arab countries around the region faced demonstrations calling for democracy and the removal of their leaders. Syria was no exception. Syrian Kurds used this to leverage more autonomy from the Syrian government and suddenly the PYD came into power in much of the border region with Turkey. Suddenly, their fears of another Kurdish entity near their borders were a reality. Turkey consequently closed their borders with the Rojava effectively closing them off from the rest of the world.[129]

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[126] McDowall, *Modern History*, 292-293.
[127] Van Bruinissen, *Agha*, 273-274.
[128] Ibid, 191.
[129] Leezenberg, "Ambiguities", 682.

4.4.3. Consequences of the civil war in Syria

During the civil war of Syria, Turkey has taken an active role. It has taken in many refugees that fled from ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other militias. Moreover, it hosts Syrian opposition to the Assad regime and supports the FSA in its fight against Islamist militias and the SAA.[130]

Leezenberg explains how in 2015, Kurdish groups rose up in Turkey demanding democratic confederalism in their region. He ties this event to the successes of the PYD in Syria and how this inspired the Turkish Kurds in taking action.[131] Ünver explains how the attack on the city of Kobanî in 2015 by ISIS was the main reason for these protests. Turkey did not allow Kurds from Turkey to help in the defense of the city and this was seen as implicitly helping ISIS. This gave way to the idea that Turkey supported ISIS and hoped that ISIS would mitigate the growing influence of the Syrian Kurds. However, the fight against ISIS would provide international recognition to the Syrian Kurds and it would help to entrench them into international politics. Together with an international alliance including the United States, the YPG was able to fight of ISIS and consolidate their influence in northern Syria. The Kurds were increasingly pushing west towards the Mediterranean Sea.[132] As Ünver explains: "In traditional Kurdish geopolitics, a hypothetical Kurdistan would be completely landlocked and would be at the mercy and goodwill of its neighbors for trade and survival. The Syrian Civil War changing this thinking. Once ISIS was defeated at Kobanî, the Kurdish cantons of Afrin, Kobanî and Jazira would unite along the border, creating a singular territorial reality, resting at the edge of Turkey's Hatay province – which would be the only gap that would prevent a unified Rojava from accessing the Mediterranean Sea."[133] Ünver goes on to explain that this would erase the dependence of the KRI on the goodwill of Turkey to be able to trade their oil. This would

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[130] Antonopoulos, "Turkey's interests", 408.
[131] Leezenberg, "Ambiguities", 672.
[132] Ünver, "Schrödinger's Kurds", 79-80.
[133] Ibid, 81.

change regional political alliances massively. So, faced with a growing Kurdish presence in the border region with Syria, protests in their own country and the possibility of losing political and economic control over the Iraqi Kurds, Turkey decided to take action.

In August 2016, the Turkish government launched the Euphrates Shield Operation and indirectly invaded the Efrînê canton by supporting militias that fought against the SDF. The aim was to stop Efrînê from connecting to the rest of the Kobanî and Cizîrê canton. The Turkish government did not want a united Rojava. Moreover, the Turkish government wanted to establish control over the border region between Turkey and Syrian Kurdistan and create a safe zone. Whereas the Efrînê canton had been largely spared from intense fighting thus far, now the fight was brought to them. In January 2018, Turkey directly invaded the region with the Operation Olive Branch with their own forces and the SNA (Syrian National Army), which consist of Turkish-backed militias from the FSA. The SDF quickly lost much of its territory in Efrînê. Furthermore, much of border region in the Kobanî and Cizîrê cantons was now being controlled by Turkey or Turkish backed rebels including the capital of the Rojava, Qamishli.

