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The People's Communes in Rojava and Northeast Syria Characters, Evolution and Contradictions in a Self-Governing Institution

ABSTRACT

In Syria, since 2003 the institution of the Commune, in both its gender-mixed and women's variants, has been at the core of the PYD's political action and revolutionary perspective. Between 2011 and 2012, the Syrian social uprising allowed the party to extend and openly claim the activities of the Communes. It structured them into a system of commissions and delegations that has become a unique form of self-government in Syria. Since 2013 this system has witnessed the establishment of administrative institutions that initially were barely linked to the Communes. The Communes were given the historical task of gradually eroding those very provisional and administrative powers, building a radically democratic perspective at the grassroots level. The war against IS (2014-2019) increased the number of Communes, and even extended them beyond the limits of Kurdish communities. The Turkish invasions (2018-2022) halted and undermined this process of expansion quantitatively (since they were dissolved in occupied areas) and qualitatively, forcing them to become transmission belts for emergency directives that mostly come from the administrative institutions. This produced a reversal (whether temporary or not is yet to be seen) of the political dynamics imagined by the PYD both at its foundation and at the beginning of the Syrian revolution.

KEYWORDS: Rojava, communes, political action, self-governing institution, PYD

During the Syrian uprising of 2011, various political groups took to the streets. In the Kurdish-majority northern regions (called Rojava, or Western Kurdistan, by the Kurds: McGhee 2022), the Democratic Union Party was the most influential (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD). Founded in 2003, it had previously created an underground network of units of Kurdish self-government called Communes (*Komîna*). Their purpose was to allow residents to congregate and, among other things, settle disputes through judicial practices independent of the courts of the Syrian Arab Republic (Ayboga et *al*. 2016).

In the history of the Kurdish movement, the first experiment of the Commune took place in the Iraqi Kurdish refugee camp of Maxmur, between the 1990s and early 2000s (Grasso 2018a: 101-105). In Syria they became a countervailing judicial power. Kurdish parties of similar ideology were covertly creating similar structures in Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Not surprisingly, in Rojava the PYD went on to establish its own armed wing, the People's Self-Defense Units (*Yekîneyên Xweparastina Gel*, YXG). Although it is difficult to estimate the degree of popular support for the Communes in that period, they did express a widespread demand for de facto autonomy within the Kurdish communities.

During the 2011 mobilization many joined the protests in Rojava. Kurdish communities had been leaders of the last mass insurrection in Syria. In 2004, an uprising had pitted thousands against security forces in many locations for several days. This occurred in correspondence with political gains achieved in Iraq by the Kurdish Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*, KDP) and the Kurdish Patriotic Union (*Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê*, PUK) during and following the 2003 Anglo-American invasion. However, at the time, no Kurdish party was legal in Syria. The existence of Kurdish organizations, if kept quiet, was merely tolerated by the government (Schmidinger 2017: 63-73).

While the PYD suffered severe repression for its support of the 2004 uprising, it gained considerable respect among the people. In 2011, at least three Kurdish factions supported the demonstrations. First, that of the PYD and its allies, which we may call "confederal" for being inspired by the confederalist theory of self-government and democratic nationhood to be found in the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, the president of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkeren Kurdîstanê*, PKK). Second, the nationalist factions linked to the Iraqi KDP, made up of a network of conservative parties hostile to the PYD (Atassi 2014). Finally, those ready to pick up the cues sent out in the rest of the country by the liberal or Islamist Arab opposition, such as newly created

informal groups and the Kurdish Future Movement Party (*Şepêla Pêşeroj a Kurdî li Sûriyê*: Schmidinger 2017: 79-85).

Several reasons led to the prevalence of the confederal variant in the Kurdish segment of the Syrian insurgency. The general uprising in Syria mainly became armed between June 2011 and the spring of 2012. It turned into a civil war with strong international implications from the summer 2012. Around that time, a revolution in the revolution, led by the PYD, took place in Rojava (Barkhoda 2016: 82-83). This was based on the widespread establishment of People's Communes (Grasso 2018a: 119 ff.). Ten years later that revolution is still ongoing. The Communes movement has undergone a series of important and dramatic developments.

This article intends to focus on the People's Communes in Rojava studying their character, evolution and ability to understand the people's need for self-government, socio-political independence and political organization. These needs emerged in a population threatened by (1) repressive forces of the state; (2) neighboring states and international powers; (3) armed opposition groups of various orientations. This contribution aims to highlight the political significance of the construction of the Communes and to analyze their recent development.

The first part of the text, titled "The Creative Process", analyzes the assembly structures, elective bodies and sub-Committees of the Communes, along with the role of the party within them and the specific relationship women have with these institutions (mainly thanks to the party's social action: Kaya 2015). The second part, titled "Social Challenges", traces the military and diplomatic events that led to the establishment of administrative bodies different from, and independent of, the Communes, in Rojava and in the surrounding Arab-majority areas.

In addition, the relationship of the Communes with the population, with administrative law and with the PYD's conception of the state will be considered. Finally, in the third part titled "Political Contradictions", the tripartite nature of the legal system of the confederal revolution will be clarified, that is the division among the revolutionary Movement, the general Administration and the people's Communes. This three-way division is explained by its theoretical features as much as by its practical contradictions and ongoing crises, listing the difficulties encountered by the Communes during the military invasions and occupations perpetrated by Turkey since 2018 (Al-Hilu 2021).

The data presented are drawn from documentation sources found on site, in-depth interviews with the protagonists in the process, participant observation by the author during the activities of Rojava's Communes, high-level journalistic reports, and relevant scientific literature.

The Creative Process

The Movement for a Democratic Society

In the first months of the Syrian revolution, the PYD proposed to the Kurdish communities in Rojava (and other areas of the country, such as the Kurdish-majority neighborhoods of Aleppo and Damascus) to come together in popular assemblies called Councils (Ayboga et al. 2016: 51-52). The process of forming similar groups was ongoing throughout the whole country. Both liberal-oriented Arab groups (such as the Damascus Declaration) and conservative Islamic regroupments (such as the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution) were forming assemblies fighting for political and organizational hegemony in the process (Al-Shami et al. 2016: 35-75). In 2011 the general nascent anti-Assad movement was already suffering violent reactions from the state (Dechlich 2016: 135-184).

The success of the Councils convened by the PYD among the Kurdish communities was remarkable. In August 2011, an election led to the selection of 330 delegates from the various Councils to form the body of the Popular Congress of Western Kurdistan (*Meclîsa Gel a Rojavayê Kurdistanê*, MGRK: Ayboga et al. 2016: 85-86). The latter elected a territorial coordinating body of 33 delegates, called Movement for a Democratic Society (*Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk*, Tev-Dem). The widespread participation led to the Tev-Dem breaking up the town assemblies at the neighborhood, residential street and village level, allowing the new institutions to function better and making it possible for all residents to be actively involved (Hag Qasim 2016). The district and village assemblies resulting from the division of the Councils were called Communes. It is plausible, and confirmed by personal conversations between the author and local PYD's militants, that they integrated and overlapped the pre-existing underground Communes established by the PYD during the 2000s.

