

Over the past month, the news cycle has been dominated by the Kurds and the United States, the Kurds and Turkey, the Kurds and Syria – after years of the Kurds and the Islamic State. This time it’s because the United States abandoned the Kurds, leaving them at the mercy of Turkey, Syria, and Russia.

News media readers seem to always be hearing about the Kurds in conflict with others around them. And it’s strange how quick news outlets are to lump everyone in the northern Syria region of Rojava as “the Kurds.”

Clearly it would be too much to ask for these articles to refer to area as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES). Clearly it would be too much to ask their readers to think about terms like “polyethnic autonomous region,” “self-governing secular polity,” “decentralized direct democracy,” and “communalism rooted in feminism, ecology, and autonomy” – all terms that more accurately describe whatever the media means when today it says “northern Syria” or “the Kurds.”

After all, if readers were exposed to such terms they might have to rethink their assumptions about despotic Middle Eastern regimes, or about Israel being the only free and democratic society in the region. If readers had to think about terms like “democratic confederalism,” “green anarchism,” “libertarian socialism,” and “Rojava revolution” they might start questioning their own governments, the regimes under which they live, the horizon of what’s possible in politics.

Instead, the news media valiantly carries on publishing of explainer pieces inevitably titled “Who are the Kurds?” Here at *The Leveller*, we found five such articles dating back to the ’90s with the most casual of searches. We imagine Western newspapers have been working in this well-worn tradition going back to the days of the Ottoman Empire, at the very least.

Well, dear reader, this is not another one of those articles. We hope to produce something here much more original, informative, and provocative.

While the push to form an autonomous region has stemmed from the oppression of the Kurds, the broader goal of the Rojava revolution is to form an egalitarian and inclusive self-government that includes all the minorities in the region, whether they are native to the land or have been forced into it as a result of conflict.

In order to explain what has happened in northern Syria and how and why all the gains of the Rojava revolution are now threatened (to say nothing of the lives of the people of the region), we must – despite all previous protestations – begin with the Kurds. (But that won’t be all.)

TURKEY & SYRIA VS. THE KURDS

The Kurds’ current predicament can be traced back to the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Kurdistan, a nation that dates back in various forms to at least the 3rd century, had been subordinated by the Ottoman Empire, but was denied nationhood as this empire was split up in the wake of the war.

While the 1920 the Treaty of Sèvres included provisions for a Kurdish state, the firestorm kicked off in Turkey by the treaty swept Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s Turkish National Movement to power on the strength of their fierce rejection of the treaty’s provisions. This rejection led directly to the Turkish War of Independence, which saw Atatürk’s forces defeat a portion of the WWI Allies who had defeated the Ottoman Empire. In the wake of Atatürk’s victory, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which denied a Kurdish state, was signed.

So, ever since the Treaty of Lausanne and the French Mandate over Syria in 1923, the Kurds have received similar treatment – not great, to put it mildly – from the various state governments they ended up under. Kurds have been subject to multiple genocides by multiple state actors and responded with multiple rebellions and guerrilla conflicts.

After the Treaty of Lausanne left the Kurds divided, Turkey began severe Turkification processes. They banned the

Kurdish language, making it illegal to write, speak or sing in the language. The government further strove to strip Kurdish identity away, calling Kurds ‘Mountain Turks’ and promoting resettlement in order to dilute the Kurdish population. It was illegal to even use the words Kurds, Kurdistan, or Kurdistan.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government stripped many Kurds of their citizenship in 1962, leaving them trapped and stateless. They were severely discriminated against, with their language and culture delegitimized by the lack of citizenship rights.

THE KURDISTAN WORKERS’ PARTY (PKK)

This systematic marginalization and oppression led to the formation of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in 1978 by a group of students led by Abdullah Öcalan.

Öcalan began as a revolutionary socialist and a Kurdish nationalist, essentially in the familiar mould of a Marxist-Leninist guerilla leader. Yet his thought and the goals of the PKK have significantly evolved since the ’70s, especially after his imprisonment in 1999. Öcalan was decisively influenced by green anarchism, feminism, and in particular the communalism or revolutionary municipalism of Murray Bookchin – an American writer and political philosopher.