Since the invasion of Turkey into Efrînê and the border region in the Kobanî canton, many Kurds have fled from those regions to parts that are still under control of the SDF.[134] Turkey wants to actively change the ethnic composition in Efrînê through the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees that have fled to Turkey over the course of the war. These refugees are primarily Arab and Turkmen and are resettled in the former Kurdish-majority cities.[135] The relation between Turkey and the Rojava is strained to say the least. The SDF and the SAA fight actively against the Turkish forces. Moreover, the fighting has forced many Kurds to flee to places where the SDF is still in control. This has resulted in a shifting balance between Kurds and Arabs living in the cantons. Especially in Efrînê, many Kurds have left and have been replaced with Arab Syrian refugees. Turkey plays an active part in resettling

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[134] Schmidinger, *Battle*, 101-102.
[135] Ibid, 102-105.

Syrian refugees in these areas under the guise of them returning to their home-country.[136] The future will tell how this will influence the Kurdish population in Syria and if the ethnic demographic will be permanently changed.

4.5. Iran

Iran has supported the Syrian government from the start of the Syrian civil war. As such, their prime objective was to keep Assad in power. Additionally, their aim was to control the rise of Sunni extremists as they would turn on the Syrian Shia population.[137] Emile Hokayem believes that another aim for Iran is to increase its regional importance and influence. Moreover, Hokayem describes how one of the main objectives of Iran is that Hezbollah will keep their influence in the Levant. A change in power in Syria would most probably endanger this. The integrity of Syria was therefore not a main concern for Iran. Thus, when in the north the Kurds broke free, this was temporarily justifiable.[138] However, since ISIS is no longer the threat it once was, and Assad is increasingly establishing his power in territories once lost, the Iranians are looking more towards the Rojava and its possible threat for the Iranian integrity. If there was to be another Kurdish entity in the Middle East, the Iranian Kurds would perhaps band together and ask for the same. This of course, is not what the Iranian government wants.[139] McDowall adds to this that the Iranians are wary of the growing ambitions for regional superiority from Turkey. Iran wants to avoid Turkey becoming a regional superpower as they have the same ambitions.[140]

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[136] Schmidinger, *Battle,* 101.
[137] Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances", 39-41.
[138] Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War", *Survival,* 56, no. 6 (2014): 70-77.
[139] Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances", 44.
[140] McDowall, *Modern History,* (2021), 507.

4.6. Hezbollah

Hezbollah entered the civil war with three main objectives according to Augustus Norton: making sure that its overland supply route from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, to Lebanon would be preserved, to ensure the stability of Bashar al-Assad, and to ensure the security of Lebanon. Hezbollah supports Assad as this would safeguard their access to the overland supply route. Norton describes how Hezbollah mainly focused its troops on fighting Sunni extremist rebels side by side with the Syrian Arab Army. They primarily fought against the Free Syrian Army, which is an army from the Syrian opposition based in Turkey. As they fought primarily in the border areas between Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah rarely came into contact with the SDF or other Kurdish forces. They aligned themselves with the Syrian government and worked intensely with the Syrian Arab Army and with Iranian fighters.[141]

4.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, the relations between neighboring states and non-state actors with the Rojava have been examined. The only proponent of the existence of the Rojava is the PKK. Since the main political party in the Rojava, the PYD, is the PKK's sister party, the PKK hopes that the Rojava will persist. Since the PYD follows the ideology of Öcalan, with the ideas surrounding democratic communalism and gender equality, the PKK can recognize an actualization of this ideology within the Rojava. Moreover, its existence means that there is a safe place for the PKK to exist outside of Turkey. A fierce opponent of its presence is Turkey. For the reasons that the PKK is content with the existence of the Rojava, Turkey is opposed. As it views the PYD as a terrorist organization, it will not stand for its close vicinity to Turkey's borders. Both Iran and Hezbollah do not come in direct contact with the Rojava since they are mainly fighting with Syrian forces in other parts of the country. Iran and Hezbollah will follow

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[141] Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 186, 189-191.

the Syrian government in its reaction with regards to the Rojava. Moreover, Iran will try to use the Rojava in curbing the growing regional influence of Turkey. Additionally, as the KRI mostly follows Turkey in its stance towards the Rojava, the Syrian Kurds will not find direct support from the Iraqi Kurds.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

