

**PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE MIDST OF A WAR:  
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN ROJAVA DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMY**

By

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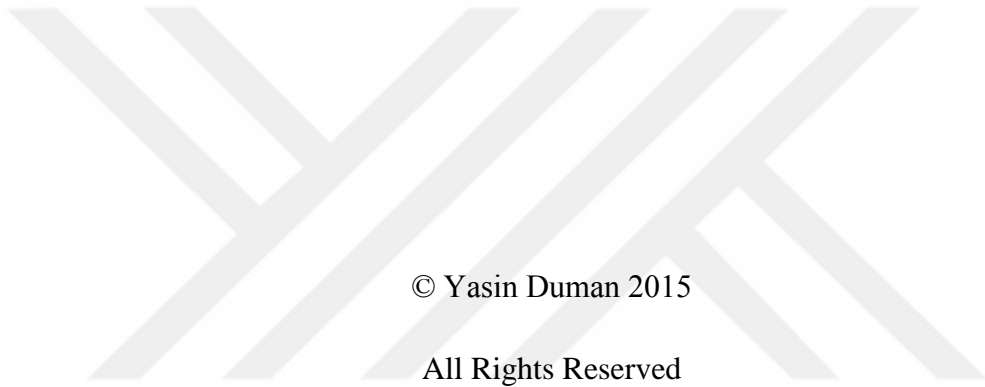
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## ABSTRACT

### PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE MIDST OF A WAR: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN ROJAVA DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMY

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Program of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, M.A. Thesis, 2015

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Discussions on political autonomies have been centered on two main arguments. Some argue that political autonomy is an effective conflict resolution mechanism especially in the settings where social, political, and economic conflicts are common and the autonomy seekers want a political and administrative resolution. De-centralization and power-sharing are two main pillars of political autonomies in which local citizens get the right to rule themselves with their own local resources without changing national borders of a state. Some others however discuss political autonomy as a conflict escalating tool, particularly, if an ethnic group has a strong motivation for independence and state-building. To this end, in the light of the existing literature on autonomy, this thesis investigates the nature of the Rojava Democratic Autonomy (RDA) declared in January 2014 in the midst of a civil war in Syria. In-depth interviews were conducted with the heads and deputies of official bodies and civil society organizations in Cezîre (Jazeera) Canton of RDA to investigate how they perceive both the past and ongoing socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts in Syria, and what strategies and policies they implement to resolve them. The thesis evaluates the resolution practices based on RDA's relation with the Syrian government (national), regional and international powers (international) and with its civil society organizations (domestic). The thesis also discusses the RDA policies and strategies for solving the socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts through power-sharing and by providing group autonomies to all ethnic and religious groups based on the Social Contract drafted by members of all ethnic and religious groups in Rojava. Besides presenting these solutions, the thesis also discusses the already-existing problems as stated by the participants of this study.

**Keywords:** Rojava Democratic Autonomy, Syrian Civil War, de-centralization, self-management, power-sharing, conflict resolution and peace

## ÖZET

### BİR SAVAŞIN ORTASINDA BARIŞ VE ÇATIŞMA ÇÖZÜMÜ: ROJAVA DEMOKRATİK ÖZERKLİĞİ'NDE OLANAKLAR VE ZORLUKLAR

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Siyasi özerkliğe dair tartışmalar iki temel gruba odaklanmış durumda. Bir grup özellikle toplumsal, siyasi ve ekonomik çatışmaların yoğun ve özerklik talep edenlerin siyasi ve idari bir çözüm arayışında olduğu durumlarda siyasi özerkliğin etkili bir çatışma çözümü mekanizması olduğunu düşünmektedirler. Yurttaşların buldukları yerelde kendilerini kendi kaynaklarıyla ve devletin sınırlarını değiştirmeden yönetme hakkını elde ettiği siyasi özerkliğin iki temel ayağı adem-i merkezileştirme ve güç paylaşımıdır. Diğer grup ise, özellikle bir etnik grubun bağımsızlık ve devlet kurmaya dair güçlü bir motivasyonu olduğu durumlarda, siyasi özerkliğin çatışmayı tırmandırma aracı olduğunu düşünmektedir. Özerklik literatürü ışığında, bu tez Suriye iç savaşının ortasında Ocak 2014'te ilan edilen Rojava Demokratik Özerk Yönetimi'nin doğasını incelemektedir. Suriye'de geçmişte ve şimdi yaşanan sosyo-politik ve etnik-dini çatışmaları nasıl algıladıkları ve bu çatışmaları çözmek için ne tür strateji ve politika uyguladıklarını incelemek için Cezîre Kantonu bakanları, bakan yardımcılarını ve sivil toplum örgütü temsilcileriyle derinlemesine görüşmeler yapıldı. Bu çalışma, çözüm pratiklerini Rojava Demokratik Özerk Yönetimi'nin Suriye hükümetiyle (ulusal), bölgesel ve uluslararası güçlerle (uluslararası) ve sivil toplum örgütleriyle (dâhili) ilişkisi temelinde değerlendirmektedir. Bu çalışma aynı zamanda Rojava Demokratik Özerk Yönetimi'nin sosyo-politik ve etnik-dini sorunların çözümü için Toplumsal Sözleşme esasına göre özerklik içinde güç dağılımı ve Rojava'daki bütün etnik ve dini gruplara tanıdığı grup özerkliği çerçevesinde geliştirdiği politikaları ve stratejileri tartışmaktadır. Bu çalışma ayrıca katılımcılar tarafından dile getirilen hali hazırdaki problemleri de tartışmaya açmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rojava Demokratik Özerkliği, Suriye İç Savaşı, ademi-merkeziyetçilik, öz yönetim, iktidar paylaşımı, çatışma çözümü ve barış



*Ji bo bîranîna cangoriyên azadiyê û rûmeta mirovahiyê*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ENKS: Encûmena Niştîmanî ya Kurd li Sûriyê – Kurdish National Assembly in Syria

FSA: Free Syrian Army

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Sham

KCK: Komela Civakên Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Communities' Union

PDK: Partiya Dîmûqratî Kurdistan – Kurdistan Democratic Party

PDPKS: Partiya Demokrat a Pêşverû ya Kurdî li Suriyê – Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria

PKK: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Workers' Party

PYD: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratîk – Democratic Union Party

RDA: Rojava Democratic Autonomy

SNC: Syrian National Coalition

SZK: Saziya Zimanê Kurdî – Kurdish Language Institution

TEV-DEM: Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk – Democratic Society Movement

YNK: Yekîtiya Niştîmanî Kurdistan – Kurdistan Patriotic Union

YPG: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – People's Defense Units

YPJ: Yekîneyên Parastina Jin(an) – Women's Defense Units

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has been probably one of the first regions that come to mind when there is a discussion on ethnic, religious, and sectarian conflicts or issues about security or control of the resources, such as energy and oil. Bozarslan (2011: 29) argues that political violence in the Middle East, just like many other regions in the world, is not a recently emerged matter. There have always been various protracted conflicts under the authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, ethnic and sectarian suppression and discrimination in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey are just a few known examples that have lasted for decades. The so-called ‘Arab Spring’ is the latest wave of political, ethnic and religious violence of various conflicting groups in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Citizens’ demands for freedom, democracy and justice have been violently suppressed by authorities. That also produced counter-violence by armed opposition groups leaving hundreds of thousands of people dead and millions of people flee their countries. Since 2011, the governments, opposition groups, and opposition parties followed different strategies to deal with violence and counter-violence.

Kurds in northern Syria, hereafter as Rojava Kurds, are one of the main parties in the recent Syrian conflict and currently enjoys *de facto* autonomy along Turkey’s Syrian border. This study investigates how this autonomy aims to resolve socio-political, ethnic and religious conflicts in the three autonomous cantons (Efrîn, Kobanî and Cezîre) in Rojava. It analyzes the Rojava autonomy case at three relational levels: (a) its relations with the Syrian government, (b) its relations with regional states and Kurdish population in Turkey, Iran and Iraq and (c) its intergroup relations with other ethnic groups in the autonomous regions. Since the Kurds in Rojava established autonomy while the civil war has been going on and radical Islamic groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have been fighting in the region, the Rojava

autonomy represents a different case compared to negotiated autonomies or autonomies established as post-conflict political arrangements. Although it takes Rojava as a case study, the thesis also answers the theoretical question of whether and how autonomies can address the diverse problems of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies while conflict continues.

Taken all these into consideration, the first aim of this thesis is to explain the conflict between the Syrian state and Rojava Kurds based on the existing literature on nationalism, identity politics, assimilation, political struggle and representation, democracy, justice and freedom. In other words, the conflict in Syria will be examined from multiple perspectives. The study analyzes the ways and methods that Rojava autonomy uses to resolve the mentioned issues.

Political autonomies, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, have been one of the main political administrative solutions to the ethnic or regional/territorial conflicts. There is a large body of literature on autonomy models in different settings (e.g. Dinštejn, 1981; Hannum, 1996; Lapidoth, 1997; Legaré & Suksi, 2008). This body of literature, to a most extent, argues that granting ethnic or religious groups wider administrative rights to establish self-rule or autonomy through decentralization could solve the conflicts (Casanova, 2005; Weller & Wolf, 2005). Syrian Kurds pronounced three autonomous regions within Syria, strongly criticizing and degrading the establishment and practices of nation-states. They give references to what Öcalan<sup>1</sup> calls “a democratic system of the people without a state” (Kurdish Media, 2005). This distinct autonomy model is worthy to be further investigated because it is proposed by the PKK as a political solution for the conflict between Kurds and the government in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. In that sense, it will also contribute to the discussions on political solutions of the Kurdish issue in those states. Compared to Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, Kurds in Syria relatively represent a different case in many aspects. The Syrian regime suppressed Kurds and they were ignored for a long time by the international community. Yet, with the establishment of the autonomous regions, they seemingly became the leading ethnic group in the fight for democracy, freedom and equality against various conflicting parties in northern Syria. They recently got more popular both in regional and international context thanks to the wide international attention to Kobanî in their

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<sup>1</sup> Abdullah Öcalan is the leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and, starting in early 2000s, he developed the idea of democratic autonomy for solution of socio-political issues in Turkey. Democratic autonomy is extensively explained in the coming chapters.

fight against ISIS (RT 2014). That has turned into an important era not only for Kurds, but also for the other ethnic groups supporting and joining the autonomous administrations.

The motivation for presenting such a study to conflict studies is as follows: First, Kurds in Syria- compared to Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, are not paid much attention in the peace and conflict studies. Secondly, the existing literature on the conflict between Kurds and Syrian state mostly focuses on how Kurds and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or the PKK) became a bargaining chip in the conflict between the Turkish and Syrian government, which centers on issues like water, and security. Role of Rojava Kurds and the PKK in recent developments in Syria and establishment of the autonomous governance as a new dynamic in the Middle East have not been studied much in the academia. Third, existing autonomous regions were established by changes in state systems, constitutional changes, or peace agreements following the conflicts settlements. Rojava Democratic Autonomy, however, emerged in the midst of an ongoing war and apparently leads discussion on a different way of autonomy building.

This thesis is composed of five parts. Chapter 2 begins with literature review providing basic information about autonomy and various autonomy models. As a political-administrative solution to the socio-political conflicts, autonomy is analyzed through a closer look at the existing examples as well their negative and positive impacts on the conflicts. Chapter 3 offers a brief history of the conflict Kurds in Syria had to struggle against and provides milestones in the relation between Kurds and the state, other ethnic groups in Syria. Chapter 4 is devoted to methodology section, covering the method through which the research questions are answered. It also briefly introduces the field research and in-depth interview technique used to collect data of the study. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the data analysis. It analyzes how the participants of this study saw the Kurdish autonomy in Syria addressing the socio-political conflicts in their region and how the ethnic groups were accommodated in this model. Chapter 6 provides a conclusion from these findings and discusses the theoretical implications and contribution to the field.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter will be focusing on autonomy as a political administration and way of organizing societies, and a solution to different socio-political conflicts in a broad context of conflicting regions. The aim of the chapter is to provide a comprehensive literature review on various autonomy models that have been practiced in Europe, the Caucasus, Africa and South Asia, and how they have become successful or failed to deal with these conflicts. The chapter will examine these in three parts. The first part is going to give detailed information about what autonomy is and provide different types of autonomy. The second part will be devoted to the role of autonomy in the resolution of ethnic and socio-political conflicts, and examples from various regions will be provided to discuss the success/failure of these models. The last part will investigate how autonomy in multiethnic context is practiced and what kind of problems appear in implementation.

### **2. 1. Autonomy and Autonomy Types**

Autonomy, as a concept, is used in many social sciences to define cases in which a person, group or nation has power and ability of self-governance. In psychology, for instance, autonomy means individuals' ability to think and behave based on their own free will and needs. Ryan and Deci (2006: 1557) argue that "the term autonomy literally refers to regulation by the self. Its opposite, heteronomy, refers to controlled regulation or regulation that occurs without self-endorsement". It is a self-organizing or self-managing process. In politics, autonomy appears as an administrative term and refers to a political system providing a region certain rights to govern itself through local organizations or institutions. Blomgren (2012: 521) notes that traces of autonomy can be found in the antique Greek city-states



governed by their own law system. Benedikter (2009: 10) defines autonomy as “a means of internal power sharing aimed at preserving the cultural and ethnic character of a region and ensuring a major dimension of regional democratic self-government.” On the whole, the autonomy lets individuals or local populations enjoy the advantage of self-ruling.

In his work that presents comparison of many different autonomous administrations, Benedikter notes that there are three main autonomy types: political autonomy, cultural autonomy and local autonomy.

Despite it is not the case for all, in some of political autonomies, people of a territory have the right to regulate their own domestic affairs with local parliament, government and executive bodies without demanding independence (Benedikter, 2012: 73). By establishing state-like institutions, the political autonomies have a potential to satisfy the right of local populations to internal self-determination and keep them affiliated with the central governments. Wolf and Weller (2005: 14) argue that except for the foreign and defense policy, the full self-government has all the administrative rights. They also note that “regardless of the degree of autonomy granted to the specific territory, the country’s overall constitutional framework will be preserved, and the autonomous territory will remain an integral part of that country” (Wolf and Weller, 2005: 14). With their federal state systems, Italy and Belgium are some examples of such political systems (Wolf, 2010: 12).

Cultural autonomies offer ethnic or religious groups the right to preserve and develop their own cultures through cultural institutions which are run by them. Cultural autonomy includes education, media, and use of national symbols, protection of cultural heritage, traditions and uniqueness of cultural identity of the group. In Romania, for example, for a long time the minorities demanded cultural autonomy especially for education, language and culture and struggled for the Romanian draft law that allows them to have education in mother tongue and cultural autonomy (Decker, 2007: 443-444). However, due to national opposition and government’s fears, the draft was not approved by the parliament and cultural autonomy has still not been granted to the ethnic minorities in Romania. Prina (2013: 2) argues that “diversity cannot simply be eliminated” and “the denial of difference does not solve its complexities, but merely removes them from public discourse”. Cultural autonomy welcomes diversity and has potential to resolve the conflicts deriving from intolerance to cultural heterogeneity by making a society to become more aware of diversity and promoting equality among different groups.

Local autonomies are political units that do not have legislative rights, yet they enjoy the same privileges as cultural autonomies (Benedikter, 2014: 77). In that sense, political autonomies have broader authorities and more control on regulation of executive affairs including the local administrations, financial resources, and issues related with culture and traditions. The elected assemblies (e.g. municipality assemblies) are the typical bodies that are active in the local autonomies and expected to manage local cultural and financial activities (Benedikter, 2014: 76).

## **2.2 Autonomy in Conflict Resolution**

Autonomies have both negative and positive outcomes depending on the nature of the autonomous administration, political and financial relations between the autonomous regions and central government; and socio-political perceptions of various ethnic, religious and political groups. Autonomous regimes are expected to satisfy the needs of local populations by providing rights to internal self-determination<sup>2</sup> which does not necessarily lead to secession and state-building. However, in such regimes, the relation with the central government is based on power-sharing or decentralization and under legal protection. Any violations to those administrative and legal rights may trigger the autonomous regions to demand independence rather than staying attached to intervening central governments. The financial issues over budget and oil have been the main causes of the conflict between the Kurdish and Iraqi government. Kurds want 17 % share of the budget and reject the Iraqi government's demand on marketing the oil under the supervision of central government. India also suffered from a similar problem in Kashmir and Punjab, two federal regions, where the local population demands independence (McGerry & O'Leary, 1993: 34). New Delhi's increasing intervention in domestic affairs of the two federal regions leads further conflicts since the intervention violates the right of self-determination and autonomy. The two cases tell us that federalism would work better if there is non-violated distribution of financial resources among the local and central governments and respect to internal self-determination.

The perceptions also play an important role in the functionality of the autonomous regions. If the autonomy is practiced in a multiethnic region, it is quite possible to cause

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<sup>2</sup> Senese (1989: 19) argues that internal self-determination is “the right of people to freely choose their own political, economic, and social system” while external self-determination means “the right to constitute itself a nation-state or to integrate into, or federate with, an existing state”.

further problems stemming from domination over or suppression of other ethnic or religious minorities. Language requirement is an example for such a discriminative approach leaving the minorities who are not capable of meeting language requirements unemployed and without access to social services (Hannum, 1990: 462). Such an approach may increase inequality among the members of a society and cause intergroup tensions and conflict. In multi-ethnic regions, autonomous administrations may satisfy multilingualism and lessen discrimination against diversities in the society.

Establishment of autonomous regions is usually an outcome of agreements between the local parties and central governments. However, idea of autonomous administration may also trigger fears of separation especially in case of ethnic conflicts in which the discriminated minorities plan to establish their own state. Politics of the Turkish governments on the Kurdish demands were mostly constructed on the fear of separation because the PKK said in its establishment manifesto that it aimed to establish a united great Kurdistan. However, despite the PKK gave up the idea of building a nation state in the 1990s, the majority of the Turkish society still believes that Kurds in the near future are going to separate from Turkey and establish an independent state (SETAV, 2009: 109; KONDA, 2011 ).

Salamey and Payne (2008: 454) refer to the Lebanese consociational democracy model and argue that it has been successful in “moderating inter-denominational tension, allowing religious communities with varying histories and political aspirations to coexist for many years”. They assume that consociationalism in Lebanon precluded establishment of a powerful nation state by offering a confessional autonomy (2008: 455). Empowering the minorities in the autonomy is expected to increase cooperation among different groups of the society to achieve internal self-determination and decentralization and decrease possibility of formation of national states. However, some argue the opposite, that autonomy is practiced as the initial step towards a nation-state. Cornell (2002: 245), for example, reasons that ethnic mobilization of the minority groups usually initiates struggle for external self-determination or complete secession. Some believe that “geography, irredentist potential, past autonomy, kin ties with another secessionist group, number of other secessionist groups in the country, and relative size importantly affect the degree of secessionism” (Sorens, 2012: 52).

Autonomy is also considered as part of state-building in which the newly established country does not share any powers with the previous government and has clearly defined geographical borders. Some autonomous regions may later on demand separation. Recent

examples from the UK (Scotland) and Spain (Catalonia) show that autonomy may not be satisfying enough but the right to independence is not granted to all autonomous regions. There are three different state responses to the demands for secessionism depending on the state structures as shown in the following examples: (a) Great Britain and Canada perceive secession as an option to be negotiated; (b) Italy, France and Spain have always rejected any attempt of secession; and (c) India, Turkey, Philippines and Papua New Guinea do not even tolerate any parties favoring secession. Approach of the states to the minorities' right to self-determination becomes effective depending on the way the minorities respond to them. In the first group, for example, political struggle shows a tendency to achieve independence. In the second group, both political and armed struggle may take place together. In the third one, since there is no permission for or very limited political participation, armed struggle against the central government becomes the only way. However, in the last second groups, depending on how the central government and minorities consider the conflict, negotiations may be initiated for a political resolution (i.e. negotiations with the ETA in Spain and the PKK in Turkey).

Leaving aside the possible negative consequences of autonomies, it can be argued that autonomies, in the form of decentralization, can address various issues emerging from ethnic and socio-political conflicts. In de-centralization, central government assigns local administration the task of managing some local administrative affairs. Rashid (2005: 782) argues that decentralization is a sort of “devolution, or the territorial distribution of power and decision-making to lower levels that are largely or wholly independent of central government and include some form of political autonomy”. It is also argued that decentralization helps governments be more accountable to the local people by satisfying their needs for more control over regional sources, which also helps governments to maintain stability (Duncan, 2007: 711). Decentralization, in that sense, can play a role to mitigate regional conflicts by offering both central and local powers a chance to address basic demands of both central authorities and local populations.

There are several forms of decentralization yet federal systems and autonomies are two popular ones. Lauglo (1995: 11-12) argues that federalism may exist through combination of several states and it can be “either as a largely voluntary combination of member states or by devolution of power so that provinces or regions become member states in a country”. The U.S.A, Germany, Russia, Brazil, India, and Australia are some examples of federal systems. Each has unique aspects of federation but the common point is that “in many very diverse

societies, a federal system of government permits recognition both of this diversity and of common interests and identity at the same time” (Forum of Federations 2014).

Bermeo (2002: 97-98), referring to the federalism in Switzerland, Canada, Spain and Belgium, argues that federalism prevents secession if it is practiced within a democratic system. From this perspective, federalism as a form of decentralization can be a solution to territorial ethnic or minority conflicts since it recognizes the right to internal self-determination and does not necessarily result in secession. However, there is no guarantee that member states of federal systems will remain in the union and not seek independence through secession. Iraq has been in transition to federation since the Kurds established their own government in northern Iraq, yet the Kurdish government has many times implicitly stated that it is time to separate and establish its own state.

Autonomy, as Anderson (2004: 110) argues, despite some of its disadvantages, is also recommended as a way to deal with violent conflicts in many regions of the world. Since autonomy partially grants ethnic minorities the right to govern themselves, autonomy appears as a good solution to many ethnic and regional or territorial conflicts. Cornell (2002: 247) argues that “the popularity of autonomy as a solution undoubtedly stems from its being one of the few conceivable compromise solutions in conflicts over the administrative control of a specific territory”. What Cornell calls “administrative control” refers to the decentralization in which the central governments give up some certain rights and agree on local government’s control over local population, resources, politics and culture. Autonomy may also produce some outcomes with which both the regional powers and central authorities are satisfied. Autonomy granted regions, for example, do not alter international borders, but maintain regional integrity, enjoy local authority over local sources, and satisfy need for self-determination at local level (Anderson, 2004: 89).

Hannum (1990: 458) argues that there are five main areas autonomy may be a solution for: “language; education; access to governmental services, including police and security forces and social services; land and natural resources; and representative local government structures”. In most of the ethnic conflicts, language appears as a critical part of culture, but may encounter the threat of extinction if not allowed to be used. For Kurds in Turkey, besides other political demands and recognition of national identity, language has remained as one of the outstanding demands during their struggle against cultural suppression and assimilation since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

There are also some countries who resolve the language problems of the minority groups through autonomous administrations and legal protections. China for example, has 5 autonomous regions of Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet, and Xinjiang where “all languages, regardless of size and status, have legal guarantees; however, major minority languages in these Autonomous Regions are required to share space and resources with Standard Chinese in the domains of government administration, the courts, education, and the media” (Dwyer, 2005: 7). Bilingualism in autonomy may foster both social and political interaction between groups and decrease discrimination against and suppression of cultural diversities. That can even promote coexistence of ethnic identities and diminish the common perception in nation states that the minorities are threatening unity and should be assimilated.

Education, being quite related to the first area, is another important element in the discussions of autonomy because (a) an ethnic group may demand right to education in native language and based on its own culture and (b) offering education in mother tongue has a high potential to prevent extinction of a language. Lijphart (2004: 97) discusses that power sharing and group autonomy can play a key role in establishing a successful democratic system in divided societies and argues that autonomy provided groups that “have authority to run their own internal affairs, especially in the areas of education and culture”. Right to education at local level can also decrease impact of assimilation. As Hannum (1990: 461) points out, in autonomy, content of the curriculum should be formed by local or indigenous people based on their history, traditions, culture, and without intervention of the central government. The Walloons in federal Belgium, for example, have their right to decide the curriculum in all education institutions (Benedikter, 2012: 214). Similarly, in all ethnic minority autonomies in China, people are permitted to use their native languages as language of instruction in all schools (Rong, 2009: 190). In such autonomies local people automatically become bilingual or multilingual which may facilitate establishing better social relations and communication with the majority or other ethnic groups’ members.

Access to governmental services is a part of institutionalization of the autonomy. Local people tend to have their own security forces defending the autonomous regions. The Basque Country is an illustrative case with its own security forces formed by the Basque people. Replacing central security forces with local ones may decrease tension since, as Benedikter argues for the Basque case, the central security forces may have a bad image in the eyes of local people due to suppression and violence carried out before the autonomy (Benedikter, 2014).

Right to land is closely related to the right to work (e.g. in agriculture) and right to food, especially for the agrarian societies or the ones that have a less-developed industry. Autonomies require transferring these rights from central governments to local executive bodies. Duncan (2007: 712) argues that these rights were mostly ignored in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, with decentralization and emergence of autonomy models, this approach has started challenging central states; thereby local administrations could focus on their local administrative problems and needs more, and realize their own plans for future. That has brought about two significant results: (a) state's sovereignty and control over local regions and resources decreased; (b) and local agents gained opportunity to focus on their own problems and capabilities to solve them and accommodate the existing resources.

The question whether the right to use natural resources should be entirely given to autonomous regions or remain under the authority of the central government is important for regulating financial relations between local and central governments. In unitary states, natural resources are usually claimed by the central governments because they are considered as state property. Taxes collected from the natural resources like oil, mine, mineral, water and gas are not given to local administrations (i.e. municipalities), but either the government or its affiliated institutions (usually local branches of ministries) maintain the right to collect them. Such a system creates many problems. Local people work to get the resources out, yet without government's permission they cannot draw upon. They also have no right to bargain prices of the natural resources and the government does not need to ask their opinion for any destruction or construction to extract the resources. In decentralized or non-unitary states, however, autonomous regions have the right to extract, run and trade the natural resources. Catalonia and South Tirol are two examples where the right to resources is in the hands of the locals thanks to their autonomous administrations (Benedikter, 2009: 41).

Representative local government structures are essential to establish relations between central and local governments. An autonomous assembly and its ministry-like bodies can efficiently coordinate the relations and officially negotiate demands of the local population at the state or national level (Hannum, 1990: 466). The questions of how these bodies work and to what extent they are given authority are mostly negotiated with central governments. However, Benedikter (2009: 50) argues that since autonomy is not a full statehood some main responsibilities of states are remained to central government (i.e. defense, foreign affairs, borders and monetary systems). Boundaries of authorities are usually guaranteed and

protected by constitutions in which some references are given to international treaties ensuring minorities' rights both at state and autonomy level.

### **2.3 Autonomy in Multiethnic and Multicultural Context**

Majority of the nation states have ethnic, religious and cultural diversities. However, when these states do not accommodate and support ethnic, religious and cultural groups to exist, such diversity leads to sociopolitical conflicts at different levels. Recognition of diversity in multicultural societies may stop denial, assimilation and suppression by the nation states. Multiculturalism does not only mean existence of cultural diversity in a given setting. Al Haj and Mielke (2007: 2) argue that multiculturalism is “the right to be different”, which they explain as a process in which “socio-political inequalities should be dealt with and power should be negotiated and shared as an integral part of promoting multicultural conceptions and shared civility”. In the nation-states, despite social interactions among multicultural entities, some communities might still face discrimination and inequalities. Several reasons can be listed for why this happens: (a) at the state level, the minorities are not officially recognized and empowered, which at the end engenders social problems and failure in integration of cultural diversities; (b) the discriminated communities are not strong enough to initiate a mobilization for their rights and deal with socio-political structures; and (c) the ethnic minorities are considered as a threat to the unity of the state. On the other hand, political autonomies can deal with such issues to a great extent thanks to the following advantages: (1) recognition and power sharing agreements between local populations and central governments facilitate socio-political integration and reconciliation of the relations; (2) all ethnic and religious groups gain the right to organize under the political autonomies without dominating each other, which may even increase cooperation among them for achieving coexistence; and (3) since national or international borders do not alter and secession does not occur, political autonomies do not become a threat to the national unity but share authority at local level.

Nation states rarely welcome ethnic diversity and multiculturalism because they are established on a single national ethnic identity that mostly determines how citizenship is



defined and what people are obliged to do to be ‘ideal citizens’. In Turkey<sup>3</sup> and Syria<sup>4</sup>, for example, the citizenship is defined based on Turkish, and Arab ethnic identity respectively. This ethnic definition imposes certain set of rules that all the citizens must follow. Minorities in these countries usually have social, political and financial difficulties that are outcomes of ethnic and national unification enforced by constitution.