The relationship between the new Communes and the city level Councils was thus formalized by the MGRK. The City Councils became the direct expression of the local self-government of the Communes (RIC 2019), a meeting place for delegates elected by the local Communes. This structuring took place in

parallel with the emergence of considerable female participation. The presence in Rojava of secular, socialist parties such as the PKK until 1998 and the PYD since 2003 had made the Kurdish population familiar with theoretical justifications, whether accepted or not, of women's participation in public and political life (Öcalan 2013; see Shahvisi 2018). Female participation was something that, by contrast, wouldn't be appreciated in most Councils emerging elsewhere in Syria (Hilal et al. 2017). Women rarely played an open political role during those months, except in the PYD-promoted Councils and Communes (Saliha 2016).

Each Commune began to elect a co-Chairman and a co-Chairwoman by majority vote during plenary assemblies. They also elected delegates to Neighborhood Councils, and City Councils, through direct, imperative and revocable mandate (Tev-Dem 2014; see Al-Tamimi 2018). City Councils allowed delegates from all Neighborhood Councils and Communes in and around the city to coordinate their answers to practical problems, discussing and approving solutions (Biehl 2015). The growth of such a political structure favored the participation of families and individuals who did not necessarily adhere to the ideological tendencies of the PYD (RIC 2019: 24 ff.). This entailed a renewed paradigm, oriented in a moderate socialist and ecological direction, with women at the centre. According to the ideology of the PYD, the Kurdish national question would have been gradually reconciled with those of the other linguistic communities. No demand for the creation of a separate Kurdish state was envisioned (Öcalan 2016).

The Communes' network was capable of connecting territories and communities at risk of being dismembered by repression and war. The Tev-Dem structure attracted sectors of non-Kurdish communities of Rojava, such as local Assyrian, Armenian, Yazidi and Arab groups (RIC 2021). These enlargements led the Tev-Dem to build two further levels of territorial coordination: the District Councils (bringing together delegates from neighboring City Councils) and the Cantonal Councils (bringing together District Councils of three Cantons: Cizire, Kobane and Afrin).

The Assemblies of the Communes

Since then, the Commune has been the basic unit of self-government in territories militarily controlled by the Confederal Movement. It involves people at a residential street level, normally some 30-200 households, reaching the number of 500 in major cities (Ayboga et al. 2016: 87). They are structured according to criteria of effectiveness, i.e. the concrete possibility of deciding

and acting (Burç 2016). The fundamental instruments are plenary assemblies, with all members present. Assemblies are orderly and take place with people arranged in rows, looking towards a Commission consisting of three or four members (the co-Chairs plus one or two other participants, elected at the very beginning of the gathering).

What follows is an excerpt of an in-depth interview with a European Tev-Dem activist. He attended three Commune assemblies in the Afrin Canton, one in the village of Reco, two in the city of Afrin. The following memories concern meetings which took place in January 2018.

The assembly was orderly. Most people sat on chairs lined up, as if you were at the cinema or in a theatre. There were all kinds of people: younger, older, women, men (...). The only confusing element was the children running around the assembly, especially in town. The one in Reco was in the courtyard of a building (I don't remember what it was), so it was more orderly even physically. Those in the city of Afrin took place in the streets: there was more movement on the sides, for example children (...). In front of the lines of chairs there was a Commission of three or maybe sometimes four people, both men and women. I did not see if it was elected because I arrived later. At least in one case I am sure that part of the commission were people who did not belong to the Commune but came from higher (civilian) institutional levels. In the context of approaching war there was a need to discuss the scenarios that might emerge. The discussion was about what the Turkish army was going to do, what we could do, even diplomatic moves they were thinking about, which later turned out not to be useful. I think the higher level, I'm not sure, was from the Administration of the Afrin canton, from the central Tev-Dem in Afrin, people who then went to the individual Communes and villages to give a clear and sharp view of the events (Bindi 2021).

In the assemblies, if a general consensus has not been reached, the possibility of majority voting is guaranteed, in order to give a clear and reasonably rapid outcome to the discussion (Ayboga et al. 2016: 87-88). Assemblies are convened every so often by the co-Chairs and then elect delegates to Committees (*Komîte*, sometimes also called Commissions: not to be confused with the "commission" or committee elected just for once to flank the co-presidents during an assembly: O'Keeffe 2018). The multiple, long-standing Committees established by the Communes are responsible for economic issues, peaceful dispute resolution, self-defense, education, ideology, and health protection (Cemgil et al. 2016; Duman 2017). This is their description by the co-Chairwoman of a Commune in Amude, interviewed in March 2016:

We have five Committees in each Commune. First we bring together the people in the neighborhood and they elect the co-Chairs; then the members of the Committees are chosen and this choice is confirmed by an election. Each Committee then chooses a spokesperson. Every week there is a seven-person meeting between the spokespersons of the five Committees and the co-chairs of the Commune. Every fortnight there is a big meeting of the Committees with the people, and the Committees report on what they have, and discuss it with the people. The people complain about them or they complain about the people. If I want to go to the City Council, I can run for office and the people choose whether I did well or not, by voting. The Commune can also write to the administration and ask for the removal of even top Executive, Legislative or Judicial Councils' personnel from office. I can assure you that if an official is challenged by a Commune it is a serious problem for that person. He will be replaced. These are our Committees: (1) Problem Solving (Judicial); (2) Educational (Training on self-governance and language); (3) Self-Defense; (4) Economic; (5) Health. There is no fixed number of Committees; there can be five or thirteen, there can even be an "Ecology Committee", it depends on the neighborhood. Let's take an example. The Economic Committee makes up a draft of projects, e.g. a factory to be built in the neighborhood. It addresses the people, collects money and goes to the city Council, where they say "we have this project". They ask for more money and authorization. It is up to the city Council to give the authorization. Another example: the Health Committee. The Administration gives medicine for free for the Committee to distribute them and to have doctors inoculate children (Hag Qasim 2016).

The core of self-government is built on the relationship between participation and delegation. In line with most radical socialist traditions (and in opposition to liberal democracy) it interprets the mandate as imperative and revocable (Bance 2020: 77-100). The delegates are continuously subject to the control of the Commune members, who can draw up written reports on their actions, ask for their dismissal or request meetings with the relevant Committee, or an assembly (Mendanlioglu 2020). The pyramid of delegates understands the decentralized units – i.e. the Communes –to be the summit, not the base. In this inversion and weakening of hierarchical relations characteristic of administrative law lies a cornerstone of the PYD's idea of "non-statist" institutional action (Grasso 2018a: 124-130). In Ghalia Hag Qasim's words, "municipalities are against the central government: decisions come from the people and go to the authority, which carries out their suggestions; so decisions go from the bottom up, not vice versa." Saliha, a top representative of the Tev-Dem, said in an interview: "We are breaking with the state system, since we are not going from the top down, but from the bottom up. If people have a problem they don't

wait for outside institutions to intervene: they organize themselves to find solutions."

The Party and the Communes

Within the Communes, the political militants of the PYD do not always necessarily have a formally recognized role (Bance 2020: 120-151). They often don't need it, since they possess high prestige, determined by several factors. The latter include personal exposure in the defense of the community (such as war merits), political-ideological preparation (the ability to articulate general and complex analyses in meetings), and technical skills (the ability to mediate, train, use technology, suggest and advise). These qualities are supposed to be based on political and pragmatic knowledge, accumulated over years of militancy in numerous contexts and territories (Grasso 2022). The political cadres are expected by many to productively fulfill a leadership role, whatever their formal position (De Jong 2016). To clarify this phenomenon I will share qualitative data acquired in Syria through participatory observation between 2016 and 2017.

