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## **Ideas on Self-Determination and the Rise of Rojava**

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# Universiteit Leiden

## **Ideas on Self-Determination and the Rise of Rojava**

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## Introduction

A democratic, multi-ethnic, gender-equal, environmentally-friendly society, and most importantly, a safe place for the Kurds to call home; this is the aim for the Rojava region, also known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [AANES], in the north of war-torn Syria. An oasis of peaceful co-existence in a region that heavily suffers due to Syria's civil war, and regional as well as global tensions and instability.

The rise of this Kurdish-led autonomous region in Syria is a new step towards Kurdish self-determination. The Kurds have dreamt of a homeland for decades, and Rojava has brought them a step closer to achieving this goal. This occurrence, however, created many questions surrounding the Kurds in Syria, and the Kurdish quest for self-determination. This research aims to contribute to the knowledge on Rojava by looking at the region through the scope of self-determination. By analysing the views of international actors on self-determination, this thesis aims to deepen our understanding of their relations towards the Kurdish-led autonomous region in Syria. It also aims to explain whether the changes in Kurdish views on self-determination can be connected to the views of international actors. In short, this research will investigate international views on Rojava through self-determination and discuss if, and how, the internal views of Syrian Kurds on self-determination have changed over time, and how these views have impacted the rise of Rojava. The research question is:

*How have international and internal views on self-determination impacted the rise of an autonomous Rojava?*

Through the investigation of this question, this research will contribute to the understanding of the Syrian Kurds, a group which has gone relatively unnoticed until its sudden rise to autonomy following the Syrian Civil War. While much research has been conducted on Rojava since the war, this conceptual historical analysis aims to deepen our understanding by placing Rojava into the context of self-determination. This aims to show that the rise of Rojava is not just a product of the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIS, but that decades-long underlying notions of ideas, such as self-determination, have played a role as well. Self-determination as a concept has brought many new states to life in the past century. However, after the period of decolonization, it is viewed as having less practical importance. This research on actors' interpretations of the concept of self-determination connected to the rise to autonomy of a 'forgotten' group will contribute to the relevance of this concept in contemporary times.

The structure of the research is as follows. First, a literature review discusses academic works on factors that have contributed to the rise of an autonomous Rojava. It also discusses varying academic views on the complexity of Rojava's international relations, and the concept of self-determination broadly as well as in a Kurdish context. Secondly, the methodology, being a conceptual analysis with a historical approach, and the case selection are explained. Thirdly, the analysis is conducted. Split up in three chapters, each chapter discusses one of the selected cases, being Russia, the United States, and Rojava's Kurds themselves. Fourthly, a discussion section describes the interactions between the cases and the chapters, and discusses how they are connected. Finally, the conclusion briefly summarises the research, and the research question is answered.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review is organised into three sections. The first section discusses views of scholars on factors that contributed to the current situation of autonomy in Rojava. The second section examines the complicated (inter)national relations of Rojava. These two sections illustrate that those topics are explained through multiple factors and seen through different perspectives. It also shows a knowledge gap on the role of ideas on self-determination and their impact on the rise of Rojava. The third section focuses on the concept of self-determination, and the lack of academic consensus on what this concept exactly entails. This literature review functions as an important foundation for the research, which delves deeper into the different meanings given to self-determination, in the context of Rojava's international relations and its rise to autonomy.

### **Contributing Factors to Autonomy in Rojava**

This section discusses varying academic views on factors that have contributed to autonomy in Rojava, touching upon history, symbolism, and ethnicity. First, we look at a historical argument presented by multiple authors. When addressing literature on the Kurds in Middle Eastern politics, reading on border-drawing by the powers in World War I [WWI] is inevitable. After WWI, Western powers drew new borders and divided the former Ottoman Empire, laying foundations to the current states in the Middle East. A state for the Kurdish people was originally discussed, however, never realised. Multiple academics present this century-old historical event as a main contributor to Kurdish motivations to strive for self-determination, and for the rise of Rojava. One of such scholars is Ahram (2017), who argues that the agreement of Sykes-Picot, an example of this border-drawing by the West, symbolises all of what is wrong in the state system in the Middle East (p. 345). He states that the artificial borders created by colonial powers failed to reflect underlying economic, political, and cultural factors, and that even though these borders have received international recognition, internally they have created many issues of legitimacy (Ahram, 2017, p. 345). In addition, Rogan (2015) argues that these artificial borders are the main reason for a century-long conflict between Kurds and their host governments (p. 107-108). Ahram (2017) uses Rogan's (2015) statement to argue that contemporary groups, such as ISIS and Kurdish groups, have become obsessed with the downfall of Sykes-Picot, as they aim for territorial control beyond the artificial borders (p. 345). Oeter (2018) underlines their arguments on the importance of Western border-drawing on

Kurds and their motivations to pursue self-determination. He even dares to state that the Kurds have been the greatest losers of the geostrategic reordering of the Middle East, as it betrayed their dreams of self-determination and a Kurdish state (Oeter , 2018, p. 208). These three authors thus seem to agree that the geopolitical redrawing of the Middle Eastern borders after WWI functioned as a primary motivator for Kurds to strive for self-determination.

While the aforementioned scholars have emphasised a century-old historical factor contributing to the rise of Rojava, others point out the importance of more recent historical events and their symbolism. Federici (2015) argues that, compared to Kurdish populations in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, Syrian Kurds have had a quieter history of nationalist mobilisation and lack symbols of national struggle such as the memory of the chemical attacks on the Iraqi-Kurdish population (p. 85). This statement on the lack of national symbols of struggle is debated, as some argue that such symbols are actually very present. Özçelik (2020), for example, mentions the memory and implications of the 1962 Census in which the Syrian regime took away the rights of a significant number of Kurds in Syria, making them stateless (p. 694). Tuastad (2014) also counters Federici's (2015) statement. He argues that the deadly Kurdish versus Arab football riots in 2004 symbolise the Kurdish need to defend their home territory and to preserve their people (Tuastad, 2014, p. 383). Rizki (2020) takes Tuastad's (2014) argument even further. He argues that the Kurdish protests in 2011 were thematically intertwined with commemorating the 2004 riots, thus also acknowledging its symbolic value (Rizki, 2020). He also argues that these riots functioned as fuel for the first wave of the revolution, and that it was an essential episode in the Kurdish quest to liberation (Rizki, 2020). While Federici (2015) thus argued that the Syrian Kurds lacked significant symbols of struggle, authors such as Tuastad (2014) and Rizki (2020) present a counterview. According to them, the symbolism of the riots in 2004 were of such importance to the Kurds that they even functioned as an essential episode for Kurdish liberation, and that its fuel set off the first wave of revolution (Rizki, 2020).

Whereas the above authors argue on the historical importance of border-drawing and symbolism, others put their focus on demographic aspects. Despite past relocation efforts of the Syrian Ba'ath Party, Rojava is inhabited and currently led by a majority of Kurds. Many scholars have made arguments on the importance of this ethnic composition. Wucherpfennig et al. (2012) state that discriminating ethnonationalist policies by regimes create grievances within the marginalised groups (p. 89). These grievances allow rebels to recruit and fight on behalf of the oppressed groups (Wucherpfennig et al., 2012, p. 111). Saed (2017) links this argument to

the Kurdish situation in Syria. He states that the military aspect of the Rojava revolution is identifiable with a single political force, being the Democratic Union Party [PYD], which coincides with the Kurdish ethnicity (Saed, 2017, p. 5). Another author presents a similar argument, by stating that the presence of an ethnic Kurdish majority aligned with a revolutionary group was one of the requirements of the Rojava revolution (Rojava, 2015, p. 11-12). These authors thus agree on the importance of a unitary ethnic composition in a revolution, and the Rojava revolution specifically.

Not all scholars agree on the importance of ethnic unity in this revolution. Duman (2017) for example, acknowledges the aforementioned role of grievances due to ethnic oppression, which are visibly expressed in the Syrian conflict (p. 85). However, he also argues that the autonomous Rojava is the product of a multitude of ethnicities, such as Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, and Turkmens (Duman, 2017, p. 85). He provides the example of Rojava's Social Contract, which has been drafted by multiple ethnic groups (Duman, 2017, p. 85). Next to this, Duman (2017) also discusses Kurdish intra-tribal conflicts, showing that even though the Syrian Kurds might have the same grievances, they are not necessarily one united front (p. 87). These arguments thus downplay the above emphasis on ethnic unity. Lowe (2016) also acknowledges the Kurdish majority in Rojava, militarily as well as in population. However, he also argues that the PYD is aware of the issues and controversies in regards to an ethnically Kurdish domination of Syrian territory, and therefore boasts the inclusion of other minorities in order to gain international support (Lowe, 2016, p. 11). Lowe (2016) presents the example of Rojava's name change to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; an effort to show the multi-sectarian character of the region (p. 11). Thus, while some authors argue for the importance of ethnic unity in this revolution, this section showed scholar's arguments that the autonomous Rojava is a multi-ethnic product, and that this ethnic diversity is purposefully boasted.

