Women and Kurdish Nationalism

Max Robertson
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In the following I will attempt to negotiate a theory of the Nation State and question whether that system is reconcilable with feminist movements in Kurdistan. Working from various 20th and 21st century feminist critiques of the nation state model, as well as Kurdish writings on both gender and the state, I will craft an argument that challenges the notion that the nationalization of Kurdistan is an essential step in the preservation of channels by which Kurds can seek a gender-equitable society, and posit that the State is in fact incompatible with those goals. I will also explore what Kurds who oppose the formation of a Kurdish state see as possible organizational models for Kurdistan in the future.

In order to fully understand the ways in which the goals of Kurdish nationalist efforts will affect gender equity in Kurdistan, a theory of the nation state as a model weighted against the efforts of that equity must be established. While the theory of the State, particularly of Western, democratic, secular design may appear to at least allow for the ability of a gender-equitable society to organize itself around a national identity, I will, in the following pages, craft an argument that the nation state is rooted in and inextricably linked to patriarchy, and as such is counter to the aims of non-state groups committed to forming autonomous configurations that are outside of or actively opposed to patriarchy.

Firstly, it is important to make clear the roots of the state in the Christian theological tradition, though it is standard for European states to posture themselves as decidedly secular, or functionally separate from religious practice. In the following, although I will attempt to draw from as many sources as possible, will be relying on
and speaking through the Kurdish intellectual and imprisoned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) founder Abdullah Öcalan, one of the most prolific Kurdish thinkers, both as his writing serves as a thorough critique of the State through a feminist lense, and so as to root my own writing and research concerning the issues of Kurdistan and Kurdish nationalism in the repertoire of Kurdish thinkers themselves. On the issues of woman and the formation of the State, Öcalan observes in his seminal work *Democratic Confederalism*:

> The sacred and divine ideas and practices which had been present at the origin of the community increasingly lost their meaning for the common identity and were, instead, transferred onto power structures like monarchs and dictators. The state and its ruler became king by the grace of God. They represented divine power on earth.¹

This God which granted the “state and its ruler” the authority to exert “divine power on earth” is, as the State’s origins are inarguably European, the Christian God, the “Heavenly Father,” understood to represent a patriarch of divine legitimacy.

Öcalan argues in *Liberating Life: Woman’s Revolution* that the beginnings of patriarchal rule began as an attempt by the men in hunter-gatherer societies to procure power in matricentric pre-civilization. As hunter-gathering shifted towards agriculture, men established dominance by forming what Öcalan describes as an “alliance” between the “shaman” (male religious elite) and the “wise old man” (male social elite) which, by drawing young men into their ideological gender separatism, gained power by transitioning the male’s role in society from one of the hunter to one of the protector, an inherently militaristic role that came about as a result of the need to

defend the increased surplus of capital resultant of the advancement of farming
techniques and technology. As such, the male became not only the protector, but the
controller, of wealth during the time of the first civilizations. In Öcalan’s account, the
process of commodifying surplus provided by transitions in the processes by which
societies accumulate wealth (the beginning of “Economy” in abstract) served as a
means by which men further established social dominance by commodifying not only
material capital but women’s reproductive labor, in both Öcalan and Sylvia Federici’s
language: women became the first colony of civilization (distinct from each other,
however, Federici would argue that this process wouldn’t occur until the European
transition from feudalism to capitalism, whereas Öcalan places this imposition millennia
earlier and as unlimited in its geography.)

The State, which acts as a manifestation of patriarchal power, is thus an invalid
organizational form for any society. As the nation state needs women to give birth to
the coming generation(s) of national subjects, without women’s ability to give birth, the
nation will collapse. As such, it is not only advantageous but necessary for a state to
take ownership of (or colonize) women’s bodies to continue itself. Regarding the
performance of reproductive labor, in the eyes of the state, the less agency afforded to
women, the more stable the society. In this way, male dominance is ingrained in the
abstract “State,” as it is in our broader social structures, of which the constructed state
is a reflection.

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The task of dismantling patriarchy cannot be responsibly undertaken without addressing the systems which patriarchy uphold and which uphold patriarchy. To endow in our conception of the State the ideal that it has the ability to root out the sexism upon which it is founded is to be ignorant of the fact that the casting off of institutional sexism on the state level is against that state’s own self-interest.