The first episode I witnessed occurred in September 2016, during a plenary meeting of the Commune of Qanat al-Suways, a neighborhood in the city of Qamishlo (Cizire Canton). Some sixty people were present, and the meeting was chaired by a Commission consisting of two co-Chairs and another person who was taking the minutes. Much of the time was taken up by the Chair's reports on the activities of the Commune and its Committees. This was followed by short speeches from some residents who stood up to express their appreciation, criticism or requests.

What everyone seemed to have felt as the high point of the discussion was, however, a man aged around forty speaking at great length. He made a thorough political analysis of the overall historical period, linking the work of the Commune, and its limitations and difficulties, to the general work of the confederal movement. Turkey had invaded Syria for the first time a few days earlier, and tanks were threatening the city of Kobane from the border. The speaker was a PYD militant. His speech revealed an evident gap in the capacity for argumentation and analysis. No one else had produced an analysis of the same length and kind, and no one countered it or subsequently proposed an alternative.

The second episode occurred a year later, in November 2017, in the village of Carudiye, near the city of Derik (Al-Malikiyah). Four or five people, including

the co-Chairs of the local Commune, welcomed me and other outside visitors in the village and in their houses. We observed the economic organization of the village, managed by the Commune's Economic Committee, and interviewed residents about their political and social relations. It emerged that about half of the population were supporters of the ENKS, the loose coalition of conservative pro-Iraqi KDP Kurdish party opposing the PYD in Rojava (Atassi 2014). I was surprised, since the ENKS openly called for all its supporters to boycott the Communes and any institutional structure promoted by the PYD. It came out that the will and need to maintain good neighborly relations, cooperating in an effective organization of labour and trade, had prompted conservative villagers to reject the ENKS's instructions in this respect.

During our conversations it emerged that the Mukhtar – a traditional judicial authority, recognized by state law in Syria – had been stripped of his judicial powers by the Commune. Such powers were taken over by a Peace Committee (*Comîteya Aşîtî* : what Haq Qasim had called "Judicial Committee"). It would mediate between residents in case of a dispute (see Ayboga 2014). The Mukhtar, however, retained economic pre-eminence, owning more land than the other residents. A loquacious figure respected by the people, called the *mamoste* (teacher) explained that the Economic Committee of the Commune had expropriated part of the Mukhtar's land. Land registers showed that his family had misappropriated it over time. To the visitors' remark that the monopoly of military power exercised by the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* or YPG, evolution of the YXG since 2012) would easily allow an overall expropriation and redistribution, the *mamoste* replied that not all residents disavowed the traditional role of the Mukhtar. For this reason, many would oppose violent or illegal actions (in relation to the Republic's civil law) toward him and his family.

Shortly afterwards, as a large part of the village was gathered for lunch, it was suggested to the co-Chairman of the Commune that he propose a discussion about the future role of the Mukhtar. Visitors would thus understand the kind of sensitivities that existed within the community on the issue. At this request, the co-Chairman met for a few minutes with one of the members of the Commune. The latter called me shortly afterwards outside the hall, in the presence of the co-Chair, introducing himself as a political cadre of the PYD. He said that this kind of discussion would provoke bitter dissent in the Commune, bringing to the surface barely dormant disagreements, and breaking fragile political balances. It would have been better not to sacrifice the progress achieved on the altar of a discussion created for the benefit of outside ob-servers.

This man's upper body was mutilated. He had probably been injured in combat. Very often PYD militants undertake the most dangerous military operations to protect the community, and mutilation is not rare among cadres. This is, beside political feeling, a reason for many to respect them and rely on them, even when they weren't born in the village or neighborhood where they act, or they do not live there all the time. The movement interferes with their connection to a specific territory with constant relocation, in order to avoid the accumulation of power and possible corruption. Not all Communes have as much attendance as those in Qanat al-Suways or Carudiye. Foreign travelers could see in 2014 that a communal assembly of a large Kurdish district of Qamishlo, Corniche, consisted of only 16-17 participants (Baher 2019: 47).

The Women and the Communes

In addition to gender-mixed communal assemblies, women often meet in additional, separate meetings. Here they form the Women's Communes (by some referred to as Women's Committees of the overall gender-mixed Commune: Ayboga et al. 2016). In doing so, they undertake a dual political path, both autonomous and gender-mixed (Rasit et al. 2020). This model is adapted to the concrete conditions of each community. Where political and social conditions prevent local women from undertaking this endeavor, the Women's Commune will wait to be formed (Ib.: 64-67). PYD militants, female and male, take pride in the pragmatic and flexible character of the rules they try to implement, rejecting absolute and fully formalized patterns. This is not something pertaining solely to the women's autonomous Committees; it also pertains, as Haq Qasim told us, to the number of Committees in general.

This does not mean that Communes are unrelated monads deprived of political coherence. On the contrary: in order to understand the confederal system, one must bear in mind that the autonomy of the communes is not unlimited. Principles qualifying the confederal revolution as such are to be followed by all Communes, even regardless of the will of their members. An example is the rule on the abolition of polygamy, contained in the Fundamental Principles and General Provisions for Women (the so called Women's Law: RXD 2014b; Grasso 2021a) issued by the Rojava Administration (see below) in 2014. The assembly of a Commune can not vote to reintroduce polygamy, although multiple Communes would do so if they could due to the moral and religious inclinations of many of their members. The abolition of polygamy is considered by the Tev-Dem to define the political core of the revolution, as defined by the PYD. That norm, among others, is understood as producing the egalitarian space in which communalism can arise and mature (Grasso 2022).

The woman's question is actually one of the most telling in appraising the interconnection between the party (political organization) and the self-governing structures (social process). Since 2011, PYD militants have invited women to participate in Council and Commune meetings wherever possible (Barkhoda 2016: 84). They have done so despite the existence of customs, in Rojava, which envisage a clear division of labour within the family. According to deeply rooted customs, women are expected to dedicate themselves to housework and children, whereas men are supposed to meet publicly for trade or public affairs. This division of labour in many Syrian families is defended by taboos, such as that implying that a woman's independent action in society is disreputable, representing unbearable dishonor for her male legal guardian (be it the father, the husband, or another close male relative: Maktabi 2010).

The women of the PYD challenge these taboos (Ferreira et al. 2018). They first ask families to allow women to meet with them privately in their homes, something which does not contradict the local custom. They then talk to them about their problems, inviting them, as a next step, to join all-female meetings where they set up the Women's Commune. The Women's Commune will later join (collectively) the meetings of the gender-mixed Communes. Many women have been introduced to politics and life in society this way under the protection of the many and powerful PYD female militants.