Constitution of political autonomies redefines citizenship in a way that it either mentions and embraces all identities or does not have any reference to ethnic or religious identity per se. It also provides identities of local populations with legal protection and prevents systematic and institutional violence of human rights. In his study on South Korea and its transition to a democratic system, Park (2003: 315) argues that quality of local government is closely related with democratic citizenship and functioning democratic institutions. Not all but democratic local autonomies also encourage citizens to actively take part in decision making processes and become coequals of the multicultural societies (Park, 2003: 292).

Establishing more democratic political and administrative systems requires detailed analysis of the traditional state systems. As one of the prominent supporters of social ecology and communist movement in the U.S, Bookchin (2013: 97) reasons that a state is a means for allowing the suppressive and colonial class to control and regulate behaviors of the oppressed and exploited class, and keeps the power of inspection and oppression to achieve its aims. Considering nation states, what Bookchin calls “the suppressive and colonial class” corresponds to the government and “the oppressed and exploited class” represents majority of the society that continuously becomes subject of political arguments but is not given any authority by the former one to solve any problems. Ziriğ (2014: 71) further argues that nation-states established on a single nation, are nationalist and sexist, and they monopolize trade, industry, finance and power based on a capitalist derive; and assimilate ethnic and religious identities, cultures and languages by force. Such nation states create totalitarian regimes that do not recognize any cultural diversity and welcome any political activism, but legitimize use

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<sup>3</sup> Turkish constitution, Turkish Citizenship, Article 66: Everyone bound to the Turkish State through the bond of citizenship is a Turk. Accessible at: [http://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution\\_en.pdf](http://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Syrian constitution, Article 43 [Citizenship]: The law regulates Syrian Arab Citizenship and guarantees expatriates and their sons and for the citizens of the Arab countries. Accessible at [http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/asw/syrianarabrep/syria\\_constitution.htm](http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/asw/syrianarabrep/syria_constitution.htm).

of state forces to oppress opposition groups and create unity based on one identity and one ideology. In such cases, possibility of a conflict is quite high since most of the time the suppressed groups or classes try launching a rebellion against the totalitarian regimes and governments. Excluding people from basic mechanisms that regulate their socio-economic conditions and political participation in some cases does not work for the advantage of the state and sooner or later it may lead to domestic conflict. Cultural, ethnic and political diversity does not always create conflicts. A good way to deal with intra-state violence and conflicts stemming from cultural, ethnic and political diversity is mutual tolerance among the groups that may be provided with cultural or political autonomy. Tolerance and equal accommodation of different ethnic, religious or political groups by the state may allow them to maintain their co-existence. This is the case especially for the ethnic and religious groups who become marginalized minorities of the nation states.

For the case of ethnic minorities, Benedikter (2014: 25) argues that most of them live on the lands where they are originally from, but due to the historical developments, demographic, social and financial changes they become part of a nation-state affiliated with another ethnic identity composing the majority. Since the state is constructed based on a specific identity, the demands of ethnic or religious minorities in nation states are mostly undermined. The Tamils who were separated between India and Sri Lanka, the Basque people who were divided by the border between Spain and France, and the Kurdish people who used to live in national borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria encountered such a problem of division and became minorities of these countries. To deal with problems stemming from practices of governments of the nation states, members of minorities may apply different socio-political methods, which in extremely prolonged oppressive and violent cases after a while may turn into an armed struggle. The PKK in Turkey, the ETA in Spain, and the LTTE in Sri Lanka started armed struggle in all three cases in which these groups seek either different types of autonomous administrations or independent states.

In most of the ethnic and religious conflicts, what triggers the local population to struggle for state-building or autonomy is the denied and/or unsatisfied basic needs. The Aboriginal people, for example, demand self-determination “to assert their collective identity and improve their socio-economic and cultural status” (Elder, 2012: 21). However, depending on the nature of the conflict and needs of the minority people who demand self-determination, one could argue that autonomy does not merely offer protection of collective identity or cultural elements, but it also needs to grant political, administrative and legislative rights to

minorities. Some people have strong affiliation with land, geography and national history that motivates them to act towards a political and institutional establishment. Also people may want guarantees that previous conflicts will not be repeated and all the gains will be protected through political autonomy. It is also important for them to have full control over economy, land, resources, and agriculture in their territories to maintain local administrations and territorial sovereignty.

Regions gaining autonomy may also have some ethnic and religious minorities and in such cases they may also demand autonomy within autonomy. Singh (2008: 1101) notes that some tribes in Northeast India, in spite of territorial autonomous councils, insist on demanding formation of new autonomous councils because they think that they need share of political power to retain their socio-cultural belonging and development. He also states that “each council is empowered with a certain amount of legislative, executive, and financial powers on subjects such as land allotment, occupation or use of land, regulation of shifting cultivation, establishment and administration of village and towns committees, inheritance of property, marriage and social customs, and the like” (Singh, 2008: 1103). Political autonomy, thus, may require further autonomy in it to ensure that the smaller ethnic or religious groups have the same cultural rights with the majority group(s). Ghai (2003: 23) argues that in autonomous regions where some groups become minority, a good strategy to prevent new conflicts is to grant group autonomy for culture, language, religion and personal law that is practiced by Muslims in India; linguistic groups in Belgium; national minorities in Estonia, Latvia, and Hungary; Arabs in Israel. By doing this, the autonomous regions can eliminate any problems stemming from unequal status of smaller minorities and strengthen coexistence and ensure a fair rule.

Accommodating ethnic and religious groups in autonomy is important for reconciliation of different groups and legitimacy of the autonomy. Autonomy facilitates reestablishing cordial relations between ethnic and religious groups who have become hostile towards each other due to socio-political inequalities or state’s discriminative policies favoring one group over others. To end such inequalities and discriminative practices in an autonomy granted regions where smaller ethnic or religious groups become minorities within the autonomy, the local administrations may implement different methods.

## **CHAPTER 3: BACKGROUND OF THE KURDISH ISSUE IN SYRIA**

### **3.1. Demography and Nationalism in Syria**

Syria has always been a multi-ethnic country where Arabs make up the majority (90.3 %) and Kurdish, Assyrian, Chechen, Druze and Armenian peoples (around 9.7%) have been the minority ethnic groups (The World Factbook, 2014). Syria was a colony territorially shared by France and the UK with Sykes-Picot Agreement (1917) after the collapse of authority of the Ottoman Empire in the region. This colonialist sharing in the region was also the first separation of ethnic and religious groups who got used to live together under cultural or territorial autonomies without any national borders. An important number of members of these ethnic groups had to live in different countries after the Lausanne Treaty in 1923. Kurds, Assyrians and Armenians, for example, started living under the rule of Syria and Turkey and the others had immigrated to other regional countries.

Non-democratic and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa failed addressing the ethnic and religious diversity that still leads to fierce conflicts provoked by and intensified with nationalism and chauvinism. They were unable to accommodate ethnic and religious groups who to some extent had been autonomous and given some basic rights during the Ottoman Empire. Syria, after 26 years of the French mandate system, established the Syrian Arab Republic in 1946. During those years, France followed a strategic approach manipulating the socio-political relations between the minority and majority groups to keep the balance of power for its interest (Kıran, 2014: 86). Bingöl (2013: 25) argues that France supported the minority Nusayris/Alawites (12 %) against the majority Sunnis (73 %) as a divide and rule strategy to have more control over Syria. After the Nusayri leaders came to power in 1970, the first clash between the Sunni and the Nusayri broke out in Hama in 1982 where around 20.000 people were killed by the state's ground and air forces in response to Muslim Brotherhood's attacks on some state troops loyal to the Nusayri or Alawite-led

regime (Kenner, 2011). It is possible to see traces of this initial conflict in the ongoing war between Sunni and Nusayri/Alawite groups in Syria.

France slowly lost its impact in both domestic and international context of Syria. In 1958, Syria and Egypt proclaimed the United Arab Republic leading an increase in Arab nationalism and discrimination against the non-Arab minorities in both countries. Palmer (1996: 50) argues that the unification was acclaimed as the initial move towards revival of the Arabs yet the unity did not take even four years and the leaders accused each other of “not being solemn and sincere enough”. However nationalism did not get weakened, but was practiced through military coups and strengthened with nationalist constitutions, one-party system and its harsh policies towards the minorities in Syria.

Ethnic minorities in Syria encountered discrimination and suppression at both state and society level. Arab nationalism and Baathist ideology gave rise to prolonged ethnic and identity conflicts in Syria because there have been systematic and intentional cultural assimilation, political suppression and socio-economic inequalities between the Arab-populated and the non-Arab populated regions. Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians and Chechens, whose ethnic identities were not recognized, did not have the right to education in native language or establish their own political parties. There is one-party system in Syria and it is only the Baath Party that was allowed to run for the elections. Ethnic groups who struggled to establish political parties were relatively discriminated and suppressed much more than Arabs because some of them (i.e. a number of Kurds) are not even recognized as citizens of Syria and were blamed as separatists or anti-Arab people.

Prior to the Arab Spring, the discriminated groups (i.e. Kurds and Assyrians) resisted the Baath regime but had never been that successful in gaining their rights. In 2012, the regime withdrew from the regions now controlled by Rojava Autonomous Administration. Arabs, Assyrians, Chechens, and Armenians also partly join the administration because of various social, political, financial and security reasons.

### **3.2. Civil War in Syria**

The Arab Spring gave rise to different political, social and financial impacts in different contexts. Some say that the spring turned into winter in Syria since the war still goes on with increasing death-toll. Phillips (2011: 37-38) argues that “when the dictatorial regimes of Tunisia and Egypt were toppled by popular unrest few expected Syria to follow” probably because, as he notes, “prior to 2011, unauthorized public demonstrations of any sort in Syria were extremely rare”. However, soon the protests started in February 2011 Deraa town where the state officers took 15 schoolchildren into custody when they wrote some sentences and drew graffiti to protest the government for its suppressive regime (Shoiche, 2013). Soon after the arrests, “several thousand Syrians publicly gathered [in Deraa] to cast off that yoke by calling for greater freedoms” (Abouzeid, 2011). It was also the city where the Syrian state forces killed several protestors and took tens of others into custody. Suppression and killings of the Syrian regime were responded with more resistance by the protestors in the next days. Bashar Al-Assad blamed the ‘foreign’ powers who aim to destabilize Syrian government by provoking people (BBC 2012). Protests spread almost all the cities of Syria.

Syrian opposition parties and individuals gathered in November 2012 in the meetings organized in capital Doha of Qatar to get united and established the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Carnegie 2015) that initially had 63 members (Carnegie 2012) from various national organizations and political formations. To be able to respond the regime’s attacks, argues, Syrian rebel groups started forming armed groups in December 2011 which later on were organized under the name of Free Syrian Army or the FSA (O’Bagy, 2013). The FSA also supported the SNC against the government. Meetings for a solution to the civil war began around one year after the conflict started yet the parties could not reach a solution.

Asseburg and Wimmen (2012: 1) argue that for more than a year of the conflict the Syrian regime and the rebels believed that they could win militarily, and thus, did not accept any concessions. However, this did not happen and the death toll has been increasing every day as the parties reject a political solution. There have been some international attempts to convince the parties (Assad government and the Syrian National Coalition, the SNC) to end the violence and agree on a negotiated solution. Russia backing the Assad government and the U.S. supporting the SNC invited the parties and some regional and international delegations to hold Geneva I Conference on June 30, 2012. The negotiations took place in Switzerland and after the negotiations the Geneva I Convenience that proposed establishment of an interim government. The main points of the transition government were:

- Establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers that could include members of the government and opposition, which is to be formed on the basis of mutual consent,
- Participation of all groups and segments of the Syrian society in a meaningful national dialogue process,
- Review of the constitutional order and the legal system,
- Free and fair multi-party elections for the new institutions and offices that have been established,
- Full representation of women in all aspects of the transition (BBC 2014)

Besides the items on participation and power sharing, the convention also invited the parties to stop violence and allow humanitarian corridors into Syria. The parties agreed to hold the second conference and negotiate further issues, however, the convention was never implemented and the parties returned to Geneva with empty hands. The main concern of the opposition in Geneva II Conference was whether Assad would leave the office. The SNC had many internal problems since it could not unite the opposition groups. Of the 121 groups, 44 decided not to attend negotiations, because the Assad government did not act according to the convention. The SNC lost its popularity and seems to have lost the fight against Assad. The only problem with the SNC was not its inability to keep the opposition parties united, but the radical Islamist groups got more and more powerful against the SNC seized more ares from it.

Another important factor was that there have been many radical Islamic groups in the conflict. These groups (i.e. Jabhat Al-Nusra<sup>5</sup>, Ahrār ash-Shām<sup>6</sup> and ISIS<sup>7</sup> (also known as ISIL)) slowly emerged as the new actors who were motivated to establish a ‘self-interpreted’ Islamic Sharia rule in Syria. They were under the FSA (Free Syrian Army) in the first years of the conflict, but later on separated from it and created their own units to fight against the ‘infidels’ and any armed and non-armed groups who cooperate with Assad or do not obey the Sharia. The main target of these groups was the Syrian regime forces and Nusayri, Kurdish

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<sup>5</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al Julani previously announced the organization’s allegiance to Al Qaeda (Joscelyn, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> “A Sunni Islamist group, it began to take shape in the Hama and Idlib Provinces in 2011. It advocated a strongly Islamist line, seeking religious rule in Syria, but was open to collaboration with rebels on all sides of the political spectrum” (Lund, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> “The Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL) is a Salafi militant organization in Syria and Iraq whose goal is the establishment and expansion of a caliphate” (Stanford University 2015).

and Christian communities. However, some clashes broke out between these Islamist groups (Middle East Monitor 2014) over territory, ammunition and resources. The Islamists have also fought FSA (Al-Abed, 2013) and Kurds near Aleppo and in northern regions of Syria. The chaotic setting of Syria and the complexity of the conflict allowed them to get control of many regions in a very short time and spread over Syria's eastern and southern territories. They could also recruit foreign militias from all over the world, and Turkey has been one of the main destinations for the foreign militias to reach the Islamist groups in Syria. The countries supporting the FSA implicitly announced that they provide the FSA with ammunition and military training; however the countries who were accused of supporting radical Islamist groups never accepted their responsibility. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey were the main powers blamed by the Syrian regime, the FSA, and the Kurds for their support to the Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq.

The Syrian Civil War has been the most prolonged conflict in the region after the Arab Spring started in Tunisia. It was first considered as a domestic conflict in which the Syrian people took the streets and occupied the squares for the same demands that people in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain struggled for. However, the conflict turned into a battle field of international and regional powers aiming to keep the existing government or establishing of a new one that will be a good ally and satisfy their own interests and future plans. Now it is getting harder to foresee whether Syria will overcome the conflict and reach a peaceful settlement. As *Figure 1* shows, Syria currently is divided into four regions. In southwest the Syrian regime controls a wide area but is in fight with the FSA; the northeast and northwest regions are under the control of the Kurdish de facto autonomy being attacked by the ISIS, in the north, south and south east ISIS operates, and lastly the FSA fights both the regime and ISIS in northwest and southwest. The ongoing clashes between all these armed groups and the regime decrease possibility of a political solution to the conflict.

### **3.3 Kurdish Conflict: Borders and Ban on Political Activity**

Kurds refer to Kurdistan as their homeland which has never been an independent nation state, yet was recognized as an autonomous region during the Ottoman Empire. Kurdistan is the name of the regions in eastern and southeastern Turkey, eastern Iran, northern Iraq and north Syria. Kurds used to live with Arabs, Assyrians, Armenians, Chechens, Turks and Turkmens in these regions. The Turkish, Syrian, Iranian and Iraqi nation-state formation denied the



limited autonomous Kurdish rights within their territories. Kurds have lived under sovereignty of different religious and nationalist regimes for some 90 years.

Kurdish population in the world is around 30 million, including Kurds who live in diaspora (CNN 2015). Since they are not recognized as a diverse ethnic identity, estimated numbers about their population are a bit ambiguous. The number of the Kurds living in Syria hovers between 8 to 10 % of the whole population, which is about 2 million. Majority of them are living in the northwest of Syria at the border with Iraq and Turkey. The rest lives in the northern region at the border between Syria and Turkey. Before explaining how and why the Syrian government did not recognize and ignore millions of Kurdish people, it would be better to have a look at the history of Kurdish political struggle in Syria and its relation to the state's approach.

Bedreddîn (2014: 19) argues that Syrian state, even in the times of parliamentary system and constitutional legacy, did not allow Kurdish people to enter politics and establish parties and banned Kurdish language and literature. Bedreddîn also suggests that Syria's totalitarian regime never satisfied social pluralism and could not achieve to be a state able to manage the diversities (2014: 20). The first Kurdish national movement in Syria was Xoybûn<sup>8</sup> that was formed in 1927 in Qamişlo (Rojava) and Sofer (Lebanon). Thirty years after Xoybûn, in 1957, the first Kurdish political party, Kurdistan Democratic Party-Syria (PKKS) was established in Syria. However, the government's monist approach towards all the minorities was a failure for the Syrian politics and that approach was also followed by army officers, who started to be more effective over politicians by leading military coups (Bedreddîn, 2014: 24). The latest military coup was organized in 1966 by Nureddin Atassi who was accompanied by the army officers Salah al Jadid and Hafiz al Assad (Country Studies). Hafiz al Assad later became the leader of the Baath Party and ruled the state from 1966 to 2000. Nationalist and authoritarian regime did not tolerate any political formations by Kurds and in 1961 outlawed PKKS<sup>9</sup>, banned all its activities and forbid everything related to Kurds and Kurdistan. Yet, in the following years, authoritarian policies even got harsher towards Kurds.

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<sup>8</sup> Many Kurdish nationalists in North Kurdistan (Turkey) joined Xoybûn to struggle against Turkish authorities. It was later on banned by the French mandate in Syria due to the fears of starting a Kurdish nationalist movement in the country (Yıldırım, 2015: 364)

<sup>9</sup> Established in 1957, Partî Dîmuqrati Kurdistan-Sûriye (the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria) is the first Kurdish party.

### **3.4 History of Mass Killings, Denial and Oppression of Kurds**

Kurds in all nation states were persecuted with mass killings, exiles, imprisonment, torture and psychological oppression. The early 1920s were the remarkable periods of Kurdish rebellions against the imperialist European states in the divided Kurdistan. Later on it turned into a battle between Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian nation-states and Kurds living in these countries. However, the Treaty of Lausanne inflicted the heaviest blow on Kurdish nation since separation and isolation with the new national borders would cost much to Kurds. Not being able to form a joint army against these states, lack of international diplomatic support and political tolerance by these states against Kurds to negotiate their demands were Kurds' main disadvantages. Turkey (1925-Şêx Seîd Rebellion, 1938-Seyîd Riza Rebellion), Iraq (1986-Helebçe), Iran (1950s after Mehabad Kurdish Republic was crashed in 1947) and Syria (1960-Amûdê Cinema, 2004-Qamişlo Uprising) carried out mass killings during Kurdish rebellions and/or the states' massive attacks on the Kurds. The focus of this chapter is on the mass killings and suppression carried out by the Syrian regime in Rojava and in the following section, this thesis will discuss only the accounts in Syria. These events are important to understand how the conflicts intensified and led to politicization and struggle of Kurdish society against the Syrian regime. They also show human rights violations and polarization of ethnic identities in Rojava and Syria.

#### **3.4.1 The Fire at the Amûdê Cinema**

In 1960 a cinema was burned down in Amûdê (a city in Cezîre or Jazeera) where more than 280 children from Kurdish Amûdê city passed away. There are different narratives about how the events unfolded but the most common belief is as following:

On November 13, 1960 the Syrian regime ordered all the children in the city's primary schools to be brought to the cinema. The order was given in order to collect support for Algeria, which at the time was fighting for independence from France. The teachers were made to bring the students to the cinema and admission was forcibly collected from the children's parents. Around 500 students between the ages of 8 and 14 were crammed in a space normally meant to accommodate 150. The children got their first surprise when the film began. Without any advanced warning an Egyptian horror film named "The Blame of Midnight" started playing. As screaming and shouting began to be heard, flames began to emerge from the cinema's projection booth. Hundreds of frightened children

began to head for the exits at once. However in the 130 square meter theater there were only two narrow doors. The cinema, which was constructed of wood, burned down in a very short time. Despite all the efforts of local people 284 people died in this terrible manner. The Amûdê Cinema Disaster continues to be accepted as one of the worst moments in the history of the Rojava Kurds (Rojava Report 2014).

The Syrian government did not investigate the fire and no case was opened against the officers or the teachers. The state forces many times attacked the demonstrations organized to demand justice and to protest the government. Every year on November 13, Kurds in many Kurdish cities commemorate the victims and condemn and call on the Syrian regime to find out and sanction the suspects.

### **3.4.2 1962 Population Census and Stripping Civic Rights**

Kurds in Syria were categorized by the Syrian government into three: (1) those that were given citizen rights, (2) those who were considered as foreigners, and (3) those who were recognized as unregistered. Yildiz (2005: 94) points out that the 1962 census aimed “to weed out Kurds who had come to Syria after 1945, the arbitrary granting and removal of citizenship status of many Kurds did not support this argument”. He also notes “the government considers the Kurdish population to be a result of migration from Turkey and not an endogenous ethnic national group” (Yildiz, 2005:7). That allowed the government to ignore hundreds of thousands of Kurds and easily legitimize discriminative and unfair administrative approach towards them. These foreigners and unregistered population did not have the right to education, to occupy official positions, to be employed in the state institutions, to health care, social support, travel, and private property. The census was more than an official regulation and was planned as a strategy to force the Kurdish population leave the region and migrate either to neighboring countries or get assimilated into Syrian Arab society. Regarding the official decision of the census, the chief of police in Heskê (Al Hasakah) province noted that

Cezîre (Jazeera) region, compared to other Arab regions, is more fertile and has more resources. I call on all Arabs to save this region and take it from the disgraced bad people. Kurdish question, at the moment when Kurds get organized, is just a tumor growing in the body Arab nation. The only way to cure that is to completely remove it (Umar, 2012).

To remove the Kurdish society from Rojava region, the government planned several programs. Discrimination against Kurds has been practiced intensively in many social and official areas. One best known practice was what the Kurds call “the Arab Belt” that was an attempt basically for dispossession of lands owned by Kurds in Cezîre (Jazeera) region. Several reports have been released so far to announce human rights violations in Syria. In 2008, the Human Rights Watch prepared a special report on the Syrian Kurds explaining how Kurds were marginalized through the government’s policies. In 1965, the government issued an official statement encouraging Arabs to resettle in the territories where Kurds had been living for years (Human Rights Watch 2009). The report argues that the government aimed to isolate Rojava Kurds from the Kurds in north and south Kurdistan who already initiated national reawakening through struggle for self-determination.

The census was possibly carried out to legitimize the dispossession as the people who are not considered as citizens of Syria had no right over land or private property. The resettlement of Arab citizens was expected to play some other roles: (a) Kurds would have to migrate to Turkey or Iraq or to the big cities of Syria and leave all the fertile and resource rich regions to the government and Arab population, (b) assimilation of the Kurds would be faster since they would be separated from each other and that in time would weaken social, cultural and national ties and solidarity among Kurdish people, and (c) Kurds would not get organized to initiate a nationalist movement against the government. The government became successful in the creation of “the Arab Belt” and caused thousands of Kurds leave the region and country, forced them to leave their lands to the new settlers and give up their rights to land and resources. It should be noted that it was not only Kurds who were affected by the belt but also Arabs had to relocate their houses, which created new problems for them as well.

### **3.4.3 2004 Qamişlo Uprising**

Nationalism was on the rise in Syria against the Kurds especially after the Iraqi Kurds gained more control and strengthened territorial authority after the US invasion of Iraq in 2002. In 2004, during a football match between a Kurdish and an Arab team in Qamişlo, nationalist Arabs from Deir ez-Zour started attacking Kurds with the stones they carried in vacuum flasks. In the intervention of security forces, at least 7 Kurds were killed and many wounded. In the clashes broke out during the funerals and following protests the death toll reached 30. Kurds took the streets, not only in Kurdish populated regions, but also in

populous Syrian cities such as Damascus and Aleppo to protest the attacks. President Bashar al-Assad, for the first time, invited all Kurdish parties to discuss the issue. He, after the meeting, publicly stressed on Al-Jazeera TV that Kurds are one of the basic constituents of Syria and would soon be granted full civic rights (Amûdê 2004). However, contrary to what Assad promised, nothing changed for Kurds except for the release of some of the youths who were arrested during the civil unrest. Despite the conflict between the government and Kurds during the Qamişlo Unrest, the unrest did not cause hatred and polarization among grassroots Kurdish movements against the Arab community. Social relations between Kurds and Arabs were affected by this tension, yet it did not turn into a real conflict between the communities and, as such, the uprising should be seen an explosion of frustration against the Syrian government's approach towards 'forgotten' and discriminated Kurds, and not inherent Kurdish hatred of Arabs.

### **3.5. Kurds in the Syrian Civil War**

Kurds are the biggest minority group in Syria. They did not have any pronounced armed units until 2011<sup>10</sup>. What position Kurds would take in the chaotic civil war remained unanswered for a while. At the beginning of the protests against the regime, Kurds supported the opposition in big cities like Damascus and Aleppo and organized several demonstrations in Rojava. The SNC had several meetings with the Kurdish parties to join the common opposition against the Assad government. In the meetings, Kurds demanded that the SNC accept the Kurdish national identity and 'grant Kurds a federal region based on decentralization' (Khoury, 2014) in which the SNC's new government would have no intervention in domestic administration. However, because the SNC failed to satisfy the Kurdish needs, some of the Kurdish parties decided to open a new front which they later on named as the "third way" under the leadership of the biggest and most popular Kurdish party the PYD (Democratic Union Party). The third way means that Kurds neither support the Syrian regime nor the SNC since neither promised a democratic and free future for any ethnic groups in Syria and that they believed in establishing their own institutions.

Forming defense forces in Rojava was a priority for Kurds since they needed forces to protect the existing population to develop a new political and social system and have a stable

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<sup>10</sup> YPG was established in 2011 but before that there was YXG (Yekîneyên Xweparastina Gel – People's Self-Defense Units) which was formed after the Qamişlo Uprising.

order in Rojava. The YPG (People's Defense Units) and the YPJ (Women's Defense Units) were formed in 2011 for these purposes. The YPG and the YPJ later on recruited new members from non-Kurdish ethnic groups, too (ANHA 2014). Assyrians, a Christian nation, also established their own armed group, Sutoro, (meaning, security in the Assyrian language) in the YPG and the *Asayîş* (Public Security-Police Force in Rojava).<sup>11</sup> It was not only the Rojava Kurds who joined YGG and YPJ for security but also hundreds of Kurds from North, South and East Kurdistan and from some EU countries where Kurds immigrated to, especially to fight the ISIS (Ahmad, 2014). Rojava, in that sense, became a new area of struggle bringing together both Kurds and other ethnic groups suppressed under the rule of the Syrian regime along with those who wanted to protect themselves against radical Islamist groups in Syria. On July 19, 2012 the YPG and the YPJ forces drew out the regime forces in Kobanî and in the following days, they took Efrîn and Cezîre (Jazeera) regions of Rojava.

No serious clashes between YPG and regime forces were reported when the YPG took those cities. That was perceived by the SNC and the countries supporting the SNC as an agreement between the Kurds and Assad government for autonomy to Kurds in northern Syria. Some argued that Assad did not want to fight on another front and preferred withdrawing from the region to lessen impact of a possible Kurdish uprising in that chaotic context (Hamsici, 2014). The PYD co-chair Salih Muslim, however, refuted the claims on agreement with Assad government and said, on the contrary, that Kurds have a long history of political struggle against the Syrian regime, referring to the latest one in Qamişlo Uprising (Çamlıbel, 2014). The Assad government has not made any official statements regarding the Kurds and *de facto* autonomy in Rojava. Ambiguity of the motivation and position of the government still continues.

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<sup>11</sup> See the interview with the Sutoro members on YouTube "'Sutoro': Christian Autonomist Fighters of Syria." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLYd8yLuQlk>.