The Kurdish Republic (also The Republic of Mahabad,) a short-lived Kurdish nation in the Kurdish region of present-day Iran, demonstrated the difficulties of nationalizing without undermining women’s status in Kurdish society. Though the furthering of women’s rights was a pronounced goal of the republic, the processes by which the nation formed were dominated by what Shahrzad Mojab describes as a “thoroughly masculine politics.” In the struggle for sovereignty of the Kurdish people from the states whose borders the Kurds live within (states whose politics are oriented around male dominance,) a nation such as the Kurdish Republic, despite all commitments to women’s rights, could only operate within the patriarchal realm of international politics as itself a patriarchal state. As such, the only power it had to establish a truly gender-equitable society was the granting of rights to women by male leaders. This system by which women achieved status in the republic masks the underlying flaws in the endeavour to create a state in which women have equal societal weight as men apparent, as it highlights the state’s inherent gender imbalance, in

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which men’s rights are established as self-evident, but women’s are afforded to them by those men.

In the poetry of the Kurdish nationalists of the 20th century, the imbalances of gendered power are apparent as well, and, like their legal status in the Kurdish Republic, their proposed ideal place as one that is equal to men is fundamentally rooted in patriarchy, masked by supposed exaltations of the nationalist Kurdish woman. In the last issue of the nationalist Kurdish magazine Niştman, published in 1944, an image of two Kurdish women executed by the Turkish state was accompanied by a poem, reading:

Whoever swears at another person will say, ‘Go, Your cowardice be like women, your pants be like women’s!’ Where in the world is there a boy like these two women, To be a symbol, in politics, for the cause of the motherland? These two happy saplings were sacrificed for the Kurdish motherland, How happy is the boy who can be like these two girls!

While the poem deliberately genders the sacrifice of these particular nationalists at the hands of Turkey, so as to celebrate the accomplishments of the sacrificed not just as freedom-fighters, but as women, immediately prior to this celebration, the poet establishes a clear connection between women & women’s clothing and cowardice. As Mojab writes, “sexuality is inseparable from the project of nation-building. The purity of the nation, and its strength, is inseparable from chastity.”

The mobilization of women in nation-building in a patriarchal society is dependant upon the allowance of such mobilization by the patriarchal rulers, and as

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6 *ibid.*
such women in these movement are subjected to the same bodily colonization no matter how far to the political left the nation postures itself regarding women’s issues.

The example of the Kurdish Republic is useful in this research as a demonstration of the ways in which women’s issues are translated onto a state project, and made further relevant by its fully Kurdish origins. As I have already introduced, while the Kurdish Republic in rhetoric supported the cause of women’s rights, much of the writings of nationalists at the time utilized the same patriarchal language and gender norms employed by nationalist movements elsewhere.

Common themes appear throughout the nationalist poetry of this time, such as the protection or liberation of the Kurdish “motherland,” the beauty and chastity of Kurdish women—or “girls,” as they are often referred to, regardless of age (another standard practice of patriarchal condescension)—and the call for women to perform the roles of men, as men do. An anonymously-published poem appearing in Nistman describes a conversation between a brother and sister in which the man, speaking to the “sensible and beautiful Kurdish girl” declares: “May your chastity never be stained” and asks that all Kurdish women “like Joan of Arc, rise up like men.”7

Again, this way of obscuring the belittling language of patriarchy with male-appointed empowerment of women serves to reify the status of men as leaders of the state, wherein the goal of that empowerment (as it is granted by those leaders) is the right to participate in society not on the same level as men, but occupying the same space.

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These patriarchal literary tropes were not limited to the realm of poetry, however, as evidenced by the play Daykî Niştman (“The Mother of the Homeland,”) in which Kurdistan is personified as a Kurdish woman with greying hair liberated from the oppressive regimes of Iraq, Turkey, and Iran (in the play depicted as literal chains) by the “sons of the Motherland.” The cast, as it was performed across Kurdistan, was entirely male, including the “Mother”

In Kurdish intellectual circles, women’s issues became a focused topic of discussion following the first world war, introduced to the discourses of the time as the “woman question,” and quickly became consumed by nationalist media in Kurdistan. The “woman question” in Kurdistan chronologically parallels the rise of women’s movements abroad, notably women’s suffrage in the West. Critically, this discourse was presided over largely by men, and would not become a central issue until the lead-up to the establishment of the Kurdish Republic, where it would continue to be dominated by the male intellectual elite.

The nature of the Kurdish discourse surrounding the status of women in Kurdistan was tied, as it was elsewhere, to developing notions of “modernity” which arose in tandem with the proliferation of the nation-state. Wrote one early-twentieth century Kurdish thinker, “a nation’s womanhood is the mirror of its degree of progress. Nations’ and peoples’ degree of progress is always proportional to the position of their women.” This sentiment would be echoed a century later by Abdullah Öcalan, though in the context of anti-statism, arguing that, as the State is an inherently oppressive

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9 ibid.
configuration, taking women’s issues as the litmus test by which the “progress” of society is measured would in any state indicate regression rather than progression.