Just as the set of delegates of the gender-mixed Communes constitutes the Tev-Dem, the set of female delegates of the Women's Communes or Committees forms the Kongra Star (known as Yekitia Star up to 2016). Tev-Dem and Kongra Star are two implementing bodies of the project of societal transformation, through self-government and women's autonomy, inspired by the works of Abdullah Öcalan (Mendanlioglu 2020). They are therefore conceived of as movements rather than apparatuses. Despite Kongra Star's autonomy from the Tev Dem, they cooperate entirely, as they have a common mission. The common mission is essentially represented by the ideology and aims of the PYD, to which the most advanced political cadres in both Tev-Dem and Kongra Star belong (usually occupying top positions). Party membership becomes indeed a coveted goal for individuals who become male or female Commune delegates, eventually devoting their lives to the ongoing revolutionary process.

The female segment of the Communes network encourages women (both young and old) to act independently, following new ideas rather than the customary principles justifying subjection to family or clan rules. This is a key cause of potential resentment by local families and clans to the work of the

Communes. This social resentment is far from absent in Rojava and is particularly vehement among Arab communities involved in the confederal project (Awad 2018). Various tribal structures make respect for patriarchal customs (and loyalty to Islam, sometimes understood as an otherworldly confirmation of their validity) a distinctive element. The refusal of secular and new norms is understood by some as the cornerstone of tribal independence from the modern state system. This is why the opposition to Kongra Star and Tev-Dem often becomes radical and even armed (RIC 2021: 82-98).

Social Challenges

The Communes and the Administration

In the beginning, the complex network of self-government did not face full-scale repression by the state (Taha 2012). The multiplication of various types of councils everywhere in the country was so rapid that the government had to prioritize its targets. It selected contexts in which intervention seemed more urgent, those linked to forces establishing relations with regional (and international) powers hostile to the Syrian Arab Republic, and therefore potentially more capable of threatening the state militarily. These powers were Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, the United Kingdom and the United States (Álvarez-Ossorio 2012b). The PYD did not fit into the geopolitical axis designed by these nation-states. Turkey, moreover, considered the PYD an extension of the PKK, classified as "terrorist organization" in Ankara. This designation of the PKK was furthermore accepted by the EU, the US and NATO, although not by the UN.

The potential hostility between the confederal movement in Rojava and the Turkish government may explain the different stance that the Syrian government initially took toward the PYD. It might have been seen as an actor which, for ideological and geopolitical reasons, might restrain at least some of the internal and international anti-regime activity. The Syrian government's repression was therefore, in the eyes of the political and military elites, to be postponed to a later stage. Government action focused on the so-called Free Syrian Army (*Al-Jaysh As-Suri Al-Hurr*, FSA) whose establishment by defecting officers of the state's army (Syrian Arab Army: *Al-Jaysh Al-ʿArabī As-Sūrī*, SAA) had been announced by the Syrian government in July 2011. The insurgency of the FSA was coordinated, if not directed, by the Defense Front (*Jabhat Al-Nuṣra li-Ahl Al-Shām*, JN), the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda (Del Grande 2018: 134-153). In the course of 2012 it had been paralleled by the opposite insurgency carried out by the YXG in the north.

It was actually the groups acting under the banners of the FSA and JN who attempted the repression of the confederal experiment and the Communes system between 2012 and 2013 (Hag Qasim 2016; Ayboga et al. 2016: 77-78). The YXG, which in July 2012 took control of Kurdish areas, were reinforced by new Kurdish fighters coming from Syria and other countries (notably from the Kurdish-majority regions in Iran, Iraq and Turkey). They gradually set up checkpoints between towns in Rojava, amid protests by opposing Kurdish factions such as the ENKS or the Kurdish Future Movement (Schmidinger 2017: 86 ff.). They multiplied military installations between July 19th and 20th around the cities of Afrin, Kobane (Ayn al-Arab), Qamishlo, Derik and Amude. Meanwhile, the population, led by PYD militants, occupied government buildings. The government's reaction resulted in casualties (Ibrahimi 2016) but wasn't comparable to what was taking place in other parts of Syria.

The military control gained by the PYD meant an opening of political space for the Tev-Dem, which established general administrative institutions in 2013. The latter ought not to be confused with the Communes, which had created the Tev-Dem itself in 2011. Through the latter, it was indeed the Communes that decided to establish separate administration bodies between 2013 and 2014 (Radpey 2015). Each Canton was equipped with new administrative Councils, unrelated to the existing ones. They were named Legislative, Executive and Judicial Councils. They didn't consist of delegates of the District and City Councils, but were filled with representatives of political and social groups willing to join a self-government process and not necessarily involved in, or favorable to, the Communes and Tev-Dem political prospect or line of action. They declared themselves autonomous within (and not from) the Syrian state in January 2014. The three Cantons were then baptized Autonomous Regions (AR) with the publication of a fundamental law called Social Contract (RXD 2014a). The AR failed to get de jure or de facto recognition by the state or by any state (Radpey 2016: 484 ff.). Their establishment was also contested by Turkey and by opposing factions in the Kurdish and Arab opposition spectrums.

Along with the FSA and JN, an offshoot of the latter called Islamic State (*Ad-Dawla Al-Islāmiyya*, IS: Luizard 2015; Revkin 2016) attacked the AR militarily. The AR were defended with unexpected success by the YPG and by unprecedented, and somewhat unexpected, air support from the US air force. The resistance around Kobane also witnessed the relevant action of a new independent female force, the Women's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ). The counterattack of the YPG-YPJ in 2015 eventually allowed for an even wider expansion of Tev-Dem territorial control, especially into predominantly Arab-

residential areas. Results were the establishment of (a) military and (b) civilian entities with the presence of (a) Arab batallions (the Syrian Democratic Forces or SDF, created under the direction of the YPG-YPJ) and (b) new Kurdish and Arab political personnel for the confederal project (the Syrian Democratic Congress or SDC, instituted by the Tev-Dem). In 2016, the SDC proclaimed the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), a broader and more diverse institution replacing the AR (Grasso 2018b).

In 2018 the military annexation of Arab-majority and former IS-ruled areas such as Manbij, Al-Tabqa, Ar-Raqqa and part of the Deir el-Zor governorate brought the SDC to declare the autonomy within the Syrian Republic of a larger Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). These administrative institutions repeatedly made clear that their ultimate goal was to integrate themselves into the Syrian state institutions and not to secede, nor to question Syrian territorial integrity. The still existing AANES, like the AR and the DFNS, is not recognized by any state or inter-state organization in the world (Grasso 2021b).

Such political and military developments brought the extra- or anti-state system of the Communes to face new institutions, shaped, by the very Communes' and PYD's will, on a quasi-state model. Moreover, these were in-stitutions that, in the future, could potentially reconcile with state structures. Subsequent developments, such as military interventions of the Turkish army to repress the Democratic administration and the communal network, led to a quantitative and qualitative setback of the Commune experiment. In 2018 and 2019 the AANES was partially occupied by Turkey (in Afrin, Tell Abyad /Grê Spî and Ras Al-ʿAin/Serêkanî). The Turkish authorities acted in support of the prevailing far-right factions on the Arab opposition spectrum (Heller 2017). The latter had experienced an Islamist evolution being subsumed under an or-ganization called Syrian National Coalition (SNC).