In this discussion, I will address the third sub-question: What can happen to the autonomy of the Rojava in the future? In previous chapters, many different actors have been introduced. All of these actors have plans for the Rojava and its territory. This chapter will center around the third sub-question: What can happen to the autonomy of the Rojava in the future? To be able to answer this question, this chapter will present possible scenarios for the future of the Rojava where different actors would be in control of the Rojava. These scenarios are rooted in the research found in the previous chapters. For each of these actors, I will explain the scenario in which they would come to be in control or maintain their influence, how other actors would react and what they would win or lose by this actor being in power, and the likelihood of this actor staying in power. For now, these scenarios are based on the situation in the Rojava at the end of 2019 where Turkey holds a significant amount of territory with the support of the SNA and where the Syrian government and the SDF fight together against the Turkish influence.

This chapter will not go into the possible safety or threats from Iran and Hezbollah for the autonomy of the Rojava, as these parties will follow Assad's decisions for the Rojava. In addition, there will not be much focus on the KRI and the KDP as they will most likely follow the Turkish course of action and they will influence the situation in the Rojava through the KNC.

5.2. Syria

The Syrian government aims to restore its territorial integrity. This means that they are attempting to gain control over regions that have been governed by rebel governances over the years. The Rojava remains a sore reminder of the lack of control the Syrian government has

over their territory. The Syrian government will want control over the region itself, but until 2019 has not been able to regain this influence. For now, they work together with the SDF, and through this inexplicitly with the Kurds, in fighting the Turkish influence in the Rojava. As long as this threat of Turkish influence is present in the Rojava, the SDF and the SAA will continue to work together. So, inadvertently, Turkey is helping in normalizing the relationship between the Syrian government and the PYD.

Even though the Syrian government aims to restore control over the Rojava, this is currently not their biggest concern. Islamist rebels took over control in Idlib and the south border region with Iraq and Jordan in 2011. The Syrian government is therefore currently focusing on decreasing the influence of the Islamist rebels as they present a danger to Syria's integrity and serve as a reminder of ISIS. Although they are different from ISIS, the rebels of Idlib do not want to work with the Syrian government and are thus a threat to the power of the Syrian government. The Syrian government receives help from Hezbollah and Iran in this fight. As the Syrian government's focus is currently mainly aimed at Idlib, the Rojava are left for now. However, it begs the question what will happen to Rojava once the Idlib resistance has been defeated.

One can assume that the Syrian government will then focus its efforts for the restoration of Syrian sovereignty towards the Kurds. Still, the Kurds have been earning much fighting experience over the last decade, so the fight will not be easily won. Another option would be that the common threat of Turkey will remain and that the Syrian government will use the Kurdish presence on its borders to its advantage as it has done in the past and use it to leverage influence in the Turkish-Syrian relationship. This would result in some form of autonomy or Kurdish representation in the Syrian government. A third option is that the Turks and the Syrians will work together with Iran against the Rojava in exchange for the Turkish retreat from Syrian territory. This would be beneficial for the Syrian government as it will regain its

territorial sovereignty and for the Turkish government as it will decrease the Kurdish power and possibility for Turkish Kurds to find refuge here.

If the Syrian government was to take control over the Rojava once again, this could mean three things for the Syrian Kurds. Scenario 1 is that the PYD and the Syrian government will come to the agreement that Syria will be turned into a federal state where the Kurds would control the Rojava and the Syrian government would be responsible only for matters of national importance. This would mean that the Syrian Kurds would become a legitimate power in the Middle East and their interests would be guarded by the government of the Rojava. This scenario is what the PYD has been aiming for since its establishment. Scenario 2 would be that the Syrian government takes over the Rojava, but will include the Kurds into its national government. Kurdish parties would be allowed to be elected and they would become a part of the Syrian government once elected. Kurdish rights would be safeguarded by its political representatives and the Syrian Kurds would be able to take an interest into Syrian politics. This would be similar to the way the Ottomans treated the Kurds under their ruling. Scenario 3 would be the return to the situation before 2011. The Syrian government would oppress the Kurds and ban Kurdish political parties from being elected to the Syrian government. In this scenario, the Kurds would be repressed and the PYD and KNC would have to go back underground and its members would be at risk of imprisonment.