Figure 1: Rojava Democratic Autonomous Cantons (encircled in red) and the area taken by YPG (encircled in yellow) in June 2015

### 3.5.1. Declaration of Autonomy in 2014

Rojava Kurds declared autonomy despite the ongoing war and attacks on the region by the Islamist groups. The autonomy was proclaimed ahead of the Geneva II Conference when Kurds for the second time were ignored and not invited to the negotiations by Russia and the US. That was a response to the international community's silence and ignorance against the Kurds in Syria. In fact, it was one of the initial steps taken by Kurds for today's political and administrative developments. The PYD co-chair Muslim said that they declared autonomy since Kurds in Syria could not wait for a negotiated resolution that both the SNC and government delegations would agree with (Kurdistan Tribune 2014), which as a matter of fact, never happened so far. In January 2014, the Kurds declared Democratic Autonomy and established in three cantons in Efrîn, Kobanî and Cezîre.

Declaration of autonomy brought about both disadvantages and advantages. Embargoes, political and diplomatic isolation on Rojava were probably the worst results. Turkey and KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraqi Kurdistan) strengthened the embargo on Rojava to destroy the democratic autonomy project so that it serves for the purpose of the two governments: a) Turkey's aim was to prevent any Kurdish state-building based on PKK's ideology b) KRG's aim was to get the oil resources in town of Rimêlan in Cezîre region (Biehl, 2014). Mesûd Barzanî led-KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) has been the most influential and powerful party in the KRG and the KRG's policies towards Rojava were mostly based on the KDP's plan of not allowing the PKK to become powerful in another part of Kurdistan. That is why the KRG President Barzanî did not recognize Rojava

Democratic Autonomy, which was probably not expected by Kurds who want national unity despite the international borders dividing Kurds. However, regardless of the attempts of Turkey and the KRG, the PKK has been the main source of inspiration for ideological and armed struggle in Rojava. The KRG ultimately accepted to help Rojava Democratic Autonomy after the Duhok Meeting between the Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (TEV-DEM, the Democratic Society Movement) and the Encumena Niştimanî ya Kurd li Sûriyeyê (ENKS, the Kurdish National Assembly in Syria). The parties agreed in the meeting on acting together to establish a joint assembly which was later on named as Lêvegera Siyasî ya Kurd (Kurdish Political Transformation) with attendance of 30 delegates (each party having own 12 members) and 6 independent delegates. The articles of the agreement were not released in details yet, but it was noted that the ENKS decided to join the Rojava Democratic Autonomy. After several meetings between the two, the negotiations could not become a solution to the issues. The parties met for the first time on December 12, 2014 and announced that they agreed on establishing a joint administration and army (Xebat Nûçe 2014), but that has never been achieved.

The problems between the TEV-DEM and the ENKS resulted in political isolation of Rojava Democratic Autonomy. Also Turkey was not comfortable with the Rojava autonomous administration acting as an independent actor in Syria and tried to convince Kurds to take part in the SNC. Upon Kurds' decline of this proposal, Turkey started implementing trade embargoes at Rojava border. Recently the Turkish government said that it believes the PYD and Rojava Democratic Autonomy are threatening Turkey's national integrity, further claiming that "the PYD and the YPG are terrorists just like the ISIS terrorists" (T24 2014). Aim of such an approach was to prevent any international political and military support to the Kurdish forces fighting in Kobanî against the ISIS. Yet it did not work because YPG and Kobanî Canton government received international military and political support.

Citizens in Efrîn, Kobanî and Cezîre cantons, despite all these domestic, regional and international issues, founded many civil society organizations to be able to both develop the autonomy at societal level and maintain its stability by organizing the society. Civil society organizations in Rojava have been working on various matters. They became bridges between the official institutions of the cantons and the society, and the number of such institutions increases every year as autonomy develops.



### 3.5.2. Civil Society Organization in RDA

Rojava Democratic Autonomy (RDA) is a social and political organization model being established based on Abdullah Öcalan's understanding of autonomous administration that has been influenced mostly by Murray Bookchin's arguments on social ecology and communalism. Öcalan, in his articles and prison writings, always proposes the Kurdish political and social organizations to read Bookchin's books on the local administration and adopt it according to social, political and economic dynamics of Kurdistan. Bookchin (2013: 64) believes that creating a free society needs a free social struggle that must encourage transformation of the individual and a political base movement established based on permanent and democratic joint institutions that will be transformed and liberated within confederalism. Öcalan (2008) imagines autonomy as an internal part of democratic confederalism argues that it may be a solution to all crises in the Middle East. He defines democratic confederalism as follows:

Democratic confederalism is a non-state organization of democratic nation. Democratic confederalism is an organization of the minority; cultural organization, religious organization, even gender organization and so on. I call this organization of nation and culture. Every village may have a commune. Unification of all cultural organizations means confederation. This must be presented as a [political and organizational] line. I call this non-state democratic confederalism.

Bookchin's reference to institutional transformation and Öcalan's remarks on non-state organization, I assume, refer to the same understanding of social organization. Their emphasis on communes and communalism also shows that this organization will be based on local social, cultural, political and economic dynamics. RDA, although it has some state-like characteristics, is imagined to be a non-state organization. There have been some concerns about whether RDA will follow the same way that many autonomous regions had gone through and established their own nation states. Fall of Soviet Union that led to emergence of 15 nation states, is one of the most concrete examples in the discussions regarding ethnic mobilization towards state-building. Bookchin (2013: 62) also reminds that none of the local administrative movements will be accepted as true political structure if it does not have confederal characteristics and consist of mutual relations between towns and cities in its region. He also says that replacing the nation state at local level with towns and cities means to struggle for social change (Bookchin, 2013: 62). The canton system in Rojava in fact aims

to replace the Syrian regime with local administrative bodies and empower the society in decision making processes and management at local level through the communes. Democratic Society Movement or TEV-DEM is the main actor training citizens on how they should approach self-administration at their neighborhoods or villages by organizing public discussions and political training workshops. TEV-DEM believes that communes are the building blocks of organizing society and developing the Democratic Autonomous Administration at local level (ANHA 2015).

### **3.5.2.1. Commune System**

It is possible to see commune centers in almost all villages and neighborhoods of Rojava cities. Number of the communes is higher in Cezîre Canton than Efrîn and Kobanî since Cezîre Canton has been stronger in mobilizing the people and is the biggest canton of Rojava having a bigger population actively participating in the local works. The neighborhood communes are established by residents of the neighborhood. The communes are mostly given names of fallen members of YPG, YPJ or Asayîş (Public Security Forces). Several communes of the close areas also establish a commune center. Yekîtiya Star, a member organization in TEV-DEM and the women's umbrella organization in Rojava, also opens communes managed only by women residents of a neighborhood or village. In an opening ceremony of a commune in Efrîn Canton, for example, Yekîtiya Star member Zelal Cîger says "women sow the seed of free society in these communes and they need to strengthen their organization to create a democratic and moral society" (ANHA 2015). The Youth in Rojava also establishes communes to support autonomous administration and social organization in several ways. One of the recent youth communes was established in Heseke where mostly Kurds and Arabs live in the same neighborhoods. Members of the commune argue that "communes are the will of the society and all youth should be members of the commune and defend their society" (ANHA 2015).

In some areas where different ethnic groups live together the communes are established jointly. Girkê Legê is one of these cities where Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs have been used to live together. Martyr Dilşad Commune (the name probably comes from a fallen YPG member) is one of 10 communes have been established in Rimêlan, a town of Girkê Legê, and it has 37 commune members from different ethnic backgrounds. Ebdilqadir Remo, one of the commune members, believes that "establishing communes guarantees a communal

society and thanks to the commune all the residents of the town strengthen their solidarity and cooperation within the commune” (ANHA 2015). Serêkaniyê is another multicultural city of Cezîre Canton where Kurds, Arabs and Chechens established several communes and participate in social organization and reconstruction of the city that faced many infrastructural problems during the regime and destruction when the Jabhat Al-Nusra attacked the city in 2013 (ANHA 2015).

Depending on the needs of the residents of a neighborhood or a village, communes have several committees assigned to help the people deal with their daily problems. Each commune has, for example, committees of education, treasury, women, youth, peace and reconciliation and defense. Education committee is organizing training programs on various topics (i.e. cultural awareness, co-existence, ecology, human rights etc.) for commune members. Treasury committee deals with resources of the commune and management of expanses. Women’s committee mostly works to organize female members and train them on jineology and history of women (SBA, 2014). Öcalan defines jineology as “combination of women’s liberation ideology and social sciences” (SBA, 2014: 15). He argues that jineology identifies women’s relation with nature, society, history and philosophy from which women have historically been excluded (SBA, 2014: 152). Rojava also aims to institutionalize jineology by opening academies and training centers that will teach both men and women on gender issues and possible ways to deal with them. It is also common that women participate in all social, political and military organizations in Rojava, which lead people call the developments in Rojava as revolution of women.

Youth committee is mainly working to organize, mobilize and train the young members of the commune. Peace and reconciliation committee mostly includes old members who are respected in the society. They work to solve daily problems in addition to various protracted issues among commune members. The peace and reconciliation committees will be explained in more details in the following pages. Defense committee is composed of commune members who are able to use guns. They hold vigil at intersections of streets and check IDs of people and cars entering their neighborhood. Each commune has an executive board in which women share 40% of presentation. The communes have legal framework, a law that briefly defines a commune, its methods of working, organizing, managing, its rights and relation with the autonomous administration (ANHA 2014).

Öcalan argues that capitalism separated people from each other and their societies by favoring individualism while communes are uniting individuals again with their societies in a shared setting where people try to meet their needs through socialization and solidarity (SBA, 2014: 74). He briefly defines communes as follows:

A commune is not an assembly. It is also not a smaller version of an assembly. A commune is a small operational society. It is like a primary school where individuals will live based on free and democratic principles. (SBA, 2014: 74)

Communes, in accordance with Öcalan's reasoning, are expected to be local autonomous entities and basic smallest formations of society where people can cooperate with each other to be able to produce and consume together. Private property does not exist in communes and people are expected to be aware of each other's needs and share all they have with commune members.

### **3.5.2.2. People's Assemblies and People's Municipalities**

People's assemblies had been established before the communes and are usually formed by local residents in neighborhoods of the cities and villages. They have played important roles in social organizations and official institutions. Public service committees were formed in the assemblies of people's municipalities when the Syrian regime withdrew from Rojava in 2013. These assemblies were later on recognized and assigned as official assemblies of the people's municipalities and number of the committees and employed people has increased as they are expected to solve infrastructure problems and organization and reconstruction of cities. The people's municipalities now work in cooperation with the assemblies and communes to solve the problems. Women are co-mayors of the people's municipalities and work almost in all committees. People's municipalities receive their budgets from Ministry of Local Administrations and the TEV-DEM.

There are also brotherhood assemblies in Rojava. Kurd-Arab Brotherhood Assembly in Efrîn Canton, Kurd-Arab Brotherhood Assembly in Heseke (Cezîre Canton), and People's Brotherhood Assembly in Serêkaniyê (Cezîre Canton). These assemblies aim to prevent emergence of new ethnic or religious conflicts in Rojava and have been actively working more especially after jihadi groups wanted to occupy Rojava cities (i.e. Heseke, Serêkaniyê and Til Temir) where Kurds, Syrians, Chechens and Arabs live together. Participation of women in these assemblies is lower compared to communes and people's houses.

### **3.5.2.3. People's Houses**

People's houses have similar formation to the communes but people's houses are smaller organizations. The People's houses not only try to solve the local problems but also play a significant role in reconstruction of a new understanding that will determine future of a country, break influence of cultural and political assimilation, guide the society for self-defense and co-existence of all ethnic and religious identities (Altay, 2014). Mihemed Salih, a member of People's House in Dêrik which is one of the multicultural cities of Cezîre Canton, assures that

[People's houses are] institutions to which everybody, whatever his or her identity, culture or language is, may bring to discuss his or her problems freely and find a solution. It is like a house where family members have to respect each other and save values of the house. Those who come to the people's house have to see that institution as their houses and protect it (Botan, 2014).

He also reminds that such institutions have historically been present in Kurdistan. He argues that when a problem occurs between families or tribes, the wise people of the families or tribes are invited to a house to negotiate the problem and find a solution. He says this tradition is revived thanks to the public works of the Kurdistan Workers' Party since early 1980s and people's houses established in all cities of Rojava. People's houses also work with the people's municipalities and other official and civil society organizations to meet the demands of the local population (Botan, 2014).

### **3.5.2.4. Women's Houses**

Women's houses (Navenda Perwerdehî û Zanista Jinê – Center of Science and Education for Women) are members of Yekîtiya Star, the umbrella foundation of women's organizations in Rojava. Women's houses aim to protect women's rights and freedom in social organizations for the sake of creating a democratic, free and ecological society (Botan, 2014). The very first aim of these houses is to deal with violence against women, financial and familial problems, help divorced women with sheltering and making life. These houses are established in all cities of Cezîre Canton. There is also Women's Academy in Rimêlan where cadres of the women's houses are trained on jineology and history of women, family structures and women's rights. Women's houses are also advised by Ministry of Women

before the ministry drafts a law to solve social, political or financial issues women still encounter.

### **3.5.2.5. Unions**

Unions in Rojava have been established mostly after the declaration of Rojava Democratic Autonomous Administration since it was forbidden to form a union without getting permission from the Syrian regime. Schenk (2012: 7) argues that “unions have been, and continue to be, an important force for democracy, not just in the workplace, but also in the community —locally, nationally and globally”. In Rojava the following unions were established and have been actively operating following the autonomy declaration in January 2014: Rojava Teachers’ Union, Rojava Students’ Union, Rojava Democratic Youths’ Union, Rojava Journalists’ Union, Free Press Union, Rojava Kurdish Lawyers’ Union, and Rojava Workers’ Union. All these unions receive their license from Ministry of Social Affairs and they have to abide the Social Contract to be able to organize in cities of Rojava. Ministries advise the unions in case they work on the same or similar areas or projects.

### **3.5.2.6. Academies**

Academies in Rojava are educational institutions and mostly focus on teaching social sciences. All members of the society, regardless of their educational background, have the right to attend the courses. The academies usually offer 3-month education sessions in which the attendees are offered courses on history of Syria and Kurdistan, contemporary politics, democratic nation, democratic autonomy, and jineology. The education materials are mostly composed of Öcalan’s books translated into Arabic and Kurdish, publications of the TEV-DEM and Yekîtiya Star. Teachers also sometimes prepare their own course materials to be used in the lectures. Mesopotamia Academy of Social Sciences<sup>12</sup>, the first university of Rojava and has sociology and history departments, Mesopotamia Academy of Social Justice and Law and Celadet Bedirxan Academy of Kurdish History, Literature and Language are official institutions in city of Qamişlo. Besides these two there are also Women’s Academy in

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<sup>12</sup> Only registered students can attend the courses at Mesopotamia Academy of Social Sciences and every semester around 35-40 applicants are accepted to departments of history and sociology.

city of Rimêlan, and branches of Nûrî Dêrsimî Academy of Free Science and Thought in several cities. Similar free science and thought academies by the name of fallen YPG and the YPJ fighters (i.e. Martyr Rustem Academy in the city of Serêkaniyê and Martyr Farûq Academy in the city of Heseke) were established in Cezîre Canton.

The academies also organize workshops for employees at the official bodies, municipalities, Asayîş (Public Security Forces) and members of communes, people's houses, and people's assemblies. People trained at these academies are required to teach some of the topics at their communes, people's houses and assemblies. Some of them, at the end of the training, become the cadres of the academies and start working there as teachers. Those who offer the courses at these academies are not required to have a diploma or publications. Anyone who knows the above-mentioned topics and wants to contribute to the academy is asked to have an interview in which the academy staff evaluates his/her knowledge and experience. If he/she is found to be able to offer a course, he/she is allowed to teach at the academies. Dorşîn Akîf, one of the lecturers teaching jineology at the academies, says in an interview that:

Education at the academies is a kind of education that aims to raise cadres to establish social life and achieve social transformation. The main perspective in [our] education is constituted on democracy, ecological economy and gender liberation. We have a [relatively] different system than the education that nation-states have developed. It [our education system] rather bases on giving knowledge back to where it belongs, to the society (Zan Enstitü 2014).

Academies, as Akîf argues, are designed both in terms of structure and content to play a different role than what is offered by the existing academic field. Attendance of members of the society having different backgrounds is higher and expectations from the attendees are requesting greater effort since autonomy is newly established and it needs contribution of all people.

Ministry of Justice works in cooperation with Mesopotamian Law Academy. The Minister Ebdulhemîd Bekîr explains how the ministry opened courts in Cezîre Canton and tried to employ people for maintaining the judicial system in RDA:

“When the revolution was achieved, we said ‘we should do something for people’. A Justice Council was formed and it determined judge and court members. It also offered and still offers training at the academies. Prospective judges and prosecutors learn how they should work. Majority of them are lawyers living here. Some Kurds and Arab came and attend the training. We also employed those who do not hold a diploma. We employed people who can work for societal

justice, are respected among by the society, and involved in resolution of the problems people had. We wanted to practice also social justice at our courts.” (Dirbêsiyê, August 21, 2014)

It appears in Bekîr’s statements that participation of the Rojava citizens who do not hold a diploma is considered an important part of judicial system in the RDA. The ministry of justice and Mesopotamian Academy of Social Justice and Law do not distinguish between those who have a university background and those who do not. That also removes the artificial social borders and hierarchy between the citizens and provides equal opportunity to all members of the society.

### **3.5.2.7. Martyrs’ Families Institution**

Martyrs’ Families Institution was established for solidarity with the families of the fallen members of the YPG, YPJ, and Asayîş (Public Security Forces) in Rojava. There are branches of the institution in all cities of Cezîre Canton. The institution also includes families of the fallen the PKK guerillas before the RDA was established and of the fallen members of Sutoro. The institution also aims to support the families with the help of Ministry of Martyrs’ Families in case of facing financial problems. The institution members sometimes visit the YPG and the YPJ members on the fronts and express their support to them in their fight against the jihadi groups (Azadiya Welat 2014). The YPG, the YPJ and Asayîş also recruit non-Kurdish people and thus there are non-Kurdish families as well at the institution. People in Cezîre Canton usually pay mass visits to the families of the fallen security forces to offer condolence to the families (ANHA 2015).

### **3.5.2.8. Peace and Reconciliation Commissions (PRCs)**

Societal peace is an opportunity to bring common reasonable solutions to the chaos and post-conflict peace. In order to make this peace possible, this effort requires the input of a distinct societal category on top of the politicians, local administrators and elected officials. This societal category — non-existent in all nation states — is being formed under the name of peace and reconciliation commissions in the communes and people’s centers in the cities, villages and neighborhoods of Rojava. The main responsibility of these commissions is to solve the problems and cases of the people on grounds of



reconciliation; without having to go to court, hiring a lawyer or applying to prosecutors. Those who take part in these commissions are either elected or take part voluntarily. Those that are voluntary members consist of people who are well respected and trusted by the community even before the autonomous administration in Rojava was established. Rather than apply to the courts of the regime and wait for months to solve an issue and being made to pay bribes, the rising number of applications is showing that the people of Rojava are increasingly gravitating towards these commissions where they have faith in their reconciliatory methods and the application of swift justice. Debt liability, buying and selling property, inheritance cases and domestic violence (mostly against women) are among the most common cases brought to the commissions. The regime courts still exist, but why are the people increasingly tending towards the commissions? How are hundreds of cases being resolved without having to be taken to court? How are the people convinced by the commission's principles, proposals and deliberations? The working principles of the peace and reconciliation commissions go a long way in answering these questions, so it is definitely worth mentioning them here.

The main principles of the peace and reconciliation delegations:

Listening to the sides without prejudgments; the peace and reconciliation commissions invite the sides to the people's centers upon a complaint. If one of the sides fails to attend, the delegation is committed to go to the person/s in order to listen to their account of the issue, even if this means a visit to their homes. The commission is committed to understanding the complaints, demands and needs of the sides in order to establish a platform for reconciliation. During this process, experts and experienced people in the field of the specific complaint are called upon. For example, on complaints of domestic violence, the commission asks for the contributions and input of Yekîtiya Star and the Women's Houses. These are institutions which support women in these cases and, where any such demand is made, offer women protection from physical violence.

Proposing solutions to the sides; after listening to both sides and taking into account the deliberations of the experienced people in the specific cases, the commission proposes reconciliatory solutions in which the interests of both sides are preserved. For example in cases of debt liability a payment plan is drawn up. If the indebted person is unable to make the payment in one go, then one of the proposals is a plan to pay in instalments and the lender is persuaded accordingly.

Second proposals; if the sides are not convinced by the initial proposal then the commission make a reanalysis of the case and congregate privately in order to make a second proposal. This proposal is once again presented to both sides. If once again reconciliation cannot be achieved, the commission passes the case over to the courts of the RDA. It is down to the sides whether they want to pursue a legal case in the courts. However, even if one of the sides decides to pursue the case in the courts then a hearing is conducted and the decision of the courts is enforced.

Reaching a solution without going to a court; PRCs avoid passing the case over the courts. There are several reasons for that. One reason is that the courts, instead of reconciliation and taking a decision that will make both sides satisfied, take decisions based on enforcement that satisfy none of the sides. For example, if the court sends a man who carries out violence against his wife to a prison, this may end the violence but not be enough to solve the problems the man and woman have been dealing with. As far as opportunities that women, without needing help of anyone, can make their lives are not provided, imprisonment or divorce will not be a solution but just increase the imprisonment and divorce rates. It is not possible to claim that such domestic violence does not exist anymore after the imprisonment or divorce. What PRCs do in such cases is to end violence with help of Women's House, Yekîtiya Star and Women's Asayîş (Women's Security Forces) and receive support from other civil society organizations.

PRCs need parties' willingness to negotiate and openness to reconcile. Otherwise, as it happens in all cases, the case is passed over to the court that makes the final decision. For PRCs, searching for a solution at the courts is the last option. Some of the cases take months even years while some others take just a few days to be solved. As far as one side does not want to take the case to the court, PRCs continue searching possible ways to reconcile them.

Peace and reconciliation attempts have mostly been affiliated with post-conflict settlements. Truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa, reconciliation commissions in Sudan, peace and reconciliation commissions in Afghanistan, and truth and reconciliation commissions in Canada are a few examples from conflict regions. PRCs in Rojava, however, try to build peace and reconcile the conflicting groups or individuals while the war goes on in the region.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

Rojava autonomy despite all problems is still alive and advances diplomatic relations within a wider context. The international community now pays more attention to the developments in Rojava and attempts to understand the autonomy system and its practices. The ENKS and TEV-DEM are expected to meet more often and lead cooperation between the Kurdish parties and organizations of other ethnic groups in Rojava. The FSA and the YPG could find an opportunity to fight against the ISIS in Kobani, which may contribute to the formation of joint defense systems both in Rojava and other regions of Syria. Haya al-Tanisiq, another opposition group in Syria, visited Rojava cantons for several times and announced its support to Rojava Democratic Autonomy (Stêrk 2014). All these positive developments in Rojava may strengthen the autonomy administration to take part more actively in the regional and international politics, maintain its stability and meeting the needs of the citizens, which in turn may increase the support for and legitimacy of the autonomy.

Civil society organizations, depending on their involvement in decision-making processes, can play a significant role in democratic governance and in meeting the needs of the society by creating new spaces for cooperation and solidarity. All three cantons of Rojava face significant problems stemming from domestic, regional and international issues. The civil society organizations aim also to decrease influences of these issues and be able to keep people in autonomous regions by providing protection, education, and opportunities to organize themselves through communes, assemblies and academies.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology used in the study to answer the research question of this thesis “*How does Rojava Democratic Autonomy aim to resolve sociopolitical and ethno-religious conflicts?*” To answer this question, I conducted a field research in Rojava’s Cezîre Canton between August 19<sup>th</sup> and September 4<sup>th</sup> in 2014. I also interviewed two more participants in Cezîre Canton in January 2015.

I conducted interviews and had participant observation during the research. While doing the interviews with the officials at the administrative bodies (hereafter as ministries) and representatives of the NGOs in Cezîre Canton of Rojava, I also tried to observe perspectives and understandings of the people I interviewed and those I met on my way to the field. The officials at the administrative bodies are those who hold seats at the administration departments of the Cezîre Canton, namely the president, prime minister, ministers and deputies. In the interview had open-ended questions designed from Thomas Benedikter’s study which proposes the minimum criteria for a successful autonomy.<sup>13</sup> Benedikter (2009: 252-253) argues that a well-functioning autonomy should answer the following questions:

- Has a significance degree of self-governance be ensured?
- Is the ethnic and cultural identity of a national minority protected?
- Is peaceful coexistence of two or more ethnic groups in a region facilitated?
- Are equal chances for all citizens ensured, regardless of their ethnic affiliation?

Benedikter’s questions address the minimum standards that autonomy should have, but since Rojava autonomy has some unique aspects, some further questions are needed. Rojava autonomy, for example, is being established in the middle of an ongoing civil war and there

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<sup>13</sup> The reason why this thesis takes Benedikter’s studies as reference is that he examines many cases throughout the world, which makes it easier to analyze an autonomy model based on the minimum requirements he draws from these cases.

have been no negotiations with the central government for autonomy. Rojava also offers a system which aims to meet the needs of various political ethnic, religious and gender groups by involving all of them in the establishment and decision making processes.

#### **4.1. Methodological framework**

The methodological framework of the study is based on the grounded theory which has mechanics that “produce verbatim transcripts of interviews and read through a small sample of text (usually line by line)” (Bernard & Ryan, 1998: 608). The theory also requires identifying themes and building models to analyze the text. In vivo coding is the initial step of grounded theory in which a researcher describes some categories and terms employed by the interviewee or the participants of a study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The next step is a process where one describes the way that the themes link to each other (Bernard & Ryan, 1998: 609).

To conduct the study based on the grounded theory framework, I designed my interview questions based on the following thematic categories: protection of human rights; social equality and justice; regional and domestic peace and reconciliation; solidarity among the peoples; political participation; and supporting the disadvantaged groups. I choose these categories based on the Benedikter’s minimum criteria for a working autonomy, and to investigate the unique aspects of Rojava autonomy. The reason for choosing such a wide scope of themes is that Rojava autonomy has already taken some steps to resolve common problems in these listed areas. The study analyzes the themes based on the following order. In the first step, the themes will be identified comprehensively and the context of each theme will be presented in details. In the second step, the relation between the themes will be described and their potential to resolve or transform the social and political conflicts and to build peace will be discussed by referring to various real examples. In the third step, the approach of Rojava autonomy to regional and international politics, its relations with The Syrian regime, and its attempts to mitigate domestic socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts will be analyzed with a focus on the given themes.

#### **4.2. Data Collection**

The data of this study is obtained from the interviews with Cezîre Canton’s Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women, Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Defense, Co-Presidency of

Cezîre Canton, Prime Ministry of Cezîre Canton, Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), Presidency of the Legislative Council of the Constitution, Mesopotamian Law Academy, Mesopotamian Academy of Social Sciences, Celadet Bedirxan Language, History and Literature Academy, Serêkaniyê People's House, Serêkaniyê Center for Developing Economy, Syrian Women's Initiative, Dêrik People's House, Assyrian Security Forces (The Sutoro), Revolutionary Youth Organization, Reconciliation Committee of Serêkaniyê, Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Syrian Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (PDPKS). These ministries, institutions and civil society organizations are the main actors to consult about the formation of Rojava Democratic Autonomy (RDA). It is also these institutions and organizations that can identify the existing issues and policies and methods they develop to resolve them. By choosing both governmental institutions and civil society organizations, the study aims to grasp both official and societal perceptions of the conflicts and also see the linkages between the two in the autonomous administration.

I chose Cezîre Canton as the field of the research because of the following reasons: (a) Cezîre Canton is the biggest canton of RDA and has more ethnic and religious diversity than the other two cantons (Efrîn and Kobani); (b) it is at the center of diplomatic relations thanks to its borders with northern Kurdistan (Turkey), southern Kurdistan (Iraq); (c) since the Syrian government still controls a few points in Qamişlo, which is the capital of Cezîre Canton, it offers an opportunity to observe the relations, if there is any, between the Syrian government and the Cezîre government; (d) Political and administrative decisions practiced in Efrîn, Kobani and Cezîre are mostly made in Cezîre Canton, which makes this canton more representative of the RDA model. All these allow me to investigate multiple aspects of the autonomy and see to what extent it functions at the social, political, and administrative levels. I interviewed only the officials and representatives from civil society organizations to find out how the autonomy organizes itself and approaches to civil society.

I entered the field on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014 and started interviews one day later. During my 20-days of field research I travelled to all cities of Cezîre Canton (except for Heseke) and could observe how the autonomous bodies work. I left Cezîre Canton on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014. I did two more interviews in my second visit to Cezîre Canton in January 2015. I interviewed 32 people from different communities to ensure that the study involves the voices of all ethnic and religious identities.