Due to multiple failures in attempting to place the "Free Syrian Army" factions under a single chain of command, in late 2017 the Turkish army had established a new paramilitary force to replace the FSA. It was called Syrian National Army (SNA). Since 2013 the SNC had attempted, with little success, to govern the territories taken from the state by the FSA or JN (Álvarez-Ossorio 2012a) through an Islamist-inspired Interim Government of Syria (SIG) initially based in Gaziantep (Loufti 2017). Using the SNA as a de facto police force, the SIG declared its sovereignty over former AANES areas occupied by Turkey in 2018 and 2019 (Grasso 2021b). This resulted in all the Communes and Tev-Dem structures in these areas to be forcefully exiled or dissolved.

The expansion and contraction of the political experiment embodied by the People's Communes is linked directly to military developments in a condition of war. The Communes underwent a quantitative and qualitative increase during the fight against IS, and a corresponding decrease in the phase inaugurated by the Turkish invasions. Quantitatively, they multiplied rather rapidly after 2012 and 2014 exceeding, according to confederal authorities, the number of 4.000 in 2016 (Dilsha 2016). The expansion of the SDF was accompanied by Tev-Dem activism on the ground, where militants attempted to involve local communities in the establishment of new communal structures, with considerable success. The political, humanitarian and economic consequences of the Turkish invasions not only slowed down this process, but often partially altered the functions and tasks of existing Communes in the AANES.

The Communes and the People

The success of the communal system among the Rojava population was evidenced by the explicit demand for their creation not only by Kurdish, but also Arab communities in the areas liberated from IS between 2015 and 2017. In 2016, representatives of Arab tribal structures from the outskirts of Tell Tameer reached the Tev-dem offices in Qamishlo to protest because the Communes in their areas had not yet been established (Dilsha 2017). More than by ideological sympathy for the project, this protest was determined by the need to be included in a network of economic and institutional relations (IS had dissolved state institutions and the Administration had dissolved IS ones). During the war, the confederal system there gained consensus as the only effective institutional structure, alternative to the state and to IS (see Revkin 2016).

The SIG and the SNC never produced unified and stable networks of government or self-government, nor entities protected by paramilitary forces subject to clear chains of command (as had the confederal and, at the opposite political side, IS forces: Loufti 2017; Hilal et al. 2017). Creating infrastructure and circulating primary and secondary goods was a pivotal element around which the political leanings of communities, individuals and families were revolving. However, the population's adherence to the institutional set-up of AANES had been wavering and ambivalent. This was true in all linguistic communities, albeit primarily among Arabs.

In areas of Rojava such as Derik, Kobane or Qamishlo, membership in the Communes is high and their number enormous, constituting a complex mingling of assemblies, activities and delegates. In other Kurdish areas of

Rojava membership is weaker. In certain neighborhoods of Derik and Amude almost every house displays flags linked to the ENKS, an organization which refuses to recognize the communal system. Among other things, the ENKS supporters challenge the confederal view that a Kurdish self-government in Rojava should not develop into a future state. Self-government for the ENKS must have as its goal the establishment of a Kurdish nation state. The confederal project, on the contrary, proposes to enhance Kurdish identity through a process of democratic involvement of all linguistic communities and religious denominations in a new political system.

Among non-Kurdish and non-Muslim communities direct and deep involvement in the communal system has always been weaker. In the Arab neighborhoods of Qamishlo and the Assyrian villages of Tell Tameer part of the population rejects the confederal system. Sometimes these communities accept *obtorto collo* the military defense provided by the YPG-YPJ and SDF, as the only available ones. The connected action of the AANES is, by some, barely tolerated while waiting for the Damascus regime to get back (Glioti 2014; Enab Baladi 2019).

The institutional design of AANES Arab-majority territories is any way different from that in Rojava. Since 2018 the AANES is no longer composed of three Cantons, but of seven Regions: (Afrin, Manbij, Al-Tabqa, Ar-Raqqa, Cizire, Deir el-Zor and Euphrates). For decades, the population of the three Kurdish-majority Regions (partially overlapping with the original Cantons) has ben familiar with the ideology of the PKK and the PYD. In the other four regions, where the majority of residents are Arab, and where this ideology is barely known and often rejected, self-government is not based on Communes, but on unelected civil Councils consisting of former and new politicians, tribal notables and intellectuals who agree to cooperate with the confederal movement. The Tev-Dem creates Communes or cooperatives in these territories as well. This is the case when and where the residents ask for it, or to the extent to which they are willing to cooperate. The development of the Communes in these Regions is, however, much more limited and not comparable to that of Rojava (Awad 2018: 12 ff.).

Among Arab communities the concept of local self-government and the rejection of centralized, bureaucratic imposition of law is very popular – e.g. in matters of dispute settlement, or personal status. However, such rejection of centralism is often rooted in the respect for customary regulations and traditional forms of authority (Bance 2020: 154-162). Moreover, since Öcalan is a Kurdish leader and the PYD a Kurdish party, biases arise among families and

leaders. Furthermore, the organizational and ideological strength of the Tev-Dem is, paradoxically, another reason for concern in those politically unorganized communities that do not see it as realistic to fill in this gap. Many community leaders do not see it possible to effectively rebalance the Arab-Kurdish power relations in the AANES. These issues partly explain the refusal of large sectors of the Arab communities in AANES to develop communal structures, even when they accept the authority of the confederal civil councils, perceived as a less ideological alternative to the state.

The confederal revolution, like any political phenomenon, should not be confused with the population constituting the broader social context in which that phenomenon occurs. At the same time, it should not be identified with a specific linguistic or religious community, since communities and people of all religious and linguistic parts of the region do join in different numbers. Many individuals – e.g. many Arab women in the city of Ar-Raqqa – join enthusiastically, getting to the point of challenging their families and community structures (Argentieri 2021). The part of the population supporting and animating this project includes Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkmens and Yazidis, but there are also individuals and groups that remain indifferent or oppose the system. The incidence of membership is higher in those communities that have been influenced by the PKK or the PYD for decades, and lower in those which have not.

The Communes and the State

The Communes were established, in their growing phase, to fill the void of a departing state. Nevertheless, they were not supposed to resemble the administrative bodies of a state.

People needed places to solve problems after the regime left, so we created Councils for neighboring towns and villages, but that wasn't enough, so we started to create Communes. Our town, Amude, is divided into four parts, each of which has four or five Communes, coordinated by a People's House (*Mala Gel*), making a total of four People's Houses and eighteen Communes. The Communes know everyone, even the refugees who have come from other parts of Syria. They create committees to find legal solutions, to provide protection, services, to make up for the lack of food, even just a vegetable at a certain time, right now courgettes. If I have to find a job I go to the Commune, they know everything about me, the People's House and the City Council don't know anything about me. If I have to apply for deferment or exemption from military conscription [in the HXP Self-Defense Forces, distinct from the

voluntary YPG but still part of the SDF, A/N] the Commune knows if I am an only child and therefore, for instance, I qualify. When the regime withdrew in 2012 not only did the soldiers leave, but the offices and the bureaucracy did. We forced the government to leave with the revolution of July 19th, 2012 […]. Only the post office, the registry office for certificates and the waterworks offices remained here (Hag Qasim 2016).

Unlike the administrative local bodies of a state, in the Commune each individual is supposed to be freely and voluntarily involved. Joining the Commune is not mandatory, and one is free not to join. The significance of the action of the Communes is the opposite of the administrative activity, which has been delegated to the separate structure of the Legislative, Executive and Judicial Councils of the AANES.