This has meant that the PKK has abandoned the goal of forming a nation-state in favour of forming an autonomous and multi-ethnic network of administrative councils that are elected by neighbourhood communes – democratic confederalism.

Within this system, individuals have property usage rights, but the commune makes decisions about how to dispose of it and meet the economic needs of the group. Öcalan has described democratic confederalism as “democracy without the State,” and a “democratic, ecological, gender-liberated society.”

The PKK is classified as a terrorist organization by Turkey and a number of its allies, including the EU and its member states and fellow-NATO countries like US, UK, and Canada. The UN does not consider it a terror organization; neither do a range of nations including Russia, China, Switzerland, Brazil, and India.

The PKK considers the Turkish regime of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) to be fascist, believes it wants to establish a military dictatorship, and vowed to overthrow it in 2016 in a joint statement with other socialist organizations in Turkey.

While the PKK started in Turkey, it has also operated in Syria, which led to the formation of its Rojavan equivalent, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD’s program is also the democratic confederalism of Öcalan and the PKK.

ROJAVA, OR THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA (NES)

Northern Syria has been referred to with different names, but is most commonly known as Rojava, meaning “west” in Kurdish. This refers to the fact that this territory forms the (south)western portion of Kurdistan.

Rojava gained its status as a de-facto autonomous region after the Syrian government withdrew from the region in 2012 in the midst of the civil war and the near-collapse of Assad’s regime. Rojava’s forces steadily gained control over a large portion of northern Syria over the course of the ongoing civil war and the subsequent coalition war against the Islamic State (IS).

From the chaos of the civil war, the Rojava revolution led to the communion of the predominantly Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) with other Arab, Assyrian and Turkmen groups in the region. Together they formed a constitution for the de-facto autonomous region, which eventually went by the name of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES).

This federation created a system of self-governance, and worked to implement Öcalan’s democratic confederalism, pluralistic tolerance, and gender equality. With a

diverse population and strong female leadership, Rojava’s ideals are anchored in grassroots democracy, secularism, gender equality, sustainability, tolerance and diversity.

These ideals, birthed from oppression and ethnic cleansing, stand staunchly against the mindset of the governments in the region, which are built on ethno-nationalism, religious conservatism, and an authoritarian personality cult. Its presence and initial success poses an implicit threat to neighboring governments, simply by existing.

THE PEOPLE’S PROTECTION UNIT (YPG), THE WOMEN’S PROTECTION UNITS (YPJ), AND THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES (SDF)

There are a number of militias who have fought to preserve the Rojava autonomy. The YPG is a militia predominantly run by northern Syrian Kurds. They were established by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to protect Kurdish enclaves when the Syrian civil war was still green.

They had their first big victory in Kobani and, since then, the YPG has grown and formed alliances with other militias fighting to protect their regions from separate forces. They have often been lumped in with the PKK and are considered a terrorist organization by Turkey.

The YPG’s female brigade, the YPJ, was founded in 2013 as a female-only organization. This is in keeping with the democratic confederalism’s feminism, which insists on women’s full participation in the Rojava revolution – and the use of woman-only spaces to keep traditional patriarchy from sabotaging gender equality.

The participation of women has been paramount to the strength of the militia. They were heavily involved in Raqqa, Afrin and Tabqa.

ISIL fighters were terrified of YPJ fighters, since they believed that they would be denied a martyr’s place in heaven if they were killed by a woman. Before attacking ISIL positions, YPJ fighters would identify themselves through distinctive battle cries, as an act of psychological warfare that ensured ISIL fighters knew they were facing an army of women who were about to send them to hell.

As Rojavan autonomy because a reality, the PKK has worked closely with YPG and the YPJ in the front lines of the war against IS and were key ground forces in the Siege of Kobani. The PKK and YPG militia together pushed out IS jihadists and retook most of northern Syria, driving them out of key regions like Kobani, Raqqa and Manbij.

