Rojava

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Nacima Kerouad

Amid the chaos of Syria's civil war, Rojava has emerged as a bold experiment in democratic self-governance. Officially called the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), bordering Turkey to the North and Iraq to the east. Rojava was established in 2012 when the Assad regime withdrew from Kurdish-majority areas during the civil war.

The AANES' governance model is based on "democratic confederalism", meaning that the power is decentralized, with local councils and communes playing a central role in decision-making. These councils, which include representatives from all ethnic and social groups, make certain that governance is participatory and inclusive, for example, the top three officers must consist of one Kurd, one Arab, and one Assyrian or Armenian Christian, with at least one of them being a woman. There are women's and youth councils, along with the feminist militia YJA Star (short for 'Union of Free Women'), named after the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. The militia played a significant role in combat operations against ISIS. Rojava's governance model emphasizes gender equality, environmental sustainability, and grassroots democracy.

This bottom-up approach, one of a kind in the Middle East, was inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and considered to be the leader of Kurdish liberation. Abdullah Öcalan has been imprisoned in Turkey for the formation of armed organizations. During his time in prison he got influenced by Murray Bookchin, a social ecologist and writer, who advocated for freedom and a return to "real" democracy at the local level.

Rojava has long faced hostility from its neighbour, Turkey, which views it as an extension of the PKK – considered as a terrorist organization not only by Turkey but also the U.S. and the EU. The Turkish government also considers the Kurdish-led People Defence Units (YPG), a key part of Rojava's defence organization, and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as linked to PKK. This has led Turkey to launch repeated military operations, such as the Operation Peace Spring (2019) that have displaced thousands of people and destabilized the region. These actions have faced global criticism, including allegations of human rights abuses and war crimes. For example, Sweden stopped selling arms to Turkey in 2019

due to these military operations, but later lifted the ban during its NATO membership bid. Turkey's main goal is to block the Kurdish autonomous region near its border from gaining political recognition, which it sees as a national security threat.

After more than a decade of civil war in Syria, the regime of Bashar Al-Assad has fallen at the hands of the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The AANES expressed their contentment and congratulated all the people of Syria, describing the fall of Assad regime as a historic moment and hoping for a new era in Syria. Yet, the fall of the Assad regime has introduced new dynamics to the region, leaving Rojava in a precarious position internally as well as externally. Indeed, The AANES struggles with the Arab tribes over resources and political power, this highlights the importance of Rojava strengthening its authority and addressing the concerns of the Arab community. Additionally, the Turkey-backed Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by Abu Mohammed Al-Julani and responsible for overthrowing Assad's regime, has origins in both al-Qaeda and ISIS. Despite Al Julani's current portrayal as more moderate, HTS poses a significant threat to Rojava. The two are deeply opposed: Rojava, supported by the U.S. and Western allies, has actively fought against ISIS, defended the Yazidis during the genocide, and continues to resist Turkey's aggression. These stark differences in governance and values make a future clash between AANES and HTS highly likely. Externally, Rojava's main foe Turkey is taking advantage of the power vacuum by escalating military campaigns against Rojava, aiming to suppress what it considers as Kurdish insurgency linked to the PKK, which has caused displacement of thousands and undermined Rojava's autonomy.

Even though the fall of Assad reduced the central state's influence in northern Syria, forcing Rojava to operate as a de facto independent region, this shift not only brought new opportunities for local governance and grassroots participation but also amplified its vulnerability to external and internal threats.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Rojava's story is the lack of global media attention it receives. Despite its democratic model, commitment to equality, and fight against extremism, its challenges and successes are largely overlooked. Increased media coverage could bring Rojava's efforts into the spotlight, boost international support, and highlight its cutting-edge approach.

Rojava is more than a region; it's an idea, a vision of how communities can rebuild and prosper, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Rojava's survival is a reflection of the strength of its people and the power of its ideals. In a region wracked by authoritarianism and extremism, Rojava offers an alternative vision, where communities work together to build a future based on justice, equality, and cooperation, which could shape a New Middle East.