Until January 24th, 2014, it was the Tev-Dem that dealt with relations between the people's components through the Legislative and Executive Councils [established in the summer/fall of 2013: Allsopp et al. 2019]. After that date the Councils, through the established Administration [the AR, predecessor of AANES] played this role. The Tev-Dem retreated, to be more alongside the Communes and City Councils, presenting ideas for economic, financial and self-defense projects. The Tev-Dem creates Committees or helps with the skills to create Committees, from the Communes to the City Councils (...). The aim is to get people to administer themselves (Saliha 2016).

The voluntary nature of the Commune's membership is a sign of its highly political character. At core, the Communes share an idea of self-government and do not claim to represent the entire population. The Commune relates its "people's" character to a politicized concept of "the people" (*gel*). The invitation to the Commune is an invitation to partisan adherence to a basic vision and direction in a political process. The latter is not to be simply super-imposed, on the other hand, on the ideology of the PYD. There is a gap between the feelings and sensitivities of the "patriotic" part of the population (welatparêzî) and the actual line of the party. The political vanguard, on the other hand, always tries to fill this gap. The process of filling this gap in terms of "mindset" and "ideology" is what the confederal movement sees as social revolutionary process (Grasso 2022).

Although the Communes carry out socio-economic, educational and land management activities, they cannot be considered as units of the Autonomous Administration (Bance 2020: 88-92). Between 2014 and 2017 they enjoyed total autonomy from the top administrative Councils, as shown by the absence

of any reference to them in the 2014 AR Social Contract regulating the Administration bodies. A mere mention was to be found in the 2016 DFNS Social Contract (MDFD 2016: III, 1, 48):

> The commune is the essential basic organizational form of direct democracy. It is a system for making decisions and for management within its organizational and administrative boundary. It works as an independent council in all stages of decision making.

This excerpt was the result of internal discussions within the Tev-Dem, where two visions had emerged: one more radical, which envisaged the Communes as fully independent from the administration, and another less radical, willing to discuss how to tie them to the DFSN structure and let them take on administrative roles, making the Federation's legal system more coherent, stable and unified (Dilsoz 2017).

> The communalist conception of the democracy embraced by the PYD sees the Commune as the driving force in the transformation of society (Dirik et al. 2016). It is an autonomous decision-making body at the top of an imaginary political hierarchy (Hag Qasim 2016; Saliha 2016). The Communes were not formed to enforce directives coming from above, even when this "above" initially emanated, as provisional structure, by the Communes themselves.

Political Contradictions

The Tripartite Nature of the Confederal Legal System

The legal system of the confederal self-government consists of various powers not only balancing each other dynamically, but responding to a political conception that determines their actual hierarchy and interaction. The Declaration of Autonomy of the AR in 2014 brought about the creation of institutions – Legislative, Executive and Judicial – not part of the elective system embodied by the institution that had created them (the Tev-Dem). The Administration's members were selected by consensus among the political and associative entities adhering to the Tev-Dem alongside the Communes (in 2013 the Tev-Dem had been joined by five Kurdish parties in addition to the PYD, as well as by representatives of Armenian, Assyrian, Yazidi and Arab social organizations (Ayboga et al. 2016; Havga 2016; Ibrahimi 2016). Much of the Administration's political staff was recruited among the more moderate and compromise-minded individuals of the opposition parties. This helped to weaken and fragment the opposition to the confederal project in the region (Schmidinger 2017: 129 ff.).

The administrative Councils, reproducing the modern, statist threefold division of public powers, produced a quasi-state structure on a land hitherto governed by a network of self-managing assemblies through direct democracy, albeit informally directed by a vanguardist political party (Rasit 2021). The confederal movement, driven by a radically democratic idea, does not believe in the state model (Cemgil 2016). It envisages possible, provisional integrations of the new confederal institutions into existing states. Its stated goal is to gradually make society more democratic within the different states colonizing Kurdistan. The societies straddling the different borders would then become more interconnected. Tev-Dem and PYD militants explain the creation of transitional administration structures also in diplomatic terms (Allsopp et al. 2019).

The evolution of the Syrian war until 2013 had shown that the Turkish veto of the PYD's participation in international peace talks was reinforced by the absence of a de facto government of Rojava. In order to meet international law standards, the revolution had to take on the institutional contours of a government of some sort and some form of territorial quasi-statehood. The AR were the confederal response to the Turkish-Qatari-SNC establishment of the SIG, in correspondence with the 2014 Geneva II international talks between the Syrian government and the SNC (which expressed the SIG as its executive: Loufti 2017). The DFNS, in turn, was proclaimed during the Geneva III talks of 2016. Since 2014 the confederal institutions thus seem to have been characterized by a dual nature: two parallel legal paths – the substantial, grass-roots one and the diplomatic-instrumental one – coexisted without depending on each other.

The Administration responded indeed, in the view of the PYD, to political-historical tasks that were different from those of the Communes. The apparent dualism corresponds to a general theory of change. The Administration is supposed to represent what Abdullah Öcalan, in his works, calls Democratic Autonomy. It is, so to say, the equilibrium achieved by the popular forces (*gel*) organized by the movement (*tevger*: ideologically directed by the political organization of the party, or *rêxistin*) and the old world that finally needs to be overcome (i.e. the domestic and international state system, to be replaced by a communistic and stateless global society). The Communes, co-ordinated by the Tev-Dem, are in themselves pure expression of the persistent transformative imbalance produced by the everyday strivings of the popular forces engaged in practices of self-government. In a way, this is a prelude to the future stateless communism which Öcalan calls "Democratic Confederalism" (Öcalan 2011; 2016).

The existence of both the transitional Democratic Autonomy and the eventual Democratic Confederalism is historically to be enabled by an educated vanguard,

i.e. by the party's action. The militants who merged into the Tev-Dem did so in response to the need to think both strategically and tactically, for substantial transformation and immediate administration (Rasit 2021). This requires a capability for critical discernment: a method of thought, a political science – what the PYD calls "ideology" (*ideolojî*). The militants have studied in revolutionary Academies, have learned and share the confederal ideology shaped by the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan and subsequent wider and more disseminated organizations. Thus, in fact, the apparent duality of the system conceals not a dual, but a tripartite nature: the provisional administrative government and the constantly developing network of the Communes both respond to the third "authority", i.e. the organized movement or party (*rêxistin*). The supreme source of unwritten law, thus of law in the broadest but fullest sense of the term, is neither the tactical quasi-state, nor the strategic self-management network, rather a political movement aiming at transforming society through a theory of change and a science of political conflict.

The Political Significance of the Communes

This tripartite system brings about a process animated by interconnection and interaction (sometimes strident) between the three relevant institutions. In September 2016, in the Qanat al-Suways neighborhood of Qamishlo, the Tev-Dem mandated the police forces (*Asaysh*, depending from the Cizire Canton's Executive Council) to hand over responsibility for law and order to the Self-Defense Committee of the Qanat al-Suways Commune. The armed body supposed to take over were thus the Essential Defense Forces (*Hêzên Parastina Cawherî*: HPC). The HPC are the result of the training provided to the locals by the Self-Defense Committee of a Commune. They are so called because they are supposed to embody the essence (*cawherî*) of the democratic process leading toward Democratic Confederalism. In fact, unlike the Asaysh, they are a voluntary and non-military (civilian) armed corp. Its members don't wear uniforms as they are supposed to be direct expression of the people.