An article published some time in the 1920’s praising the efforts of various Kurdish women’s groups that formed as branches of nationalist organizations, a fair sample of typical writing on the subject in that place and time, connects the new fascination with the “modern” nation-state and the progression of women’s rights succinctly, reading:

We must take the qualities of knowledge, art, technology, and all [other] kinds of developments from America and Europe exactly as they are and graft the good sides of them onto those national qualities that exist among us … Nothing can be brighter than our ladies’ appreciation of this reality. It means that our ladies [will] not be prone to display and ostentation, but [instead will] have reached the goal of ‘securing the advancement and progress of Kurdish womanhood with a modern outlook’ the day that every lady of the family has become a mother who instills the feelings of patriotism, duty, and sacrifice in our children and siblings.

Present in this excerpt are a number of problematic assumptions being made of women’s social and familial roles, as well as associations being drawn between women and their nation. While seemingly equating a progressive stance on women’s issues and a progressive society, the author has no qualms with the continued relegation of women into “traditional” childbearing and child-rearing roles. In this imagining of an ideal Kurdish state, the progress of woman includes an increased access to education, politics, culture, etc. but ends at her fulfilment of the role already assigned to her, one fundamentally concerned with procreation and as such one that extends only

fractionally past the sphere of the private family unit. Notably, its final sentence asserts that the advancement of society is predicated on not its women’s participation in motherhood, but the nature of that motherhood, namely a mother of the nation’s subjects, to whom she grants the values of patriotism and duty, as woman’s primary role as mother in modernity is taken to be natural and impenetrable.

Writing in the same time period, Kurdish author Memduh Selîm Beg wrote extensively on the “woman question” and its importance in distinguishing Kurds from their geographic neighbors in the context of asserting the level of distinctness of the Kurds necessary to warrant the forming of a Kurdish nation. This drawing of lines between a group and all others is a crucial part of nation-building, as the centralized nation requires the construction of a national identity which is reliant upon the homogeneity of its subjects. Selîm Beg, recounting a “true story” of a Kurdish woman encountering an extranational Other who, desiring the woman, attempts to euphemistically “forget about [the] meal” she has provided for him, writes that:

> With arms as strong as her morals, the young lady immediately ties this ungrateful [man] to the tree next to him. The guest is made to wait there, [and] in the evening the master of the house comes and, surprised, asks: ‘Who is this?’
> - The lady: ‘Someone who wants to steal your property.”

This story serves several purposes as a piece of Kurdish nationalist mythology. Firstly, it, as with nationalist propaganda across Europe and America and throughout history, establishes two conflicting identities: one, the Kurdish, represented as essentially of high character and basic “goodness” (the woman in Selîm Beg’s fable acts out of
kindness to the stranger for nothing the sake of kindness, and later releases him, framed by the author as “sav[ing] [his] life”), and the second, the Other, nameless and of unspecified origin (in line with the formalization of an Other identity for all non-Kurds), entering Kurdistan for the purpose of stealing the “honor” of the Kurdish people, i.e. the sexual purity of Kurdish women (and subsequently the ethnic purity of future generations of Kurdish children.) In the story, the woman understands her own role in defending Kurdish identity, acting (Selîm Beg would say selflessly) not out of self-defence against a potential rapist, but out of an unbreakable sense of duty to the preservation of the purity of her husband’s property, and as an extension, the purity of all Kurdish people.

This is not to say that patriarchy was imposed on Kurdistan by its nationalization. Certainly, the systemized oppression of women existed in Kurdish society before its legitimization by the establishment of a “state.” However, the Kurdish Republic stands as a demonstration of the state’s ineffectiveness in rooting patriarchy out of society. This is not due to any inability on the part of the Kurdish people, but rather the State itself, the Kurdish Republic is the actualization of nationalism revealing itself to be the necessarily masculinist project that it is. In other words, as the State is inextricably linked to conceptions of male dominance, the desire to establish a nation is consequently, despite any intention to be otherwise, firmly planted in the desires of men to further solidify their dominant positions in their respective social hierarchies. Nationalism, as the Nation, postures itself as fundamentally neutral concerning the
gender of its participants, but that purported neutrality is contaminated by the masculinity that informs notions of ideal performances of statecraft.

