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The most recent pictures of thousands of refugees fleeing from heavy attacks of ISIS and making their way from Syria across the border to Turkey, come from the area of Kobani – one of three cantons of the self- proclaimed Autonomy Region Rojava in Northern Syria.

This region – which consists of three geographically disconnected enclaves along the Turkish border – strategically used the deteriorating situation to declare self-rule in July 2012 and has since been celebrated as the "Rojava Revolution" within the Kurdish Movement associated around the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The population of Rojava, which has long been a stronghold of the PKK, is predominantly made up of Kurds – both Muslim and Yezidi[1] – as well as Arabs, Christian Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen and Chechens. The desire for some form of self-determination especially among the Kurds was triggered through decades of denial of basic citizenship rights under the Assad-regime.

This quiet revolution is, however, not a question of independence. It is not the founding of yet another nation-state. Deliberately declaring itself an autonomy region instead of a state, derived from the critique of existing nation-states with their homogenising and exclusionary principals of citizenship, centralism of government and non-democratic structures under which the Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria have suffered on the one hand and the strategies of classic national liberation movements on the other. This critique along with an alternative model of "democratic autonomy" was brought forward by the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, and replaced the earlier struggle for independence. The concept of democratic autonomy is envisaged along the lines of libertarian thinker Murray Bookchin as a decentralised, radical democracy within or despite the given nation-states which abides by principals of equality between genders, religious- and ethnic affiliations as well as ecology[2]. In this sense, the PKK and its affiliated organisation PYD (Democratic Union Party) in Syria are promoting this model, whose fundamental principal is to achieve a unity of all different faiths and ethnic groups without assimilating them, for the whole of the Middle East.

Within the past one and a half years the outnumbered Syrian military has been expelled from most parts of the region; police, secret service, and the civil service of the old regime have been dismantled, and the legal and education system transformed. Additionally, despite the

detrimental security situation, central institutions for the most radical changes have been established in three main areas: the introduction of direct self-government through communes, assurance of equal participation in all areas of decision-making for all faith and ethnic groups and the strengthening of the position of women.

Aiming at decentralizing decision-making and realizing self-rule, village- or street communes consisting of 30-150 households have been organised. These communes decide on questions regarding administration, electricity, provision of nutrition, as well as discussing and solving other social problems. They have commissions for the organisation of defence, justice, infrastructure, ecology, youth, as well as economy. Some have erected communal cooperatives, e.g. bakeries, sewing workshops or agricultural initiatives[3]. They also organise the support of the poorest of the community with basic nutrition and fuel. Delegates of the communes form together a council for 7-10 villages or a city-district, and every city has yet another city council. The city council is made up of representatives of the communes, all political parties, the organisation of the fallen fighters, the women's organisation, and the youth organisation. All councils as well as the communes have a 40% quota for women. The decisions are to be made on basis of consensus and equal speaking-time is enforced. Besides this, a co-chairperson system has been implemented for all organisations, which means that all councils have both a female and male chairperson. All members are suggested and elected by the population. However, according to the co-president of the PYD, Salih Muslim, this radical change from dictatorship to this form of self-rule is not an easy process: "The people are learning how to govern themselves"[4].

This change in decision-making has also brought about a radical change in the legal system: the establishment of "peace and consensus committees"[5]. These committees, which originally developed as leftist Kurdish underground institutions in the cities of the Kurdish region of Syria in the 1990 and were severely repressed in the 2000s, have resumed their importance with the uprising, and have transformed into the basic structure and fundamental principal of the new legal system. The aim of these committees, which attend to all general legal questions and disputes apart from severe crimes such as murder, is to achieve a consensus between the conflicting parties and in doing so a lasting settlement. In a general assembly of all residents every commune elects the 5-9 members of its local peace and consensus committee (40% of which have to be women) according to their ability to facilitate such a consensus in discussion among between the parties. It is emphasized that these

members should not be co-opted by traditional authorities, but democratically elected and in accordance with the gender-equality principal. These peace and consensus committees also exist on the district level, whose members are elected by the popular councils on that level respectively. Parallel women-only committees have been established which specifically attend cases of crimes against women, such as domestic violence, forced-marriages and multiple marriages. Cases which cannot be solved in this consensus-finding way are forwarded on to higher institutions which exist on city, regional and canton level. Courts of appeals have been established in every region and a constitutional court is concerned with the further development of the constitution which has however been framed as a "social contract"[6].

The decision to agree on a social contract instead of a constitution is the manifestation of the centrality of the multi-faith/ethnicity principal behind the concept of the democratic autonomy in Rojava. This contract, which developed out of meetings among representatives of different ethnic and belief groups, has the aim to secure safety and self-rule to all groups. All groups are to be equally present and active in decision-making on political as well as economic and social questions and their right to self-determination is to be ensured not only through self-rule on village-level, but also through the right to organise themselves autonomously on other levels. According to the report of a delegation which visited the region in May this year, the participation of Arabs an Assyrians is steadily increasing in all areas[7]. All groups are also supported in participating in the armed wing YPG or founding their own self-defence groups, as the Assyrians have done most recently.