This first part of the literature review has discussed different scholars and authors, who have all put emphasis on different aspects and factors that contributed to the rise of Rojava. While some have mentioned that a century-old historical event has functioned as a key aspect, others argued for the importance of more recent historical events and their symbolic value. Next to a historical approach, the second part of the literature review focused on the demographic side of Rojava, discussing the differing views on the importance of ethnic unity and diversity. This part of the literature review thus showed that authors put emphasis on different factors, which can either complement, as well as oppose each other.



## **The Complexity of Rojava's International Relations**

This section discusses literature on the relations of Rojava. Where the above section discussed views on historical and demographic factors that contributed to Rojava's autonomy, this section looks at previous works on the practical start of it, with the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. It also discusses academic works around the complexity of the international relations of Rojava, something that this research aims to explain in further depth. This overview of literature identifies a research gap on the use of self-determination by international actors.

The rise of Rojava is often explained in the context of the Syrian Civil War, although viewed through different perspectives. Özçelik (2020) argues that in the early stage of the war, Assad wanted to avoid an insurgency in northern Syria, and instead consolidated his troops against the Arab opposition, like the Free Syrian Army (p. 695). Because of this withdrawal of troops from Kurdish regions, the PYD and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units [YPG], were able to easily take control of the area, and established an autonomous region (Özçelik, 2020, p. 695). Cemgil, & Hoffmann (2016) seem to agree with Özçelik (2020), however, they argue that the tactical retreat was also based on Assad's conception that it would be relatively easy to reclaim this land once the rebels are defeated (Cemgil, & Hoffmann, 2016, p. 60). They argue that the poorly equipped Kurdish forces did not seem to pose a real threat and could thus function as interim placeholder, especially since it would be kept in check by other hostile armed groups in the region, such as ISIS (Cemgil, & Hoffmann, 2016, p. 60). Üstündağ (2016), however, argues that the revolution occurred through civil disobedience, claiming that mass protests in the region caused the Syrian Army to resign (p. 202). It is thus interesting to see how one views the rise of Rojava as a result of Assad's military priorities, whereas another gives credit to the people of Rojava. The difficulty in understanding the Rojava-Syrian relationship is exacerbated by Galvan-Alvarez' (2020) statement that the PYD sometimes collaborates with the regime, while at the same time aims to be less dependent on them, thus simultaneously being allies as well as enemies (p. 184). Scholars' views on the relationship between Rojava and the Syrian regime are thus contested.

Another complex and debated relationship exists between Rojava and the United States. Lowe (2016) explains Rojava's international relations mainly through the fight against ISIS, as the YPG has proved to be an effective ally in this battle (Lowe, 2016, p. 12). He claims that the relations between Rojava and Western states, such as the US, are characterised by the conflict between their urgency to stop ISIS and to acute sensitivities to Turkey, which openly fights Rojava (Lowe, 2016, p. 12). He also explains international support through Rojava's democratic

model of governance, which aligns more with Western ideals than any other Syrian alternative (Lowe , 2016, p. 12). Galvan-Alvarez (2020) agrees with Lowe (2016) by stating that the US supports Rojava as the PYD claims to be on the forefront of the War on Terror (p. 184). However, he disagrees with Lowe's (2016) statement on governance, as he argues that the PYD claims to be a vanguard of an anti-capitalist system, countering the ideology of the United States (Galvan-Alvarez, 2020, p. 184). Another point is brought up by Cemgil & Hoffmann (2016), who state that next to the military support of the US, Rojava simultaneously enjoys support from Russia (p. 53). This is especially interesting as Russia and the US have opposed interests in the region and generally support opposite sides of the conflict (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016, p. 61). This all shows how contradictory Rojava's international relations can be. The views of scholars on the motivations and factors playing a role in Rojava's relations with other actors can thus greatly differ, clearly displaying its complexity.

This section of the literature review described existing works on the relations of the Syrian regime, as well as foreign actors, with the Kurds in Rojava. It showed that these relations are complex, and that they can often be explained through multiple factors and seen through different perspectives, making further research necessary in order to increase our understanding. It also showed that the relations of Rojava, despite the authors' differing views, are often described in the context of the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIS. Views on self-determination however, are left out of the analysis. This research aims to increase the understanding of the relations of Rojava, through the scope of involved actors and their views on self-determination.

### **Self-Determination and the Kurds**

This section discusses literature on self-determination, in the context of the Kurds and elsewhere. It begins by showing the difficulties when conceptualising self-determination, and the debates that have arisen from it. Then, it discusses academic works on self-determination in the context of the Kurds in general and Rojava specifically. It is important to note that when discussing the concept of self-determination in International Relations, there is little consensus on what this concept exactly entails, and to whom it applies. Many authors have attempted to create explanations that could lead to consensus, with varying levels of success. An important landmark in this discussion is found in the description of the United Nations in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights: "All peoples have the right of self-

determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (United Nations General Assembly, 1966, Article 1).

This legal definition still leaves space for interpretation and did not lead to a consensus on the concept’s applicability. Questions were raised concerning this Article - for example, scholars dispute what constitutes as a ‘people’, and how one must interpret the freedom to determine their own status. Throughout the years, many scholars have written about their interpretations. Cunningham (2014) for example, defines self-determination as the right of a ‘people’ to govern themselves, and to control their own political future (p. 11). She also argues that this concept has to be seen as “national self-determination”, as due to the rise of nationalism, both have become intrinsically interconnected (Cunningham, 2014, p. 11). According to Cunningham (2014), self-determination has to be seen as a collective right for a group to determine its future, thus transcending the individual (p. 11). Fisch (2015) follows up on this, by arguing that self-determination for a collective entails the right to create one’s own independent state or sovereign entity, but that it can also be partially exercised, for example by demanding autonomy instead of independence (p. 40).

When a group demands sovereignty, this creates a paradox of sovereignty as shown by Macklem (2006). He argues that when a group applies the right to create an independent statehood, it secures the freedom of the collective to determine their own future, however, radically disrupts the sovereign integrity of the state from which the group secedes (Macklem, 2006, p. 501). Moore (1997) acknowledges this paradox as well, by stating that the self-determination of groups can endanger the unity of multi-national states (p. 901). He argues that due to this threat, the word ‘people’ has generally been interpreted as inhabitants of colonies or pre-existing political states, instead of national people, thus leaving out the right to secession (Moore, 1997, p. 901). Sinha (1973) comes to a similar conclusion, and analyses that by looking back at the 20<sup>th</sup> century, self-determination has primarily resulted in the reconstitution of independence for states that had already existed before World War II [WWII], and the decolonization of colonial territories (p. 260). He argues that this has left out groups which have not been subject to either of these, such as the Francophones in Canada, the Catholics of Northern Ireland, or the Kurdish People (Sinha, 1973, p. 260). Based on this observation, Hannum (1998) states that self-determination in the past had nothing to do with ethnicity, culture, or language, and argues for exceptions in its applicability (p. 776). According to him, minorities which have been systematically excluded from political and economic life, or have

been the victim of a state's attempt to destroy the minorities' culture, should also have the right to self-determination (Hannum, 1998, p. 777). Even though history has shown to whom self-determination has been applied and to whom not, authors such as Hannum (1998) thus argue for a more inclusive application.

Throughout history, there are many factors that have worked against Kurdish independence. Fuller (1993) argues in line with Macklem's (2006) paradox by claiming that an independent Kurdish state would severely break up the existing multinational states in which the Kurds reside (p. 109). Gunter (2004) therefore argues that an independent Kurdistan nation-state would probably only be likely to exist after a major collapse of the existing state system of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (p. 106). Here, he takes Poland as an example, as it took the upheaval of World War I to finally create a Polish state (Gunter, 2004, p. 106). Fuller (1993), however, claims that the state system is not the only factor working against Kurdish independence, by arguing that Kurdish self-determination has also failed due to the lack of unity of the Kurdish people (p. 109). According to him, the separation of Kurds into multiple states has made for Kurdish-ethnic identities within these states, but also lessened the border-transcending Kurdish identity, working against the chance of gaining self-determination (Fuller, 1993, p. 110). Gunter (2004) follows up on Fullers (1993) argument by focusing on Syria specifically. Whereas internationally seen, the Kurds are divided by borders, the Kurds in Syria face a similar problem internally. Gunter (2004) argues that the Syrian Kurds have been too divided and weak to threaten the government as they are separated into three non-contiguous geographical regions (p. 110). These authors thus seem to agree, although with different arguments, on factors that worked against Kurdish self-determination.