This disconnected neutrality is present at all levels of the state, in all of its forms. The democratic processes and secular values of (particularly Western) states is not exempt from this, which is made clear by the social standings of men and women in the nations of Europe and North America, which are cited by (particularly Western) statists as examples of truly fair and equal democratic states. Despite the liberal aspirations of these states, and governing structures which appear to operate with an ingrained gender-blindness, their politics, economies, and social structures are still male-dominated. This is, again, not a failing of the individual subjects of these nations but a failing on the part of the Nation itself, and in the case of liberal Western democracies, democratic secularism, which upholds established patriarchies while seemingly invalidating women’s movements as dangerous attempts by women to achieve a status in society that has already been granted to them.

The State, in a structural reflection of the masculine insecurity pervading the male subjects of patriarchy, views the advancement of women’s rights as an existential threat; liberal democracies are unable to enfold women equitably into the social fabric of the state, only serving to obscure the need for this advancement. While women’s position in the State as subjects of patriarchy relegated to roles dominated by the performance of reproductive labor has been addressed in this paper, it is worth further exploring not only Woman’s Marxian relation to state formation in terms of Her reproductive labor, but the role that the “traditional” family unit, as both a tool and
microcosm of state power, strengthens patriarchy ingrained in both the Nation and in Nationalism.

Critical to this discussion is the reiteration of statehood’s intentionally obscured roots in abstract human imagination. Understanding the State as a construct by which patriarchal power is preserved necessitates framing statehood as an invented space. As such, all relationships between State and subject (and relationships mediated by the State between subjects) are invented. This is not to say that the origins of the Nation in the imagination of men exists only within that imagination (as a falsity, or unobtrusive abstraction,) as the consequences of statehood are apparent in the performance of nationality, but rather that the Nation is a created space, one in which the desires of the powers responsible for its execution are exerted in physical, tangible ways. Or, as Anne McClintock posits, “nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize peoples’ access to the resources of the nation-state.” This legitimating and limiting is structurally gendered, creating within nationalities (identities formed to distinguish and represent a people’s culture from an Other) hierarchies which legitimate male power and limit women’s.1112

The Woman’s role in nationalism is tied irretrievably to the Family. This is in both women’s reproductive roles and their status as “symbolic bearers of the nation.”13 Not only does nationalism exclude women from the masculinized project of statecraft, it relegates them to distinct roles both on the private level, as in motherhood within a

13 Ibid., 62
family, and on the level of national mythology, in which, filtered through the lens of familial iconography, Woman becomes a repository for the tradition and history of a culture which legitimizes the nation’s “naturalness.”

The “family trope,” as McClintock calls it, “offers a ‘natural’ figure for sanctioning social hierarchy within a putative unity of interests” and “a ‘natural’ trope for figuring historical time.”\textsuperscript{14} The “unity of interests” to which McClintock refers are the interests which unify national subjects under a singular identity, a unity which purports to level the positions of its subjects while functionally reinforcing normative male-dominated power structures. As the family configuration which places men at the height of familial hierarchies is seen as “natural,” so, then, must be the national configurations which mirror it. The family trope allows for constructed social distinctions between men and women to be seen as unimpeachable and apolitical, insisting on the timelessness of the Family, that is, that the Family exists both outside of and throughout history.

McClintock argues that the family trope sanctions the subordination of women as a natural fact, which allows for societies to depict in familial terms all social hierarchies, effectively ‘naturalizing’ all forms of slavery.\textsuperscript{15} \textsuperscript{16} in the Modern age, these descriptions were further validated by a Darwinian vocabulary that couched the Family in not just tradition, but science, qualifying cultural conceptions of family as moral on the basis that it is resultant of a natural, scientific (and therefore irrefutable) physiology.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 63
\textsuperscript{15} McClintock, Anne, 64
\textsuperscript{16} Abdullah Öcalan calls the social assimilation of woman into mother “housewifization” and argues, similarly to McClintock that this process was the root of all forms of slavery. See Öcalan, Abdullah, \textit{Liberating Life: Woman’s Revolution}
In the Nation, this gendered familial assemblage becomes an indispensable formation both at the level of the individual, in imposing a familial rubric on the relations between people, regulating and manipulating social space, and at the abstract level of the fiber of the nation itself.