To conclude, the Rojava is save from the Syrian government as long as it faces bigger threats than the Kurds. As long as the Kurds are willing to work together with the Syrian government against Idlib and the Turkish presence, and remain a safe haven without much internal conflict, the continuity of the level of autonomy of the Rojava is pretty much guaranteed. However, should the threats from the Syrian opposition and Turkey against the Syrian government diminish, there is a big possibility that the Syrian government will focus on the Kurds to regain their territorial sovereignty.

5.3. Turkey

Turkey's main aim is to rid the border region of all possible PKK influence. In the beginning, Turkey also wanted to replace Assad as president and thus supported the Syrian opposition forces (FSA) and the SNC. However, when it became gradually more apparent that Assad would remain in power they shifted their focus more towards the Kurds. Also, as the Kurds gained more importance in their fight against ISIS, Turkey became more worried about the endurance of a Kurdish state and the possible international support it would gather. They fear that the Rojava would become a safe haven for Kurds that want to evade the Turkish government, and that, from there, the PKK would fight against the Turkish government and launch its attacks. Since Turkey is scared that the Kurds in Turkey will rise up and demand an autonomous region for themselves, they want to prevent PKK-affiliated groups from obtaining it elsewhere, such as the PYD in the Rojava. So, the Turks invaded the Rojava and now hold a considerable amount of territory in Syria and Rojava.

Since it has taken control over territory in Efrînê and Kobanî, Turkey has started to push out the Kurds and settle Arab Syrian refugees in the region. This will have a lasting impact for the region. The Syrian government mistrusts these refugees as they often support of the opposition or have had other reasons to flee from the Syrian government.

Turkey will want to limit the influence of the PYD and will continue to stay present in the border region with Syria now that it has influence over it. Because Turkey has openly supported the Syrian opposition during the Syrian civil war, I do not believe that Turkey and Syria will be working together anytime soon. They might fight a common threat in the Kurds if Syria would start to view them as a threat, but I believe that the Syrian government will continue to regard Turkey as an uninvited presence and will continue to work with the Kurds in order to expel the Turks from Syrian territory. The Syrian government could have chosen to sit by and let the Turks take over the Rojava, instead they started to fight with the SDF against

Turkey and the SNA. With regards to the Rojava, I do not see the border checkpoints opening soon. So, Turkey will continue to oppose the Rojava in every way, politically, economically and militarily.

5.4. PYD and KNC

Currently, the PYD is in power in the Rojava through its election into the AANES together with several other political parties. It is fighting together with the Syrian government against Turkey and the SNA to regain control over the border region with Turkey and Efrînê. The invasion of Turkey has shown that the SDF is not capable of defending its territory against its neighbor Turkey and this resulted in the need for support of the Syrian government to stand against them. This could have consequences for the future autonomy of the Rojava.

The aim of the PYD is to establish a grassroots-based non-state where councils are giving the opportunity to all people to voice their concerns and questions. They did achieve this aim through the establishment of the AANES. However, only time will tell if this political construct will continue to exist and if it will continue to enable people from all ethnicities and religions to have a voice. They also want to establish a federalist system in Syria, in which the Rojava would be one of those federal states. If they would be able to achieve this, it would give the AANES and the PYD the legitimacy it now lacks. This directly ties into the third aim of the PYD which is to be recognized internationally as a representative of the Kurds and to be allowed at the table for discussions about the future of Syria. They will want the Rojava to be acknowledged by the Syrian government and establish a working relationship with them as this will further the legitimacy of their rule through the AANES. They will want to take the place the KNC now holds in these discussions.