This section of the literature review showed the debate on the meaning and applicability of self-determination. It also focused on Kurdish self-determination specifically, and discussed multiple reasons for the unsuccessful application of self-determination in the Kurdish context. Based on this section, this research dives deeper into the differing conceptualisations and applications of self-determination by actors involved in the rise of Rojava.

## **Research Gap**

The literature review for this research discusses academic works on factors that contributed to the rising of an autonomous Rojava and the complexity of its relations. It also looks at the different interpretations of the concept of self-determination, and its application to (Syrian) Kurds. The rise of an autonomous Rojava has often been explained in the context of the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIS, or through factors such as historical events, symbols of oppression, and ethnic unity or diversity. However, this leaves out underlying notions of self-determination. The same goes for Rojava's ambiguous international relations, which authors have mainly explained through the fight against ISIS. This explanation is not incorrect, however, it could be seen as incomplete. The international relations of Rojava constitute more than purely the fight against ISIS and the Syrian Civil War, and this research aims to contribute to the understanding of these relations. The third part of the literature review focuses on scholar's interpretations of self-determination, and differing views on why this has not been applied to the Kurds. The authors discussed in this section however neglect the impact of international actors, as well as Syrian-Kurdish interpretations of self-determination over time. This research contributes to the academic knowledge on self-determination, through a different perspective than seen in this literature review. Overall, this literature review functions as a foundation for the research, as this thesis will explain how international and internal views on self-determination have impacted the rise of an autonomous Rojava.

## **Methodology**

This research aims to create a deeper understanding of the rise of Rojava through differing views of self-determination. The literature review identified a research gap on the use of self-determination in Rojava's international relations. In order to understand whether, and how actors' views on this concept have impacted Syrian Kurds' own ideas on self-determination, and the rise of an autonomous Rojava, we have to fill this gap. This section explains how this research aims to contribute to existing academic works, and how it will fill the gap.

### **Approach and Methods**

As we aim to understand Rojava's current situation through actors' ideas of the past and the present, a historical analysis is conducted. Part of this research fits in the approach of historical sociology in international relations [HSIR]. Weberian historical sociology, for example, argues that the state is a product of warfare, and not a natural product of the liberal social contract (Hobson, 1998, p. 287). This is visible throughout the research, as the Kurds have aimed to create a social contract, instead of living in the artificial borders shaped during and after WWI. This will especially be recognised in the section on Syrian-Kurdish history. The most important link between this research and HSIR is summarised by Hobson et al. (2010). They state that HSIR views domestic processes as interrelated with international factors with the aim of finding patterns that explain historical processes, such as regional crises, wars, imperialism, and processes of state formation (Hobson et al., 2010, p. 5). This analysis focuses on one of such interrelated processes, being the strive for self-determination, in a historical context of imperialism, state formation, and war. The application of HSIR is also visible in the case selection, as both international and domestic actors are selected, as well as in the analyses, where their ideas and interrelations are discussed in a historical context. This historical analysis aims to create a deeper understanding of present ideas and relations related to Rojava. The research thus fits in HSIR as it aims to explain a possible relation between international and domestic ideas on the process of striving for self-determination, and the creation of an autonomous region.

The aim of this research is to analyse how international and internal views on self-determination have impacted the rise of an autonomous Rojava. The analysis of the differing views and implications of actors' interpretation of self-determination is conducted through a

conceptual analysis. Olsthoorn (2017) states that conceptualizations of political concepts are rarely value-neutral and that we can use conceptual analysis to help us recognize ideological interpretations of concepts (p. 178-179). There is thus a focus on the interpretation of the concept of self-determination. Concepts are seen as indispensable tools for understanding the world, and the way that they are understood has tremendous socio-political consequences (Olsthoorn, 2017, p. 156, 178) Concepts can thus have real-life implications. Therefore, this analysis looks not only into the interpretations of self-determination, but also into the way they are reflected into practice. It is important to note that this method is used in the particular context of the research. The aim of the analysis is not to create an all-inclusive conceptualisation of self-determination. This research aims to use conceptual analysis in order to find and explain differing and possibly rival interpretations of a concept, and to analyse their real-world effects. This is done, as previously mentioned, through the lens of historical sociology.

The analytical component of the research is conducted in a qualitative way. Olsthoorn (2017) states that when analysing conceptualisations, using textual passages is necessary to determine their meaning and extension (p. 185). This research uses texts, consisting of primary and secondary data, to look for the meanings given to the concept of self-determination, and the effects that they had on the rise of Rojava. This is combined with looking at historical and contemporary factors relevant to Rojava. The primary data consists of books, government documents, and media coverage. First, books from important historical figures such as Lenin, Stalin, and Öcalan are used to analyse their interpretation of self-determination. Second, the research makes use of government documents of the US and Rojava to analyse views on self-determination, as well as historical and present relations to Syrian Kurds. These government documents are mostly used in the context of the United States, because of two reasons. Firstly, the US has been the main ally of the Kurds in the fight against ISIS, making it more likely for government documents on their relationship to exist. Secondly, due to linguistic limitations of the researcher, documents written in English are more accessible than government documents written in Russian. The third kind of primary data, media coverage, is used in order to analyse the present situation in northern Syria. The secondary data mainly consists of books and academic articles, which are used in all chapters, and which function as the main source of data in this research. This research thus analyses texts in the form of primary and secondary data in order to understand the views of involved actors such as Russia, the United States, and Syrian Kurds on self-determination and autonomy in Rojava.

## Case Selection

The analysis is broken down by level of analysis. The first chapters analyse two global actors, namely Russia and the United States. The third chapter analyses internal changes in Syrian-Kurdish ideology and ideas on self-determination. After these three analyses, a separate chapter discusses how the above chapters interact with and impact each other. The choice for structuring the research in this way is mainly motivated by the aim to create a structured overview. When each actor is analysed separately, this provides a clear overview of each actor's views on self-determination and Rojava. This separation however, goes at the cost of showing the interaction between actors and their ideas. An alternative to this structure is for example a timeline. Here, interaction of actors and ideas can be identified more easily, however, this would go at the cost of providing a clear overview. One could risk losing themselves in the complexity of all actors and their ideas combined. This research aims to make up for the weakness that occurs when breaking the analysis down per actor, by providing a discussion chapter at the end of the analysis. Here, the interactions of the cases are discussed.

As stated before, the analysis focuses on Russia, the United States, and Syrian Kurds themselves. Russia is one of the strongest international state supporters of Rojava (Lowe, 2016, p. 12). This alone could be a motivation to include Russia in the research, however, there is more to it. Russia's preceding Soviet state was one of the two global powers during the bipolar Cold War era, and was thus of great influence on international politics and cases of self-determination during this period. As an actor whose ideas greatly mattered and impacted the world, the USSR and the Russian Federation are thus highly relevant to this analysis. Till this day, Russia is still an important actor in Middle Eastern politics, and an ally to the Assad regime, which creates an interesting situation as Assad and AANES have different interests in the Rojava region. Russia, as an important ally of the Kurds and former global superpower, thus makes for an interesting case in this research.

The United States has formed an effective alliance with the YPG in its fight against ISIS (Hunt, 2018). At the same time, the US is an important ally of Turkey, a state that is actively involved in a war against AANES and the YPG. Historically, the US is also an interesting actor as they supported Kurdish independence after WWI, as evidenced by the Fourteen Points written by US-president Wilson. Here, president Wilson states that the nationalities under former Ottoman rule should have an unmolested opportunity to develop autonomously (Wilson, 1918, XII). This will be explored more in-depth later. Despite these points, the US has never actually shown support for an independent Kurdish state in Syria. In a later period, during the



Cold War, the US was the other global superpower in a bipolar international system, having significant influence on international politics. This historical role, combined with the complex relations with the YPG as well as with its enemy Turkey, make for an interesting case.

