Revolution in Rojava

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Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan

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Background

The name *Kurdistan* ("Land of the Kurds") first appeared in Arabic historical writing in the twelfth century, referring to the region where the eastern foothills of the Taurus Mountains meet the northern Zagros range.[1] Estimates of the number of Kurds in the world vary considerably, but the most realistic range from 35–40 million; of that number, about 19 million live in Turkey, 10–18 million in Iran, 5.6 million in Iraq, 3 million in Syria, 0.5 million in the former Soviet Union, and about 1 million in Europe.[2]

The Kurds are the third largest ethnic group in the Middle East, after Arabs and Turks. Today, the area of Kurdish settlement, while relatively compact, straddles Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The region is of strategic importance due, among other things, to its wealth in water. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which supply water for Syria and Iraq, flow through the Turkish part of Kurdistan (Bakûr).

Linguists agree that the Kurdish language belongs to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family, although Kurdish differs significantly from Persian. There is no common, standard Kurdish language, nor even a standard alphabet or script, owing in part to the division of Kurdistan and to the bans on Kurdish language in the various states. Kurdish can be divided into five main dialects or dialect groups: Kurmancî, the southern dialects (Soranî, Silemanî, Mukrî), the southeastern dialects (Sinei, Kimanşah, Lekî), Zaza (sometimes considered a separate language), and Guranî.[3] These dialects are so different that speakers can't readily understand each other.

As to the Kurdish people, we have no certain knowledge of their origin. Researchers, nationalists (both Kurdish and Turkish), and even the PKK have all offered theories, depending on ideological orientation. Kemalism, the official state ideology of Turkey, upholds the "indivisible unity of the State with its country and its nation."[4] According to Kemalism,

all citizens of Turkey are Turks, and any aspiration to recognition of a non-Turkish identity is persecuted as separatism. Turks insist that the Kurds descended from the Turkic peoples.

Many Kurds, for their part, consider the ancient Medes their forebears. The PKK's first program, issued in 1978, states, "Our people first attempted to reside on our land in the first millennium BCE, when the Medes, progenitors of our nation, stepped onto the stage of history."[5] When Kurds try to legitimize their rights as a nation to live in Kurdistan, their arguments tend to rest on territorial settlement rather than con-sanguineous ancestry.[6] But assumptions about continuous Kurdish settlement and descent from the Medes entered the collective under-standing long ago.

1.1   Geography of Rojava

During the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), nomadic Arabs entered the area that is now northern Syria, where they encountered the local Kurds. A central trade route connected Aleppo with Mosul and today's southern Iraq. Between the two world wars, Kurds and Christians fleeing persecution in Turkey settled here. Together with the region's nomads, they make up the bulk of Rojava's population today.

In 1923, the victors in World War I created the 511-mile (822-kilometer) border dividing Syria and Turkey. This arbitrary line was drawn between Jarabulus and Nisêbîn (in Turkish, Nusaybin) along the route of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway.

Three islands of mostly Kurdish settlement lie just south of that border. The easternmost is Cizîrê, which also abuts Iraq for a short stretch of the Tigris; the middle island is Kobanî, and the westernmost is Afrîn. Due south of Cizîrê, in Iraq, lie the Şengal mountains (also called Sinjar), which are inhabited by Kurdish Ezidis.