However, their affiliation with the PKK means that Turkey will never trust the PYD. Unless Turkey is able to establish a lasting peace with the PKK, the PYD will always be viewed

by Turkey as an enemy of the Turkish state. This means that Turkey will not allow a PKK-extension to rule a territory at their borders. Turkey will try to hold on to the territory it now controls and will try to influence other actors, for example the Syrian government and the KRI, to act against the PYD as well. Although the PYD works with many actors to achieve their goals, they will not work with Turkey as Turkey continues to pose a threat against the creation of an autonomous region in the Rojava with their invasion in 2018 and their continuous presence since then. Thus, as long as the PYD is perceived as a threat to Turkey, Turkey will use its influence in international politics to prohibit the PYD from being granted a seat at the table and the PYD will refuse to work together with Turkey as long as they are present in the Rojava.

One way to increase the legitimacy and support of the PYD among the Kurdish population in the Rojava is to work together with the KNC. The KNC has been invited to the international table through its participation in the SNC. It is acknowledged by Turkey and supported by the KRI. Should the PYD and the KNC manage to work together as both could be elected in the AANES, this would shift the balance in favor of the Rojava. This could for instance mean that Turkey and the KRI would have less of an issue with the AANES. However, the possibility of this happening is slim. As discussed previously, both the PYD and the KNC are supported by different actors. The PYD has been very critical of the KNC for working with the SNC and thus being influenced by Turkey, which the PYD sees as a major threat for their goal of autonomy in a federal state. As Syria, who supports the PYD in turn are also at odds with each Turkey, who supports the KNC, they can negatively influence a possible cooperation between the PYD and the KNC.

The KNC on its own also aims to create autonomy for the Rojava and is thus an actor that could defend the autonomy of the Rojava. The KNC could come into power in the Rojava one of two ways. It could obtain the support of the population of the Rojava and be elected into

the AANES. This would mean that they would have the mandate of the Rojava to rule. However, since they have denounced the AANES for being a unilateral creation made by the PYD and not decided on a national level, the possibility seems slim that they would just work with the AANES without trying to change its composition. Here, the differences in ideologies between the PYD and the KNC return. While the PYD aims to establish a non-state through grassroots politics, the KNC wants to create a Kurdish federal state which would be governed top-down. Therefore, the AANES would not fit into the views on governance that the KNC has.

The second way the KNC would obtain control over the Rojava is if the SNC or Turkey would come into control of the region. To placate the Kurds living in the Rojava they might want to install a Kurdish government that would rule in their stead. However, the chances of this happening are extremely slim since the actors, were they to come into power in the Rojava, would either have eliminated the Kurdish resistance in the form of the PYD or still face much resistance from the PYD and PKK. Either way, the SNC and Turkey would both want to remain in power in order to control the situation. Moreover, since the Syrian government has recovered much of its strength from before the civil war, they would probably sooner opt for supporting the PYD than opt for losing control over the region to Turkey or the Syrian opposition forces. Thus, if the KNC were to take over control over the Rojava from the PYD in an attempt to create their won version of an autonomous state, this attempt would always fail since the governmental structures in place in the Rojava do not support their ideology and with help from the SNC and Turkey, the Rojava would not receive the same level of autonomy from these actors.

5.5. Conclusion

To conclude, the disagreement between the PYD and the KNC makes it extremely difficult for the Syrian Kurds to form a united front. The PYD holds the military might and

political legitimacy in the Rojava and it has established a working relationship with Syria in their common fight against Turkey and the SNC. However, the KNC is acknowledged by Turkey and has been able to gain a place in the talks about the future of Syria, which in turn influence the future of the Rojava.

Turkey will remain to push back against the PYD and it will continue to refuse the PYD its seat at international conventions. Unless Turkey establishes a lasting peace with the PKK, the PYD will continue to be pushed back by Turkey. The Syrian government will work with the PYD against their shared enemies: Turkey and the SNC. As long as their interests align, the Rojava has little to fear from Assad. However, their arrangement could mean that the Syrian government will increase their control over the region as it becomes vital in their survival.