Analysing the Syrian Kurds themselves is a necessity when explaining the current situation of Rojava. The third chapter thus focuses on Syrian Kurds, and their views on self-determination. These views are analysed through the ideas of the Kurdish political activist Öcalan, as he is partly responsible for the founding of the PYD, and his ideology inspired Rojava's current ideology. The Kurdistan Workers' Party [PKK] in Turkey is mentioned as well, as this organisation is of significant importance for the development of Syrian-Kurdish political activism. Other Kurdish movements, such as Kurdish groups in Iraq, Iran, or Armenia, are left out of the analysis. This omission is due to the limited scope of the research, in addition to the fact that these movements are very different to the Syrian Kurds, due to their unique domestic circumstances, political history, and interactions with international actors (Kaya, 2020, p. 157).

## **Chapter 1: Russia**

This chapter starts by looking into the views of Russia on the concept of self-determination over time. Then, it applies this view on the Russian-Kurdish relations in general, and Rojava specifically. Russian views on self-determination go a long way back in history. The starting point of the research and this chapter is around World War I, with the creation of states in the Middle East. This aligns well with Russian history, as during this period, the Russian Revolution, with the rise of Lenin(ism) and the creation of a communist government, significantly impacted Russian history. As the new Soviet state took up a new state ideology during this period, it functions as a fitting starting point to this chapter.

Around the end of WWI, there are two important actors to examine. This chapter on Russia discusses the views of Vladimir Lenin and his successor, Joseph Stalin, as both their views have significantly impacted Soviet policies towards self-determination. After analysing their interpretations, Soviet use of self-determination after WWII is discussed, followed by post-1991 Russian-Kurdish relations and Russian views on Kurdish independence.

### **Lenin and Stalin on Self-Determination**

This chapter begins with an examination of Vladimir Lenin's views on self-determination. 'The Right of Nations to Self-Determination', a book written by Lenin himself in 1914, functions as a good starting point to analyse his views. Here, he clearly states that "it would be wrong to interpret the right to self-determination as meaning anything but the right to existence as a separate state" (Lenin, 1964, p. 397). Three years later, with the Bolsheviks' rise to power, this view was translated into the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia. The document proclaimed "The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, up to the point of separation and the creation of an independent state" (Mark, 2008, p. 30). This view was put into practice as well, as immediately after the Bolshevik victory, Lenin supported the independence of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland (Bowring, 2011, p. 8). Thus, the Bolshevik leader Lenin interpreted the right to self-determination as the right to secession.

It is important to take Lenin's motivations for supporting secession into account. When looking at Lenin's texts, as well as literature on his views, it becomes clear that for Lenin, self-determination functioned as a means to an end, and not as a goal in itself. Influenced by the teachings of Karl Marx, Lenin advocated for socialism, and linked this to self-determination. While Lenin saw a danger in nationalism, the right of nations to self-determination had to be

used as a step towards global socialism. Even though self-determination would break up existing states, it would enable the proletariat to recognise the bourgeoisie as its real enemy, as it would no longer be confused by the national strivings that the proletariat had in common with the bourgeoisie (Page, 1950, p. 350-351). Lenin argued that “mankind can proceed towards the inevitable fusion of nations only through a transitional period of the complete freedom of all the oppressed nations, that is their freedom to secede” (as cited in Mark, 2008, p. 28). He thus reasoned that the freedom of the oppressed nations was a prerequisite for the global unification of the proletariat under socialism. The concept of self-determination was thus interpreted as secession, and was seen and operationalised as a step in a process towards socialism, rather than as a goal itself.

Lenin died in 1924, and for the next 30 years, Joseph Stalin became the leader of the Soviet Union. While Lenin’s views on self-determination and secession are seen as consistent, Stalin’s views can be seen as less so (Bowring, 2007, p. 11). In 1913, Stalin wrote a book called ‘Marxism and the National Question’, in which he provided a definition for nations: “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” (Stalin, 1913). Based on this definition of a ‘nation’, he argues in line with Lenin by stating that a nation “has the right to complete secession” (Stalin, 1913). Following up on this however, Stalin argued that secession has to serve the interests of the masses, and that that the interests of the masses dictate that the demand of nations to secede from Russia was highly counterrevolutionary (Schwarz, 1953, p. 30). The principle of self-determination was thus subordinate to the principles of socialism, and functioned more as a slogan than a practice (Mark, 2008, p. 29).

After World War II, the ideal of self-determination became more globally prevalent. The Communist Party led by Stalin came to argue that the right to self-determination was already realised in the Union of Socialist Republics [USSR], making the legitimate ground for secession from the USSR disappear (Mälksoo, 2017, p. 212). His argument was that the USSR was created by a voluntary unification of nations through their exercise of the right to self-determination (Poghosyan, 2021, p. 184). Thus, after WWII, the USSR was only concerned with self-determination as secession in other countries, as internally the issue had already been resolved (Mälksoo, 2017, p. 216). The Soviets thus started to use two different views on self-determination, one internally and one abroad (Mälksoo, 2017, p. 216).

## **Soviet Views on Self-Determination**

While the principle of self-determination and secession was largely ignored within the USSR under Stalin and his successors, the Soviet Union pushed this principle outside of its borders. After WWII, this was highly motivated by the Cold War. The USSR presented itself as a strong advocate for decolonisation and anti-imperialism, and strongly supported the inclusion of the right to self-determination in United Nations covenants in 1966 (Mälksoo, 2017, p. 202). In so doing, the USSR claimed to be one of the most important promoters of the right of a people to self-determination in international law (Mälksoo, 2017, p. 202). Including the principle in international law, however, did not create a consensus on the exact meaning of the concepts, as previously discussed.

The strong support of the Soviet Union to enshrine self-determination into international law, and to support national and decolonisation movements abroad, seems to be in line with the interpretation of self-determination by Lenin, and partly Stalin. However, the motivations behind these acts diverge from the Leninist interpretation. By ignoring calls from within, while strongly pushing self-determination voices abroad, the Soviets instrumentalised self-determination in line with their self-interests (Poghosyan, 2021, p. 193). The USSR was caught up in the Cold War and attempted to increase Soviet influence worldwide. Supporting national and decolonisation movements was used as a strategic tool to gain an advantage in the Cold War (Hashimoto & Bezci, 2016, p. 644). When looking at the Middle East specifically, the Soviets supported anti-Western movements in order to undermine Western influences, and to gain advantages over other Middle-Eastern actors (Hashimoto & Bezci, 2016, p. 644).

The Kurds are not an exception to the policies of the Soviet's self-interests in disguise of self-determination. For example, declassified documents of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs show that the Soviets planned to stir up Kurdish tribal disturbances to pressure other states, such as Iran and Turkey (Hasanli, 2011, p. 126). Turkey has especially fallen victim to these policies. In 1963, it was believed that the main Soviet Union-related threat was not the spread of communism, but the Soviet-backed Kurds (Hashimoto & Bezci, 2016, p. 643). These Kurds wished to secede from inter alia Turkey to create an independent Kurdistan, a project that was sponsored by the Soviet Union in order to create chaos in the Western-influenced regions of the Middle East (Hashimoto & Bezci, 2016, p. 643). The PKK also fitted the USSR's foreign policies well as it followed the Marxist-Leninist ideology (Delanoë, 2015, p. 17).

After the break-up of the USSR, the Russian Federation was confronted with many new claims of self-determination from former Soviet states and nations, which go beyond the scope of this analysis. Russia's interpretation of self-determination has also transformed after the Soviet-era. Post-Cold War, Russia's interpretation of self-determination no longer includes the right to secession, as long as minorities can achieve self-determination through autonomy within the state (Lundstedt, 2020, p. 7). This interpretation aligns itself more with international law, which also emphasises solutions within the existing states. After the dissolution of the communist USSR, policy goals increasingly started to override sincere motivations for self-determination, and self-interest developed itself more in the Russian interpretation (Lundstedt, 2020, p. 29). This is evidenced by, for example, the invasion of Crimea in 2014, which was triggered by geopolitical calculations, instead of worries on human rights (Lundstedt, 2020, p. 29).

Although Russia's interpretation of self-determination changed, outside of the former-USSR territories it showed a persistent Soviet legacy (Lundstedt, 2020, p. 1). In line with the USSR, self-determination remained to be utilised as an instrument for control (Beissinger, 2015, p. 481). The support for the PKK increased after the dissolution of the USSR. This was in line with the new Russian view on self-determination, as simultaneously, the PKK abandoned its claims for secession and began to strive for autonomy. This will be elaborated on in the chapter on Syrian Kurds. As a consequence of the dissolution of the USSR and the relative power vacuum that followed, the Chechens seized the opportunity to realise their long-sought after independence from Moscow. Since Turkey supported the Chechens in their cause, Russia increasingly used the Kurds and the PKK as a proxy to fight and have leverage on the Turkish state (Dannreuther, 201, p. 552). Here, Kurdish nationalism and their strive for self-determination, interpreted as autonomy, was clearly used to for the realisation of Russian self-interest.