Finally, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was created in 2015 to coordinate all the militias cooperating in Rojava against the IS. Signatories included the YPG and YPJ, as well as the Assyrian Syriac Military Council and Arab Al-Sanadid Forces from the Jazira region, the Syrian rebel factions of Free Syrian Army from the Euphrates region, and the Army of Revolutionaries from the Manbij region.

The SDF is also bolstered by smaller Armenian, Turkmen and Chechen forces in their respective regions. They are the official military wing of the NES.

These diverse yet coordinated armed forces have safeguarded the multi-ethnic Rojavan experiment, fighting off the jihadists Islamic State and safeguarding minorities.

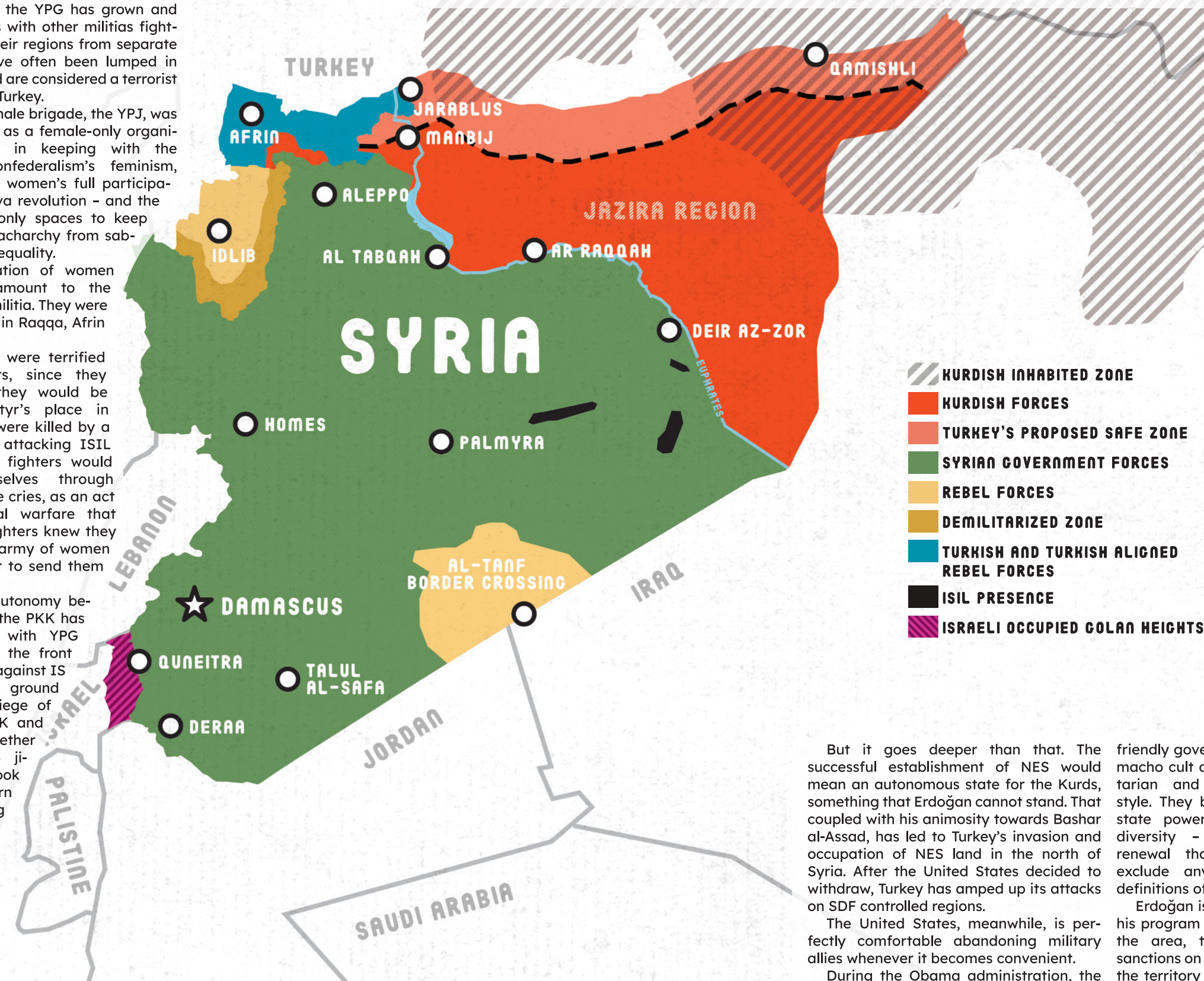
Rojava has been a refuge for many

WHO ARE THE KURDS? WHAT’S HAPPENING IN NORTHERN SYRIA?