The HPC do not represent a government-related police body, as do the Asaysh. Moreover, they do not represent a political movement as does the YPG which, although made up of volunteers as well, originated as the armed wing of a political party and only later became loyal to the Tev-Dem and SDC. The Asaysh represent the provisional compromise with the still overwhelming mentality of public law and the division of powers (the "executive"). The YPG is the political, ideological army, aiming to overcome public law in history on a path of change defined by ideology (Folly 2020). The HPC are the occurring change: a qualified popular stream changing itself in practice through self-government, self-critique, education and social cooperation.

In the eyes of the PKK and the PYD, the revolutionary evolution of Kurdistan and the Middle East is therefore supposed to consist in the establishment of Democratic Autonomy structures, where a gradual transfer of social powers from administrative to self-governing bodies takes place under the military and ideological protection of the party. This transfer includes law-and-order responsibilities – from the Asaysh to the HPC. Similar processes should slowly involve the economy, the judiciary, education, health, etc. The provisional quasi-state, created to defend the revolution from marginalization in the domestic and international state-system, would gradually die out as long as the social change and the ideological spillover of the revolution is successful. It would help constituting a much stronger society, defined by stronger social and political relations.

Here the role of the political vanguard is as clearer as ever. If, for whatever reason, the Asaysh refused to hand over responsibility to the HPC when so asked by the Tev-Dem, or if whatever administrative powers hesitated to hand over responsibilities to the Communes, the YPG – by far the preponderant military force – would intervene to enforce the correct historical path. Although the Communes are supposed to embody the most advanced and forward-looking element of the revolutionary process, it is the movement that needs to direct them. People who are not "moving" cannot change and liberate themselves; and people who are not learning can not move. The party is, after all, a congregation of individuals who share a view of change and goals that they consider to be especially appropriate.

As in Marxism, and especially in the Bolshevik variant of it (from which the PKK drew its original inspiration), revolutionary history is the affirmation of a subject through struggle. The legal phenomena and forms, created by this affirmation, are but temporary instruments and sedimentations of a liberating power. Therefore they are destined to be destroyed by the movement itself, in its process of conquering wider and wider spaces of freedom. Although the paradigm of the PKK and the PYD has profoundly changed since the start of the 21st Century, this way of representing political transformation is still very much present among the cadres and in the party.

The essence of the new paradigm is mainly related to the rejection of the state as a tool of transition and the understanding of the role of women as the main revolutionary subject toward confederalism (Burç 2020). This is why the Communes are "the essence" of the confederal revolution. Provisional legal formulations such as the administrative structures – including legal documents drawn up in the form of quasi-constitutions, such as the Social Contracts, or

written provisions and laws – are but temporary accidents, hybrid instructions and constructions bearing the signs of the new as much as of the old (top-down, codified, etc.).

This conception is curiously confirmed by its mirroring – and telling reversal – by state entities at the Syrian and international level, when dealing with the confederal phenomenon. The Syrian government, during the Covid-19 pandemic (wherever minimal cooperation had become necessary, e.g. for the administration of the few vaccines available), showed a preference for establishing contact with the Communes and their Health Committees rather than with the administrative councils. This was due to the fact that relations with the administration could have set a precedent of implicit recognition. AANES is an institution clearly claiming public authority on the territory, and seeking legitimacy inside the existing (Syrian and international) legal system (that is why the AANES is always calling for dialogue with the Syrian state and all international actors).

The Communes are considered much more inoffensive on this respect. That is so precisely because, opposing statehood, they make no claims to statehood. This phenomenon has been highlighted in an interview conducted with an international NGO volunteer active in the DFNS and the AANES from 2017 to 2022:

> If you have to implement health care work on the ground, your reference is the Commune. The Commune is a kind of umbrella, then you have the sub-Committees. We, in particular, relate to the Health Committees. This is politically barely sensitive since they are technical-administrative bodies (…); it is also thanks to these bodies that we were able to implement the vaccine plan, since basically the regime said: all right, if the administration of the vaccine takes place at the local and administrative level it's fine; if it takes place at the regional, political level, then it becomes a problem. (Ludwig 2021).

It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the PYD, the NGO volunteer and/or the quoted regime see the Communes (the "essence") as "administrative" instead of "political"; and the AANES (the "administration") as fully and actually "political". This is quite a telling confirmation of the difference of confederal political thought from what might be seen as statist thought. That is so while also being a striking reversal of the movement's own conception of political progress. In any case, through the PYD's lenses, state mentality is supposed constantly to reverse any real culture of democracy. For the PYD, statehood is effective domination under the current power and international relations and,

in a mindset where politics is domination and power, it is political. Whatever does not claim statehood, for the same mentality, is not that.

This approach does not concern the Syrian state specifically. As the PYD would expect, throughout the years the whole nation-state system rejected the claims of the confederal institutions to be recognized politically, even though they have consistently governed a large portion of Syria for many years. Moreover, even the United Nations prefers to deal with the Communes rather than with the Administration when they need to make contact:

> When WHO sent medical supplies to the hospital of Al-Tabqa (which is part of AANES) it did not deal with the AANES Ministry of Health in Qamishlo, but with the local Health Committee. (Ludwig 2021).

Any implicit recognition of AANES by UN offices would anger both Syria and Turkey, while neither of them would care about the Communes.

The Communes and Military Invasion

The critical phase of the confederal revolution followed the Turkish invasions of Rojava which began in 2018. Its effect was to bring the existing tensions in the relationship between the Communes and the people, and within the Communes themselves (e.g. between ordinary members and party cadres), to an extreme. In the face of military invasion, the technical and competency gap between the organized movement and the members of the Communes became more relevant. At different times, two European citizens who cooperated with the Rojava Communes reported details about the decisive role the communal structures play for all of society in times of emergency (e.g. in connection with war or economic embargoes: Lynch 2020).

The understandable lack of direct, spontaneous action by families and the overall population on the brink of war or economic crisis strengthens the Commune's leading role in society, consequently delegating action and strategy to the esteemed and respected party militants. However, this form of implicitly absolute mandate is not well-digested by most PYD militants. It reveals the possibility of the failure of the proper political project, turning the Communes into ordinary administrative units, remodeled in turn into a sort of top-down functioning body (Gerdziunas 2020).