### **Russia-Rojava Relations**

As described above, the Kurdish aim for self-determination has mainly been used as a geopolitical tool by the USSR and the Russian Federation in order to have influence in the Middle East. When it comes to the Kurds in Syria, and Rojava specifically, this seems to be no different. However, Russia and the Syrian regime are allies, in contrast to, for example, the Turkish regime. Russia's long-standing alliance with Syria, stemming from the Cold War, is a

result of the USSR's tendencies to support anti-Western actors, of which Syria's-leading Ba'ath Party is one (Dannreuther, 201, p. 543). Even though the Cold War is long over, the Russian-Syrian alliance is still highly relevant to ensure Russian diplomatic significance and international influence (Crosston, 2014, p. 95). This makes for an interesting situation, as supporting Kurdish self-determination and protecting the Syrian state seem to be contradictory.

There are multiple reasons for Russia to engage with the Kurds in Rojava. Here it is once again important to note that Russia has largely followed the USSR in instrumentalising self-determination in line with its self-interest (Poghosyan, 2021, p. 193). Russian support for the Syrian Kurds was, for example, increased when the US decided to slowly retreat from Syria, giving Russia a chance to fill the power vacuum and to decrease Western influence (Tol, 2017). The Russian-Turkish relationship also remains to play a role in Russian-Kurdish relations. After Turkey shot down a Russian military jet in its airspace in 2015, Russia started to stress more strongly the need for self-determination of the Syrian Kurds (Bielicki, 2018, p. 37). Russia delivered weapons to the YPG in Syria, and opened a Syrian-Kurdish diplomatic mission in Moscow (Tol, 2017). The Kurds thus remain a tool in politically pressuring Turkey (Tol, 2017). Next to this, the Kurds also enjoy Russian support in their fight against ISIS. Not only are there security concerns over the terrorist threat of ISIS, Russia also fears that a Kurdish refugee influx into the Caucasus would negatively affect the wider region (Tol, 2017; Delanoë, 2015, p. 13). Finding a political solution to the Kurdish Question in Syria would thus be beneficial. Russia's engagement with Rojava is thus motivated by geopolitical self-interest with other actors active in the region, such as the US, Turkey, and ISIS.

Russia's support for Syrian-Kurdish self-determination is clearly evidenced by events in 2017. In this year, Russia hosted a meeting to discuss the Russian draft of a new Syrian constitution, in which the PYD participated (Suchkov, 2017). In this draft, Russia proposed a provision allowing for the autonomy of the Kurdish regions, which is seen by Russia as an adequate compromise for the federalisation of Syria (Suchkov, 2017). Proposing autonomy is in line with the previously mentioned Russian interpretation of self-determination. This provision, combined with opening a diplomatic mission of Rojava in Russia's capital, shows an active approach of Russia towards Kurdish self-determination in Rojava.

This proposal diverges from Lenin's and Stalin's theoretical conceptualisation, as Russia proposed autonomy and not secession. However, it is in line with the post-USSR interpretation of self-determination, showing that Russia is no longer tied to the dogmas of its communist past. Proposing autonomy over secession also serves Russian self-interest. While

Russia uses Rojava for international leverage and influence, a secessionist Kurdish state is not a necessity to achieve this. Kurdish secession from Syria would also violate the territorial integrity of Syria and weaken it, which is not in Russia's interests due to their alliance with the Syrian regime. Another reason is the fact that the PYD itself does not seek secession, which will be elaborated on later, making possible Russian support for secession unneeded in the first place. Therefore, interpreting Kurdish self-determination as the proposed compromise of autonomy is preferred, and in line with the Russian interpretation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter analysed the interpretations of self-determination by Lenin and Stalin. Lenin interpreted self-determination as secession, in service of achieving global socialism. Although both interpreted self-determination as a right to secession, Stalin argued, contrary to Lenin, that this right only applied abroad, and not within the Soviet Union's borders, as within the USSR, socialism had already been realised. Stalin argued that the USSR had already gone past that step, and that the USSR was an expression of state's self-determination. During the Cold War, the Soviets pushed self-determination and secessionist movements abroad in order to increase Soviet influence and undermine other actors such as the US and Turkey. In this period, as well as after the USSR's dissolution, the underlying motivations of Lenin seemed to have disappeared completely and geopolitical self-interests of the USSR and Russia are seen as the main motivations to support self-determination abroad. The Kurds have functioned as a tool in the USSR's and Russia's foreign interests, and still do. Supporting the autonomy of Rojava can therefore not be seen as a post-communist adoption of Lenin's interpretation of self-determination. Russia's motivations have changed over time, and since the USSR's dissolution, Russia interprets self-determination as autonomy rather than as secession. This aligns with the PYD's aspirations, as well as with, most importantly, Russia's self-interests in Syria and the region. However, one thing that has not changed from Lenin's interpretation is that the use of self-determination by the Russian state has always functioned as a means to an end, rather than as a goal in itself.

## **Chapter 2: The United States of America**

Whereas the first chapter of this analysis focused on Russia's views on self-determination and its relationship with the Kurds in Syria, this chapter investigates the views of the United States and its relationship with this group. Just as in Chapter 1, this chapter commences by looking into the origins of views on self-determination from the starting point of WWI, and especially the interpretation of US president Woodrow Wilson. Then, the chapter looks at the use of self-determination by the United States during the post-World War II era. Lastly, the chapter analyses the United States' application of self-determination on the Kurds, and their relationship with the Kurds in Rojava specifically.

### **Wilson on Self-Determination**

When speaking of the history of self-determination, former US-president Woodrow Wilson is often one of the first to come to mind. As an influential state leader during and after WWI, Wilson was occupied with the question of how to create a more just and peaceful world after the war. He envisioned a world ruled by popular consent, where aggression would either be prevented or punished by the international community (Unterberger, 1996, p. 926). This collective international community was materialised in the League of Nations, with Wilson as its architect. Wilson also spoke on self-determination, linking it to the aforementioned rule by popular consent. Where Lenin and Stalin clearly conceptualised self-determination, Wilson does not provide us with a definition, however, a lot is written on his interpretations and motivations.

The origins of Wilson's view on self-determination stem from the spirit of the American anti-colonial sentiment dating back to the War of Independence (Unterberger, 1996, p. 929). He was influenced by Lincoln's statement on the "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (as cited in Unterberger, 1996, p. 929). For Wilson, self-determination essentially meant the moral necessity of governments to rule by consent of the governed, thus interpreting the concept as popular sovereignty (Batistich, 1995, p. 1016; Unterberger, 1996, p. 933). Wilson thus linked the right of a people to self-determination to democracy, as this is a way for a people to determine their (political) future (Mälksoo, 2017, p. 202-203). Wilson's views on self-determination also stemmed from his belief that the United States had a moral duty to liberate 'mature' people from autocratic governments (Lynch, 2002, p. 424). In order to achieve peace, some nations had to be liberated from foreign invaders in order to realise



democracy. Wilson's 'self-determination' thus entailed a right to democracy and the freedom from foreign domination, however, he did not intend to make this universally applicable (Connor, 1967, p. 31).

Wilson only intended self-determination to apply to 'mature' people, meaning the people under the defeated Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires, and leaving out, *inter alia*, the European colonies (Bowring, 2007, p. 11; Lynch, 2002, p. 424). This became clear in Wilson's speech on his famous Fourteen Points. Here, the word 'self-determination' is not mentioned, however, it is touched upon multiple times, referring to the German, Russian, and Ottoman empires specifically. Wilson viewed self-determination only as democracy and freeing peoples from the rule of the aforementioned empires, thus not including the right to secession (Unterberger, 1996, p. 930). According to Wilson, changes of sovereignty should not be made by conquest, and national groups should be autonomous within the state they belong to (Unterberger, 1996, p. 930). Self-determination also did not have to include ethnic groups, and ethnic boundaries did not have to coincide with political ones (Unterberger, 1996, p. 930-931). To conclude, Wilson thus interpreted self-determination as electing a democratic government, without foreign domination, however, only wished to apply this to the defeated empires of World War I.