In July 2012, during the Syrian war, the Kurdish movement was able to liberate these three majority-Kurdish regions from the Ba'ath regime. In January 2014, these three regions declared themselves cantons and embarked on the task of establishing a Democratic Autonomous Administration.[7] Each canton is currently under the administration of a transitional government. In March 2016, the Federal System of Rojava/ Northern Syria was declared [see 6.9], encompassing the three cantons and some ethnically mixed areas that had recently been liberated from IS.
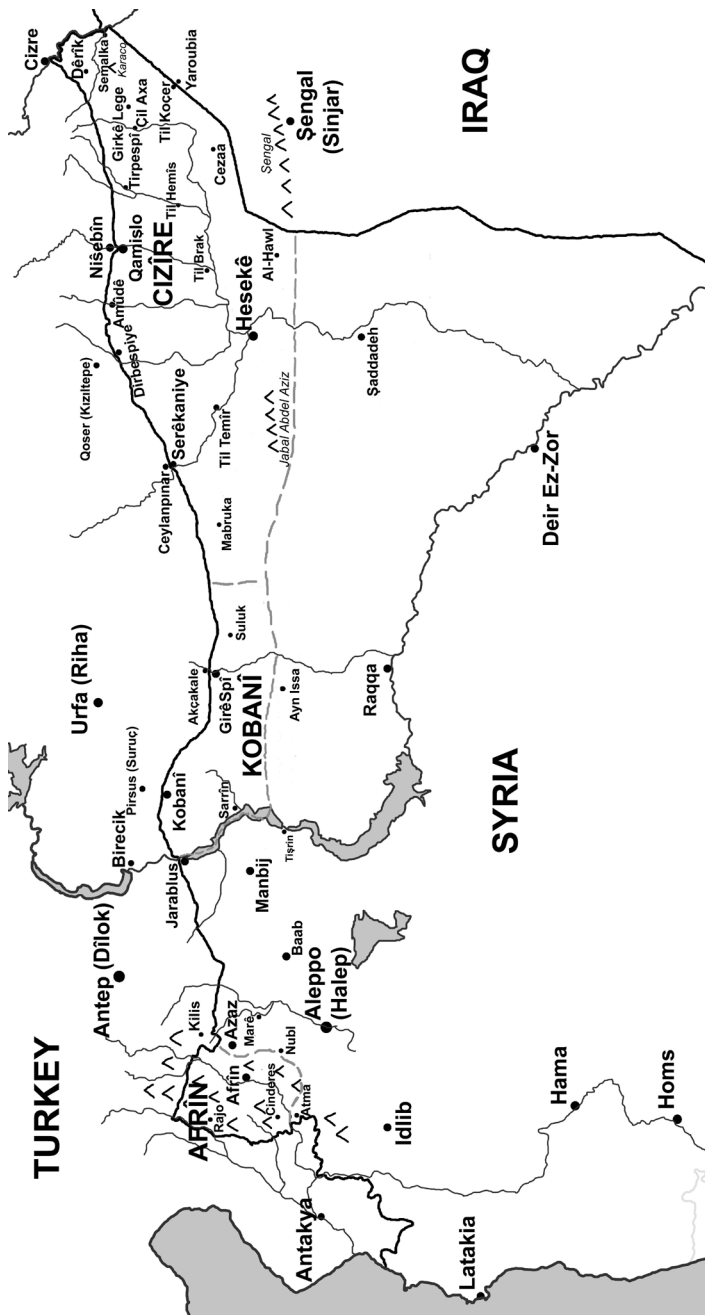
Figure 1.1 Rojava's three cantons: Afrîn, Kobanî, and Cizîrê

Afrîn Canton

Afrîn (in Arabic, Afrin), the westernmost canton, is bounded by the Turkish provinces to the north (Kilis) and west (Hatay). Covering about 800 square miles (2,070 square kilometers), it includes eight towns—Afrîn city in the center, then Şêrawa, Cindirês, Mabata, Reco, Bilbilê, Şiyê, and Şera—and 366 villages. Afrîn canton also encompasses the highland known as Kurd Dagh ("Mountain of the Kurds"; in Kurdish, Çiyayê Kurd or Kurmanc; in Arabic, Jabal al-Akrad), which rises westward to the Turkish border and southward and eastward to the Afrîn River, extending slightly beyond. Kurd Dagh is 4,163 feet (1,269 meters) high.[8]

Afrîn city was founded at a junction of nineteenth-century trade routes. In 1929, its population numbered approximately 800, but by 1968 it had risen to about 7,000 and in 2003 to 36,562.[9] At the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the canton's population was estimated at 400,000, but once the attacks began, many refugees from Aleppo immigrated to Afrîn, boosting the population to 1.2 million.

Most of the inhabitants are Sunni Muslim Kurds. Additionally, about 8,000 Alevi Kurds live in Afrîn, mostly in the northern town of Mabata,[10] where a small number of Turkmens also live. A number of Ezidi Kurd villages contain between 7,500 and 10,000 inhabitants, which are called here *Zawaştrî*. According to the canton's foreign relations board president, Silêman Ceefer, about 10 percent of the population is Arab. In contrast to the other cantons, *aşîret* (tribes) no longer play a significant role here.