Were the Syrian government to take over control over the Rojava, it would be interesting to see how they would respond to the request for self-determination and whether they would allow the influence of the councils to continue. Would scenario 1 come true where Syria would become a federal state and where the Kurds would enjoy freedom to govern the way they want. Would scenario 2 come to fruition where the Syrian government holds all the power, but the Kurdish rights are recognized and they are allowed to be elected to be a part of the Syrian government. Or would the Syrian government take back control and try to oppress the Kurds and not acknowledge their rights as described in scenario 3.

I would deem it most likely that Syria ends up gaining control over the Rojava, where scenario 2 will be as the most probable outcome. The Kurds have become important members in the Syrian society and the international political arena over the years and have developed into a formidable military force. Moreover, they have developed their ideas into reality and have proven to be capable of governing a large territory with many different ethnicities and religions. The Syrian Kurds will not back down easily now that they have had a taste what it is

like to determine ones' own governance and society and Syria would not want to upset the international relations that the Rojava has created over time.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to describe the evolution of the Kurds in Northern Syria. It has at length discussed the main political actors within the Rojava and in its neighboring countries. The aim of this thesis was to answer the question of how the level of autonomy of the Rojava has progressed over time and what could lie in the future of the Rojava concerning their autonomy. The ties between Syrian Kurds and Kurds in other nations go back hundreds of years. The Kurdish identity has largely been shaped by the different governments they have lived under over the years. Although all these governments treated them differently, with different levels of autonomy, the Kurdish identity has persevered throughout all the changes and instabilities in the Middle East throughout history and their claim for autonomy has only gotten stronger every time there was a new Syrian government.

The Kurds of the Rojava have mobilized over the past decade. With the Syrian civil war, they have been able to establish a rebel government according to values of democratic communalism and ethnic equality. In fighting against Turkey and ISIS, they have been forced form alliances with parties they would have never worked with otherwise. During its years of existence, the Rojava has undergone many changes. From nearly being overrun by ISIS to growing in international importance in its fight against ISIS, the Syrian Kurds have used every opportunity to create a road towards self-governance and autonomy from the Syrian government. Based on literature research, it can be concluded that the Rojava has been able to establish a working government where the PYD holds the most influence. Although, the PYD has created many councils and are not excluding certain groups from getting elected, it has at times been accused of being authoritarian and leaving no room for other political parties. With regards to the future of the Rojava, it can be concluded that it is under constant threat of being attacked. Turkey aims to rid the border region with Syria from the existence of a PYD presence,

as they see in the PYD an extension of the threat that the PKK poses for the Turkish government. As Turkey keeps supporting the Syrian opposition, Syria has found a common enemy with the Rojava in Turkey. Both Syria and Turkey are not in favor of having a rebel government in the Rojava formed by the Kurds, but for now, the Syrian government views Turkey to be a bigger threat than the Rojava. However, only future will tell how the situation of the Rojava will develop and how the other actors will respond and act upon its existence.

If the SDF and SDC would be able to distance themselves more from the PYD and the PKK, this could mean that Turkey would be more open towards its existence. One political party that could fill this gap is the KNC. However, the Syrian government would most likely not accept the KNC being in control of the Rojava as it has allied itself with Turkey and the Syrian opposition during the Syrian civil war. So, in placating Turkey, the Rojava would probably create an enemy in the Syrian government.

Interesting further research could be done in the connection between the KNC and the SNC. Since the KNC does not always agree with the SNC, it would be interesting to discover why the KNC has associated itself with the SNC, while the PYD did not, and what each party hopes to gain from this alliance. Another interesting topic would be to look into the influence that COVID-19 has had on the Rojava, its connection with the Syrian government and how this has affected the autonomy of the Rojava. A crisis of this magnitude may have made the Rojava more dependent on the Syrian healthcare system, especially since the borders with Turkey have been closed. A third topic of interest would be how the inclusion of the Arab administrations has affected the AANES and how this alliance between Kurdish and Arab majority cantons has developed. Moreover, it can be examined what the aims of the Arab administrations are for associating with the Rojava instead of the Syrian government and how this will impact the stability in the region and the strength that the Rojava has to defend itself from outside threats, from whomever these may come.

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