### **American Views on Self-Determination**

After WWII, calls from the Global South for self-determination, decolonisation, and independence increased. While Wilson was mostly concerned with the post-WWI empires, other parts of the world now clearly called for self-determination. The US, now led by Truman, was careful to answer these calls. The US feared that claims to self-determination would disrupt states and the global order, and produce superpower conflict, secessionist movements, state-fragmentation and genocide (Simpson, 2012, p. 675-676). While helping the colonial peoples was more in line with the aforementioned US traditions, the US also had a strategic interdependence with the colonial powers (Heiss, 2017, p. 129). Therefore, it tried to present itself as a broker between the colonial powers and the independence movements, carefully balancing both sides' interests and trying to alienate neither of them (Heiss, 2017, p. 129, 131).

Under Truman's successor, Eisenhower, Cold War tensions started to rise and the US feared that decolonisation could play into the hands of the USSR (Heiss, 2017, p. 129, 131). This would shift the international balance of power towards the Soviets, and negatively impact

the US (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Therefore, it became increasingly important for the US to play a role in the decolonisation process, to make sure that only those movements which would result in non-communist regimes achieved success (Heiss, 2017, p. 129, 131). The US thus found itself in a position where its history made for an ideology supporting self-determination, however, where the balancing of self-interests both for and against self-determination called for difficult decisions. The US ended up mainly supporting movements when they served, or were in line with American self-interests.

When it came to non-colonial calls for self-determination, the US was generally less supportive, as discussions around self-determination are always connected to regional and global dynamics (Toft, 2012, p. 582). The US has diplomatic ties with many states, and often privileges these intergovernmental relations over those with non-state actors (Todman, 2018, p. 161). Supporting groups who claim self-determination could endanger the relations between the US and the home-state, or with surrounding states in the region, causing instability (Todman, 2018, p. 161). There are some exceptions to this, as different kinds of self-interests of the US inevitably come into play. However, generally speaking, the US has prioritised the need for stability and the inviolability of borders over claims of self-determination (Carley, 1996, p. 1).

### **The United States on Kurdish Self-Determination and Rojava**

When looking at American-Kurdish relations, it is necessary to go back to Wilson and his Fourteen Points. As discussed, Wilson supported self-determination of nations under some former empires, including the defeated Ottoman Empire. In the twelfth article of his Fourteen Points, Wilson states the following: “The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development” (Wilson, 1918, XII). Despite Wilson’s aforementioned meaning of self-determination, this article gave the Kurds hope for an independent state, which was not realised due to the imperial ambitions of actors drafting the post-WWI peace treaties (Little, 2010, p. 65). This left the Kurds stateless, and forgotten by the US for a long time.

Any US response to self-determination movements is inevitably coloured by the relationship of the US with the government involved (Carley, 1997, p. VII). Self-determination movements of Kurds are no exception to this. During the Cold War, the US opposed Kurdish

secessionist efforts in Iran, simply because Iran was an American ally (Rubin, 2019). In Turkey, another Cold War ally, the US mainly chose to overlook the Turkish-Kurdish conflict for the sake of the Turkish alliance and stability (Carley, 1997, p. 3). The US did, however, designate the PKK as a terrorist organisation, which clearly signalled an opposing position towards their claims of self-determination.

The US government was clear in defining its relationship with Rojava from the start. John Kirby, the Spokesperson for the US Department of State clearly stated that the US-partnership “with Kurdish fighters exists in terms of the effort to go after Daesh. That is the focus of that partnership” (Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, 2016a). When the Obama administration decided to partner with the Syrian Kurds, they were looking for allies to fight ISIS, and US officials claimed that the Kurdish-led forces were the only ones to take up this battle (Hunt, 2018). This coalition is the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF], the official military force of AANES, and supporting this group would thus mean to support a group that claims autonomy in northern Syria. When questioned on this, Kirby replied: “We don’t support self-rule, self – semi-autonomous zones inside Syria. We just don’t. What we want to see is a unified, whole Syria that has in place a government that is not led by Bashar al-Assad, that is responsive to the Syrian people, whole, unified non-sectarian Syria.” (Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, 2016b). In line with the examples of Iran and Turkey, the US thus prioritises stability and territorial integrity in Syria over calls for self-determination (Rubin, 2019). Despite the US deeming the Assad regime illegitimate, the US wants to prevent any party from altering borders in the Middle East, as this could lead to more movements of self-determination and secession, and more instability (Tabler et al., 2016).

Another reason for not supporting an autonomous Rojava is found in the ideology of the PYD and AANES. The US is concerned that AANES is attempting to create an anti-capitalist space, which firmly rejects the premises of the US-led global order (Hunt, 2018). Former US diplomat Stuart Jones underlined this by stating that supporting the Kurdish-led forces “does not create a political monopoly for a political organization that is really hostile to ... US values and ideology.” (as cited in Hunt, 2018). The US’ choice to abstain from supporting the autonomy of Rojava is also influenced by the historic ties of the PKK to the Rojava revolutionaries (Hunt, 2018). The US has an interest in maintaining at least somewhat friendly relations with Turkey, as previously mentioned. Turkey strongly opposes a Kurdish autonomous region on its border. Balancing between its position as an ally of both Rojava and Turkey, the US had no choice but to take some of Turkey’s interests into account. This is

evidenced by the US allowing Turkish forces to invade parts of Rojava (Hunt, 2018). The choice of the US to not support autonomy in Rojava is thus a mix of ideological and regional geopolitical factors, as well as an American tendency to prioritise the territorial integrity of states.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter analysed Wilson's interpretation of self-determination. Wilson interpreted self-determination as a group ruled by a democratic government without foreign domination, and only intended to apply this to the four defeated empires after WWI. During the decolonisation era however, other areas started to call for self-determination as well. The US responded hesitantly due to its interests in maintaining relations with both the colonial powers and the decolonisation movements. Rising tensions in the Cold War made US support for self-determination primarily motivated by US self-interests. Non-colonial calls for self-determination often did not receive support from the US, as they prioritised regional relations and stability.

When looking at the contemporary American support for the Kurds of Rojava, the US clearly stated that the support is purely militarily focused, in order to defeat ISIS. Claims for autonomy are disregarded, as the US continues to follow the pattern of prioritising existing borders and stability. The US does, however, claim to wish for a representative government for the whole of Syria. This is in line with the Wilsonian view, which conceptualises self-determination as democratic representation. The current US position also aligns with Wilson in the rejection of the right to secession, especially for ethnic groups. In conclusion, not supporting Kurdish autonomy is thus in line with the American perspective on self-determination. The US' position to not support an autonomous Rojava is explained by a mix of ideological motives, combined with self-interests in intergovernmental relations, their aim to not worsen regional instability, and a wish to not disturb the global order.

### **Chapter 3: The Kurds in Rojava**

This chapter is structured differently than the previous ones. Whereas chapters 1&2 started with an analysis of the interpretations of self-determination by historical figures, this chapter does so after providing a summary of Syrian-Kurdish history. Then, it analyses the interpretations of self-determination of PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan, and how his view has shifted from secession to autonomy. Thereafter, Rojava's road to autonomy is explained, followed by the current application of self-determination by AANES.

#### **A History of Syrian-Kurdish Self-Determination**

Before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after WWI, there were no separate states of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, and the Kurds mainly lived in the Empire (Gunter, 2014, p. 7). After the Ottoman defeat however, the greater powers of Europe, mainly the British, French, and Russians, partitioned the former Empire. Kurdish people hoped for their own state, especially after hearing Wilson's aforementioned Fourteen Points. In 1920, the Ottoman Empire signed the Treaty of Sèvres with the Allied Powers. This treaty stated that Kurdish independence from Turkey would be granted if the Kurdish people addressed themselves to the League of Nations and showed that a majority of people in the Kurdish regions wished for independence (as cited in Hurewitz, 1979, p. 221). However, this Treaty was never ratified and was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which gave no provisions for Kurdish self-rule, forcibly incorporating the Kurds into Turkey, Syria, and Iraq (Bajalan, 2019, p. 13; Ali, 1997, p. 521). Soon after WWI, Syria was occupied by France and was placed under a French Mandate, until its independence in 1946. The Kurds became minorities in their new states, and these new borders caused fragmentation among the Kurdish people (Kaya, 2020, p. 111).