### **4.3. Limitations**

The study aims to discover the ways that Rojava autonomy uses to deal with issues related to social, political, ethnic and religious affairs. Although contributing to the existing literature on autonomy models, conflict analysis and resolution, and peace studies, the study has some limitations. To begin with, in order to limit the scope of the thesis, it includes interviews only with the Cezîre Canton officials and representatives of the civil society. It could also include the Rojava citizens, as the agents living under a new political structure, to understand how they perceive the autonomy system.

Second limitation comes from the fact that the thesis did not conduct interviewees with the Syrian government and the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) members to see what they plan to do about the RDA and whether they are willing to recognize internal self-determination in Syria. To deal with this problem, I referred to the statements of the government and SNC politicians on the media and impressions of the officials of Cezîre Canton. A further study may be conducted after the civil war ends and the relations reconciled between the conflicting parties in Syria, which makes it possible for a researcher to fill the gaps of this study.

## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

Conflicting parties usually have different perceptions of the conflict depending on their understanding of the conflict and its roots, interests they want to achieve at the end of a possible conflict settlement or an agreement, and motivations to achieve these interests. Syrian conflict is a prominent example of multiparty conflicts where it is possible to see both state actors and non-state actors. Among the former group, there are national (Syrian government), regional (Turkey, Iraq, Iran) and international powers (US, Russia, EU countries, China). Among the non-state actors, there are Syrian National Coalition, Rojava Democratic Autonomous Administration, ISIS and other small armed and non-armed groups.

This chapter will focus only on the perceptions of the officials and members of civil society organizations in the Rojava Democratic Autonomous Administration on the socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts in Rojava. The chapter investigates how RDA approaches these conflicts, what strategies and policies it develops to resolve them and how these are perceived by the civil society representing different groups in Rojava.

The analysis chapter consists of four main parts. In the first part, perceptions of the official bodies and NGOs on the conflicts will be provided. In the second part, strategies, policies and attempts of these two actors will be explained in detail. The third part will focus on what the official bodies and NGOs have done so far, and examine their understanding of the functionality of the autonomy. It will mainly cover the issue that were addressed and those which were left unresolved.

The analysis chapter will examine the conflict and autonomy at three relational levels: (a) the relation of the Syrian government with the Rojava autonomous administration, (b) the



relation of autonomous administration and NGOs in Rojava; and (c) the relation among the peoples living in Rojava.

### **5.1. Perceptions of the Conflicts in Syria and Rojava**

The Efrîn<sup>14</sup>, Kobanî<sup>15</sup> and Cezîre<sup>16</sup> canton administrations, despite the ongoing war in Syria and ISIS attacks on Kobanî and Cezîre regions, continue social, political and financial reconstruction. They formed 22 ministries in each canton upon the declaration of autonomy in January 2014. For these ministries there had been no elections, but a consensus among the political parties, organizations and institutions that are members of the Democratic Society Movement<sup>17</sup> (TEV-DEM that was established in 2011). Members of the Kurdish and Assyrian parties and members of the Arab and Chechen communities are assigned based on this consensus as body presidents (ministers) or deputies. Rojava cantons have the following official bodies: Co-presidency, government, ministries of foreign affairs, defense, internal affairs, justice, local administrations, finance, social affairs, martyrs' families, education, agriculture, health, economy and trade, transportation, women, culture, tourism and archeology, religious affairs, youth, and human rights, electricity, and communication. There is also a legislative assembly that has 91 members and passed Rojava's Social Contract in January 2014. 33 officials and representatives or members of the NGOs in Cezîre Canton were interviewed. The following two parts are analyzing their perceptions of the conflicts both before and after the Syrian civil war and establishment of autonomous administration.

This study identifies two types of conflicts in Syria: socio-political conflicts and ethno-religious conflicts. The first category includes the conflicts related to the political structure and policies of the Syrian state and their impacts on social and political activities. This category also focuses on suppression, exclusion, discrimination, assimilation, and denial

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<sup>14</sup> Efrîn is the far western canton and predominated by Kurds. There are also Alewite and Êzidî Kurds in some of 360 villages, and Arabs in the city center. Population in Efrîn was around 500 thousand before the war but due to internal displacement and immigration it is close to one million (Akîf Roj, 2014)

<sup>15</sup> Kobanî is predominantly Kurdish and the population is about 250 thousand. Arabs live in western, southern and eastern regions of the canton (Akîf Roj, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Cezîre is the most multicultural region. The population is around one and half million. It is also has the richest oil resources in Syria (Akîf Roj, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> TEV-DEM is composed of 57 parties and civil society organizations established by Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs.

of historical minorities in Syria. The second category examines the ethnic and religious conflicts among different groups. Discrimination and violence by ethnic and religious groups against each other are the main themes of the second category. Parts of the interviews that are related to these categories and themes will be referred to figure out how the conflicts have started and resulted in the current state.

### **5.1.1. Perceptions of the officials and civil society representatives**

During the interviews, it was found out that the officials have some common point of views about the conflicts. The majority of the interviewees refer to the policies of the Syrian government as the main source of the conflicts. Another common perception is that Syrian government always wanted to maintain its unique authority in all social and political areas. It also implemented some discriminative and suppressive policies to create inequality among different groups. Another important point the participants of the study agreed on is that the Syrian regime denied the existence of the Kurdish people and never recognized their national identity.

The Co-president of Cezîre Canton Hediye Yûsif who spent several years in Adra Prison of Damascus and was released on July 19, 2012 believes that the Syrian regime wanted to weaken the Kurdish society in Syria and prevented them to have their own agenda for self-determination. She explained why Kurds struggled against the Syrian government as follows:

“[The regime] never recognized the struggle of the Kurdish people for their own will and freedom. The regime did not provide our people their basic rights. Just the opposite, the regime was adopting policies so that a nation lacks its own will, becomes uncommitted, and works for the interests of the regime.” (Rimêlan, August 28, 2014)

Discussing the ethnic conflicts in the Middle East, Binder (1999: 8) argues that the nation states “appropriated the idea of the national community and incorporated it into a general political strategy concerned with the recognition of some groups and the denial of recognition to the other groups”. Denial of the recognition of Kurds by the Syrian regime is an example of what Binder discusses. The denial triggered political collective action and mobilization by Kurds for their fundamental rights. In line with Hediye Yûsif’s arguments, the Co-president of Cezîre Canton Legislative Assembly Hakem Xelo also referred to the

nationalist ideology and intolerance of the regime to all identities as main reasons of the conflict. According to Xelo,

“The regime’s laws were based on its nationalist ideology. They were based on its nationalist perceptions and always for the power so that the regime becomes a dictatorship. [It was] a one party system! It did not recognize the Kurdish identity. According to the Syrian constitution, neither Kurds nor Assyrians [were identified with their own nationalities] All the nations living in Syria were identified as Arabs. Even on our ID cards, our nationality was recorded as “Syrian Arab”, no matter whether you were a Kurd, an Assyrian [Syriac], an Armenian, or a Chechen.” (Amûdê, August 30, 2014)

Obviously, all non-Arab ethnic identities in Syria were subjected to denial and assimilation by the government. Xelo’s emphasis on the nationalist laws and dictatorship indeed shows how the ethnic identities had been suppressed for years under the Syrian Arab nationalism. Having the Arab ethnic and cultural identity in Syria does not necessarily mean that the Arab citizens did not have any problems with the government. Aras and Toktaş (2008: 37) argue that there were two main opposition actors in Syria: Islamic groups (the Muslim Brothers, especially between 1976 and 1982) and Kurds. Hediye Yûsif argues that Arabs were also suppressed, but she also believes that Kurds suffered more compared to any other ethnic group in Syria:

“For sure [Kurds have been suppressed more]. Those who identify themselves with chauvinism [of The Syrian regime] have more power and whether you like it or not Arabs have been socially, politically and economically more advanced. It was Kurds who lacked their rights the most. They got nothing from the country. They had no existence. So we can say that it was the Kurdish people whose rights have been violated the most in Syria.” (Rimêlan, 28 August 2014)

She also differentiates the socio-political problems that Arabs and Kurds had under the authority of the Syrian government:

“Arab people also had problems. That is right, but these were not related to the existence of a nation, a historical existence or lack of full representation. Kurds had the following problems: (1) they could not live as a nation; and (2) they could not live as a citizen of Syria, a country, which they died for its independence. That was why all the prisons in Syria were full of Kurdish youths whenever they started a national uprising. All the political works were responded by violence and slaughters. Undoubtedly, the Ba’ath Regime has a deep history. To establish its authority, it did not tolerate any uprisings in the society. There are examples of Hums and Hama<sup>18</sup> where the regime resolutely carried out a massacre against the

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<sup>18</sup> The regime’s indiscriminate violence in 1982 against the Muslim Brothers and its supporters in Hama caused deaths of around 20.000 people. This was known as the biggest massacre in the Syrian history before the civil war started in 2011 (David Arnold, 2012).

Muslim Brotherhood organization [in 1982] when it revolted against the regime. It silenced the political voices. That is how it created a society that lacks its own will, and disciplined it. When Kurds launched a process or a campaign to get their rights, the regime practiced very specific policies against them. There has been a long history of assimilation and destructive policies in the Kurdish regions. The aim was to make Kurds forget everything related to their Kurdishness.” (Rimélan, 28 August 2014)

Yûsif’s reference to Kurds’ support of the war of independence against the French government in 1946 and denial of the Kurdish identity in the following years indicate one of the biggest frustrations for the Kurdish people. In nation-states, citizens are expected to follow authority of the government imposing a single ideology, national identity and sometimes a religion or a sect, which results in centralized, authoritative and exclusive regimes. Pierret (2013) argues that the Syrian regime for decades have imposed pro-Alawite policies especially in the army, which created a sectarian polarization and discrimination and suppression of the Sunni population. Any ethnic or religious mobilization to challenge the authority of the Syrian regime was strongly responded by the regime’s forces.

Violence is literally multifaceted. Johan Galtung (1990) categorizes violence into three: direct violence, cultural violence and structural violence. According to Galtung (2000: 102):

Direct violence, visible, destructive, with a will to harm, is the form most feared. Structural violence is invisible, with no will to harm, killing slowly but may be as much or more destructive”. In comparison to direct and structural violence, Galtung (2000: 102) says “cultural violence is also invisible, but with clear intent to harm, even [to] kill, indirectly, through words and images; in short, symbolically.

It is possible to see almost all types of violence in the history of the ruling Ba’athist regime in Syria. The massacre in Hama in 1982, the fire in Cinema Amûdê in 1960, violent suppression of the Qamişlo Uprising in 2004, and the mass killings since 2011 are some examples of direct violence in Syria. Torture in the prisons is not mentioned much by the interviewees but it has been a common type of direct violence in Syria. Regarding the tortures in the prisons, Hakem Xelo says:

“There were no powerful opposition parties [in Syria]. Even this regime did not allow any opposition parties to participate into politics. There were always imprisonment, torture and exile... A democratic atmosphere, thus, was never achieved in Syria.” (Amûdê, August 30, 2014)

Sureyya, who has been working in the Peace and Reconciliation Committee in Serêkaniyê, is a Kurdish woman who was imprisoned for one year when she had been active

in Yekîtiya Star<sup>19</sup>, an umbrella institution for women's organizations in Rojava. Talking about her political activism and imprisonment, Sureyya says:

“There was always suppression by the state before the [Rojava] revolution but we still maintained our political works. I was imprisoned many times. I was beaten so much. I was struck with cudgels every day for one year.” (Serêkaniyê, August 24, 2014)

Imprisonment and torture seem to be one of the common ways used by The Syrian regime to oppress political activist people and groups. Many people were also killed during the tortures. One of them is an Assyrian political leader Said Malki who was a member of the Syriac Unity Party. He was arrested by the Assad forces and later on reported to be killed in August 2013. Regarding his killing, a Sutoro (Syriac Security Forces in Rojava) member in the city of Dêrik says:

“The regime arrested some Syriacs in the areas it had control. They are political prisoners. The political leader of the Syriac people, Said Malki, was arrested in Qamişlo. Then he was taken to Damascus. We were told that he was killed yet we did not announce this since we could not approve it and receive his body.” (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Besides the political suppression and direct violence, the Syrian regime also had some financial policies leading socio-economic inequalities between the different regions of Syria. The Rojava citizens, despite that the region has enough financial resources, suffered great deprivation due to the Syrian government's ignoring policies. Causing the people to leave their lands was one of the most practiced policies of the Syrian government. Mentioning about the welfare differences between the cities of Rojava and western or metropolitan cities of Syria, Minister of Social Affairs Dijwar Ehmed says:

“The only thing that our people [Kurds] were doing was to find a way to raise their families. Since the last 10-15 years there has been no way of doing it here [in Cezîre region]. They moved to the metropolitan cities. It was exactly the same with Kurds in North [Kurdistan] who moved to İstanbul, Ankara, Adana and Mersin to find a job and offer a normal life to their families. Besides those who went to the European countries, thousands of people migrated to the regional countries, to Lebanon for example. Tens of thousands of people had to move to Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia to find a job, earn money and maintain their families.” (Qamişlo, August 30, 2014)

Moving to another city is not just a disconnection with land, culture and history of one's roots but it also results in difficulties in integration into a new socio-economic context. The

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<sup>19</sup> Yekîtiya Star was active also before the establishment of Rojava Autonomy, yet its members were operating secretly.

last 10-15 years may be long enough for a community to weaken its ties with its cultural identity and its relation to the geography and history. Hassan (2013) argues that the migration from Rojava has a longer history, about 30 years, and makes the following statement about the internally displaced Kurds:

“After playing a game of cat and mouse with the authorities to establish their neighborhood, they [Kurds] finally managed to get their way. That’s why some locals refer to the area as “zore afa [zorava]” in Kurdish, which means “built by force.”

Zorava is one of the slums in the city of Damascus where Kurdish immigrants settled down a couple of decades ago. At the beginning the residents consisted of those who knew each other and later on more and more people moved to Zorava that lacked almost all the facilities provided to the other areas of Damascus (Silêman, 2010). Galtung (2000: 4) calls such cases as structural violence in which “people die or lead miserable lives because they are politically repressed and economically exploited”. Having all these socio-political and financial troubles, some Kurds lost their affiliation with Kurdish identity, dissociated themselves from their background or they were simply afraid of struggling for their rights. Hassan (2010) also notes that the majority of Kurds immigrated to Damascus do not speak Kurdish and tried not to get involved in the clashes that broke out after the Qamişlo Uprising in 2004. Some Kurds in Aleppo and Damascus also joined the protests after the clashes in Qamişlo yet Hassan’s argument reveals that regime’s policies became successful to a great extent and could manipulate the cultural, political and social relations among Kurds across the country.

Eric Brahm (2003), in his analysis of conflict stages, draws attention to the role of the longstanding economic inequalities and argues that “the government may be unresponsive to the needs of a minority or low power group” in a context where “strong value or status differences may exist” and lead to an “open conflict after a triggering event”. Kurds in Rojava involved several events and mass uprisings took place both in Rojava and Kurdish settlements in other regions of Syria. The Qamişlo Uprising is the most known mentioned in the background chapter of the thesis.

Another point that Dijwar Ehmed raises is the regime’s approach to the young population of the Kurdish society. He accuses of the Syrian government for debasing the youths in Rojava and Kurdish settlements in other cities:

“They [The Syrian regime] removed all the legal barriers before the young population. They were free for to do whatever they wanted. They could go to brothels, smoke nicotine and other drugs. I mean, in all ways, the regime wanted to corrupt the youths. Despite the strong relation and our efforts to keep them away from such things, these problems still exist. These are what the regime left here and people have been living in this way for decades. The regime purposefully developed such policies for 50 years.” (Qamişlo, August 30, 2014)

In line with Ehmed’s arguments, a member of the Revolutionary Youth Movement Rustem Dêrik explains the regime’s approach towards the youth in more detail. Similar to Yekîtiya Star, the Revolutionary Youth Movement existed before the RDA, however, it was forbidden by the Syrian government. Dêrik says:

“There were brothels in Qamişlo. There were such places even in Dêrik, but not many. The regime wanted the number of the brothels to increase and in fact it was slowly increasing. Before the [Rojava] revolution smoking cocaine and heroin was quite common. Different types of drugs were imported to Rojava, especially from the north. Efrîn still suffers from that. (Dêrik, 28 August 2014)

Both Ehmed and Rustem consider the presence of brothels and use of drugs as practices against moral principles and leading social corruption that the young population is imposed on by the regime. These also reveal the social codes of the moral values and emphasis given to the youth in the Rojava society. Ehmed thinks that youths have an important role in ‘Rojava Revolution’ and the regime wanted a social corruption in the Kurdish society to prevent it for years:

“Revolution is achieved by young people. They are essential in revolution. They support and develop a revolution. The regime poses a threat to the young people by allowing them to use drugs and access these bad and immoral places [brothels]. It let them do whatever they wanted to do with these drugs and immoral places.” (Qamişlo, August 30, 2014)

Education has been another area of conflict, especially for the Kurdish students. Upon the population census carried out by Heseke governorate in 1962 and rescinded citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people. Including right to education, all citizenship rights were officially cancelled. Several generations grew up since the population census and children of the people who were not given an ID also could not go to schools. Those who had an ID and went to a school could study only for 12 years, which means they could study until high school, but were not allowed to register to a university in Syria. Rustem Dêrik explains how the Kurdish students suffered from lacking an ID in Syria and how the Revolutionary Youth Movement could easily get organized among the high school-graduate students:

“As known, the Kurdish youths did not have an ID. The Kurdish society, in fact, had no identity. Since they did not have an ID, it was meaningless how many years they studied. They could study for 12 years but were not able to get a university degree. Those who studied in a university were the Kurds who had an ID. However, they graduated from the university but could not find a job; they were just sitting at home or became overqualified workers. That is why when we established the movement it was these workers who joined us first. They bore a big grudge against the regime because the regime nullified their whole education.” (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Although the students knew that they will not be able to register at a university, they studied for 12 years. Probably they hoped this system would change one day or thought they could go to study in neighboring Arabic speaking countries. Some students who now study at Mesopotamian Academy of Social Sciences<sup>20</sup> had gone to Lebanon to study in a university but they said they decided to return to Cezîre Canton after the civil war started. Hesên Ednan, a lecturer at Mesopotamian Academy of Social Sciences, criticizes quality of education provided by the Syrian government. Ednan also accuses of the Syrian government for isolating the students from societal relations and facts so that it could train generations who will only be employed for the government’s policies (Qamişlo, September 2, 2014).

Minister of Agriculture Dr. Salih Al-Zabba argues that Kurds were oppressed and discriminated the most but Arabs who did not support The Syrian regime were also deprived their rights to education and work. Dr. Al-Zabba contends that

“I was a PhD student, for example, but the regime did not allow me to find a job according to my qualification. Those who had a lower degree than mine could find better jobs. Our tribe was not Ba’athist. If we were the members of the Ba’ath Party, the Syrian regime would also support us.” (Dirbêsiyê, August 25, 2014)

Language, for ethnic minorities, is an important component of culture. By denying the right to education in Kurdish; The Syrian regime also prevented the use of language as a part of cultural survival and development. Azad Quto, a student at Celadet Bedirxan Academy of Kurdish History, Literature and Language, discusses the assimilationist policies of the Syrian government and explains how Kurds started assimilating their children:

“The regime wanted Kurdish language to disappear, people not to learn it. It wanted Kurdish children to forget their language. Over years people started teaching their children Arabic. They taught Arabic before the children went to

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<sup>20</sup> Mesopotamian Academy of Social Sciences opened in city of Qamişlo on September 2, 2014 and has departments of history, sociology and law. Three of the students I met there said they first went to Lebanon, but later on decided to come back to Rojava and register at the Mesopotamian Academy.



schools because people said ‘our children should be successful when they go to school’. These were all the results of the regime’s dirty politics. (Qamişlo, August 30, 2014)

In line with Azad’s statements on assimilation policies of the Syrian government, Minister of Culture of Cezîre Canton Nehwend Mihemed argues that:

“Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs are living together here. All the old cultures were forbidden and peoples have been assimilated. What we want to do is to revive all these forgotten and assimilated cultures.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

One of her deputies, Henne Henne is a Syriac man who previously worked as an oil engineer in a company before 2011. Henne agrees with the statement of Nehwend Mihemed and believes that Syriacs shared the same destiny with the Kurdish people:

“Syriac culture is also a part of that society. Similar to Kurds, Syriacs have been assimilated, too. We thought we need to get united with the Kurds and revive our cultures.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Henne argues that Kurds and Syriacs suffered from the same problems and they now need to support each other to save their cultures and co-existence. He further explains the issues that the Syriac society in Syria and Rojava had been dealing with for more than a half century:

“Syriacs were in Turkey before. They migrated to Cezîre region after the World War I. The first thing they wanted to do is to establish schools. They wanted to survive Syriac culture [through education]. Our culture developed until 1950s but after the 50s there were always domestic conflicts in Syria. There were so many military coups. Dictatorship came out from these coups and those who came to power closed our schools. Education in Syriac was forbidden and since then Syriacs had no right to education in their language. Syriac, like Kurdish, was suppressed and forbidden.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Elaborating on Syriacs who fled the battlefield after the WWI, Henne also notes that the agreement between France and Turkey in 1939 was another event which marked the destiny of his people:

“Syriacs came to Syria with two mass migrations. The first one was after the WWI and the second one was when France agreed to leave İskenderun to Turkey. The intensive migration of Syriacs happened after the latter. This [the agreement] was an imposition.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

It is obvious that the conflicts of the international powers and regional states in contemporary Turkey and Syria became the main reason of an enforced displacement for the Syriac people. However this agreement also had some adverse long-run outcomes. Members

of a cultural and ethnic entity have been physically separated by borders, socially, culturally and politically suppressed and denied all the rights by the governments of Turkey and Syria. The Sutoro member in Dêrik also notes in the interview that:

“We were massacred both in Turkey<sup>21</sup> and Iraq. We did not want the same tragedy to happen here. That is why we established Sutoro, to protect our people”. (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Traumas of the past and having no trust in any parties in Syria led Syrians to form their own armed units. Sutoro is a part of People’s Defense Units (YPG) and Asayîş (Public Security Forces) in Rojava. Öcalan (2014: 11) argues that Syrians are one of the ancient peoples of Kurdistan and not only the Turkish İttihat and Terakki<sup>22</sup> nationalism, but also some Kurds who cooperated with İttihat Terakki were also responsible for the painful history of the Syrian people. However, many Kurds and Syrians, argue that they think they have better intergroup relations compared to the years before the establishment of the autonomy. The Sutoro member notes that the regime always reminded this historical fact so that Syrians and Kurds grow hostility towards each other:

“The regime wanted to create problems and conflicts between Kurds and Syrians. It said the Syrians “Kurds massacred you” and Kurds “you are Muslim and closer to us”. Syrians ruled the municipalities but they were the Ba’athist Syrians. That [rule of the municipalities by Syrians] was a step against Kurds. It wanted to make Kurds believe that Syrians were closer to the regime and tried to provoke Kurds against Syrians.” (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Why would the Syrian regime want a conflict between ethnic groups in Syria and what did the Syrian regime gain from these policies? The joint administrations, local councils, and armed forces established by Kurds, Arabs, Syrians and Chechens let those people protect their regions from both social, political, financial policies and violent practices of the regime. Despite the fact that there are still some points in the city of Qamişlo protected by the armed forces of the regime, the rest of the administration system in all three cantons is managed by the autonomous bodies and protected by the joint armed units formed by Kurds, Arabs and Syrians. The regime now has very limited access to Cezîre region. Bashar Al-Assad, for

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<sup>21</sup> Syrians in city of Midyat, North Kurdistan, for the first time planned to protest the massacres in carried out in 1914 and 1915. The head of the Syrian Unity Association Yuhanna Aktaş said “Although it came late, it is positive that a known and a real event has finally been recognised. It is a fact of history and you cannot ignore it. The reactions against the recognition are childish. We have to confront our history.” (ANF, 2015)

<sup>22</sup> İttihat Terrakki (Union and Progress, also known as Young Turks) came to power in 1912 and planned to achieve a social and political transition based on Turkish nationalism.

instance, was not allowed by the autonomous administration to hold the 2014 presidency election in Cezîre (except for those points under the control of the regime), Efrîn, and Kobanî. By creating the conflicts between ethnic and religious groups who have different backgrounds, the regime wanted to prevent solidarity among those groups and weaken their ability of a possible mobilization against the regime. Since Syria has not been a democratic regime and peoples were not allowed to join politics, it was possible that an outburst would sooner or later emerge in Syria. The best way for the regime to prevent a sudden violent social and political blowup was that it must paralyze the social groups, make ethnic and religious diversities more visible and conflicting, and suppress people and leave them believing that there will be no other way except for obeying the authority of the regime. This is what exactly has been done so far in Syria.

The Syrian regime's manipulation of the economy and local sources was also a part of the conflict. The Syrian Economic Forum confirms that the unemployment rate was around 10 % in 2010 (Syrian Economic Forum 2014) and majority of these unemployed people were from the Kurdish society since they had no ID, and thus no permission to work in public or private sectors. Those who had an ID, as Minister of Social Affairs Dijwar Ehmed notes, migrated to the more developed cities of Syria. It is possible to see that Cezîre region is quiet arid. Although it is a flat area and appropriate for farming, there has always been very limited activity due to aridity. Member of the Center for Developing Economy Serêkaniyê Branch Ferhad Derwîş says The Syrian regime did not allow local population in Cezîre to do agriculture and stock a farm. For the question why the regime did this, he says:

“It was quite clear why it did not allow people to do agriculture. Whenever the economy developed to an extent in Rojava, the government made a decision to stop or prevent it. The regime wanted the people to starve. Anybody starving cannot think of doing anything; the only thing s/he can do is to earn money and raise their children. If there are no water and bread, you cannot think. The maximum amount of land we could cultivate cotton, for example, was 10.000 square meters. Not more than this! That is all! We could not plant trees. Why? [Because] Trees make the nature and society beautiful. The regime never allowed these. Planting trees was forbidden here.” (Serêkaniyê, August 23, 2014)

It seems that people had very limited freedom in using their lands. The regime's motivations to maintain control over every single social, political and financial activity and its tendency to exercise violence on those who do not obey its laws or regulations indicate that there had been a strong structural violence. Local people do not have any rights to participate

in the local administrations and make decisions on how their local areas are going to be designed.

In line with Ferhad's arguments, Sureyya also mentions the despotic practices of The Syrian regime. She explained how the officials cooperated with some local people to exert despotism on local population:

“The state destroyed everything. Imagine that you are an official and your friends or relatives have a problem with someone. No matter he is a Kurd or an Arab; you would go and oppress him to accept your relatives' offer. You would go and seize his properties, lands, and animals. You would intervene in all his production activities. How does someone have such a right to intervene in everything our people do? They exactly do these to our pity people.” (Serêkaniyê, August 28, 2014)

Financial problems still exist in RDA and Cezîre Canton Minister of Economy Siham Kuryo draws attention to role of the military siege and embargo on the canton:

“We were under the siege. That siege was like a circle, the gang groups in the front, Turkey in the north, Kurdistan Regional Government in the east, the Syrian government and gangs in the west.” (Amûdê, August 21, 2014)

The first-hand experiences of the interviewees also show that the regime had been favoring those who support it over the rest. It is important to remember that the Syrian regime did not distinguish between the members of the ethnic groups who oppose its policies and unfair practices. In that sense, one can say that it is not only Kurds, but all ethnic, religious or political groups who opposed the Syrian regime have been suffering for years from the regime's authoritarian order. Almost all of the interviewees think that the political, financial and social conflicts are created by the regime and all ethnic groups, especially Kurds, suffered from state oppression. Therefore, rather than naming it as an intergroup conflict, they usually have state and people or non-state actors as parties of the conflict.

Some ethnic groups, however, had more rights while some were completely ignored depending on their relations with and closeness to the Syrian government. Such discriminative and unfair practices also had potential to create intra-group conflicts since there were some Kurds, Syrians and Arabs who become part of these practices and perceived as the hostile group of people. Besides creating inter-group conflicts, this also led to intra-group conflicts and hostility despite the shared ethnic or religious identities.