AN ATYPICAL GUIDE TO THE ROJAVA REVOLUTION AND ITS ENEMIES

BY MARIYA MUBEEN AND TIM KITZ

GRAPHIC BY ADAM ASHBY GIBBARD



ÖCALAN HAS DESCRIBED DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AS "DEMOCRACY WITHOUT THE STATE," AND A "DEMOCRATIC, ECOLOGICAL, GENDER-LIBERATED SOCIETY."

But it goes deeper than that. The successful establishment of NES would mean an autonomous state for the Kurds, something that Erdoğan cannot stand. That coupled with his animosity towards Bashar al-Assad, has led to Turkey’s invasion and occupation of NES land in the north of Syria. After the United States decided to withdraw, Turkey has amped up its attacks on SDF controlled regions.

The United States, meanwhile, is perfectly comfortable abandoning military allies whenever it becomes convenient.

During the Obama administration, the American military provided training, equipment, and crucial air support during the war against the Islamic State, especially during the siege of Kobani. Officially, the United States military was only present to fight the IS and provide support to militias on the ground. The US military refused to bring Assad’s regime in their sights, claiming IS as their sole target – much to the dismay of Turkey, who tacitly supported IS, probably in hopes they would destroy Rojava, the SDF, and Turkey’s Kurdish problem.

The presence of the United States deterred Turkey from attacking SDF-held enclaves during the war. Yet if Erdoğan ever had a natural ally, it is Trump. In fact, Trump probably admires the Turkish strongman.

They are both anti-democratic populists, with a corrupt and corporation-

friendly governance. They both cultivate a macho cult of personality and an authoritarian and fear-mongering leadership style. They both dream of overwhelming state power that crushes dissent and diversity – and an ethno-nationalist renewal that demands they violently exclude anyone outside their narrow definitions of their in-group.

Erdoğan is just so much farther along in his program than Trump. By pulling out of the area, then slapping a few token sanctions on Erdoğan, then granting Turkey the territory they would have had to fight for through a “ceasefire” that didn’t even consult the Kurds (how do you unilaterally start a ceasefire and give away land that isn’t yours?), Trump has done well by his Turkish pal.

What is ironic is that Assad and Putin are cut from exactly same leadership cloth as Erdoğan and Trump. Their program is the same – to shore up the power of their authoritarian ethno-state.

The only thing that gives NES any hope is that for the moment, the national interests of all these demagogic madmen do not align.

Assad wants to reassert his authority over Syria. If he can incorporate NES back into his state, he wins at little cost. Otherwise, he may work to violently destroy it. The establishment of a successful democratic and autonomous state within Syria previous territory has the

potential to destabilize Assad’s authoritarian government. The NES also controls some coveted oil producing regions in northern Syria that Assad wants back.

Meanwhile, Putin’s goal is always to counter US power wherever he can.

During the Syrian civil war and the war against IS, Russia propped up the Assad regime, probably saving it from toppling. They formed a coalition of authoritarians with Syria and Iran to fight against IS.

Russia has positioned itself as a peace-keeping negotiator, having met with both Erdoğan and Assad, to discuss the most beneficial course of action. Beneficial for Russia at the very least. Anything that fosters their power and influence in the region is a win for Putin.

Needing immediate protection from Turkey, the SDF have invited Assad’s troops to help at the border. However, inviting these troops into their region opens the NES up to pressure from Assad, when he inevitably tries to take back control of the region.

The NES finds itself in a tight spot. The Rojava revolution that makes our most progressive Western politics look old-fashioned and reactionary looks to be foundering, its light in danger of extinguishment by authoritarian enemies whose political projects works aggressively to roll back democracy and any achieved progress against racism and sexism.

Let’s do what we can to hold their light aloft.