When a failed Kurdish revolt in the Republic of Turkey spurred a massive migration of Kurds into Syria, the Kurdish population in northern Syria increased from 6,000 to 56,430 between 1927 and 1939 (Al-Kati, 2019, p. 46). After the French Mandate for Syria ended, the Ba'ath Party emphasised Pan-Arabism, and the creation of a common Syrian identity over other ethnic identities (Tejel, 2008, p. 39). The Kurdish identity had to make place for a Syrian-Arab one. In the years after, Kurdish history in Syria is mainly characterised by oppression. An example is the 1962 Census, where the Syrian regime attempted to identify the former Turkish-Kurdish refugees and made them stateless (Albarazi, 2013, p. 15). Many Kurds lost their identity cards, access to state welfare, ownership of land, and the right to vote, effectively

decreasing the influence of the Kurds (Özçelik, 2020, p. 694). In the 1970's the regime also created an Arab Cordon, by giving Kurdish lands to Arab settlers. This Arabisation of the Rojava region cut off cross-border Kurdish relations and decreased the possibility to express the Kurdish identity, restricting social, political and cultural expression even more (Ozkahraman, 2021, p. 571). Kurdish intellectuals became more interested in leaving Syria than in organising political movements, thus deflating Kurdish activism in the region (Gambill, 2004).

From the mid-1990s, Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad tried to reintegrate the Kurds into Syrian communities and reversed some repressive measures (Tejel, 2008, p. 66). Expression of the Kurdish identity and language, however, remained heavily restricted. In the 2000's, Kurdish treatment by the regime stayed more or less the same. However, there were some violent clashes between Kurds and government forces, for example after a football match in Qamishli in 2004, leading to the killing of 6 Kurds, which reignited Kurdish activism (Tejel, 2008, p. 115). In the 2010's the situation changed drastically. Changing dynamics due to the Syrian Civil War presented the Syrian Kurds with new opportunities to reclaim their rights and establish autonomy in northern Syria (Federici, 2015, p. 82). When the Syrian Army withdrew itself from the region in 2012, the PYD took control, with support from their armed wing, the YPG, and the PKK (Federici, 2015, p. 82, 83). This led to an autonomous administration in Rojava. Threatened by ISIS, the YPG had no option but to defend its people and enter the conflict, which made for international military support. In 2015, Rojava's military branch was renamed to the Syrian Democratic Forces, pressured by the US who did not want to partner with an ethnic-Kurdish group due to Turkish pressure (Hunt, 2018). In 2018, Rojava rebranded itself as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, again to show its diversity. However, the SDF remains YPG-led, and AANES remains to be dominated by the PYD.

### **Öcalan on Self-Determination**

Chapters 1&2 analysed views on self-determination by former state leaders. This chapter analyses the views of Kurdistan Workers' Party-leader Abdullah Öcalan, as his ideas function as an important inspiration to Rojava. Öcalan founded the Marxist-Leninist PKK in Turkey in 1978 and spent the following 20 years mainly in Syria. Following his arrest by Turkey in 1999, he is now serving a life sentence in prison, while continuing his work as a political

activist. The views and influence of Öcalan are analysed in two parts, as his views have changed over time, and as both views have significantly impacted Syrian-Kurdish political activism.

In 1978, Öcalan founded the PKK with Marxism-Leninism as its ideology. Öcalan and his supporters claimed that even though Kurds are not ruled by external colonial states, they still suffer from internal colonialism, and are exploited and oppressed (Kaya, 2020, p. 103-104). They used this as a justification to aim for a Kurdish state that would unite the Kurds from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, and framed this within the Leninist interpretation of self-determination (Al-Monitor, 2017; Kaya, 2020, p. 146). Öcalan and the PKK thus interpreted the right to self-determination as the right to secession. When Öcalan fled Turkey in 1979, he found refuge in Syria. The Syrian regime allowed the PKK to use Syrian territories, which led to an increase in cross-border links and Syrian-Kurdish mobilisation (Kaya, 2020, p. 151). The Syrian Kurds so far had mostly been active in seeking cultural and linguistic rights and had not directly challenged the regime, but the entering of the PKK into Syria created a space for stronger mobilisation and activism (Kaya, 2020, p. 126-127).

In the 1990s, Öcalan changed his ideology, and abandoned his previous Marxist-Leninist ideas. There are multiple reasons for this shift, such as the dissolution of the USSR and the transformation of the international political context, military losses of the PKK, and Öcalan getting in touch with new social theories in prison after his arrest in 1999 (Yarkin, 2015, p. 34). These changes in Turkey, regionally, and globally, made the PKK realise that a Kurdish nation-state would not be possible in the near future and that it had to change its ideas (Kaya, 2020, p. 143). In 1995, Öcalan stated that the PKK did not insist on a separate state anymore, but rather called for a state model where people's rights are guaranteed, and the PKK could govern an autonomous region (Stanton, 2016, p. 217). In the PKK's interpretation of self-determination, secession was thus replaced by autonomy.

Öcalan's new ideology, known as 'democratic confederalism', focuses on the creation of a radical democracy based on anti-statist, anti-capitalist, anti-industrialist, gender-equal, and ecological ideas (Yarkin, 2015, p. 42). This radical democracy functions bottom-up through, inter alia, local town councils, municipal administrations, and communes (Yarkin, 2015, p. 42). This revolutionary brand of communalism also rejects ethnic nationalism, national borders, and the system of nation-states in general (Al-Monitor, 2017). Whereas the initial goal was a Kurdish nation-state, Öcalan now focuses on a stateless system. With this new ideology, Öcalan had to adapt his views on self-determination as well. Öcalan (2011) states that "the right of self-determination of the peoples includes the right to a state of their own" (p. 33). This Leninist

interpretation has thus not changed. However, Öcalan adds to this that the nation-state is an obstacle for social development, and that his democratic confederalism is an anti-nationalist movement, which does not aim to create a Kurdish nation-state (Ocalan, 2011, p. 33-34). Democratic confederalism “aims at realising the right of self-defence of the peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning the existing political borders” (Ocalan, 2011, p. 34). Öcalan’s new view of self-determination thus refers to deepening democratic processes through decentralisation, local administration, and an increasing interconnectedness between localised democracies (Kaya, 2020, p. 146). This idea of decentralisation translates itself to a Kurdish autonomous region within the state, in line with Öcalan’s ideas in 1995. Thus, while Öcalan does not fully reject the right to secession, it is no longer a part of his ideology, as he now strives for Kurdish autonomy and democratic confederalism.

## **Rojava**

Syrian-Kurdish political activism was relatively quiet compared to other Kurdish groups, until the PKK came to use Syria as its base. As part of a deal with the Syrian regime, the PKK focused fully on its fight against Turkey and mobilised Syrian Kurds for that end, who made up over 25% of the PKK’s fighters (Gambill, 2004). However, after the Assad regime ended its support for the PKK in 1998, due to heavy pressure from Turkey, the PKK stopped pressuring Kurdish activists to suppress criticism of the Syrian regime (Gambill, 2004). This resulted in a shift of focus from Turkey’s suppression of the Kurds, towards repression by the Syrian regime. The imprisoned Öcalan and the PKK had created more space for Kurdish political activism in Syria, and were behind the creation of the Democratic Union Party in 2003 (Ünver, 2016, p. 80). This political party, which mainly functioned underground, was thus indirectly established by Öcalan, after he had undergone his ideological change. The PYD adopted his new ideas and interpreted self-determination in the same way as Öcalan and the PKK, thus meaning democratic autonomy within the existing state (Federici, 2015, p. 83). The PYD rose to prominence very quickly, partly due to the deadly Qamishli football riots, which made for an increase of civil unrest under Syrian Kurds (Kaya, 2020, p. 151). These riots went further than regular football riots and thousands of Kurds throughout Syria took the streets, spearheaded by the PYD (Aydin, 2016). The harsh government crackdown to this uprising



inspired the radicalisation of the Kurdish youth, and the perspective of autonomy gained further ground in Kurdish consciousness (Aydin, 2016).

Since the PYD's founding, its interpretation of self-determination has remained consistent. With Rojava gaining autonomy, however, theory became practice. In 2014, Rojava's constitution was drafted, known as the 'Social Contract'. This contract emphasises Syria's territorial integrity, and the aim to reaffirm people's right to self-determination through deepening democratic processes (The Social Contract of the Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira, and Kobane, 2014, Preamble; Article 8). Renaming itself to AANES and the SDF is also in line with Rojava's interpretation of self-determination, as it rejects ethnic nationalism and thus wants to showcase its diversity. This rebranding is an example of the practical application of Rojava's views on self-determination. The region is thus a living example of Öcalan's democratic confederalism; self-determination seen as autonomy and deepening democratic processes, and the attempt to abstain from ethnic-nationalism (Kaya, 2020, p. 194).

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has provided context for the rise of Rojava by providing a historical overview of the Syrian Kurds. It shows the importance of Öcalan and the PKK in creating a space for political mobilisation in Syria, and the founding of the PYD. It also highlights the importance of Öcalan's ideological change, from aiming for secession to aiming for autonomy and democratic confederalism. The PYD has adopted and implemented Öcalan's adapted view on self-determination in Syria. This means that self-determination is seen as deepening democratic processes and autonomy, while respecting Syria's territorial integrity.