Women have also been another target group of the state's policies in Syria. The patriarchal social and political system exists in all the Middle Eastern countries. Bekhouche

(2013) notes that according to the Global Gender Gap 2012 report, Middle East is the least (59 %) gender equal compared to “66% in Asia and the Pacific, the next lowest ranking region, and 74% in North America, which has the highest score”. UNICEF’s 2011 report on gender equality in Syria indicates that there are serious gender rights violations led by the Syrian laws and regulations. Interviewees of this study also reported first-hand experiences of the violations. One of them is Mizgîn Zêdan who is a member of the Syrian Women’s Initiative and women’s wing of the Liberal Party. Zêdan says the initiative was established after the civil war and aims to include all women with different backgrounds and lead struggle for their rights. Women in Syria share both similarities and differences in their struggle depending on their ethnic identities. Regarding to what the Kurdish women struggle for, Zêdan notes that:

“A woman married to a man, who does not have an ID, cannot pass on her nationality and citizenship rights to her children. [Some Kurdish] women have IDs, but the regime does not issue IDs for their husbands. Women do not have the right to pass her nationality on to their husbands and children. We want to bring an end to this. Syria previously had the Sharia law and two women’s testimony was equal to a man’s testimony. We want women and men to be equal.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Syria has both secular and Sharia (or religious) courts and what Zêdan refers to is practiced in Sharia courts that trial cases based on Islamic rules. The nationality and citizenship issues were common in the Kurdish society due to the population census conducted in 1962. She also sees the violence on women carried out by men and patriarchal society as the violence on men carried out by the state:

“Women are not machines of their fathers or husbands. They are also human and they have the rights. They are also living, thinking and becoming sad. They have the same feelings with men. The whole society should think of this issue in this way. Women should say “I do not belong to any man, I am like them and they are like me”. We do not say that we will impose our ideas on men but we demand to be equal for the sake of goodness. Let both of us be free! When a man carries out violence he does not become free, he is never free. There is a regime that can carry out violence on men whenever it wants. By just giving a command, the regime may imprison a man for years, torture and do whatever it wants. Yet, if men look at the issue from a broader perspective, men and women can maintain a life together. Women are half of the society and if half of the society is not free, the society is not free at all.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Zêdan’s expressions reveal two important facts: by practicing violence on women, (a) men not only violate women’s rights but also intensify existing gender conflicts; and (b) men become the main actors preventing the formation of a free society to be achieved with

freedom of gender and through a free collective life. In that respect, it is possible to argue that women suffer from domestic, social and state suppression, violence and violations of gender rights while men are also part of this unequal and oppressive regime.

Minister of Women Emîna Umer, who is a member of the Democratic Union Party, the PYD, also draws attention to violence and suppression on women. She believes that the majority of women obeyed the authority and patriarchy and did not know how they could struggle for their rights before (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014). Ozan (2015) argues that women's problems in Rojava are not that simple to be solved by the laws, yet it is basically a problem of understanding and mentality. What Ozan puts forward is that women have to deal with numerous problems stemming from social, political, cultural and financial issues, and laws are necessary but not sufficient to solve them.

A report issued by 11 Syrian human rights organizations note that mostly the regime and Shabiha (the regime's auxiliary militias) and Syrian opposition armed groups carry out human rights violations and violence on women since 2011 (Syrian Women Network 2013). Attacks on women intensified and became more visible after the radical Islamic movements and the extremists committed non-discriminative crimes (Human Rights Watch 2014). All these point out that both before and after the Syrian conflict there have been different levels of suppression and violence on women from all ethnic, religious and political groups. According to the Human Rights Watch (2014) report abductions, restrictions on clothing, movement, employment and access to necessities and education are the main human rights violations women have been subjected.

All the social, political and financial restrictions, discrimination and oppressions imposed on the almost all opposition parties and individuals show that there are manifold and highly interrelated causes of the current and past conflicts in Syria. The perceptions and arguments reported during the interviews may be limited to personal experiences, however they reveal how people were motivated to resist against the Syrian regime and its authoritarian practices. As it has happened in many conflicting areas in the Middle East and North Africa, there are probably many more unreported violations due to the ongoing war in the country. However, a detailed and elaborative investigation to be carried out after the conflict settlement will be narrating the untold stories, especially of those who could not publicize what happened to them during the conflict.

## **5.2. Solutions for the Conflicts**

Conflict resolution, management and transformation are three important concepts in the literature of conflict studies. All have different dynamics and require various steps to be taken the parties involved in the conflict. Since this thesis focuses on conflict resolution in the RDA, the main discussion of this part will be about how the RDA resolves the past and current conflicts in Rojava.

In the contexts where conflicts are complicated and have multiple parties, one may need interdisciplinary approaches to resolve them. Resolution of protracted conflicts usually takes a long time and needs much effort depending on nature, context and needs of parties. The Syrian conflict is both tremendously complicated and quite protracted. There are interrelated issues like education and culture, politics and representation, rights and recognition, which require a careful approach in addressing solutions in each area. These issues have not been identified and solved for a long time. That is why the interviewees refer to even early 1990s to identify roots of the conflicts. This part of analysis is going to focus on the solutions offered and practiced by the representatives of the civil society organizations and ministers in the Cezîre Canton Democratic Autonomous Administration.

### **5.2.1 Recognition, Power-sharing and Accommodation**

TEV-DEM pioneered the establishment of the democratic autonomy in Rojava and explicitly announced that it aims to practice non-state governance in northern Syria which is mostly populated by the Kurdish people. What leads the formation of social, political, cultural institutions in the RDA is Abdullah Öcalan's 'democratic confederalism' project. According to Öcalan:

The democratic confederalism relies on democratic polity. Contrary to the state's strict centralist, monopolist, bureaucratic administration and management approach, [the democratic confederalism] achieves the society's self-governance with political formations in which all societal groups and cultural identities are represented. Elected people work in this system, not those who are assigned [by the central government]. The main point in this system is the ability to make decisions through councils and discussions. There is no room for self-ordained administration [in democratic confederalism]. The democratic management and audit of social work from headquarters management coordination board (assembly, commission, congress) to local boards is done according to the

supervision of committees which are suitable for each group and culture, multi-structural and that searches unity within differences. (SBA<sup>23</sup>, 2008: 14)

Autonomous regions and administrations are the main political organizations in this project. In support of Öcalan's arguments on democratic confederalism and anti-centralist approach, the TEV-DEM Executive Member Aldar Xelîl says:

“Nation-states destroy will of the societies. Only one nation becomes superior and it possesses all power tools. Other nations are left without volition or their will is offended. We, Kurds, also received our share and suffered from that. We see that reality of a democratic culture is that nations should be and live together. Without establishing states, peoples become a democratic nation. I mean Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Persians, Assyrians, Syriacs, Chaldeans can live together according to that democratic culture. If one says “There must be only Kurds in Kurdistan and other nations must be wiped out”, we never accept such an argument. We say that all nations, without having borders and boundaries, should live together. This is the fact of being democratic.” (Dêrik, August 24, 2014)

Xelîl pays attention to the importance of co-existence and democratic culture in which there is no room for superiority of a specific nation but all identities and cultures are accepted equal. Katırcıoğlu (2014: 350) argues that in a democratic system where identities acknowledge and does not oppress each other identity-based conflicts rarely occur. The RDA apparently tries to accomplish a democratic system where unity and equality of diversities is ensured and all peoples are considered as constituents of a democratic nation. Another important point Aldar Xelîl makes is that autonomy does not draw political or territorial borders and separate peoples from each other. Rojava autonomy, for example, has no borders separating Rojava from Syria or Kurds from Arabs, Syriacs, and Chechens. On the contrary, the RDA considers itself a part of Syrian state and identifies Kurds as citizens of the country who want to live together with other peoples in the region. As Benedikter (2014: 98) puts forward that autonomy ensures self-governance without changing the national borders. That basically dispels fears of secession and negates suppressive policies of Syrian government on the ground that Kurds want to divide Syria and establish an independent Kurdistan.

Hediye Yûsif, the Co-president of Cezîre Canton, in her answer to the question of “why she thinks democratic autonomy can meet demands of different identities in Syria”, argues that:

“Because in our region, in Rojava, many nations like Arabs, Kurds, Syriacs, Assyrians, and Chechens are living. In order to respond to the injustices that the Syrian regime did to Kurds and these nations and prevent it in the future for us the

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<sup>23</sup> SBA is an acronym for Abdullah Öcalan Sosyal Bilimler Akademisi publishers.



most reasonable solution is the democratic autonomy. Then all nations will be able to live with their own identities and Syrian identity in a common land. In other words, the democratic autonomy is the solution for protracted issues in Syria. Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians and Kurds cannot otherwise gain their rights. For that the democratic autonomy is richness of this land. In order to keep richness of the nations and society, and underground treasure together the democratic autonomy is the modest solution.” (Rimêlan, August 28, 2014)

Both Xelîl and Yûsif perceive the co-existence and recognition of all identities as important foundations of the RDA. Recognition is a sine qua non for achieving co-existence but not simply enough because it will also need accommodation of these nations who are expected to be equal identities of the RDA.

Regarding the issue of how the individual and collective or group rights are guaranteed in Rojava, Aldar Xelîl first criticizes approaches of capitalism and real socialism to the rights and then argues that the RDA tries to set a balance between individual and collective rights:

“This [matter of individual and collective rights] is already very sensitive. Both [real] socialism and capitalism could not handle this matter they lost a lot. What did the real socialism do, for example? It left the individuals without volition to ensure the collective rights. It ignored the individual. In the other [capitalism] system individual will became superior and the society was eradicated. When the society was eradicated, no soul and no democratization were left. Now, what do we do? We take sense of community and pluralism, and develop and institutionalize it through communes, councils, and by advising them [the individuals] and show up their will. For that, in order the individual to be more active, his self-respect, being and ideas are protected so that they become active and join [the society]. We neither oppress one [individual] and favor the other [society] nor do the vice versa. But what we pay more attention to is the collective rights. For us socialization is a priority but the individual is also protected.” (Dêrik, August 24, 2014)

Without sharing authority and ensuring fundamental rights, co-existence will not mean more than a discourse. Ekrem Huso, President of Cezîre Canton government, explains how Democratic Autonomy guarantees both individual and collective rights and political participation in Rojava:

“All constituents in Rojava are equal based on the democratic nation and rights of all are protected. Rights of the people in this region are protected by the [Cezîre Canton] Democratic Autonomous Administration. There is equality and everybody [every nation] has a seat in that administration. Everybody has the right [to join the administration]. Individual rights are protected. Individual and collective life maintains. We solved all these problems [related to the individual and collective rights] in the autonomous administration. All the constituent people I mentioned, Syriacs, Chechens, Arabs, Êzidîs, participated in the administration.

Syriacs and Arabs participated as their party representatives. Rights of all are protected by the autonomous administration.” (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

Participatory administration plays an important role in peace-building, especially in the post-conflict areas, by involving the different groups in the decision-making processes and ensuring that the administration addresses issues of all groups. The belief that openness of the RDA to share power with all ethnic groups in Rojava means for these people that there is room for ethnic and religious representation and protection of fundamental rights within the autonomous administration. Literature on power-sharing mostly focuses on the relation between a central government and a recognized local administration. However, since the RDA has not been recognized yet by the Syrian government, power-sharing in this study refers to a share of authority among different political parties, representatives of the ethnic and religious groups in Rojava. Assignment of different party or civil society representatives to ministries, offices or institutions is not done through elections but a consensus that ensures power-sharing in the RDA.

McBride (2007: 596) argues that power-sharing is also important to prevent domination of majority over the minorities. In Rojava each ethnic group has a 10 % quota in the legislative council, which means Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs get at least 10 % of the seats in the council. In line with McBride’s argument, Xelîl notes that quota system prevents any ethnic group from occupying majority or all of the seats:

“When you distract 10%, the rest of the seats are distributed by the ones who get more votes. Why do we do this? Because in some regions the Syriacs are minority and if we follow just the electoral system [without a quota], Syriacs will not be represented in the parliament. Kurds and Arabs are majority. That is why we say there must be a 10% quota. First, 10% quota is determined based on the population of that [Syriac] region and then they [Syriacs] are listed as candidates and run in elections to fill this 10% quota. The rest of the list is going to be filled with the elections.” (Dêrik, August 24, 2014)

Arend Lijphart, who is known with his studies on consociational democracy and different forms of representation in multi-ethnic contexts, argues that

Social homogeneity and political consensus are regarded as prerequisites for, or factors strongly conducive to, stable democracy. Conversely, the deep social divisions and political differences within plural societies are held responsible for instability and breakdown in democracies (1977: 1).

Rojava is a multi-ethnic region and the RDA aims both to maintain its social heterogeneity and achieve political consensus and stable democracy. Aldar Xelîl’s emphasis on participation

of all ethnic groups and 10% quota, or proportional representation as Lijphart calls, indicates the concrete steps towards achieving unity and co-existence of political and ethnic differences within a plural society.

Rojava autonomy has 22 ministries in each canton and there are Kurds (14), Arabs (4), and Syriacs (4) – and a Chechen as deputy minister – assigned to the ministries of Cezîre Canton. Kurds outnumber Arabs, Syriacs and Chechens because of the following reasons. First, population and political mobilization is higher among Kurds than others and also they have more political parties and organizations in Rojava compared to Arabs, Syriacs and Chechens. Ministry of Internal Affairs Kenan Berekat says Arabs still have concerns about a possibility that The Syrian regime may return to the region and decree and penalize those who cooperate with Kurds to maintain autonomy and defy authority of the regime in Rojava (Amûdê, 26 August 2014). Tariqê Brahîmê Êzîdî who is a member of Serêkaniyê People's House and Peace and Reconciliation Commission, contends that

“No one can do something wrong to the Arabs. That would be violation of the ‘red line’ of the administration. There are some Arabs who support us and some who do not. Not because they do not want to support us, but they are afraid of gangs [the ISIS]. They think that the gangs may come back and seize their lands. Majority of Arabs are not with us and they do not have a strong belief [that autonomy will maintain]. There are some who cooperate with us but the majority still avoids working with us.” (Serêkaniyê, August 24, 2014)

Minister of Agriculture Salih al-Zabba also supports the argument that Arabs have fears but he notes that at the beginning Kurds were also distant to the autonomous administration but the more they know that this administration is not separationist, the more they participate (Dirbêsiyê, August 25, 2014).

Ahmad Mohammad Casim who is a member of Serêkaniyê People's Assembly does not agree with the arguments above and says that

“We [Arabs] had relations with Kurds before the revolution, too. We had relations with all peoples. We are nations of a country. There are no differences between Kurds, Arabs or other nations. This country is for all of us. I never had such a fear. We [Kurds and Arabs] were together even when the Syrian regime was here. We lived together, there was no fear. We are neither afraid now.” (Serêkaniyê, August 24, 2014)

Although the interviewees have different perceptions of the participation of Arabs, the fact is that participation of non-Kurdish groups still is not fully achieved. Syriacs and their armed forces, as another example, have been divided into two with one part (the Sutoro)

supports the RDA while the other backs the regime. The second group has a very limited mobilization and can only operate in a restricted area in the city of Qamişlo because the regime is present only in Qamişlo in Cezîre Canton. No matter what side they support, Syriacs socially, militarily and politically are more active than Arabs in Cezîre Canton, probably because their population is small and they want to ensure that they are protected. Chechens, however, are the smallest constituent people and has the weakest social and political mobilization in Cezîre Canton.

Berekat also points out the multicultural characteristics of Cezîre and explains what TEV-DEM has done so far to assure social and political participation of all nations:

“We [the Cezîre Canton administration], in cooperation with the TEV-DEM, established many assemblies in Arab regions and villages. We said “we should establish a joint administration that Arabs can also participate. Everybody participates and we establish a democratic system in the canton. Cezîre Canton is a beautiful and colorful region. It is a colorful garden with its Kurds, Syriacs, Arabs, Assyrians and Chechens. We also want to establish such a colorful and beautiful administration” (Amûdê, August 26 2014)

As Berekat notes, the Democratic Society Movement has been focusing on the establishment of local joint assemblies in almost all the towns and cities of Rojava. Two of them, for example, were established in cities of Heseke and Serêkaniyê (ANHA 2015) and Efrîn Canton where mostly Kurds and Arabs live together. These assemblies aim to promote solidarity among Kurds and Arabs to defend the cities against any armed groups who want to seize settlements in Rojava. They were also established to let peoples get closer and be able to work together to maintain peace<sup>24</sup> by solving problems on their own. Also, as Benedikter (2014: 100) asserts, autonomies provide better conditions to local communities to participate in politics, audit the political elites, and contribute social and financial development of autonomous regions. The local formations established by the TEV-DEM aim to include the local population in the social, political and financial development of the RDA and maintain multi-ethnic structure of Cezîre region.

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<sup>24</sup> In March 2015, ISIS carried out two bomb attacks on Kurds during Newroz celebrations in Heseke and 52 civilians including children lost their lives. Many Kurds say that ISIS is attempting to create conflicts between Arabs and Kurds so that it can easily enter into Rojava cities by getting help from Arabs. Condemning the attacks, an Arab member of Efrîn Brotherhood Assembly of Kurds and Arabs Abdulrahman Ghazal says “We wish a happy Newroz to all Kurds who struggle for their freedom, and unity and solidarity among Kurds and Arabs. We condemn these attacks lacking humanity and moral values. No religion or belief can accept their [ISIS’s] assaults” (ANHA 2015).

Cezîre Canton Legislative Assembly<sup>25</sup> has 91 delegates from all nations living in the canton. Hakem Xelo, the Co-president of the assembly, says the assembly includes all identities:

“There are 12 parties and more than 30 civil society organizations (women, youths, and culture and art organizations). There are also independent people and organizations. There are already Syriac parties and Haya al-Wataniya al-Arabiya. Arabs, Syriacs and Chechens are with us in this assembly. Representatives of all religions Muslims, Christians, and Êzidîs are also in the assembly. All the societal constituents are already in this administration.” (Amûdê, August 30, 2014)

Including representatives from almost all political parties<sup>26</sup>, civil society organizations and institutions are substantial for making laws for a greater part of society. An important note about enacting laws for greater society comes from Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Shamiram Shamoun, a member of the Syriac Union Party. She believes that the Syriacs have representation in the autonomy and she works both for rights of the Syriac people and women in the RDA. She further explains how the legislative assembly makes decisions and what happens if there is a veto by any group or party:

“If we have objections to decisions or proposals, we utter and discuss them in the assembly. What we want is that decisions must be for benefit of all constituent peoples. We cannot privilege or discriminate against any constituent. We do not make and impose personal decisions. If a decision which we find inappropriate to our society is made, we take it to the assembly and review and amend it so that we can also accept that decision.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014).

Kelleher (2005) argues that “veto rights over laws or decisions affecting a minority's vital interests offer a minority a powerful guarantee that these interests cannot be overridden by majority voting”. Shamoun’s explanation is an example of minorities’ right to veto that protects Syriacs or any other community against a possible majoritarian tendency.

In the RDA, the delegates of the parties, organizations and communities decide if a draft should be enacted or not. Such a relation between official bodies and civil society organizations, parties and communities reveals that the RDA has taken an essential step

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<sup>25</sup> This assembly enacts laws from the drafts proposed by the ministries that consult the NGOs working on the same or similar matters. For instance, the ministry of women consults Yekîtiya Star (the women’s organization in Rojava) or Navenda Zanist û Perwerdehiya Jin[an] (Center of Science and Education for Women) to propose a draft law for violence against women.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted here that Kurdish parties in ENKS have not sent delegates to the assembly because they are against autonomy and have conflicting relations with TEV-DEM.

towards establishing and maintaining an interdependent relation to ensure that both the assembly works faster and enacts laws and the civil society organizations, parties and communities become more active participants of the legal processes and regulations.

Ashui Gawrieh, the head of the Syriac Union Party and Executive Member of Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean People, also argues that

It is the first time that peoples have established such an administration. Before that when a nation got power, it tried to suppress the other nations. All the problems in the Middle East result from that. Democratic Autonomy, however, rejects such an approach. It also rejects establishing a nation state. That is why Syriacs join this administration (Adanmiş, 2015).

What mainly leads Syriacs to support and participate in the RDA is that the RDA's recognizes all identities equal and encourages unity of the differences. With regard to the way that different ethnic and religious groups are legally accommodated in Cezîre Canton, Hakem Xelo further says that:

“When we work on a law we give that right [to be part of law making] to all religions and nations. All are equal. This is a common life. We are enacting laws based on cooperation in law and duty. Rights of all religions, sects and nations are protected in the social contract. That is why all problems are solved and no conflict remains. What was the conflict? Kurds before did not have the right to speak in native language. They had no national rights and were not recognized. Syriacs had the same problems. Here we wanted to solve problems of all nations, religions and sects in a collective way. People solve their problems, defend their rights and see themselves as part of this [the RDA]. They join and defend it [the RDA].” (Amûdê, August 30, 2014)

Park (2003: 315) argues that democratic citizenship and functioning democratic institutions are two important factors increasing quality of local government. The Social Contract seems to be an important step towards democratic citizenship since it recognizes all identities and promotes equality. Xelo reminds that the existing problems stem from lack of recognition of identities in Syria. He also emphasizes share of responsibilities or duties to be achieved by all people no matter from what ethnic group they are from. The contribution, indeed, includes all social, political, financial, educational and military responsibilities that make the RDA maintain. The Syriac military organization Sutoro's joining into YPG or the Arab citizens being recruited in self-defense forces could be examples of contribution to self-defense forces and protection of the RDA. Self-Defense Law was approved in October 2014. Before registering people to the self-defense forces, ministries of defense inform them by holding meetings (ANF 2014). After the ISIS's attacks on Kobanî that started in September

2014, the ministries have organized several training sessions for the registered people who are expected to serve as soldiers for 6 months. In Cezîre Canton, hundreds of Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs have registered for the self-defense forces (ANHA 2015). In the economic organizations, like the cooperatives built in Serêkaniyê, Arabs are also encouraged to take part and develop economic activities of the region, which is another contribution expected by all nations in Cezîre Canton.

Deputy President of Cezîre Canton Hussein Azam, who was born to a Kurdish mother and an Arab father, says he has never perceived Kurds and Arabs differently:

“I feel I belong to both [Kurdish and Arab identity]. For example, when I went to that camp [the Newroz camp set for Êzidîs from Şingal] to work there were also the European journalists and parliamentarians. A European parliamentarian told me “you are an Arab, why do you help Kurd so much?” I said we are all equal and united. When we say democratic autonomous administration, we refer to every nation. We mean Arabs, Kurds, Syriacs, and Chechens... There are all the nations.” (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

Azam’s personal experience at the camp set for Kurdish Êzidîs fleeing the ISIS’s attacks on Şingal is more than an example of rapprochement after a humanitarian crisis but a social and historical fact that most of the people in Rojava have experienced. Arab Member of Serêkaniyê People’s Assembly Ahmad Mohammad Casim, for instance, says

“We are used to live together. In the past some Arabs did wrong to Kurds. There were some who did not think that Kurds are a different nation. However, after the RDA was established 50-60% of them changed their minds. They understood the truth. After the Rojava Revolution, they saw that who the YPG and Asayîş [Public Security Forces] protect not only Kurds, but all nations.” (Serêkaniyê, August 24, 2014)

Solidarity between Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, and Chechens through joint organizations or assemblies also makes it possible for them to know each other better. Paker (2013: 48) argues that social psychology studies reveal that prejudices or in-group and out-group discriminations may be mitigated through intergroup contact and relations. Çuhadar (2013: 264) also discusses that social contact is one of the most important tools that people have to deal with prejudices, discrimination and intergroup conflicts. People who have been discriminated, biased and become distant to each other – due to political and social conflicts emerging from the Syrian government’s policies or social discrimination – now get closer in Rojava. They are the constituents of a new administration and, as Casim notes, they need each other to be able to survive at the ongoing war.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Salih Gedo points out the importance of recognizing each other to achieve the aims of the autonomy:

“We have to accept each other in such a historical period. We have to accept all non-Kurdish constituents, too. We have to share power and set relations with them so that we can gain political achievements and adopt it into the society. That is important especially for the international affairs. All people should now that this administration does not belong to a single party. It is administration of all constituents. There are 57 parties and organizations acting together. Contrary to what some people argue, this administration does not belong to the PYD and TEV-DEM. This is not true. There are 57 parties and organizations in the RDA.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Salih Gedo was the general secretary of the Syrian Kurdish Left Party (PÇKS) that at the beginning was a member party of the Syrian Kurdish National Coalition (ENKS), but later on decided to join the autonomous administration. He also draws attention to discussions on whether Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the only power in Rojava. Despite being the most powerful party, it is not only the PYD, as Gedo notes, but 57 parties and organizations who established and rule the autonomous administration. It must also be noted that the majority of the regional and international media report that People’s Defense Forces (the YPG) are the military wing of the PYD. This is a wrong assumption since the YPG also recruits Syrians who have their own parties and organizations, Arabs who have no membership in any party and Kurds who are from different Kurdish parties. However, it is true that at the beginning most of the fighters in the YPG were either members or sympathizers of the PYD. The YPG now has tens of thousands of fighters from different ethnic, religious and political backgrounds and has been fighting against various armed groups attacking Rojava regions and peoples.

The Co-President of Cezîre Canton Legislative Assembly Nazira Gawrieh, in an interview, notes that Syrians have witnessed many social problems and never become as active as they are now in the RDA:

Right now the [Rojava] Democratic Autonomous Administration and [its] Social Contract protect the rights of all communities. All of them are free in living with their identities and cultures. This is the first time that this happens in the Middle East. We the Syriac people, for the first time, have been actively participating in the administration of the region (Ebdo and Stalin, 2014).

Nazira Gawrieh’s argument about the uniqueness of the RDA in the Middle East is discussed by others, as well. Cambridge University’s Miley and Riha (2015), who went to Cezîre Canton in March 2015, argue that



The revolutionary project of Rojava, based on democratic participation, gender emancipation, and multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and even multi-national accommodation, represents a third way — perhaps the only way — for achieving a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Azadî (2014) also argues that the RDA is promising for the future of the Middle East since it has potential for a social revolution in the midst of one of the most destructive humanitarian crises of the last 20 years. All these arguments on comparison between the RDA and political systems and structures in the Middle East show that some consider socio-political and administrative changes as evidences proving that Rojava substantially destroys the classical understanding of governance in the Middle East. Bektaş (2014) also defines Rojava as a region where “peoples come together in solidarity with each other rather than at war under sectarianism stoked by colonial powers” and believes that “the revolution in Rojava is the only remote hope for a different kind of Middle East”.

The Social Contract of the RDA takes an initial step for recognizing and protecting diversities. However, recognition alone may not be enough to accommodate diversities. Benedikter (2014: 74) argues that autonomies must also protect the rights and freedoms of smaller social and ethnic groups and make sure that they also benefit from advantages of the autonomies. Thus, the Social Contract must also assure that practical steps are taken otherwise the social contract will mean nothing but a unimplemented written statement of the RDA. One of these areas is culture and the Cezîre Canton administration needs to carefully work on so that it can save all cultures, especially those facing the threat of extinction. Benedikter (2009: 46) says “the minority language must be used as an official or second official language at all levels of administration located in the autonomous territory”. The Social Contract of the RDA recognizes Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac as official languages of Rojava and encourages all other languages spoken in the region to be taught and be medium of education. Referring to freedom in doing cultural activities in Kurdish and Syriac languages, Minister of Culture Nehwend Mihemed says:

“After establishment of the administration, indeed, we can get everything easliy. In the past there was fear about carrying out works in Kurdish and Syriac, but now we are not afraid. We can do everything [in Kurdish and Syriac] easily. It [the fear] is over. We are aware of our culture and we learn it without fear.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Benedikter (2009: 24) says that “linguistic, cultural and ethnic minorities are the prototypes of entities in need of protection. In order to preserve their culture, language or their religion they are interested in having their own schools, other cultural institutions, and so on”.

After 2011, Kurds established Saziya Zimanê Kurdî (SZK, Kurdish Language Institution) to learn their native language. Before 2011, Syrians could learn their language only in some of the private institutions. Chechens, Turkmens and Armenians had no such right before the autonomy. Now all ethnic communities in Rojava have the right to learn and teach their languages at the institutions. Education in native language is an important opportunity to prevent language from disappearing. Cezîre Canton Minister of Education Mihemed Salih Ebdo notes in the interview that

“[Course materials] in Arabic already exist. There is a problem is with Kurdish and Syriac course materials. Our Syriac friends said they are going to prepare course materials in Syriac and the ministry will publish them. If Syrians demand from us, the ministry will work for them as it works for Kurds. We [staff at the ministry] are not nationalist and since we are not nationalist, we were assigned to that job.” (Dirbêsiyê, August 24, 2014)

As Hannum (1990: 461) points out, in autonomies, local population should have the right to decide on the content of the curriculum based on their history, traditions, and culture. In Cezîre Canton Kurds and Syrians autonomously prepare education materials. The ministry of education is open to cooperation with Syrians not to let Syriac lag behind Kurdish and Arabic in educational institutions. Benedikter (2012: 75) considers this as cultural autonomy of minorities and by granting this right to non-Kurds the RDA ensures the right to education in native language to all constituent peoples. Correspondingly, Ebdo’s emphasis on the non-nationalist character of the RDA shows that the ministry does not favor Kurdish identity or language over the others and that, for the minorities, decreases the threat of being assimilated or suppressed by the majority.