Afrîn's terrain is mostly upland, having been settled continuously since antiquity and unthreatened by nomads. It differs in this respect from the two other cantons, which came under the plow in the period between the world wars.[11] The climate is Mediterranean with average annual rainfall of 15–20 inches. In the lowlands, Afrîn's deep, red soils are cultivated intensively, using groundwater pumps powered by diesel. Wheat, cotton, citrus fruits, pomegranates, melons, grapes, and figs are harvested, but the main crop is olives; by some estimates, the canton has more than 13 million olive trees. Beyond the region, the olives are renowned for their high quality.[12]

Afrîn, under the Syrian administrative system, is part of the Aleppo Governorate. It declared Democratic Autonomy on January 29, 2014. The assembly elected Hêvî Îbrahîm Mustafa board chair, who in turn appointed Remzi Şêxmus and Ebdil Hemid Mistefa her deputies.[13]

Kobanî Canton

Some 61 miles (98 kilometers) east of Afrîn lies Kobanî (in Arabic, Ayn Al-Arab). Situated at about 1,710 feet (520 meters) above sea level, it is economically significant for grain cultivation. The Euphrates, which provides most of Syria's water, marks the canton's western boundary; its waters reach their highest levels in April and May, after the North Kurdistan snowmelt.[14] Due to its border location and its rich freshwater resources, Kobanî canton is of great strategic importance.

Its capital, Kobanî city, was founded in 1892 as a company town during the construction of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway. The name *Kobanî* is thought to be a corruption of the German word *Kompanie* (company). The artificial Syrian-Turkish border, drawn in 1923, divided the city: the Turkish border town Mürşitpinar (in Kurdish, Etmenek), north of the railroad, was formerly a suburb of Syrian Kobanî. Northeast of Mürşitpinar, the nearest town is Suruç (Kurdish Pirsûs), in Urfa province. While Kobanî was under Syrian occupation, it had an Arabic name, Ayn Al-Arab, which means "spring" or "eye of the Arabs."

Kurdish *aşîret* long lived in the Kobanî region. Many of them were nomadic.[15] During the twentieth century, Kurdish refugees fleeing persecution in Turkey made Kobanî their home. Turkmens also live in Kobanî, and Armenian refugees settled here as well, fleeing persecution by the Ottoman Empire, but most left in the 1960s for Aleppo or Armenia. At the time of the 2011 Syrian uprising, an estimated 200,000 people lived in Kobanî region.[16] During the Syrian civil war, the massive migrations within Syria expanded the population to around 400,000. As for Kobanî city, before 2011, it had 54,681 inhabitants, mostly Kurds, but it now has more than 100,000.[17]

On July 19, 2012, Kobanî city was the first in Rojava to expel the Ba'ath regime. Kobanî canton declared autonomy on January 27, 2014. The head of Kobanî's executive council is Enver Muslîm, who appointed Bêrîvan Hesen and Xalid Birgil his deputies. Like Afrîn canton, Kobanî canton, under Syrian administration, is part of the Aleppo Governorate.

In late 2013, IS attempted to capture the canton and the city, but the YPG and YPJ [*see* 8.1 and 8.2] repeatedly repulsed its attack. In mid-September 2014, the Islamist militias commenced another major offensive on the city. Isolated from Afrîn and Cizîrê, Kobanî was surrounded by enemies. Most of the population fled, leaving only

fighters to mount a defense. The resistance drew much global attention and was supported significantly by people of North Kurdistan and also by the US-led international coalition with air strikes. In January 2015, the YPG/YPJ liberated Kobanî and drove IS from the area.

By the beginning of 2016, even though 80 percent of Kobanî city and villages had been destroyed, two-thirds of the population had returned. Before the war, tribal membership had great meaning for many in Kobanî, but wounded fighters from Rojava, brought to Germany for treatment, reported in November 2015 that since the war, tribal membership had become meaningless, while a close bond with the new political structures of the revolution and the YPG/YPJ has grown.

At the time of our May 2014 visit, the 61 miles (98 kilometers) separating Afrîn and Kobanî were partly controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) [*see* 14.1] and by Jabhat Al-Akrad (associated with the YPG),[18] but since end of 2014, IS terror militias controlled most of the area. The Turkish Army wanted to establish a "buffer zone" between the two cantons, to prevent the YPG/YPJ from also controlling this stretch, which includes Jarabulus, an important supply route for IS.

In June 2015 the YPG/YPJ and Burkan Al-Firat (an FSA group) liberated Girê Spî (in Arabic, Til Abyad), which lay between Cizîrê and Kobanî cantons. A mixed Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen self-administration was established there. The liberated area was annexed to Kobanî canton, thus closing the gap between Cizîrê and Kobanî cantons.

Cizîrê Canton

Cizîrê (in Arabic, Jazīrat Ibn ʿUmar, and in Aramaic, Canton Gozarto), situated about 30 miles (48 kilometers) east of Kobanî canton, is the largest of the three cantons, stretching 174 miles (280 kilometers) along the Turkish border. It encompasses 8,880 square miles (23,000 square kilometers).