Similarly, the empowerment of women is not only to be achieved through the presence of women in all parts of decision-making processes through the 40% quota, the co-chairperson system, woman's legal committees, but also through the establishment of their own military wing YPJ (Women's Defence Unit)[8]. In an interview, co-president of PYD, Asya Abdullah, argues that the movement in Syria has learned from other revolutions that the women's question cannot be left until after the revolution. Instead, women in Rojava are playing a leading role in politics, diplomacy, social questions, in the building of a new democratic family structure as well as in self-defence[9]. According to her the self-government structures as well as the self-organisation of women are just as important as the existing independent education institutions and seminars, and the projects to enhance women's economic

independence.

This attempt for a peaceful democratic transformation in co-existence to the state, but on the premises of grassroots self-determination, pluralism and gender-equality is, unfortunately, not welcomed by all in the region. The most recent heavy attacks on the canton of Kobani by ISIS fighters indicate a greater interest in annihilating this autonomy region, which is identified with an increasing strength of the PKK in the region. The Turkish government has reacted sharply to claims made by New York Times and other media that it is, in one way or another, supporting ISIS fighters[10]. Yet the PKK sees these accusations as grounded. Such cooperation raises strong doubts on the sincerity of the government towards the peace talks which it has been holding with Öcalan over the past year. The PKK has warned that it could put an end to the ceasefire it had declared to facilitate a possible peace process[11]. For those who have made their way from all parts of Turkey to the Syrian border to protest and are organising marches and rallies in many cities across Europe, Rojava is not only the test-ground for an alternative democracy in the region, but also a bastion against ISIS.

[1] The majority of Yezidi Kurds live in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The attack of ISIS on the city of Sinjar and the massacre on its inhabitants triggered strong international attention and the decision for intervention in the US. Since then, many Yezidi Kurds were helped to flee into Rojava by the Syrian wing of PKK-guerrilla fighters (YPG).

[2]Gunes, Cengiz (2012) The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey. From Protest to Resistance. New York: Routledge; also see Biehl, Janet (2012) “Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy”, New Compass, http://new-compass.net/articles/bookchin-%C3%B6calan-and-dialectics-democracy, accessed 20.02.2012

[3] Knapp, Micheal (2014) „Die Demokratische Autonomie in Rojava. Ziel ist eine demokratische Lösung für den gesamten Mittleren Osten“, Kurdistan Report 174, http://www.kurdistan-report.de/index.php/archiv/2014/174/154-ziel-ist-eine-demokratische-lo

esung-fuer-den-gesamten-mittleren-osten, accessed 25.09.2014

[4] Interview with Co-president of PYD, Salih Muslim, “Die Menschen lernen, sich selbst zu bestimmen“, Kurdistan Report 175, http://www.kurdistan-report.de/index.php/archiv/2014/175/177-die-menschen-lernen-sich-selbst-zu-bestimmen, accessed 25.09.2014.

[5] Ayboğa, Ercan (2014) “Das neue Rechtssystem in Rojava. Der Konsens ist Entscheidend“,Kurdistan Report 175, http://www.kurdistan-report.de/index.php/archiv/2014/175/178-der-konsens-ist-entscheidend, accessed 25.09.2014.

[6] See “Charter of the Social Contract” of Rojava under http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/resources/rojava/charter-of-the-social-contract/, accessed 26.09.2014

[7] Knapp 2014.

[8] Interview with Îlham Ehmed, Representative of the Kurdish Women’s Movement in Rojava and Member of the Kurdish Highest Council: Civaka Azad (2014) “Perspektiven der Frauenbewegung in Rojava”, http://civaka-azad.org/perspektiven-der-frauenbewegung-rojava/, accessed 25.09.2014

[9] Interview with Asya Abdullah Co-President of PYD: Öğünç, Pınar (2014) “Kadın özgür değilse demokrasi olmaz”, Radikal, 22.08.2013, http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/pinar_ogunc/kadin_ozgur_degilse_demokrasi_olmaz-1147222, accessed 25.09.2014

[10] Official summary of President Erdoğan’s speech at Assembly of the Confederation of Turkish Crafts- and Tradesmen (TESK): TCCB (2014) “We do not accept and have never accepted the notion of Islamic terrorism”, http://www.tccb.gov.tr/news/397/91043/we-do-not-accept-and-have-never-accepted-the-notio

n-of-islamic-terrorism.html, accessed 25.09.2014; The speech refers to this article published in the New York Times on the 15.09.2014: Yeginsu, Ceylan (2014) “ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey”, New York Times, 15.09.2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/europe/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html, accessed 25.09.2014.

[11] Declaration of Cemil Bayık, Co-President of the Executive Council of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK) see Firatnews (2014) “Bayık: We may end the cease-fire”, firatnews, 27.09.2014, http://en.firatajans.com/news/news/bayik-we-may-end-the-cease-fire.htm, accessed 27.09.2014