Ciwan Dêrikî (2014), a member of Kurdish Language Institution, last year had attended a conference on education in native language organized in Amed (Diyarbakir) and said:

“[In Rojava] language revolution started with armed revolution. We managed to achieve language revolution and resistance of the YPG hand in hand but we did not forbid other languages. Courses in Arabic and English continued. We pioneered Syrians to open their schools. They now learn their native language. Syriac teachers for the first time teach at their own schools since the Sassanian Empire.

Before Democratic Autonomous Administration was established Syrians already had the right to learn their language in private institutions, yet what Ciwan Dêrikî discusses is slightly different from this fact. After declaration of the autonomy almost all the regions in Rojava were taken under control by the local people. When the Kurds transformed the regime’s

schools into education institutions of the RDA, part of Syriac community also joined them and established their own institutions in a couple of cities, like Dêrik and Qamişlo, and started teaching courses in Syriac. All these indicate that cultural autonomy exists within the RDA and both the ministries and civil society organizations collaborate to achieve a multicultural and multilingual society in Rojava.

Assimilation policies of the Syrian regime have been effective since a great number of Syriacs, Chechens and Kurds forgot to speak their native languages and adopted Arab culture. The Sutoro member in Dêrik identifies a connection between defending culture and national existence, and how Syriacs decided to join the autonomous administration to protect both:

“The Syrian regime is fascist and wanted to assimilate us into Arab identity. It did not want to accept us as a different entity. It imposed assimilation. When political mobilization started in Syria and Rojava, the PYD and the Syriac Union Party came together in the light of Abdullah Öcalan’s brotherhood approach. We, as Syriacs, responded to the call for brotherhood and took part. We gained our freedom and colors, flag and symbol back thanks to the autonomy. We did not have them under the Syrian regime. There was only the Ba’ath Party imposing one language, one flag and one land policy. When Sutoro was founded Syriacs not only in Rojava, but also all Mesopotamia and Europe had the belief that now there is a military force to defend Syriacs, their culture, language and religion. All these became possible with the democratic autonomy.” (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

The Sutoro member identifies three reasons why some Syriacs joined the autonomous administration. First, The Syrian regime did not recognize Syriac identity and wanted to assimilate Syriacs while autonomy in Rojava encourages co-existence and solidarity. Second, Syriacs believe in brotherhood and mutual support among ethnic groups in Rojava and Syria. Third, the autonomy recognizes Syriacs with all cultural characteristics without requiring acculturation into the Kurdish culture. Forth, considering the Syriac security forces as an organization to defend Syriacs, and their culture, language and religion shows that Syriacs believe armed struggle is one of the important ways to exist in addition to political participation and social mobilization. His concerns recently have been justified when the ISIS attacked Syriac people in the city of Til Temir (in Cezîre Canton) and villages around it. The ISIS abducted hundreds of Syriac people and blew up one of their oldest churches in Syria (ANF 2015). That has left dozens of killings and cultural destruction, which is, in fact, one of the ways to assimilate or wipe out cultural characteristics. If there was no armed organization of Syriacs, the results of the attacks would definitely be more detrimental. Êzidîs, who have been subjected to the same attacks on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2014 had no protection against ISIS that abducted thousands of Êzidî women, killed hundreds of Êzidî men and children. Soon after

this tragedy Êzîdîs announced the establishment of Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şingalê (YBŞ, Sinjar Resistance Units) and now there are hundreds of fighters in YBŞ who fight to take the city of Şingal from ISIS. These two cases indicate the importance of self-defense forces for the minorities in the Middle East to defend themselves against radical Islamists and fundamental organizations.

Regarding the domestic security forces, Benedikter (2009: 243) discusses that “the autonomous control of local security forces under regional control (police) can be helpful in building up more confidence among the civilian population after long, violent conflicts with the central state”. The RDA still needs such security forces since the conflict continues and minorities need protection. To the question of whether Arabs and Chechens also have the right to form their own defense units, Cezîre Canton Ministry of Self-Defense Ebdulkerîm Saroxan says:

“All of them have the right to establish their defense forces; however they should act according to the [Rojava’s] Social Contract. Any community who wants to establish its armed forces must comply with the [Rojava’s] Social Contract and these forces must be part of YPG [People’s Defense Forces] or Asayîş [Public Security Forces]”. (Qamişlo, August 21, 2014)

Not being provided such a right could (and can) create conflicts between Kurds and other ethnic groups in Rojava. Ghai (2003: 23) discusses that an autonomous region may prevent emerging such conflicts by granting group autonomy and Syrians in Cezîre Canton apparently enjoys group autonomy. Saroxan also believes that the communities in Rojava should protect themselves, and any weaknesses in defense will decrease trust in democratic autonomy in the region (Oso, 2014). It is obvious that self-defense in the autonomy is crucial and will continue to exist for protection and development of both the administration and communities.

There are also Women’s Defense Units (the YPJ) and Asayîşa Jinê (Women’s Security Forces, the WSF) in Rojava. The YPJ is a part of the YPG and operates at the borders of Rojava cities alongside with YPG. The WSF however is the women’s branch in general Asayîş forces and rather operates like police force dealing with crimes committed against women. Naîme Mihemed, an executive of the WSF in Kobanî says the WSF not only protects women against violence but also makes an effort to provide social support to women in cooperation with Mala Jinê (Women’s House) (Keskin, 2014). The relation between official bodies and NGOs are also observed in the issues regarding women in Rojava. Nergis Botan

(2014) argues that Mala Jinê aims to create a democratic family system by protecting and educating women at the Navenda Zanist û Perwerdehiya Jinê (NZPJ, Center for Education and Science for Women). All these social organizations and mobilization among women in Rojava indicate that autonomy provides a significant room to the women so that they actively participate in defense, politics, and education.

Emîna Umer, Cezîre Canton Minister of Women, explains the process of resolving issues women encounter and the relation between the ministry and social organizations in Rojava:

“Women who are subjected to violence go to the Women’s House first and make a complaint there. The Women’s House investigates their problems and if it solves them the women return to their house and problems do not maintain. If no solution was reached, the complaint is passed over to the court. If the court finds a solution, women return to their family, if not, women come and explain their problems to us. A woman came and said us “there is a woman whose relatives want to kill her. We want you to take her with you”. In such cases, for example, we visit her, investigate and assess her situation. If necessary, we take her to the Women’s Protection House of the ministry.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

The RDA inspires local organizations with confidence to solve issues before taking them to the official institutions of the autonomous government. This is not because the autonomy does not or cannot solve such issues, but it wants to extend autonomy’s roots into all local areas through organizations. However, in case of need, as it happens when they register women to the Women’s Protection House, the ministry co-operates with civil society organizations to ensure that women are defended against any possible attacks by the family. Umer also notes that Ministry of Women and Ministry of Social Affairs work together, especially on some economy projects for women and adds that:

“We talked to all women organizations and asked their opinions and said to them that they can come to us for their financial projects. Now we are planning to open a business unit where women can produce handicrafts. All women organizations are partners of this business. We will sell the products for women. The income will be given to women who need financial support.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

The ministry so far drafted more than 30 laws setting forth to solve problems of women and regulate and improve their living conditions in the autonomy. Umar says the ministry has a cooperative relation with women’s organizations and explains how they get together:

“After the ministry of women was established we met all women organizations. We introduced ourselves and tried to know them. We wanted to see their systems, aims, problems, what they think about the ministry, what they demand, what they

work on and what we can do for them. We invite all to the ministry and have meetings with them. Whenever we have a meeting at the ministry we also invite them to hear their voices, too.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

The women’s organization and Ministry of Women apparently have established close relations. It is also these organizations that mostly give direction to works and projects of the ministry. Such a bottom-up model of policy making in the RDA also ensures participation of civil society organizations into decision making processes. An important point that Mizgîn Zêdan refers and Ole Waever (2012: 273) also argues is that that especially in the Middle East religious traditions justify the men’s privileges. Thus it is possible to say that women have multiple fronts to struggle on to gain their rights and become free members of their societies. Women in the RDA have appropriate opportunities and motivation to achieve this through their integration in the autonomy and active participation in all areas of life.

Given the religious and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and the fight between religious communities, seculars, and non-believers, religious diversity or presence of non-believers in Cezîre Canton could be a serious issue. However, the RDA, compared to other regions of Syria, could preclude emergence of conflicts stemming from such diversities. Related to the question of how Rojava Autonomy approaches religious diversity and non-believers, the Minister of Religious Affairs Mihemed El Qadirî argues the following:

“God willing, truth and brotherhood of all people in the administration showed our peoples and believers that our action is right and legitimate. We supported our peoples and did a lot for them. We showed both the believers and non-believers that our aim is humanity and our path is the right path. Our honesty in working led those who did not like us and perceived us as enemy approach us. We embraced them and they embraced us.” (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

El Qadirî’s argument points out the possibility that a common point may bring all religious groups and non-believers together, and in the autonomous administration this is done through the discourse of humanity. According to El Qadirî, one of the reasons why even those who had opposed the administration at the beginning now want to be part of the autonomy is the ministry’s humanistic perspective. He also stresses that:

“We make our decisions based on humanity and compassion. For me the first reference is the holy Koran, then Sunnah of Prophet Mohammad. My deputies also have their own holy books. Christians have the Bible. Êzidîs have their own book and rules. They also share their perceptions and decisions. We then make our decisions with the society, not only me. I made a speech at the Muslim Believers Union. I gave a fatwa and said I am responsible for it. I said “Êzidîs have a holy book and they have the right to live their religion. The same right exists for Christians and Jews. If there were Jews here, the Torah would also be

recognized holy. Everybody lives according to his/her book and belief. We have the red line and it is humanity and compassion. No one should violate that red line. We must take this base consider all aspects in decision making.” (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

The RDA seemingly adopts a humanistic approach to prevent any conflicts stemming from religious diversity, and by doing this it does not let a religious understanding dominate the others. Having equality as a principle in the Social Contract<sup>27</sup> appears to be a helpful approach to the diversities, yet the extent that it is practiced in everyday life determines the degree of society’s willingness to consider each other as equal. Given the recognition of Êzidî as a religion, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has taken a crucial step to transform non-Êzidî society’s perception about Êzidîs. In many regions of Kurdistan including Rojava, Êzidî community was not respected and even in some conservative regions, especially in southern Kurdistan, people still harass the Êzidî community. Mihemed El Qadirî also notes that people in Rojava, especially in Cezîre Canton historically respect each other’s beliefs and so far did not have serious issues stemming from religious diversity (Amûdê, 26 August 2014). Absence of such conflicts strengthens relations and foster cooperation between religious communities.

### **5.3 Relation between RDA and the Syrian Government**

Autonomous administration is a type of de-centralization and devolution of authority and the majority of the existing autonomies are outcomes of official agreements between local powers or actors and central government. According to the World Bank’s definition

Devolution usually transfers responsibilities for services to municipalities that elect their own mayors and councils, raise their own revenues, and have independent authority to make investment decisions. In a devolved system, local governments have clear and legally recognized geographical boundaries over which they exercise authority and within which they perform public functions. It is this type of administrative decentralization that underlies most political decentralization.

The RDA fits to this definition, but it lacks two elements: (a) the RDA does not draw any geographical borders in Syria and (b) the RDA has not been nationally or internationally recognized yet. When The Syrian regime’s officers withdrew from Rojava cantons, the Syrian

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<sup>27</sup> The Social Contract is considered as the constitution of the RDA and was drafted in January 2014. Depending on the needs of the society and administration, ministries of the RDA continue adding new articles to the constitution.

government and local parties or organizations in Rojava did not sign any agreement. The Syrian regime even avoided talking about de facto Rojava Autonomy for almost four years.

Negotiations are important for conflict settlements and peace agreements. Alfredson and Cungu (2008: 4) argue that “negotiation processes are critical for policy-making in democratic societies, a factor with the potential to shape policy outcomes and to influence which policies are implemented and how”. However, the conflicting parties in Syria are not the point that they negotiate. Cezîre Canton officials expressed their willingness to negotiate with the Syrian government over self-administration and policies they should adopt in the future. However, since the beginning of the civil war Kurds had to go their own ways of dealing with the crisis and achieve their political agendas. Co-president of Cezîre Canton Hediye Yûsif says

“In Rojava, from the beginning [of the civil war] we decided to go the third way. We are neither supporter of the regime’s nor of the opposition’s policies. We have the third way and we rely on power of the society and get power from it. That is how the autonomy works: belief in a democratic society. Therefore we have no relationships with the regime and even sometimes we had clashes with the regime. When the regime oppresses and carries out violence against our people, we respond to it and defend our people. No difference whether they are Kurds, Arabs, or Syrians, we defend all. At the beginning of our revolution, we did not have military purposes. Our methods were peaceful but the attacks on our revolution forced us to choose the way of the legitimate defense. We aimed to protect our people and land. So, whoever attacks us, no matter whether it is the gangs, the Syrian regime or any other parties, we defend ourselves and respond to the attacks. So far we did not have any negotiation with the Syrian regime.” (Rimêlan, August 28, 2014)

Hediye Yûsif, as the other interviewees, names the political, social and military developments in Rojava as revolution. The RDA did not differentiate the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) from The Syrian regime at the beginning since none of them ever recognized Kurds as a national entity and opened their rights up for discussion. Despite that the ENKS is still a member of the SNC; so far no clear statement has been made by the SNC about what the status of Kurds in Syria would be. Since the crisis intensified every year, as Yûsif explains, Kurds did not feel secure and formed their own armed organizations to defend themselves from both the regime and the Free Syrian Army of the SNC, as well as from the radical jihadi groups like the Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIS.

The RDA does not have separatist motives; contrary to that it considers itself as part of Syria and one of its peoples. Ekrem Huso, Prime Minister of Cezîre Canton, explains his



perceptions of the autonomous administration of The Syrian regime, country and people as follows

“So far we have not negotiated with the Syrian regime. The revolution started to remove the regime from here. We have no problems with Syrian people. Our problem is with the regime. The regime violated peoples’ and individuals rights, revoked democracy. We will first come together with the Syrian people and establish the future’s Syria, and then negotiate with the regime.” (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

According to Ekrem Huso, the RDA first needs to come together with all peoples of Syria and collaborate to establish a new government and then a possible negotiation with the government will be possible. In order to achieve that, the RDA recently took an initial step. The Kurdish Initiative for Democratic Solution in Syria, an initiative formed by the TEV-DEM, proposed a project that calls on all parties from Syria to start negotiations over ending the war and discussing establishment of a democratic administration. The project includes the following basic principles:

- The transition from an authoritarian, nationalist, and chauvinistic structure to a decentralized democratic system in which everyone shares in self-management
- The struggle against Salafist jihadist groups of any name
- [Protection of] the unity of the Syrian nation
- Respect for the diversity of the Syrian community with all its constituent peoples
- Draft a statement of a peaceful and democratic solution, and discuss it with all political forces that support it
- Form the largest possible grouping of these political forces, and hold an expanded meeting of their representatives. This meeting will decide on ways to follow up on the project and implement it on the ground
- Hold a Syrian national conference (Syrian Democratic Solution Peace Conference), sponsored by the United Nations, in which all political forces that believe in a peaceful resolution participate, including civil society organizations and community actors
- Elect a council of the conference with specific powers. The Syrian Democratic Council must include members of all the constituent peoples, taking into account the proportion of women and youth (Kurdish Question 2015).

Îlham Ehmed, executive member of the TEV-DEM, notes that the initiative had no negotiations with the Syrian regime but reforms and political developments may open a way for meetings:

“Meeting with the regime depends on developments and reforms. If this project advances, accordingly we may determine a certain approach. We can negotiate to end the crisis, why should not we? For us not persons or masses but the society is important. As far as we develop our relation with the society, the existing relations

develop and more parties and people join us. The project gets stronger with relations we set with peoples in the region [Rojava].” (Qamişlo, August 19, 2014)

In support of Ekrem Huso’s statement on the need for unity among opposition groups to negotiate with the regime, Îlham Ehmed also emphasizes the importance of establishing the relations between the peoples of the region before the initiative or the RDA starts a negotiation process with the regime. Ehmed says:

“So far the regime has not made any statement about the project. However, if the regime also accepts, wants the war end and political processes begin, and makes some reforms for establishment of a democratic Syria, they may have an exchange.” (Qamişlo, August 19, 2014)

Recently the Syrian National Reconciliation Minister Ali Haydar who visited the autonomous administration in the city of Qamişlo of Cezîre Canton declared that the leadership of the Syrian government is willing to negotiate self-management in northern Syria (Now 2015). This was the first time a Syrian government official explains what the government plans to do with the RDA. However, no concrete steps have been taken so far or at least they have not been released yet. As the RDA and the Syrian regime did not have negotiations over the authorities of the central government and autonomous administration, the only source is the prospects of Cezîre Canton officials and representatives of the civil society organizations on possible authorities to be granted to the RDA. The TEV-DEM executive member Aldar Xelîl notes in that:

“If the Syrian government wants to have unity and peace, and establish a democratic government, it must come and recognize this autonomous administration. I think the regime that has been defeated that much and lost the control in Syria must recognize [the autonomy]. I am hopeful about that.” (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Stefan Wolff (2005) – a prominent scholar working on ethnic conflicts and territorial autonomies – draws attention to importance of cooperation between the political leaders and to have a functional autonomy and possible ways to prevent conflict:

If political leaders really co-operate with one another and have the interests of their constituents in mind then both regional and ethnically-based autonomies can function quite well. And, above all, they can contribute to preventing the kind of violent ethnic conflict that we’ve seen so much over the past decade and a half across Europe.

Given the current saturation, a similar cooperation in Syria does not seem to take place soon and it may take a long time and so much effort, however, to keep unity and build peace in the country. As long as the conflict continues in Syria, it becomes more destructive and difficult

to imagine a future promising unity and peace in the short run. The RDA is ready to negotiate with the government and other parties from Syria on the ground that they accept and recognize the RDA. Aldar Xelfil also says that the TEV-DEM has always been ready to negotiate issues regarding recognition and authorities of the autonomy and possibility of putting the self-governance system into practice in the other regions of Syria.

Benedikter categorizes autonomies into three: territorial (political), cultural and local and refers to a draft document called *Autonomy Rights of Ethnic Groups in Europe* (Benedikter, 2009: 52) to define the scope of territorial autonomies<sup>28</sup>:

<b>Language rights and language policy</b>	<b>Social services and security</b>
<b>The right to ethnic group’s national emblems, use of names and toponyms</b>	Regional transport and communications
The right to settle any question of possible second citizenship	Energy production
<b>Education, including higher education</b>	Banks and other financial institutions
<b>Cultural institutions and programs</b>	<b>Regional and local police</b>
<b>Radio, TV, electronic media</b>	<b>Taxation for regional purposes</b>
<b>Licensing of professions and trades</b>	<b>Environmental protection</b>
<b>Use of natural resources</b>	<b>Urban planning, development programs</b>
<b>Health care</b>	Regional economic policy, incentives for economic branches

*Figure 2: Autonomy Rights of Ethnic Groups in Europe*

Autonomous administrations usually have full authority over all governmental institutions except for foreign affairs, national defense and treasury. Depending on the demands and willingness of the central governments to share the power, some authorities are provided to the autonomous regions. Almost all the officials note that authorities of the Rojava Autonomy will be decided upon a joint agreement between Syrian government and autonomous administration. Answering the question whether the decision on foreign relations of Cezîre Canton will be made by the autonomous administration or not, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Salih Gedo notes that:

<sup>28</sup> The bold items are already practiced in the RDA. Due to the ongoing war and lack of facilities, the rest is not working now.

“Then we will discuss this matter it the autonomous administration. My personal view is that we will maintain that authority. We manage the affairs related to the autonomous administration and I believe it will remain as it is.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Despite that many officials say boundaries and authorities of the autonomy will be decided after the negotiations with the government, Salih Gedo adds another item (managing foreign affairs) to Benedikter’s scope. The RDA has already had visits from and to neighboring countries, especially to Turkey and Iraq, because of its relations with the Kurdish population and politicians in those countries, and EU countries to introduce the RDA and ask for help and recognition. It has recently developed more advanced diplomatic relations with international community. Especially the ISIS occupation in Kobanî and world-wide mobilization of Kurds put pressure on the international system to see the RDA and offer help to the YPG and YPJ fighting the ISIS on the ground became main factors leading a greater diplomatic network. Many politicians, officers, human rights activists and academics have paid visits to the Cezîre Canton administration. Most of the visitors entered the canton from South Kurdistan (Sêmalka–Pêşxabûr customs gate) where the Syrian government has no governmental presence or military deployment. Gedo’s statement indicates that the RDA wants to ensure to establish regional and international relations without advising to the Syrian regime and that means that the RDA may ask to adopt its own foreign affairs policies. One possible reason for this may be the fact that the RDA aims to maintain relationships with Kurdish population in Turkey, Iraq and Iran without requiring approval from the Syrian government.

#### **5.4. Relation between the RDA and Kurds**

Kurds are not recognized as a national entity by Turkey, Syria and Iran and they have no official status in the constitutions of these countries. Kurds in South Kurdistan (Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq) have been ruling a federal government in northern Iraq and they represent themselves in the international community without getting approval from the Baghdad government. Recently, the KRG gained the right to attend the meetings between the EU and the Baghdad government, and express demands and objections in the decisions made at the EU parliament (Rûdaw 2015). However, it is still not easy for all Kurds to establish and maintain political and diplomatic relations with each other because they do not have authority in the territories they are living. The KRG, for example, would deploy Pêşmerge forces in

Kobanî but that was prevented for a few weeks by the Turkish authorities because they crossed the political borders of Turkey over which Kurds in Turkey had no right. Similarly, Kurds in Turkey still need the approval of Turkish governors in northern Kurdistan or Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara to host Rojava Kurds in Amed (Diyarbakır) or Mêrdîn (Mardin). Kurds in Iran are the least mobilized group because they still face serious charges, mostly imprisonment, torture and executions, whenever they engage in national politics or political activities for their fundamental rights. They have the weakest official and diplomatic contact with Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iraq. Regarding their relations with Kurds in other countries, TEV-DEM member Aldar Xelîl argues that:

“What we actually want is that we should develop the system of democratic confederalism. Kurds are united and historically all peoples in Kurdistan and Mesopotamia are united, which is more than a relation of two neighbors. I would do diplomacy with the Europeans or Americans but my relation to Kurdish brothers is not diplomacy. We have relations by destiny and it must be achieved. What is the solution for that? If the system guaranteeing freedom is achieved in northern Kurdistan and here, changes occur in southern and eastern Kurdistan, then we can establish democratic confederalism with other parts of Kurdistan.”  
(Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Xelîl does not see Kurds as divided and notes that the relation between them is not a matter of diplomacy, but a fact that they have the same destiny. He thinks that re-establishing relations with Kurds in neighboring countries will be possible through democratic confederalism. Also, the RDA and Kurdish politicians in Turkey usually say, they want to ‘remove’ the borders between the two communities of the same nation to have better contact and advance social, political and financial relations. As known, it is not only Kurds but Armenians, Êzîdîs, and Syriacs were also separated by these borders after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish and Syrian states. However, it does not seem possible now to physically remove the borders due to political tensions and ongoing war at the door, but border policy (like the one in the EU) may be adopted to end embargo and isolation on Rojava.

Kurds in Turkey also demand official recognition and status. The negotiations<sup>29</sup> between the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the Turkish government officials started in 2012, yet no amendments about recognition or status of Kurds have been done in the constitution so far. The RDA has always supported the negotiations and stressed that a

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<sup>29</sup> The PKK leadership negotiated for several times with Turkish governments since 1990s yet no peace agreements have been achieved so far.

democratic political solution to the Kurdish Issue in Turkey will also develop the relations between Rojava and Turkey. The Turkish government always degraded Kurds' effort to establish self-governance in Rojava, called the YPG and PYD as terrorist organizations and said it would never tolerate the establishment of a Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Kurds in Rojava, on the other hand, always wanted to establish political and diplomatic relations with Turkey and let the Turkish society know that Kurds in Rojava do not impose any threat to the Turkish state, society and its national unity. Despite the fact that many Rojava Kurds were killed at border cities by the Turkish army, defense forces of the RDA never carried out a military attack against the Turkish military bases at the border. The PYD co-head Salih Muslîm called on Turkey to get rid of its Kurdish phobia and not repeat the same policies that Turkey implemented against the Kurdistan Regional Government in early 2000 (Cemal, 2014). Turkey for a long time did not recognize the federal government of southern Kurdistan (the KRG). However, later on Turkey has developed financial and diplomatic relations with the KRG. Rojava Kurds were hopeful and expected that Turkey would practice cooperative policies also with RDA, which has not happened so far. The RDA shares the longest border with northern Kurdistan and Turkish authorities and as far as Turkey maintains the current perception of the Syrian civil war, it will be the RDA who suffers its results most. The October 6-8 uprising and mass protests by Kurds for Kobanî struck the Turkish government, however it was an important indication that Kurds in western (Rojava) and northern Kurdistan are not really independent communities and they feel a strong affiliation. This also directly affects the developments in the RDA because there are hundreds of people from northern Kurdistan in Rojava who fight in the defense forces, teach at the academies, work in the refugee camps or for construction, and so on. However, not all Kurds and Kurdish parties perceive the RDA in the same way and problems usually occur between the RDA and the KRG.

Political tensions between the RDA and the KRG mostly stem from the ideological differences, their desire to change the organizational and social systems in western (Rojava) and southern Kurdistan (KRG), and control over oil reserves. The RDA wants to establish a decentralized and canton-based administrative and social organization in Rojava while the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partî Dîmuqrâtî Kurdistan or the PDK) which is the strongest party in the KRG, aims to practice the same system it has in South Kurdistan (Northern Iraq). The Patriotic Union Party (Yekîti Nîştîmanî Kurdistan or YNK) and the Gorran Movement which are the other two strongest parties in the KRG have mostly been in favor of the RDA

and asked the KRG parliament to recognize Rojava, but that was always rejected by the PDK. Executives of the PYD and the PKK have many times stated that the PDK moves according to Turkey's agenda because both have strong financial and political relations. When the KRG did not recognize its autonomy and said 'autonomy is temporary and the Kurds will get nothing in Syria', the KCK (Kurdistan Communities' Union that includes both the PKK and the PYD) said that the PDK should change its approach and support Kurds in Rojava (Rojava Report 2014). Barzanî's statement on the RDA was disappointing for many Kurds, especially those in North and West Kurdistan because Barzanî, as one of the national leaders, was expected to recognize and support Kurds in Rojava. Although the TEV-DEM (supported by the PYD and the PKK) and ENKS (supported by the PDK) have had several meetings for political transformation in Rojava, nothing concrete has resulted from the meetings yet. In that sense, the political tension continues, despite the rapprochement among the Kurdish people and armed forces achieved after the attacks on Şingal and Kobanî. The PKK and the PDK met for several times and discussed and agreed on specific issues including the RDA and organizing a Kurdish national congress (Evrensel 2013). The PYD and the TEV-DEM would be two important participants in this congress yet these meetings failed to bring national unity or domestic peace to Kurds.

Discussions on Kurds in Iran have relatively remained weak compared to the discussions on Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The Kurdistan Free Life Party (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê or the PJAK), a member of the KCK, had a ceasefire agreement with Iranian government since 2011. Although sometimes clashes broke out between the PJAK guerrillas and Iranian soldiers, the ceasefire still maintains. Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited the PYD and offered military support against the jihadi Jabhat al-Nusra. Regarding the meetings, Muslîm says

Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs invited me. They wanted to know Kurds. It is clear that without Kurds there will be no solution [in Syria]. We tried to explain reality of Kurds. Iran supports the Syrian regime. Kurds are also an important power and Iran wanted to see what Kurds want and whether they want to divide Syria. It is understood that Kurds are not a wall that everybody can easily jump over. Russia, Europe and Iran changed their perceptions. The only power fighting al-Nusra is Kurds and they [Russia, Europe and Iran] realized this. Iran wanted to support us in the fight against al-Nusra but did not demand anything from us (T24 2013)

Iran also supports the Syrian regime in the whole country, especially areas populated by Nusayris/Alawites in western regions against the opposition forces and the jihadi groups.