The following testimony is that of the aforementioned European Tev-Dem militant who operated in the Afrin Canton between December 2017 and March

2018. Much of his stay there thus coincided with the military invasion by the Turkish army in support of SNA groups. The interviewee participated in three assemblies of different Communes, one located in the village of Reco and two in different neighborhoods of the city of Afrin (January 2018):

> In the Communes, on the one hand, they were probing the readiness of the population to resist, to create forms of resistance to the invasion. On the other hand, they were trying to organize this defense […]. The Commune meeting I saw, before the war, in Reco, was very quiet. It seemed to me that people were there to be reassured but above all to understand, to get information, to have a line, to understand things. The ones I witnessed in town, in Afrin, were different. One had quite this tone, because maybe it was two or three days before the enemy was really at the gates, somehow there was still some hope I guess, so if there are comrades from the Administration who come to talk to you, who give you information, maybe there is still some hope. On the other hand, in the opposite case, I saw another one that was really close to the epilogue, the fall of Afrin, where the attempt was to set the population of that Commune in motion, to help build the defenses necessary to face the enemy – in short, the trenches, move piles of earth, various protections. (Bindi 2021)

The increase in the sense of emergency corresponds to an even greater expectation towards political militants, who have a coordinating and directive function. Understandably, however, this also corresponds to a greater difficulty in generating one's own activity:

> In all these assemblies it was clear that there were, in addition to simple civilians, those who belonged not to the Administration as such, but to the organized political movement. It was also clear that this was what the public expected from these people, they expected to get political direction from someone. This [assembly, N/A] was qualitatively very different from the others: it wasn't orderly, it seemed very improvised; what the Commission was supposed to be wasn't very clear. There was a comrade, some comrades who, you could see, had a leadership role if you like; but also the assembly was arranged practically in a semicircle around them and they had a truck, a van from which they spoke. There, I have to say, I really got the feeling that it didn't go as expected, the people were much more fearful than they were willing to make barricades, and you could also see why the organization of this assembly was much more chaotic and improvised. (Bindi 2021)

The Communes and Military Occupation

The second testimony comes from another European activist, who worked as a volunteer for the Kurdish Red Crescent (*Heyva Sor a Kurdistanê*, international non-profit association closely cooperating with AANES) between 2019 and 2020. Her stay coincided with the aftermath of the Turkish invasion of Tell Abiyad and Serê Kaniyê in October 2019. It continued with the declaration of successive lockdowns by AANES before and during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (specifically those of the spring and summer 2020: Briy 2020; Anha 2020; Al-Monitor 2021). Turkey, in the first months of the pandemic, blocked water flowing to the area of the large city of Hasakah thanks to its control of the Alouk water station near recently occupied Serê Kaniyê (Equiza 2021; Shuweich 2021).

> When I worked with the Crescent, one of the tools we, as stakeholders, used was precisely the relationship with the militants of the Communes, which are indeed the neighborhood assemblies. So I interfaced directly with them on several occasions, for example to organize the distribution of water in Hasakah; they facilitated everything, talking to the families there too. They were our "contact-persons". I visited Communes from different neighborhoods in Hasakah, and there it was very specific, also very pragmatic, because they [Turkey] had turned off the water, so it needed to be very concrete. There were meetings where we would introduce ourselves, sometimes there were just spokespersons of the Communes, sometimes a few more people, it depended on the type of Commune and also on the availability of the people; because you see, that is what such situations are like. There we would establish where to meet, what time to go, which families needed more, which ones less. This also became a guarantee for us in the area. (Montinaro 2021)

In such extreme circumstances, the bottom-up component necessarily takes the form more of a complaint and request channel for help than suggestions or taking over new powers. It is rather structures linked to the Administration that are invoked by the Communes to solve problems:

> About this water thing the talk was about how to organize distribution. We had realized that there were some NGO drivers who were not working very well and were skipping some families. So from there Heyva Sor introduced the technique of approaching the leaders of the Communes and they would go with our staff and the drivers, and all this guaranteed the same amount of water to all families. So when we proposed this method they liked it […]. It wasn't pure management, we sought a consensus so as to do everything in the best possible

way, so much so that several Communes we worked with wrote to the Hasakah Water Department to compliment us and say they preferred working with Heyva Sor. I personally took instructions from the Water Department, which depends on AANES. (Montinaro 2021)

The resulting analysis also takes on general political consequences. The process set in motion by the emergency of war, and thus the enemy's political economy of war, is reflected in the overall political evolution of the confederal revolution. It indeed sketches out a new phase of potential future institutional organization:

> I noticed a difference between 2018 and 2020. The Tev-Dem is literally taking a step back and the AANES is trying to structure itself on the ground, not without difficulty […]. It's a work in progress. Talking to some of them, they were telling me they are restructuring the whole administrative machine and they expect to conclude this process during 2021. I can talk about the Health Sector, I don't know about the others. The Water Department had its office in Hasakah. The municipality of Hasakah was divided into two parts, north and south, while the Department was one, so my contact person was the Water Department and not the Commune […]. In my opinion, my personal perception, which could be wrong, I saw the Communes linked to the Administration as a social node linked to the territory, hence to the neighborhood, which then spills over into the administration in terms of needs, necessities – for example for water. (Montinaro 2021)

Conclusions

In the first part of the text ("The Creative process") I analyzed the assembly structures, elective bodies and sub-Committees of the Communes. The second part, titled "The Social Challenges", traced the military and diplomatic events that led to the establishment of administrative bodies, and the relationship of the Communes with the population, with administrative law and the PYD's conception of the state. In the third part, titled "The Political Contradictions", the tripartite nature of the legal system of the confederal revolution was highlighted. This tripartite nature has also been explained in relation to the ongoing crises, showing the difficulties encountered by the Communes after the military invasions that Turkey has carried out since 2018 and which are still ongoing.

The PYD's process of building People's Communes started before the civil war, while it was in hiding clandestinely. The popular uprising of 2011 made space for the increase in City Councils and Communes in Rojava. Military

successes against IS allowed the Communes to spread into Arab-majority areas, but in a more moderate way. Above all, in Arab areas they did not form the basis of a complex system of democratic mandates, as was the case in Kurdish areas. Where they exist, they do so in addition to unelected Civil Councils. Throughout the areas controlled by the SDF, including majority Kurdish areas, there are Administrative Councils (today the AANES) whose relationship with the Communes barely existed at first, primarily for ideological reasons. In fact, for the PYD, the Communes embody a concrete transformation of the people through self-governance and are therefore the essence of the revolutionary process. The Administration is but a provisional instrument mainly of diplomatic significance.

This ambivalent relationship between the Communes and the Administration began to change in 2016, when the second Social Contract of the DFNS clarified the role of the Communes in the confederal system of northern Syria. With the military, humanitarian and economic emergency caused by the Turkish invasions begun in 2018, the Administration took on an even greater directing role. The communes often had to give up much of their collective and forward-moving drive for self-government to become transmission belts for the humanitarian or resistance efforts of AANES and SDF. This, albeit caused by external circumstances and not by the will of the local militants, contradicts the reasons they were created, reducing them to administrative units, contrary to the PYD's plans. This has shifted the overall political weight to the Administration and its central organs, where action is no longer aimed mainly at transformation, but at emergency management.

The study showed that the institution of the Commune is a unique model of self-government in revolutionary Syria. The confederal communal system was able to structure itself in an extensive manner, creating a model of action, democratic mandate and self-government unknown in the rest of Syria. The differences from forms of self-government promoted by the SNC-linked groups consisted of three factors: (1) self-defense is organized according to a single chain of command, which allows for the establishment of a coherent and stable institutional set-up; (2) a party, and a broader movement, are present and capable of describing the entire process in a cultural and political sense; (3) following this, an organized stimulus to women's rising up is in place, and autonomous spaces for women are established (Rasit et al. 2020: 875 ff.). Since 2018, Turkish military operations in support of the SNC have significantly weakened the confederal communal system, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Only the condition of peace, or a reversal of the military balance, would enable a shift in the trend, with the further development of self-government practices in the country.

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