The landscape is dominated by wheatfields interspersed with numerous tells, after which many towns are named: Til Koçer, Til Brak (in Arabic, Tall Brak), Til Temir (in Arabic, Tall Tamir).[19] The only elevation in the canton is Karaçox, between Dêrîka Hemko (in Arabic, Al Mālikiyah, and in Syriac, Dayrik) and Rimelan (in Arabic, Rmelan), but at 2,460 feet (750 meters) above sea level, it is not very high. Southwest of Hesekê (in Arabic, Al-Hasakah) stand the Kezwan (in Arabic, Abd al-Aziz)

mountains, about 920 meters high, and east of Hesekê is the Kewkeb, a volcanic cone of about 300 meters. Driving west through Cizîrê, one can see the Cûdî and Bagok mountains, off to the right on Turkish territory, and to the left (that is, to the south), the Şengal range.

Cizîrê is home to 1.377 million inhabitants, averaging 60 people per square kilometer. While most residents of Afrîn and Kobanî cantons are Kurds, Cizîrê's population is ethnically diverse, comprising Kurds, Syriacs, Arabs, and Armenians. Today, in the wake of the revolution, Cizîrê has three official languages: Kurdish (Kurmancî), Aramaic, and Arabic. Many Arab villages have been liberated, and many people from Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa (in Arabic, Ar-Raqqa) have fled to Cizîrê canton, while many Kurds and Christians have emigrated to Europe.

Cizîrê is dotted with 1,717 villages, of which 1,161 are predominantly Arab—the Ba'ath regime settled Arabs here during the 1960s [see 2.2], and Arabs now make up 54 percent of the population. Kurds make up 42 percent of the population, and 453 villages are predominantly Kurdish. Fifty villages are mainly populated by Syriacs, who are 2.9 percent of Cizîrê's population. Forty-eight villages are inhabited equally by Arabs and Kurds, while three have equal populations of Arabs and Syriacs, and two, Syriacs and Kurds.[20]

Most cities have three names: a city in the far northeast is called in Arabic, Al-Malikiya; in Aramaic, Dêrîk; and in Kurdish, Dêrîka Hemko. Qamişlo is its administrative center, but since parts of that city are still under control of the Ba'ath regime, aspects of the administration have been shifted to the city of Amûdê. Under the Syrian administration, Cizîrê canton belongs technically to the Al-Hasakah Governorate.

All four ethnic communities (Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, and Syriacs) are represented in Cizîre's 101-seat Legislative Assembly. The canton's current board president is Ekram Hesso, a Kurd; the deputy board presidents are Hussein Taza Al Azam (an Arab) and Elisabeth Gawriye (a Syriac).[21]

Cizîrê comprises several districts: Dêrîk, Qamişlo, Serêkaniyê, and Hesekê.

Dêrîka Hemko

Dêrîk (the name is often used also by Kurds) is a city of 75,000 in the northeast, near the borders with Turkey and Iraq. In 2004, about 189,634

people were living there. The majority of Dêrîk's inhabitants are Kurds, followed by Syriacs, Armenians, and a few Arabs. The northern part of the city is inhabited by Kurds, the south by Syriacs. Under the Assad regime, numerous Alawites lived in the region, working as government officials, but most have since left Rojava. Other cities in the Dêrîk district are Girkê Legê, Çil Axa, and Til Koçer.

Social organization through *aşîrets* is still important, especially among some parts of the Arab population. Crops grown in the region include wheat, barley, lentils, and cotton. Much of Syria's oil comes from Dêrîk.

Qamişlo

The Qamişlo district includes the city of Qamişlo and the towns of Til Hemîs (in Arabic, Tall Hemis), Amûdê (in Arabic, Amuda), and Tirbespî. The French Army established Qamişlo city in 1926 to serve as an administrative center and military garrison; it also served as a home for Christian refugees from Turkey, and many Syriacs still live there today. The Syrian-Turkish border divides the city—the part located on the Turkish side is called Nisêbîn.

In 2004, Qamişlo city had 184,231 inhabitants; together with its 557 surrounding villages, Qamişlo district had 423,368 inhabitants.[22] Due to the many refugees, these numbers are larger now—in April 2013, some 800,000 people lived in the city and its surroundings.[23]

Serêkaniyê

The city of Serêkaniyê (Kurdish for "At the Source"; in Arabic, Ra's al-'Ain; in Syriac, Res Ayna) was established in 2000 BCE, it is said, under the Mitanni empire. It too is divided by the border: the northern part (today Ceylanpınar) is occupied by Turkey.