## **Chapter 4: Interaction Between Russia, the US, and Rojava**

So far, each chapter analysed a case, being Russia, the United States, and the Kurds in Rojava. The chapters show interpretations of self-determination over time, and the way that Russia and the US view the current autonomy of Rojava. The rise to an autonomous Rojava is also explained by looking at views of Öcalan, the PKK, and the PYD. Whereas the chapters before already mentioned parts of their interconnectedness, this chapter describes the relations between the cases more specifically. First, it discusses the links between Lenin, Öcalan, Wilson, and Rojava. After, it analyses the interconnectedness between Russia, the US, and Rojava.

### **Lenin, Öcalan, and Wilson**

Chapter one has discussed views on self-determination by Lenin. He saw self-determination as a necessary step towards global socialism and interpreted it as secession. This Marxist-Leninist interpretation got overshadowed by Soviet self-interests over time, however, remains relevant to this research as Öcalan became inspired by Lenin's interpretation and ideology. He used this to justify his aims for an independent Kurdish state on Turkey's soil. The PKK's move to Syria awakened the Syrian-Kurdish spirit of political activism in the 1980's and 1990's. The PKK's Leninist-Marxist ideology found support amongst Syrian Kurds, as the leftist anti-imperial ideology resonated with the anti-imperial sentiment in Syria, caused by the French Mandate years before (Kaya, 2020, p. 128). Later, Öcalan changed his ideology, and indirectly founded the PYD, which adopted his new ideas of democratic confederalism and autonomy. There is thus no direct link between Lenin's interpretation and Rojava, however, his views have been part of a chain of events through Öcalan, leading to the rise of Rojava.

Öcalan's view on self-determination included secession, inspired by Lenin. However, after geopolitical realities set in, he altered his ideas towards democratic confederalism, which rejects ethnic nationalism and the nation-state. He still believed self-determination meant the right to secession, however did not aim for this goal anymore. Öcalan's new views focus on autonomy instead of secession, and deepening democratic processes while respecting the existing state borders. The PYD adopted his views and implemented them during the Syrian Civil War. Öcalan's interpretation of self-determination has thus functioned as a direct inspiration for the rise of Rojava.

Wilson saw self-determination as the ruling by a democratic government without foreign domination, and only intended to apply this to the four defeated empires after WWI.

The Ottoman Empire was included in this, and in Wilson's Fourteen Points he stated his ideas on independence for nations under this former empire, including the Kurds. His views were not translated into reality due to post-WWI peace treaties. Although the Kurds in Rojava also aim for a democratic government, it is not the same kind as Wilson intended. The Kurds have also not used his interpretations in practice or for inspiration, as opposed to Lenin's and Öcalan's ideas. Thus, there does not seem to be a link between Wilson's interpretation of self-determination and the autonomy of Rojava.

### **The Soviet Union and Russia, the United States, and Rojava**

The views of important historical figures in the context of self-determination and Syrian Kurds are important and relevant, but the practical use of self-determination of the cases tells us more. From the analysis, it is clear that both the USSR and the Russian Federation, as well as the US, have mixed their interpretation of self-determination with self-interests. The USSR wanted to increase its influence while decreasing that of actors such as the US and Turkey. Therefore, it supported national movements like the Kurds to undermine other states. For example, the USSR and the Russian Federation supported the PKK, and used it as leverage against Turkey. This support has also impacted Syrian Kurds, as the PKK was based in Syria and actively incorporated Syrian Kurds in their struggle for an independent Kurdistan. Turkish and Syrian Kurds thus benefitted from the USSR's views on self-determination, and the Soviet self-interests that hid behind it.

Contrary to the USSR in this context, the US prioritised territorial stability and intergovernmental relations. They interpreted self-determination as representation through democracy, and generally did not support non-colonial national movements. These differing approaches intensified due to Cold-War rivalries. The tendency of Kurdish actors to adhere to leftist ideologies also severely weakened the PKK's chances of receiving Western support for self-determination (Kaya, 2020, p. 128). When it comes to the PKK and Turkey, the US has chosen Turkey's side and mainly ignored the Kurdish struggle for independence, as it does not align with the American interpretation of self-determination nor its self-interests. The PKK was not heavily impacted by the American position. Even though the US opposed Kurdish secession, it also generally stayed out of the conflict.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia changed its view on self-determination and replaced the right to secession with the right to autonomy. However, they also followed a

historical trend of using their ideas of self-determination as a cover for advancing their self-interest. In the present situation, the Syrian Kurds remain to be used as a tool for Russian geopolitical interests in the Middle East, especially in regards to increasing Russian influence relative to the influence of the US and Turkey. Thus, Russia's post-Soviet interpretation of self-determination as autonomy, combined with interests in gaining geopolitical power and maintaining an alliance with Assad, explain Russia's current support for an autonomous Rojava. Öcalan and the PKK also changed their interpretation, as geopolitical realities made an independent Kurdistan impossible. The Kurds became more assertive and put their focus on Kurdish regions within their country, instead of a greater Kurdistan (Kaya, 2020, p. 157). The new-born PYD in Syria adopted this view and aimed for democratic confederalism, where self-determination means a radical brand of democracy, and autonomy within the state.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the US thus interpreted self-determination as representation through democracy, whereas both Russia and the PYD interpreted it as the right to autonomy. The US wishes to see one democratic government responding to the entirety of Syria, as it prioritises stability and existing borders. The US opposing a solution of autonomy for Rojava thus aligns with the American view on self-determination and its self-interests. Russia does actively support an autonomous Rojava, and by including the PYD in drafting a potential Syrian constitution, it clearly helps AANES in its goal to remain autonomous. Even though there are disagreements on how exactly Rojava should function as an autonomous region, Russia's political support helps AANES to be seen as a legitimate actor in Syria. Thus, while the US' views on self-determination have not specifically helped or countered Rojava, Russian views have positively impacted Rojava in maintaining its autonomy and gaining legitimacy.

## Conclusion

Lenin's interpretation of self-determination as secession has indirectly impacted the rise of Rojava, mainly through the influence of Öcalan and the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s. Öcalan and the PKK adopted Lenin's interpretation for years, which significantly contributed to the rise of Kurdish political activism and mobilisation in Syria. However, due to geopolitical realities obstructing the creation of a Kurdish state, Öcalan and the PKK changed their ideology. Öcalan replaced his aim for secession with the aim for democratic confederalism and autonomy within the state. The PYD, founded by PKK-affiliates, adopted these new ideas and implemented them during the Syrian Civil War. Öcalan's interpretations of self-determination thus directly impacted Rojava's autonomy, first by increasing Kurdish activism, and second by creating an ideological blueprint for the region. The change of interpreting self-determination from secession to autonomy created a more realistic goal for Syrian Kurds, which is now realised in Rojava. Wilson's interpretation of self-determination gave hope for Kurdish nationalists after WWI, however, did not impact the current situation.

Historically, the US has not supported the PKK in seeking self-determination, as their interpretations of self-determination greatly differed, and as the US prioritised existing borders and maintaining intergovernmental relations. Following this historical trend of favouring the stability of borders and the US' interpretation of self-determination as democracy, the US does not support an autonomous Rojava. It is clear that the support of the US is purely militarily focused, to help the YPG in the fight against ISIS, and that it does not extend to political support. Thus, the US' view on self-determination has not positively impacted Rojava, however, also has not directly undermined the autonomous administration.

The USSR interpreted self-determination as secession, and supported the Turkish PKK in Syria, in order to gain influence in the Middle East and decrease the influence of rivals such as Turkey and the US. After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia came to interpret self-determination as autonomy. However, they also followed a historical trend of using their ideas of self-determination as a cover for advancing their self-interest. Currently, the Syrian Kurds continue to be used as a tool for Russian geopolitical interests and influence in the Middle East. Thus, Russia's post-Soviet interpretation of self-determination as autonomy, combined with geopolitical interests, explain Russia's current support for an autonomous Rojava. A direct positive impact of this position is evidenced by Russia's proposed constitution for Syria, which attempted to solidify Rojava's autonomy. The Soviet and Russian support for the PKK's self-determination, combined with the present support for the autonomy of Rojava, show that Russia

has positively impacted the rise of an autonomous Rojava. Even though ideas on self-determination have been used as a vessel for USSR and Russian self-interests, they have still significantly impacted the rise of Rojava to autonomy in a positive way.

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