According to Dinçer (2012: 22), primary aim of Iran in its involvement in the Syrian crisis is that Iran wants to protect the Shia bloc which does not require a sectarian unity but rather attempts to meet the political and security needs. Dinçer also says Iran never let the Syrian regime fall as far as Syria maintains its alliance with Iran (2012: 23). The international system will need Iran in resolution of the conflict and make sure that Iran has no concerns regarding security and should not intervene in Syria's domestic politics.

Iran's motivation to meet Kurds does not stem from its solidarity with the RDA but it recognizes the jihadi groups as a threat. Iran, similar to Turkey, has concerns about a possible mobilization or uprising by the Kurds who have close ties with the KCK and the PJAK. If the Syrian regime recognizes the RDA and Kurds get an official status, Iran would want to be involved in the political and diplomatic relations between the two and may even prevent Syria from granting recognition to the RDA. The UN special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura invited the Rojava Autonomous Administration and Iranian government to Geneva III Conference to negotiate a settlement of the Syrian crisis with the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition. Both Kurds and Iranian government were excluded from Geneva I and II conferences organized last year. Salih Muslim's statement about Kurds getting stronger seems to be realized by international actors, too. Any agreement to be reached in Geneva III will also affect the relations between Kurds and the Iranian government and consequently the relations between Kurds in Syria and Iran.

### **5.5. Modes of Autonomy Building and Opportunities in RDA**

Autonomy is being implemented with different forms and names in many countries including EU, South Asia, and post-Soviet countries. Some of the autonomies did not remain as autonomous administrations and became independent nation states (i.e. Kosovo and Abkhazia). Some others (i.e. Åland Islands, South Tirol, Bougainville and Aceh) however still well practice its autonomous regimes and developed democracy and social, political and financial integration at national level. Wolf (2011: 5) argues that "the one common feature they [autonomies] all share, directly or indirectly, is the transfer of certain powers from a central government to that of the (thereby created) self-governing entity, and the relatively independent exercise of these powers". According to autonomy definition of Harf and Gurr (2004, 221), autonomy means "a political arrangement in which an ethnic group has some control over its own territory, people, and resources but does not have independence as a



sovereign state”. The RDA is mostly covered by the media and in political and academic discussions as a Kurdish autonomy that covers a specific region and has majority of the oil resources in northern Syria and aims to establish an independent nation state, despite the fact that the RDA rejects a Kurdish nation state in Syria. However, Harf and Gurr’s definition may not be sufficient to fully comprehend nature of the autonomy in Rojava and one may need to observe its practices on the ground.

Autonomy formations around the world show us that there is no single way or pattern of autonomy building and each has its own characteristics stemming from background of the political, social and financial relation between the central governments and local authorities. Benedikter (2009: 42) argues that there are four main ways of autonomy building:

- The autonomy systems were established when the state was created in its current form adopting its current constitution (this was the case for Italy’s five regions with a special statute; Spain as a ‘state of autonomous communities’, Denmark and the Faroe Islands, India’s ADCs).
- The autonomy system was set up to settle international territorial tensions (Åland Islands, South Tyrol), and the autonomy has been initiated or enhanced by international authorities (League of Nations, UN)
- The autonomy system originated from internal conflicts which were settled by bilateral negotiations with the representatives of the concerned region, leading to peace treaties or other agreements, including autonomy provisions (Aceh, Mindanao, Bougainville, Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast, New Caledonia, Comarca Kuna Yala, Northern Ireland, [and] Scotland).
- In some cases, autonomy has been established as a result of the transformation of dependent or colonized territories into autonomous regions, legally on equal footing with the rest of the national territory (Netherlands Antilles, Greenland, French Polynesia and New Caledonia).

Regarding the political and military developments in Rojava and Syria, this thesis argues that the RDA presents a slightly different form of autonomy building compared to the existing autonomy settlements. The following sections of the chapter are going to introduce the most important and visible factors that have become effective in the way that the RDA has been established and could survive so far. This chapter briefly explains opportunities of the RDA and provides a grounded theory of autonomy model based on what has been practiced in the RDA. In the light of the theory, the discussion part will focus on the question of “what are the social and political opportunities leading the RDA emerge and develop in the midst of a civil war?”

### **5.5.1. Civil War and Opportunities in RDA**

Syrian civil war has not affected all the ethnic and religious groups to the same degree. Kurds, thanks to their political and social mobilization led mainly by the PKK in the last 30 years against suppression of the Syrian Baathist regime, could minimize the destructive effects of the war in Rojava. At the beginning of the war, both the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and regime had different expectations from Kurds. SNC wanted Kurds to join the general resistance and fight on their front against The Syrian regime while the Syrian regime wanted Kurds not to upraise and join to the ongoing unrest. However, none of the expectations was fully met and Kurds decided to follow a different strategy, which they define as the 'third way'. According to their strategy Kurds would neither accept to live under the regime's authority nor join the SNC that does not recognize Kurds as an independent ethnic group that demands the right to internal self-determination. Rejecting to be with one of these parties was a big risk for Kurds because they may have had to fight on two fronts against the regime (as happened in Hesekê in 2015) and Free Syrian Army of the SNC (as happened in Serêkaniyê in 2013). What was awaiting Kurds was more than that since they had to fight also the most brutal and long-lasting war with the jihadi groups emerging after 2012 and 2013.

The Syrian regime had to withdraw from cities of Rojava starting from Kobanî on July 19, 2012. No violent events were reported on the day when the regime's soldiers and officers left the city. Co-head of the PYD Salih Muslîm, in an interview, said defense committees of the local people seized all the state institutions and the same process happened in Efrîn where people started ruling themselves (ETHA 2012). That was followed by Cezîre region where Kurds took all the state institutions under control and forced the regime forces leave the region. By establishing their own armed units, later on named as People's Defense Units or in Kurdish acronyms as the YPG, Kurds could protect Rojava against all the other fighting parties that motivated to take more territories of Syria under their control and establish their own system. The jihadi groups, for instance, aimed to establish a sharia state in Syria including Rojava cities.

### **5.5.2. No-attack policy of the RDA and the Syrian regime**

The RDA originated from an internal conflict yet has not negotiated any agreements regarding settlement and recognition of the autonomy with the Syrian regime. Some argue

that the PYD and the TEV-DEM had agreement with The Syrian regime in 2012 and the regime decided to withdraw its forces from Rojava based on that agreement. Ehmed Suleyman, Secretary-General of Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria (PDPKS that is a member of the ENKS, the opponent of the TEV-DEM), for instance, claims that the Syrian regime had an agreement with the PYD and the TEV-DEM executives and tolerated them to establish their authority in Rojava. He says

Kurds would never want Assad to leave his position but would demand their rights and that was why Assad thought it would not be a problem for his authority in Syria. He simply withdrew his forces from Rojava and let the TEV-DEM and the PYD establish their authority so that he could fight the opposition in Damascus, Aleppo and other strategic cities (Qamişlo, January 30, 2015).

Rejecting claims on an agreement with the Syrian regime, Salih Muslîm of the PYD and executives of the TEV-DEM always reminded policies of assimilation, suppression, exile, imprisonment, torture, and mass killings carried out by the regime against the Kurdish society in Rojava and metropolitan cities of Syria. They also say it was the Kurds affiliated with the PKK, PYD and TEV-DEM who have been struggling against the Syrian regime most. All the people interviewed in this study said there has been no agreement with the Syrian regime on autonomy settlement in Rojava but they also noted they are willing to start negotiations if the regime recognizes the RDA and makes democratic reforms and a new constitution guaranteeing rights of all peoples in Syria. Minister of Foreign Affairs Salih Gedo says

“If we [the RDA] start negotiations with the Syrian regime, we will declare it to the public through the media. If we know that our people will benefit from it, undoubtedly we can start negotiating, we do not hesitate and this is not a shame. When the Syrian regime recognizes democratic autonomous administration, then we can have meetings with them [regime’s officials]. We will do it officially and openly.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

The RDA also has not been recognized yet by the international system. Although Cezîre Canton has been paid many visits by international politicians and diplomats – especially after Kobanî was temporarily occupied by ISIS – autonomy status of Rojava still lacks international recognition. Even for a long time the international community neglected Kurds and did not invite to the international conferences on Syrian crisis. Also none of the regional states showed any intention to acknowledge the RDA authority. There have been important obstacles, like political isolation and embargo, before development of the RDA. Consequently, considering the four modes of autonomy settlement discussed by Benedikter, it

can be said that the RDA is not similar to any of the existing ones. If this is the case of the RDA, then we may ask ‘how is RDA being built and could it survive until now?’

### **5.5.3. Societal Support to the RDA**

Displacement is one of the most common problems occur when a civil start in a setting. Syria has faced the same problem and millions of people left the country. 9 million Syrian citizens took refuge in Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan or within Syria in addition to 3 million migrating to EU, Bulgaria and Sweden since March 2011 (Syrian Refugees). Among the leavers there were also Kurds who already had no civic rights and an ID given by Syrian government. Those who did not leave the country may have had various reasons but majority of the people in Rojava decided to stay since Rojava has been safer compared to other regions of Syria. Thousands of people migrated to Rojava cantons since they have been protected by the YPG and the YPJ forces and they were at the borders of northern Kurdistan (Turkey) and southern Kurdistan (Iraq) which are considered as two stations to immediately leave the country. An important number of the stayers joined the social, political and military mobilization despite ambiguity about the crisis and future of Rojava continued. Since the regime stripped away citizenship right of Kurds who later encountered political and social suppression and economic deprivation in Rojava, majority of them had enough reasons to join the mobilization for protection and settling their own authority. The RDA in that sense had a great social support. The PKK and its mobilization in early 80s and 90s in Syria, Lebanon, and Rojava are considered one of the most important factors bringing about that societal solidarity with the RDA.

Çetin (2014: 42-43) refers to role of the PKK in social and political mobilization among Rojava Kurds and argues that Öcalan’s anticipation about The Syrian regime and the Middle East inspired Kurds to prepare for a possible civil war, especially after the 2004 Qamişlo Uprising. Öcalan also called on the Kurdish parties, especially the PYD and the TEV-DEM, to have dialogue with the opposition organizations when the civil war began in Syria (Aydıntaşbaş, 2013). However the RDA and the SNC never reached full agreement so that they can act together and form a united political and military opposition. Also the Kurdish parties in SNC have not supported the RDA partly because the SNC did not recognize Kurds as an independent entity and preferred to negotiate rights of Kurdish people after a possible solution and Assad’s resignation. The RDA and the SNC thus had different

agendas. Lacking such a support from these Kurdish parties did not become a big obstacle for the RDA because as the PKK started social and political organization in Rojava these parties have lost much of their support from the society. Ehmed Suleyman of the ENKS also accepts the arguments that the SNC does not act in the way that the ENKS wants and the SNC imagined a Syria based on the countries that support the SNC to gain what they are interested in (Qamişlo, 30 January 2015). This is one of the reasons why the society in Rojava did not support the ENKS as much as it supported the TEV-DEM and the RDA.

Political participation and social organization of women and youths is high in the RDA. Parallel women-only organizations (e.g. Asayîşa Jinê (Women's Security Forces), the YPJ (Women's Defense Units), Women's House, and other women's organizations) that focus on problems women have been facing (e.g. domestic violence, enforced and/or multiple marriage) play an important role in encouraging women to join these organizations and struggle for and protect their rights in the RDA. Participation of women in academies and language institutions is also high. In some cities, like city of Serêkaniyê, 80% of the people who voluntarily work in Kurdish Language Institution (SZK) are women, for instance. Youths also have their own autonomous organizations and union and they organize social and political activities (e.g. sports and cultural activities and demonstrations). At the beginning of the civil war majority of the youths took part within the defense forces and still majority of the YPG and YPJ members are from young population of Rojava. With establishment of cultural, educational and sport organizations mobilization and participation among the youths has importantly increased since 2014. Also, each political party has its youth wing in Rojava. Young members of Syriac parties and organizations also established their organizations. Mobilization among Arab youths is not as high as Kurdish and Syriac youths because they recently started establishing their own organizations. Youth organizations belonging to different ethnic and political groups have relations especially at the times when they organize joint activities and attend political demonstrations.

#### **5.5.4. Rapprochement between ethnic groups**

Rojava is a multicultural context and Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens are used to live together. Problems that the thesis explained in previous chapters sometimes led to intergroup conflicts and animosity between members of these ethnic groups. It is still possible to see influences of the ethnic conflicts,

discrimination and prejudices. Baran Baran who is a lecturer at Mesopotamian Social Justice and Law Academy says

“A Kurd, for example, may still see Arabs or both Arabs and the state as responsible of the oppressions and cruelty because Kurds still have such biases. Therefore they have suspicions of “to what extent Kurds can live with Arabs”. Among Arabs, some may say “Kurds will do nothing [for us], especially at a time when they got the power” and bear a resentment against Kurds. Syriacs, because of the frustration stemming from massacres or lack of trust, may not know whom they should rely on. Syriacs question what they should do or if they choose one side what will happen to them if the power changes tomorrow.” (Qamişlo, January 18, 2015)

Baran also argues that all these problems may be solved through working on awareness, education and conscious. Most of these works are done by diplomacy committee<sup>30</sup> of the TEV-DEM, academies, people’s assemblies, people’s houses and communes. Diplomacy committee of the TEV-DEM usually pays visits to ethnic communities and Arab tribes in all three cantons. In one of the visits in Cezîre Canton, for instance, the co-head of diplomacy committee Ebdilbaqî Hemo says to Arabs in Girkê Legê – a town populated mostly by Kurds and Arabs – that Kurds and Arabs should be careful and get united against ISIS that wants to create ethnic conflicts between Kurds and Arabs (ANHA 2015). In a visit of the TEV-DEM in Efrîn, the committee member Osman Şêx says all people in Efrîn have been living together fraternally and the RDA takes brotherhood of the peoples as basis (ANHA 2015). In the same meeting, Efrîn Canton Minister of Transportation Walid Salama who is from Arab community of the canton says Arabs citizens take part in all institutions of the RDA and everybody should take responsibility to establish a democratic Syria and Free Rojava.

The TEV-DEM also visits political parties and encourage establishing relations between all the political parties in the RDA although those in the ENKS do not support the autonomy (Ajansa Kurdî 2015). Majority of the parties in the ENKS later on joined the TEV-DEM and took part in the RDA. Hundreds of Arabs and Syriac youth joined the YPG and Asayîş (Security Forces) to defend Rojava cantons. There are many Arab, Syrian, and Chechen officials in the departments of the RDA. New social, cultural, religious and political organizations have been established in Rojava and the TEV-DEM try to guide people to reinforce their relations through these organizations, know each other better to make peace

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<sup>30</sup> TEV-DEM’s diplomacy committees hold meetings with various Kurdish and Assyrian socio-political groups and Arab tribes in Rojava cantons to explain what the RDA policies aim and how they may support the RDA. The committees have members from different ethnic and religious groups.

with the past and create a new future. Also social peace and reconciliation councils play an important role towards rapprochement since they not only focus on crimes against women and issues related to financial disputes but also actively work to mitigate social, political and cultural conflicts between ethnic groups through visits, meetings or events.

In Benedikter’s four modes of autonomy, the ones resulted from an internal conflict partly resembles to the RDA, yet the RDA seeks to establish autonomy based on reconciliation and co-existence of all ethnic, political and religious groups.

### 5.5.5. Solidarity among Kurds

Kurds in Rojava (western Kurdistan) received important political, social, financial and military support mostly from Kurds in north Kurdistan. There are several reasons for that. First of all, Rojava has its longest border (Figure 3)<sup>31</sup> with northern Kurdistan where the PKK has been the main actor and its ideology has become the main motivation behind Kurdish mobilization in politics and armed struggle since early 1980s. Democratic Regions Party or the DBP (formerly BDP-Peace and Democracy Party) and People’s Democratic Party or the HDP in northern Kurdistan and Turkey have been sending humanitarian aids to Rojava since the very beginning of the civil war. Kurds who support the PKK in northern Kurdistan also



*Figure 3: Rojava’s borders with northern (red) and southern (blue) Kurdistan*

<sup>31</sup> The red and blue borders in the map show the national borders of Syria (western Kurdistan), Turkey (northern Kurdistan) and Iraq (southern Kurdistan) Kurds are living. They are drawn just to show the borders between Rojava and other parts of Kurdistan. These borders have no cultural or linguistic affiliation presenting diversity between Kurds neither they are political borders in minds of Kurds.

supported the RDA by joining its defense forces (YPG and YPJ) and helped them establish social, educational, cultural and economic organizations. Northern Kurdistan provided the following support to Rojava:

- The RDA received financial, food and medical aid that facilitate finding enough resources to offer people in Rojava.
- The DBP and HDP negotiated with Turkish government for receiving representatives from the RDA to have meetings with Kurdish parties and organizations in northern Kurdistan and Syrian opposition groups in Istanbul and Turkish representatives in Ankara.
- The DBP, HDP and their organizations also invited representatives from civil society organizations in Rojava to their events and asked explain in details what the RDA has been doing, which increased awareness and interest in Rojava among the Kurds in north Kurdistan.
- The RDA has been introduced also by the media channels of northern Kurdistan to both the society in Turkey and international community
- The DBP, HDP and the PKK always stated that Kurds in Rojava (western Kurdistan) and in northern Kurdistan are relatives and the border between them is artificial. Approach of Turkey and other states towards northern Kurdistan should be the same with their approach towards Rojava. They always emphasize importance of setting peaceful relations between the RDA and Turkey, which at the end was expected also to normalize and develop relations between the RDA and the SNC and the countries supporting the SNC.

Also the PKK sent its guerillas from Rojava back to their region to establish a unified force to defend the RDA. YPG and YPJ were established by those guerillas who also trained the recruited people. The first language institutions, academies and assemblies were established with help of people from northern Kurdistan and the PKK members who work in areas of social organization and political mobilization. It is possible to see their impact in all socio-political areas in Rojava.

Kurds in southern and eastern Kurdistan also helped RDA but it was not as much and continuous as the one offered by northern Kurdistan. The political actors in southern Kurdistan have been divided basically into two groups under leadership Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) ruled by Mesûd Barzanî and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (YNK) ruled by Celal



Telabanî. Conflicts between the PDK and the PKK also affected PDK's approach towards RDA and for a long time the PDK ignored Rojava Kurds. YNK, contrary to PDK, maintained good relations with RDA and pushed the PDK in the parliament to recognize and support RDA politically, financially, and militarily. These approaches also affect the way that supporters of these parties perceive RDA. Eastern and western Kurdistan does not share borders and it is difficult also to mobilize Kurds under the Iranian regime in support of Rojava. Still many youths from eastern Kurdistan went to Rojava and joined general mobilization for defense (Omrani, 2015). Solidarity among Kurds played important roles depending on the opportunities and facilities they have under the current conditions and political agendas.

#### **5.5.6. Regional and International Support and Interest**

RDA has not received any official military and diplomatic support, except for humanitarian aids sent by regional and international organizations, until ISIS's attacks on Kobanî started in September 15, 2014. The resistance of YPG and YPJ against ISIS lasted for 5 months. Mobilization of Kurds especially in northern Kurdistan, Turkey, EU member countries and USA led the international media and politicians see what RDA had been suffering from jihadi groups. ISIS has killed many journalists, volunteers and medical staff coming from Europe, Japan, and USA, carried out several attacks in Australia and France and increased its mobilization in the EU countries. ISIS has been received as a global threat to all these countries both in their lands and also to their interests in the Middle East. Also, role of the female fighters of YPJ made Kurds' struggle against ISIS more visible since it was interesting for the westerns to see Kurdish women fighting against a radical jihadi group. International media dedicated important time and space to the female fighters and thus RDA. Military cooperation between Kurdish forces and US-led international coalition against ISIS on the ground started in Kobanî in mid-October 2014 and still continues in Cezîre region where ISIS continuously carries out attacks on RDA.

Liberation of Kobanî and following military success of the Kurdish forces has become a turning point for both RDA and international system. It has reminded the international system that Kurds still need all kinds of aid and that Kurds are important actors in the global fight against ISIS and other jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. RDA representatives were invited to international meetings in USA and EU member countries. French President François

Hollande, for instance, met PYD co-head Asya Abdullah and YPJ commander Nesrîn Abdullah at the Elysee Palace in February 8, 2015 (Güler, 2015). The meeting took place after ISIS attacks on Kobani and 8 French journalists were killed by jihadi people affiliated with ISIS. Common enemies bring common allies together and that has not been recognized for two years by the international system leaving RDA and Kurds ignored and excluded from all international meetings for solutions of Syrian crisis. All these apparently have not directly affected status of RDA but help it develop political and diplomatic relations with western states.

## **5.6. Challenges in RDA**

Rojava Democratic Autonomy continues establishing its social, political, financial and military foundations despite the ongoing attacks, political isolation and limited international support. All these and some ongoing domestic issues, on the other hand, create problems that RDA should solve as soon as possible to satisfy the minimum requirements of a fully-functioning autonomy. The main problems may be listed under the following titles.

### **5.6.1. Election**

Elections are important for legitimacy of autonomies and participation of different political groups. Political representation in an autonomous region is necessary for ethnic and religious groups, as well. Election is one of the common ways to make it possible for all groups to organize and run campaigns for representation in local parliaments and councils. The RDA has already issued law of political parties on April 17 2014 and asked all the parties in Rojava to register to the Political Parties' Committee that is composed of Minister of Justice, Minister of Internal Affairs, Minister of Social Affairs, Co-president of Legislative Assembly, and a member of Justice Council. So far 14 parties have registered and gained the right to run in all the elections (Roj News 2015). Parties in the ENKS did not register to the committee because they do not recognize authority of the RDA. On March 30 2015, the Cezîre Canton administration held local (municipality) elections. Attendance to the election was lower than expected because the parties in ENKS boycotted the election and people had to leave their cities due to the ISIS's attacks in March (Rûdaw 2015). Both conflicts between the ENKS and the RDA and security issues caused a decline in voting rate. This was the first

election since establishment of the RDA in 2014. It is obvious that the RDA will be able to hold a full-participatory election if the ENKS reaches an agreement with the TEV-DEM to establish a joint administration in Rojava and if the RDA defense forces assure security of Rojava regions and safety of citizens.

### **5.7.2 Low Social and Political Participation among Chechens and Arabs**

Participation of different ethnic and religious groups in politics and decision making is necessary for a democratic system. The RDA has achieved it to an extent, but participation of Chechens and Arabs is still not at a level that the RDA expects. Chechens are one of the smallest ethnic groups in Rojava and political mobilization has been relatively lower among Chechens in Rojava. Majority of Chechens who were used to live in Cezîre region reportedly had left the country. Some of the stayers have joined the TEV-DEM and took part in communes or local assemblies and the rest is either afraid of involvement in politics or shows no interest to take part in autonomy's organizations.

Political and social participation among Arabs, despite that their number is higher than Syriacs and Chechens, is lower than the RDA expects. The main problem with their participation is that they have concerns about their future in Syria and under the RDA. Minister of Agriculture Dr. Salih Al-Zabba who is from Arab community argues that some Arabs still fear from the Syrian government and do not believe in that the RDA will be successful (Dirbêsiyê, August 25, 2014). Baran Baran, one of the lecturers at Mesopotamian Academy of Social Justice and Law, thinks that some Arabs and Syriacs hesitate to join the RDA because they have been psychologically affected by the past conflicts between Kurds and the Syrian government and the Syriac massacres a century ago (Qamişlo, January 18, 2015). Baran argues that some Arabs still do not trust Kurds and believe that Kurds will take revenge of the Syrian government from Arabs and also contends that some Syriacs, especially the older generation, still fear that Kurds may carry out a similar massacre may be carried out by Kurds (Qamişlo, January 18, 2015). One possible way to overcome these fears may be that the RDA avoids policies that may trigger these fears and be more inclusive, adopt democratic policies, and share power with other ethnic groups.

### 5.7.3. Possibility of Intra- or Inter-group Conflict

Peace and reconciliation among ethnic and religious groups in Rojava has been mostly achieved thanks to the peace and reconciliation councils and diplomacy committee of the TEV-DEM. Despite that the possibility of emergence of ethnic conflicts is low; there is always a risk. Syriac community, as mentioned before, has been divided into two groups. One group supports the RDA and has armed forces within the YPG and Asayîş (Public Security) while the other cooperates with the Syrian government and has armed units among the government forces. Any conflict between the RDA and the Syrian government may lead to a conflict between Syriacs. It may also trigger a conflict between Kurds and Syriacs. It is possible to argue the same for Arabs. The TEV-DEM diplomacy committee and peace and reconciliation committees often pay visits to Arab tribes of Cezîre Canton, especially in the settlements that are close to the territories under the control of the ISIS. The TEV-DEM concerns about the possibility that the ISIS may enter into the cities of Cezîre Canton by manipulating Arabs and create an intergroup ethnic conflict between Kurds and Arabs.

Similarly, presence of Kurdish nationalist parties in the ENKS and nationalist discourse of some officials in the RDA have potential to trigger intergroup conflicts. Ehmed Suleyman, the general secretary of the PDPKS and member of the ENKS, for example, criticizes the TEV-DEM for establishing ‘non-Kurdish administration’ by including Arabs, Syriacs, and Chechens in the RDA. Ehmed Suleyman argues that:

“There is no Kurdish project for Syrian Kurds. RDA was established with Arabs, Syriacs and Chechens. There is nothing Kurdish. We cannot solve the Kurdish Issue in this way. People must know that what they have established will be for Kurds.” (Qamişlo, January 30, 2015)

Ehmed Suleyman apparently does not see Rojava as the land of the non-Kurdish people and argues that:

“Arabs say the RDA does not represent us. Assyrians and Syriacs say the same, too. If you want, I can send you to them. Let them talk to you! They say this administration does not mean anything for them.” (Qamişlo, January 30, 2015)

It is true that some people, including the Kurds, in Cezîre Canton do not recognize authority of the RDA but there are also hundreds of thousands of people who do not want to live under the authority of the Syrian government as in the past. If Kurds had the motivation for establishing a nation state, that would most probably lead to ethnic conflicts between Kurds and Arabs. Despite the fact that Kurds did not have such motivation, the SNC

manipulated Arab citizens by arguing that Kurds want to establish a Kurdish state in northern Syria. That is in fact one of the reasons that the FSA fought the YPG and YPJ at the beginning of the civil war in Serêkaniyê. Similar reactions and counter-reactions may be seen if the RDA does not develop strong relations with Arabs and have peaceful settlements with the Syrian government and the Syrian National Coalition, which seems a bit hard due to the ongoing war and lack of negotiations. Given the current conditions, if the nationalist parties in Rojava continue emphasizing ethnic diversities among the constituent people and manipulating them for their political interests, intergroup conflicts will be inevitable.

The Prime Minister of the Cezîre Canton administration Ekrem Huso also has a national discourse when answers the question of whether Rojava is considered as part of Syria. Huso argues that

“In Rojava, constituents of the democratic nation are equal and rights of all are recognized. However, Rojava is Kurdish. Rojava is both a part of Syria and Kurdistan. We hope that problems in Rojava and Syria will be resolved and Rojava will become a Kurdistan place.” (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

According to Ekrem Huso, Rojava belongs both to Syria and Kurdistan but it should have Kurdish characteristics. The name ‘Rojava’ itself is Kurdish and means ‘west’. The name of Kurdistan or western Kurdistan (Rojava) may not be representative to all constituent peoples in the region. Insisting on this name without tolerating non-Kurds to use any other name they want to call the region was one of the problems the RDA faced at the beginning. The Cezîre Canton administration has solved that problem by giving name of the autonomy name of region, Cezîre (Jazeera), which is representative to all ethnic groups. Emergence of nationalist tendencies has a strong potential to lead to inter-group conflicts if they suppress and discriminate other national cultures and identities in Cezîre.