The Serêkaniyê district is home to Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, and Chechens. In 2010, its population was estimated at 55,000; the current population is unknown. Kurds and Arabs are approximately equal in number. The district's 279 villages are mostly Arabic, and a smaller number are Kurdish; there are also Syriac and some Ezidi villages. From January until July 2013, Islamists of Jabhat Al-Nusra as well as FSA units occupied Serêkaniyê [*see* 8.4].

Hesekê

Hesekê, settled by Syriacs fleeing the Ottoman Empire, was established in the 1920s and 1930s by the French Mandate. In 2011, the city's estimated population was 188,000.[24] Northern Hesekê is predominantly inhabited by Kurds; Syriacs are the second largest population group, followed by Arabs. Among the 595 villages in the region are a number of Syriac villages. The Hesekê district includes the cities of Temir, Hol, and Al-Shaddadî.

Stock farming and village agriculture were traditional here, but in the mid-twentieth century, large-scale land cultivation began, made possible by modern machinery. The Xabur (in Arabic, Al-Khabur; in Syriac, Khabur) River, supplied by several highly fertile karst springs near Serêkaniyê, is an important source of water.[25]

After the Ba'ath regime took power in 1963, it distributed huge fields among the semi-nomadic stock farmers there, who began to cultivate grain and cotton. The Xabur Project built several dams and channels to irrigate 16,000 square kilometers of fields for the future breadbasket of Syria. The growing population and the continuous expansion of the fields into the steppe are contributing to a water shortage today [*see* 13.2].

1.2   Historical Overview

If Mesopotamia's long history has lasted an hour, then the nation-state has existed for only a second. The region's recent history, which is the focus of this book, can be understood only in the context of its far distant past, which this brief overview will sketch.

Prehistory and Ancient History

Mesopotamia is one of three places on the globe (the others are China and America) where the Neolithic Revolution took place. Starting in 15,000 BCE, for reasons that are still debated, human beings gradually shifted from hunting and gathering ways of life to agricultural settlements.[26]

The oldest known Neolithic edifice is located in North Kurdistan, at Xerawreşk (Göbekli Tepe; in English, Potbelly Hill). Dated at 10,500 BCE, it seems to have been a place of assembly or a temple complex, with massive stone pillars. Cult and religion often became professionalized as a society needed to interpret celestial objects and to determine sowing

and harvest seasons. The likely turn to a professional priesthood may have led to the earliest social stratification, in which priests as specialists lived on the farmers' surplus while they interpreted the stars.

Urban society emerged in the fourth millennium BCE with the first large cities such as Tell Brak (in today's Cizîrê canton) and Uruk (in what now is southern Iraq). Innovations such as writing, irrigation, and transportation are deeply intertwined with these settlements. From city-states such as Urkesh (at Girê Mozan, near present-day Amûdê) in present-day Rojava, and elsewhere in upper Mesopotamia, the earliest states arose.

Beginning in the fifth millennium BCE, in mythology, the strong female goddesses typical of the Neolithic age (as found on Tell Halaf, dating to 6000 BCE) gave way to myths of patriarchal domination. The temple became the center of the economy, from where the grain supply was distributed.[27] The surplus produce made possible monumental architecture such as Uruk's five-mile-long city wall.[28]

Patriarchal rule was extended from Uruk to Babylon. While we have evidence of female scribes and rulers in Sumerian and Akkadian times,[29] the development of centralized statehood, especially in the second and the first millennia BCE, seems closely connected to the subjugation and exploitation of women.

Present-day Rojava was thus a highly dynamic place in ancient history. The Assyrians and the Hittites annexed the region, but in the eleventh century BCE, as the Sea Peoples—apparently a melding of peasant rebels and social bandits—arrived from the west, the Hittite kingdom devolved into chaos.[30] Into the resulting power vacuum stepped the Aramaeans, who established small principalities here. These principalities developed cuneiform scripts, creating the alphabetical foundation for written Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic. In the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, the Assyrians subdued the Aramaean principalities, but the Aramaean language became the lingua franca in western Mesopotamia.[31] Persian rule followed, then the Macedonian conquest (under Alexander the Great), and then the wars of the Diadochi states, at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. In 62 BCE, the region of present-day Syria became part of the *Imperium Romanum*. After the rise of Christianity, the eastern Roman Empire spawned diverse creeds that exist today. Debates over Gnostic mysticism, among other elements, influenced the formation of the Alawite religion in Syria.