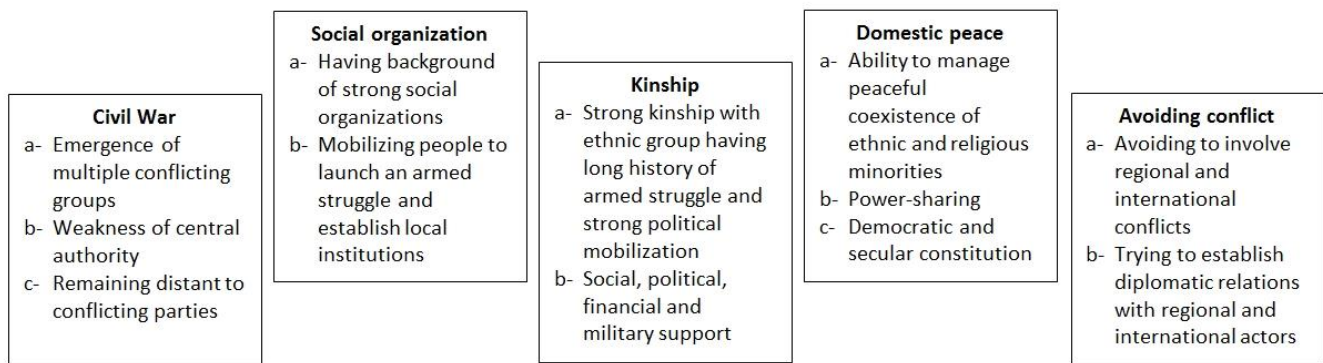
Symbols, names, and cultural and national items have always been significant for ethnic representation. The Syrian government changed names of the villages and cities from Kurdish to Arabic and now the RDA gives these names back. Considering the assimilationist policies of the Syrian government, such an act may be considered as legitimate. However what the Saziya Zimanê Kurdî or SZK (Kurdish Language Institution) does may be problematic. The SZK replaces names of the schools that were established by the Syrian government with names of fallen members of the YPG, YPJ or Asayîş (Security Forces). The names that the Syrian government gave to these schools mostly belong to the supporters of the Baathist regime in Syria and nationalist figures of

the country. Replacing their names with the names of the fallen fighters may trigger a hospitality and sense of threat among the Arab citizens of Cezîre Canton, as it did among Kurds. No matter whether the people whose names were given to the schools had done anything wrong to the Kurdish society, they evoked anxiety and even hatred in Kurds. The same may happen to Arab citizens, as well.

Another issue is about the flag of the TEV-DEM colored in green, red and yellow which were historically accepted as the colors of a Kurdish flag. It now flies in all cities and streets of Cezîre Canton. The Syrian flag flies over only on the buildings that the Syrian government still controls. Syrians have their own flag and fly it wherever they want. However, as one of the lecturers at the Mesopotamian Academy of Social Sciences criticized, using the TEV-DEM's flag everywhere in the canton is a common practice of nation-state building practices and the citizens should put pressure on the TEV-DEM not to do this but try to include symbols and cultural items of all the constituent peoples in Cezîre Canton. Some may not accept and be happy with only-Kurdish symbols or flags, especially if they are used by the TEV-DEM that includes 57 both Kurdish and non-Kurdish parties and organizations. Conflicts over values are quite common in multi-ethnic settings and Cezîre Canton potentially may face such a threat if it does not accommodate all cultural and national values existing in the region.

All three cantons of the RDA have serious problems with economy because the borders are closed the farmers cannot sell products to the neighboring countries as they were doing well before the civil war. The cooperatives established by the center for developing economy of Rojava and ministry of economy may meet the needs of the people to an extent but the RDA administration will still need to find other resources. Being aware of this problem, the RDA officials appealed many times to the Turkish and South Kurdistan (the KRG) governments to open the border for trade. The KRG recently signed an agreement with the RDA for facilitating exports from Cezîre region but Turkey that has the longest border with northern Syria does not approach to such an agreement. Solution of this issue mostly depends on the political and diplomatic relations between the RDA, Turkey and the KRG.

Besides the attacks on the RDA, all the above-mentioned domestic and regional issues still pose a threat on the RDA to be a successful autonomy. If the conflicting primary parties in Syria and regional and international actors who support these parties



**Figure 4: Factors facilitating the mode of autonomy building in Rojava**

come to an agreement and settle the conflict, majority of these problems may easily be solved. The RDA is in a transition period and social, political, financial and administrative problems will inevitably occur, but the stronger the RDA adopts democratic policies and develops internal and external peaceful relations, the easier it will be for the RDA to overcome these issues.

### **5.7. The RDA as a New Mode of Autonomy Building?**

Depending on the nature of political system in a given setting, autonomy building may simply be achieved with some constitutional redesign or come across various political conflicts. Benedikter (2014: 47) argues that autonomies are usually succeeded with small shifts in state systems or a constitutional regulation or combination of the two. Depending on conflict settlement and peaceful solution of the crisis in Syria, the RDA may go through a similar process in the coming years, however since the civil war remains, on the one hand, and the autonomy seems to be positively functioning in Rojava, on the other hand, a new discussion on modes of autonomy building is needed. Based on the previous parts of this chapter, this part discusses a new autonomy building model referring to domestic, regional and international dynamics of the RDA and the processes it has gone through both before and after the civil war. The RDA has a significant degree of self-governance through the official bodies and civil society organizations it established immediately after declaration of the autonomy. Ethnic and cultural identities of national and religious minorities are protected by the Social Contract written with participation of representatives from all religious and ethnic groups. Peaceful coexistence of Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Chechens, Armenians, Christians, Muslims, Êzidîs and non-believers have been facilitated to an important degree. No ethnic or religious conflicts have been reported yet from Cezîre Canton. Equal chances for political

participation and decision-making have been ensured for all citizens regardless of their ethnic, religious or political affiliation. The RDA has also not entered in any political issue with neighboring countries despite their negative approach towards the RDA (e.g. embargo and border issues). Taking all these characteristics of the RDA, one would have enough reasons to argue that it has already reached at well-functioning political autonomy level that Benedikter (2005: 252) argues. That requires drawing a new model of autonomy considering the achievements the RDA has gained in the midst of the civil war in Syria.

### **5.7.1. Deriving benefit from civil war**

Civil wars including multiple groups may result in a chaos in which some groups in a given setting may turn that chaos into an improvement. If there are multiple groups fighting a government, the government will have to respond to all these groups to be able to maintain its power. It will need to mobilize its forces to fight against the strongest group(s) first to make sure that it upholds the authority. By doing this, however, the government also loses its power in other regions and may not be able to fight on another front. The Syrian government followed these steps and has been mostly fighting the FSA that was the strongest party at the beginning of the civil war. The government also had to abandon Rojava where Kurds had just formed armed units to protect their cities both from the Syrian government and the FSA. Kurds remained distant to both parties and started establishing their own institutions. Presence of more than one conflicting parties weakened the central authority that did not show strong motivation to fight on another front. Benefiting from these facts, Rojava stayed distant to the conflicting parties and rather spent its energy and resources to establish autonomous structures in Rojava. However, that also caused Rojava to fight several armed groups, mostly the radical Islamist groups who wanted to expand their territory in Syria. Thanks to the strong mobilization in Rojava, the RDA could increase number of the fighters in YPG and YPJ and protect the cantons against attacks.

### **5.7.2. Powerful social organization**

Also, ethnic groups or territorial actors usually need a strong popular support to push the central government to go through de-centralization and power-sharing, and finally to grant autonomy. International system sometimes may offer diplomatic or financial support to these



groups or actors. In Syria, almost all Kurdish parties that were ignored by the international system but had strong support by the society demanded self-governance and official status from the Syrian government also before the civil war. They had a strong motivation to achieve it through political tools but that was never achieved until 2012 when the first organizations (e.g. armed forces, language schools) for self-governance emerged in Rojava. The RDA received great support from Kurdish citizens in Rojava and Syria who joined the mobilization and established social, political and military organizations to build autonomy.

### **5.7.3. Strong kinship with same ethnic group**

Some ethnic groups who live under the authority of different states, have the same political agenda and history of struggle tend to maintain social and political interaction through their political and armed movements. Being able to form and operate armed units in different settings will require these groups provide social, political, financial and military assistance to each other to be able to keep on the struggle and achieve their political agenda. Kurds in Syria have received important support from Kurds living in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and diaspora thanks to the social, political and military mobilization of the PKK that has established strong social, political and military organizations in all these states and has been receiving important financial support from Kurds in the diaspora. However, that also created a problem for regional and international powers. Turkey, for instance, was afraid of the PKK that would get stronger in Rojava and establish a political system justifying demands of Kurds in Turkey for self-governance in northern Kurdistan (southeastern Turkey). Turkey, thus, closed all the borders with Rojava cantons while the border gates between Turkey and Syria in the areas controlled by the ISIS and the FSA in Syria were usually open. Also, since the PKK is still in the terrorist list of the US and the EU, the RDA was not recognized as a legitimate system for a few years.

### **5.7.4. Building domestic peace**

In a chaotic civil war, it is usually difficult to maintain internal peace, especially if there are multiple parties, regional and international actors involved in the conflict. Each party seeks to ensure that it receives support and it is perceived as legitimate by the people. In multicultural contexts, political, ethnic and religious identities are often manipulated by the

conflicting parties so that they can create an opposite image of the others to convince people to support these parties. The majority of the sectarian approaches in conflicts in the Middle East show that polarization of the identities, indeed, serves to that purpose but also intensifies the existing conflicts. In some cases it creates new conflicts. Contrary to that, focusing on peacebuilding and promoting co-existence of ethnic, religious, and political groups may both mitigate the existing conflicts and prevent emergence of new ones. Being able to address common problems and involve all these diversities in the search for a common solution may increase cooperation and solidarity and lead to reconciliation among these groups. Power-sharing and democratic political systems also reinforce peaceful co-existence and increase participation of various groups into politics, governance and decision-making.

#### **5.7.5. Avoiding regional and international conflicts**

It is rarely possible to see conflicts that do not include regional and international actors. States that share borders with war-torn countries usually face security and refugee crisis. In some cases, these countries may even be part of the conflict. The same possibility exists also for the international actors who have interests related to their national security, financial resources and political agendas. However, in these war-torn countries the parties who avoid such a confrontation may create an opportunity to be equally distant to all the other conflict parties, deal with their own problems and achieve their own agenda. It also offers an opportunity for them to develop diplomatic relations with these countries and actors since the parties avoiding being a part of regional and international conflicts have more credibility. That may not be realized or the regional and international actors may not be willing to recognize these parties, but at least they become more legitimate because they do not make enemies out of the war and do not become first target of these actors. The RDA adopted a similar strategy since the beginning of the civil war in Syria. It attempted to establish diplomatic relations with both regional and international actors while staying equally distant to the conflict parties within Syria. The RDA representatives went to the US, some EU countries, Turkey, Iraq and Iran to introduce the autonomous system and what the RDA aims to do in Syria. Regarding the international affairs of the RDA, Cezîre Canton Minister of Foreign Affairs Salih Gedo argue

“We want to establish good relations with all regional countries and neighboring countries, especially with Turkey because we share 600 km-long border and

population beyond the borders is Kurdish. We want to work for the benefit of Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians. People must respect each other and recognize each other's rights. We will act based on mutual recognition and practicing democracy in diplomatic relations.” (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

It did not work well because the regional and international actors already became parties of the conflict and did not perceive the RDA as a strategic partner in the war because the RDA was not perceived strong enough to change the system in Syria and has always been associated with the PKK.

## **5.9. Conclusion**

In multi-ethnic and multi-party conflicts, territorially powerful parties may constitute governments or declare self-governance formations, especially if the other parties are weaker and cannot prevent such a move. The RDA case is one of these cases where the FSA and Syrian government became less powerful in northern Syria and the parties and organizations under the supervision of the TEV-DEM formed all essential institutions and organizations for autonomy building. This was one of the factors that the RDA benefited from. As the conflict continued and no serious threat, except for the ISIS, was posed on Rojava by the FSA and Syrian regime, the RDA could strengthen its autonomous system, especially since January 2014. Maybe the regime and FSA were not present in the regions where Kurds took the control but later on the radical Islamist groups aimed to destroy the whole system in Rojava, as they did in Iraq and Syria by destroying even the cultural heritage. Thus, despite leading a gap of authority in northern Syria and providing appropriate conditions for self-governance in Rojava, the civil war also required continuous fighting against radical Islamist groups. That has left Kobanî canton completely destroyed and a big threat also on Efrîn and Cezîre.

The RDA, compared to other regions that turned into battlefields in Syria, could keep the cantons safer – except for Kobanî that remained under the ISIS occupation for 4 months. Millions of people left the country after the civil war started and some thousands of them moved to Rojava regions to stay with their relatives. That also created an opportunity for the RDA because it needed people to work for defense and establishment of organizations. None of the civil society organizations would be able to operate if people in Rojava did not have an established security. These organizations also provided an important chance for the RDA to lead people to manage themselves through self-organization and intergroup solidarity. As Naîf Salih Ebbas, one of the citizens who moved from Aleppo in 2012 to Dêrik and voluntarily

works in People's House in Dêrik, argues that people's houses in the RDA played a significant role in establishment and development of the autonomy since these houses are perceived by the society as a center for solution of the issues that normally a government should deal with, and that facilitates self-governance in Rojava (Dêrik, August 28, 2014). People offer strong social support and highly involve in the autonomous organizations in Cezîre Canton. All these facilitate development of the RDA and increase mobilization at grass roots. However, the displaced people who went to the cantons of the RDA also created immediate problems in finding enough resources for food and housing due to embargo and the ongoing war. Also, as the Minister of Social Affairs Dijwar Ehmed mentions the case of Arab citizens coming from Aleppo, Damascus, and Hums. Ehmed says the Cezîre administration wanted to settle them in Syriac villages but the decision was not accepted by the Syriac community. Especially social problems stemming from conflicting relations or lack of trust among ethnic and religious groups created serious problems in settlement of the displaced people. The RDA, however, seemingly has managed to prevent emergence of new conflicts and could keep various ethnic and religious groups under the umbrella of the autonomy.

Mobilization of Kurdish population in support of each other in a trans-regional context could be more helpful for the RDA but it brought about serious problems stemming from involvement of the neighboring countries. The PKK and its sympathizers in all regions of Kurdistan and the diaspora supported the RDA since the beginning of the war by various means. They strongly share feelings of Rojava Kurds and offered both humanitarian and military aid to save the citizens in Rojava and also protect the cantons. However, the domestic conflicts among Kurds both in Rojava and other part of Kurdistan, especially in southern Kurdistan between the PKK and the PDK, negatively affected the RDA. The interviewees, except for ENKS member Ehmed Suleyman, did not mention much about the conflicts among Kurdish organizations. However, it is clear that the RDA could get more support from southern Kurdistan in terms of diplomacy and economy.

Southern Kurdistan failed to defend itself and needed help of the YPG, YPJ, PKK, and international coalition against the ISIS in many cities while the RDA needed the same forces to save Kobanî Canton. All these trans-regional mobilization of Kurdish forces could be evaluated more positively for development of self-governance in Rojava. It would also affect the relation between Kurds and the Turkish, Iraqi, and Iranian governments. All the interviewees of this study note that a peaceful settlement in Syria and Rojava will affect

relations of Kurds with the Turkish government. However, as Defense Minister of Cezîre Canton Ebdulkerîm Saroxan, for instance, says the RDA defense forces will also support Kurds in northern Kurdistan in case of Turkey attacks Kurds and a need for protection, similar to the case in Şingal, emerges (Qamişlo, August 21, 2014). That would definitely expand the scope of the civil war and make it more complex but his expression is important to understand how the RDA sees Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan.

Multi-ethnic and multi-religion nature of the RDA, as some of the interviewees define, makes Rojava a colorful mosaic or a colorful garden in which all identities can exist without suppression and assimilation. That is a positive point especially for legitimacy of the autonomous administration. However, people who have been discriminated against each other must also be aware of the fact that the RDA promotes co-existence and they should respect each other. This is explicitly stated in the Social Contract, as well. Although there have been no serious violations against it, some still may resist to internalize respect to all identities and their rights. As Baran Baran (Qamişlo, January 18, 2015) notes some people from any ethnic or religious group still may problems in perceiving other groups as honest, intimate, and trustable and maintain their biases against other groups. That, in fact, has a high potential to influence intergroup relations negatively and may destroy domestic peace in the RDA. So far, the RDA has been able to even resolve the prolonged conflicts and establish strong and trustworthy relations between these groups.

Nationalist Kurds, as Ehmed Suleyman of the ENKS expects, are not willing to share power at administrative level with other ethnic groups and aim to establish a nation federal region, which is similar to Southern Kurdistan, in Rojava. Ehmed Suleyman believes that Kurds can get their rights and own land only if the international system psychically intervenes and changes map of Syria (Qamişlo, January 30, 2015). This expectation, in fact, prevents the ENKS from establishing relations with the grass roots and the ENKS leaders usually move according to the agenda of the SNC and its supporters who do not even exist in Rojava. However, the RDA bases itself on exactly the opposite and considers that Syrian crisis will be resolved through power-sharing in all regions of Syria. The RDA is also willing and confident to cooperate with any party that wants a political solution for the conflict. The society mostly supports the RDA does not share the same ideas and motivations with the ENKS. It is early now to predict whether the society will keep supporting the RDA and its current Social Contract or become more nationalist and back the ENKS.

Taking the entire domestic, regional, and international factors that both affect and get affected by the RDA, this thesis argues that it include both opportunities and challenges to be successful while the civil war continues in Syria. Unlikely to modes of autonomy that Benedikter argues, the RDA lacks many legal, structural, and political means to be called as a recognized autonomy. Despite all these, this thesis argues that the RDA meets the minimum requirements to be classified as a functional autonomy and it definitely needs to be examined as a different kind of autonomy building model.



## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Mroue (2013) argues that Kurds took advantage of the chaos in Syria and “has carved out a once unthinkable degree of independence in its areas”. Rojava Democratic Autonomy both as an administration model and a part of a war-torn country, however, tries to survive the Syrian crisis. Perceptions of the RDA officials and civil society representatives of the conflicts influence the ways the RDA develops strategies and policies for resolution. However it is clear that, due to embargo, political isolation, internal conflicts among the Kurdish parties and attacks by the jihadi groups on Rojava, the RDA also encounters serious practical problems. The strongest relation of the autonomy is established with the civil society organizations and parties within the TEV-DEM. That is why the majority of the interviewees say that society plays an important role in establishing and keeping autonomy alive despite these political, financial and military challenges.

Even though the Syrian government has not taken concrete steps to recognize the Rojava Democratic Autonomy, it appears to be willing to meet with the autonomous administration and negotiate self-governance. However, that will also be risky for and may be prevented by Turkey and Iran because recognition of the RDA may intensify struggle of Kurds in those countries for self-governance. Whether it may open a new phase of regional conflict or not will depend on how these countries perceive the RDA and idea of autonomous administration. Also, if the parties who will attend the Geneva III Conference return to Syria with a peace agreement, the RDA will be able to take an important step towards negotiating the recognition of Rojava autonomy and gaining legitimacy both at national and international level. Regional actors will have to review their policies towards Syria and Kurds since the peace agreement will basically focus on reconciliation between the conflicting parties within Syria and their supporters. The Anti-Assad actors including the US seem to have changed

their perception of the Syrian crisis and would probably look for ways first to push the jihadi groups back rather than forcing Assad to give up his authority. The Assad government appears to remain and Rojava is likely to get more importance for international powers especially in their fight against the jihadi groups. Diplomatic channels are now open for Kurds and the RDA and recognition and peace agreement will strengthen Rojava's position in resolution of the Syrian crisis and establishment of a democratic government in the following years.

Challenges to the state systems in the Middle Eastern countries became more visible and brought about extreme violent conflicts after the Arab Spring. Stewart (2009: 47) argues that current boundaries of the countries in the Middle East were mostly imposed by "the European countries that carved out spheres of influence for their own control after the end of World War I". He also states that "in doing so, they often split ethnic groups between the states or included within one state a volatile mix of ethnic groups within historic rivalries" and refers to the common sectarian and ethnic conflicts in the Middle Eastern countries (Stewart, 2009: 47). Syria has been one of these countries with a long history of ethnic and religious fights. Current devastating portrait of Syria shows how the failed state system, which ignores social and political demands of different social, political, ethnic, and religious groups, can produce destructive results. The boundaries of Syria and Iraq are very close to a new shift while the domestic and international dynamics change very fast.

Although there are some attempts for a solution of the Syrian crisis (e.g. international conferences), it is hardly possible to foresee when a peaceful settlement will be achieved. The more the conflict keeps on; the jihadi movements become stronger and occupy wider areas both in Iraq and Syria. Despite that an international coalition offers military and logistic assistance to the armed groups fighting the jihadi groups, due to lack of weakness in mobilization and disorganization, the anti-jihadi armed forces cannot be successful enough. A recent analysis by the Maghreb and Orient Courier (2015) reveals that it is only the armed forces of the RDA who have been strongly resisting against the jihadi groups in Syria by protecting Rojava cantons and gaining some regions, especially in southern parts of the Cezîre region, from ISIS. The solution of the Syrian crisis will need a strong domestic pressure on the Syrian government and Syrian opposition parties including the RDA for starting negotiations that has potential to receive social and political assistance by the international system and a united armed struggle against the jihadi groups.



The current failed state system in Syria will need a long time to revive but it is obvious that Syria will never be as it was before 2011. New dynamics emerged in the last four years. Kurds have become one of the most popular dynamics in Syria. By gaining popular support from Arabs, Syrians and Chechens; Kurds managed to establish the *de facto* autonomous administration in the northern Syria despite diverse social, political and financial challenges. In Rojava, the ethnic groups who were socially and politically distant to each other have founded joint organizations, councils, armed forces and local governments. As the TEV-DEM executive Aldar Xelîl argues, in a federal Syria, the RDA will maintain its popularity for solving main socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts through power-sharing and peace-building practices. Relations between Kurds in western (Rojava), northern, eastern and southern Kurdistan may be closer in the future despite the national borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria that Kurds call 'artificial borders' separating Kurds. The fierce attacks on Kobanî and Şingal causing cross-border mobilization of the Kurdish armed forces (the PKK, YPG, YPJ, and Pêşmerge forces) can be an initial step for closer social and political relations.

The RDA experience yet is quite young but inspiring for peace and conflict resolution in Syria and the Middle Eastern countries because it promotes democracy, gender equality, respect, solidarity and power-sharing while knowingly and intentionally rejecting central authority and nation state building. Duncan (2007: 711) argues that decentralization helps governments be more accountable to the local people by satisfying their needs for more control over regional sources, which also helps governments to maintain stability. The RDA receives great support from all ethnic groups and increases its legitimacy and strengthens its stability thanks to de-centralization within the autonomous administration and providing cultural autonomy to all identities in Rojava.

It is possible to see similar resistance patterns of different groups in different regions of the world. Sardar Saadi (2015) argues that the self-governance in Rojava resembles the Zapatista experience:

The pursuit of creating an autonomous government, the rise of popular assemblies, the emphasis on gender equality and empowering women on every level of social and political life, the anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian ideology, the stress on ecological preservation and respect for all living creatures, self-defense, and many other aspects indicate how the Rojava revolution resembles the resistance of the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico.

Researcher Will Grant (2014) argues that what the resistance of the Zapatistas gained in Mexico, however, is debatable but it is clear that the relation between the central

government and the local Chiapas people has dramatically changed. All the interviewees are aware of the problems that the RDA encounters but they are also hopeful about the future. They believe that peoples in Syria have awakened and especially Kurds will never accept authority of the Syrian government or a new but authoritarian government to be established by the Syria opposition. PYD co-head Asya Abdullah argues that

It is not possible any more to practice the same centralist system. No matter if it is national or religion but any system relying on one identity will not exist here. The best one is a democratic system in which all wills [identities] represent themselves.” (Qamişlo, August 19, 2014)

Coming years will show us whether the conflicting parties will be able to achieve establishing a non-nationalist and secular Syrian state. The democratic system, Asya Abdullah mentions, also recognizes the right to internal self-determination and Benedikter (2014: 43) argues that internal self-determination is possible only through autonomy. One of the most important aspects of the autonomies, say Benedikter (2014: 45), is that it solves the conflicts without changing borders of a given state. The RDA focuses mostly on internal self-determination and introduces itself as a region of Syria. The RDA does not aim to change the boundaries of Syria but seek for de-centralization and power-sharing.

In the light of all these implications inferred from the literature on the autonomy, resources on the Syrian crisis and past conflicts in Syria, recent developments in the last four years, and the data used in the study, this thesis concludes with the following arguments. First, uncertainty of the Syrian crisis continues and complexity of the conflict makes it more difficult to be resolved. Second, the Syrian crisis created both opportunities and challenges for domestic, regional and international actors. Third, Kurds seemingly took the advantage of the chaos in Syria by establishing the self-governance in Rojava. Fourth, the RDA, to an important extent, has been successful so far in resolution of the socio-political and ethno-religious conflicts by developing democracy and equality, encouraging political and social participation of different ethnic, religious and political groups, promoting societal peace and co-existence, receiving great support from the society, being able to protect the RDA and avoiding to be a part of national, regional and international conflicts. Fifth, the RDA and people in Rojava do not distinguish the struggle (for democracy, freedom and justice) in Rojava from the general struggle in Syria, but demands recognition, de-centralization and power-sharing from a new government to be established by all the constituent peoples and parties within Syria. Sixth, the RDA has a great potential to reconcile the relations between the divided societies in Rojava since it does not adopt discriminative or exclusive policies but

ensures fundamental rights for all. Seventh, women gained important space and rights thanks to their struggle, participation in politics and decision-making processes, and effort to found defense forces to protect and maintain their rights.



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## **APPENDIX**

### **A sample of the interview questions**

- 1) Can you please introduce yourself and tell what you were doing before the war?
- 2) What kind of problems related to ethnic, religious, political or gender identity do you think existed before the war in Syria?
- 3) How do you define democratic autonomy?
- 4) What kind of solutions do you/your institution offer to the past and current problems?
- 5) How do you practice the solutions you/your institution offers?
- 6) Do you have any relation/negotiation/meeting with the Syrian government?
- 7) Do you have any relation with organizations, institutions, or parties of other ethnic or religious groups?
- 8) Do you have any relation with neighboring countries, regional or international states?
- 9) How do you perceive Rojava Democratic Autonomy in Syria?
- 10) How do you think the relation between Kurdish people in different parts will be?
- 11) Do you see any social and political problems in Rojava Democratic Autonomy?
- 12) Do you think that Rojava Democratic Autonomy will be successful in the future?
- 13) Do you think that Rojava Democratic Autonomy will be recognized by the Syrian government?

### **List of the interviewees**

Co-president of Cezîre Canton Hediye Yûsif (Rimêlan, August 28, 2014)

Minister of Agriculture Salih Al-Zabba (Dirbêsiyê, August 25, 2014)

Minister of Culture Nehwend Mihemed Hesên (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Minister of Economy Siham Kuryo (Amûdê, August 21, 2014)

Minister of Education Salih Ebdo (Dirbêsiyê, August 24, 2014)

Minister of Foreign Affairs Salih Gedo (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Minister of Internal Affairs Kenan Berekat (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

Minister of Justice Ebdulhemîd Bekîr (Dirbêsiyê, August 21, 2014)

Minister of Religious Affairs Mihemed El-Qadirî (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

Minister of Social Affairs Dijwar Ehmed (Qamişlo, August 30, 2014)

Minister of Women Emîna Umer (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Minister of Defense Ebdulkerîm Saroxan (Qamişlo, August 21, 2014)

Prime Minister of Cezîre Canton Ekrem Huso (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

President of the Legislative Council Hakem Xelo (Amûdê, August 30, 2014)

Deputy Minister of Culture Henne Henne (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Shamiram Shamoun (Qamişlo, August 20, 2014)

Deputy President of Cezîre Canton Hussein Azam (Amûdê, August 26, 2014)

TEV-DEM Executive Member Aldar Xelîl (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

TEV-DEM Executive Member Îlham Ehmed (Qamişlo, August 19, 2014)

Sutoro member (name and surname is not provided) (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Member of Dêrik People's House Naîf Salih Ebbas (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Member of Serêkaniyê Branch of the Center for Developing Rojava Economy Ferhad Derwîş (Serêkaniyê, August 23, 2014)

Member of Serêkaniyê Peace and Reconciliation Committee Sureyya (surname is not provided) (Serêkaniyê, August 24, 2014)

Member of Serêkaniyê Peace and Reconciliation Committee Tariqê Brahîmê Êzidî (Serêkaniyê, August 24, 2014)

Member of Serêkaniyê People's House Ahmad Mohammad Casim (Serêkaniyê, August 24, 2014)

Member of the Revolutionary Youth Movement Rustem Dêrik (Dêrik, August 28, 2014)

Member of the Syrian Women's Initiative Mizgîn Zêdan (August 20, 2014)

Dean of Mesopotamian Academy of Social Sciences Hesên Ednan (Qamişlo, September 2, 2014)

Baran Baran, a lecturer at Mesopotamian Social Justice and Law Academy (Qamişlo, January 18, 2015)

Azad Quto, student at Celadet Bedirxan Academy of Kurdish History, Literature and Language (Qamişlo, August 30, 2014)

ENKS member and PDPKS Secretary General Ehmed Suleyman (Qamişlo, January 30, 2015)

PYD co-chair Asya Abdullah (Qamişlo, August 19, 2014)