In this family paradigm the paradox of women in nationalism is indicative of the Nation’s position on women: in the process of modernization, Man becomes associated with the progress of the State, making up its intellectual elite, its political leaders, its patriarchs, oriented forward and upward, to the future and the sky, while Woman becomes associated with the State’s traditions, its roots, its mythology, naturally but necessarily oriented backward and downward, to the past and the earth. The paradox of this national gender duality lies in the unspoken position of women as necessary for progress attributed to the ingenuity of their male counterparts, a truth which nationalism both passively and actively obfuscate. The gendered language evidently present in all nationalisms (including those of Kurdish origin) pit feminisms against the Nation State at a radical and fundamental level.

Integral to the unification of a citizenry around a familial national identity is the State’s regulation of marriage, a project undertaken even in self-described “progressive” nations, and one principally concerned with the socialization and normalization of particular procreative practices which place the Woman object at the center of the attention of the Man agent. The family trope as it appears in Nation and Nationalism is impossible without the statewide imposition of marriage as a civil
institution, a legalized structure which regulates relationships between citizens so as to ensure that they fall in accordance with artificial constructions of “normal” family units, wherein specific gender roles are performed in fashions determined by the State. The institution of marriage is, as any social institution, an abstract construct, held together by the spectre of patriarchal ruling orders. In the State, the regulation of marriage is crucial to the stability of male dominance, as it inserts, in implication and legalese, procreative mandates on social (or even romantic) personal relations which would otherwise not bear that burden. We see this tension playing out in the West in the continuing governmental opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage, with arguments against these actions as, if not explicitly, then covertly rooted in the assimilation of marriage and procreation, and in counterarguments which, entering themselves into the same patriarchal conceptions of family that inform their opposition, suggest that the right to marriage between all genders should be granted because of their demonstrated ability to raise children (a gay couple may be unable to give birth to a child, but, according to the Western liberal milieu, should be gifted the rights of marriage principally for their ability to raise one, in accordance with state-sanctioned performances of the Family.)

Having formed a theory of what the detrimental consequences of the establishment of a Kurdish state would be, the question remains as to what alternative means of procuring for the Kurdish people a geographically relevant zone of autonomy are available. If a Nation is not to be the goal of Kurdish resistance to and efforts to
divest from the countries within which Kurdistan currently lies, then what will be the organizational properties of an independent, non-state Kurdistan? This question requires not only the ingenuity of intellectual anti-statist theorists, but also logistical calculations regarding and fundamental restructuring of international recognition of autonomous non-state bodies.

Though a non-state Kurdistan could conceivably come to fruition outside of international recognition, as the legitimacy afforded to states by international bodies such as the United Nations is as institutionally abstract as those states themselves, the withdrawal of Kurdish territories’ dependence upon the softening or dissolution of currently hardened borders puts an “illegitimate” Kurdistan existentially at odds with the world’s superpowers and all of the potentially threatening actions of the international community that would come as a result of that. If a coordinated Democratic Confederalist Kurdistan were to become a functional entity, though it would theoretically hold the power to control its affairs internally, its oppositional position (by virtue of its own existence) against the already-existing nations it would border would remove any stability, whether economic or civil, it might enjoy.

Were the countries that surround the Kurdish territories equally without nationality, the issue of fundamental incompatibilities between Kurdistan and its neighbors would be, though admittedly realistically not without some degree of conflict, non-existent. As it stands, however, the problem of a non-state Kurdistan lies in this incompatibility. Current understanding and practice of sovereignty relies on the uniformity of the bodies that perform that sovereignty (ie. the nation-state, the staging
of which, though varying by some metrics from state to state, remains relatively consistent.) In other words, the task of configuring a non-state Kurdistan in a state-based international community is comparable to the task of not only representing, but building a three-dimensional object in a two-dimensional plane. To reduce Kurdistan to a form which complies with its context (making a cube a square; a region a State) belies and compromises the very reasons for its dimensionality, whereas to increase the complexity of the context to meet the object (adding depth to height and width; giving equal legitimacy to both state and non-state bodies) requires a restructuring of current systems of power so gargantuan so as to be inconceivable.

Despite these logistical complications, Öcalan’s utopian vision is currently being implemented in northern Syria’s Rojava region, in the midst of both the Syrian civil war and advancing ISIS militants. Rojava currently occupies an area roughly the size of Rhode Island, and is inhabited by approximately 2.5 million people, mostly Kurdish but with Arab, Yazidi, Assyrian, and other minority groups. The Rojava revolution, as it has come to be known, has declared itself an autonomous democratically-run confederation of independent cantons, as per Öcalan’s instruction. Though the revolution is too active at present to make sweeping claims as to its practical adherence to Öcalan’s theories, the limited reports currently available show a respectable, though occasionally arguably flawed implementation of Öcalan’s revolutionary philosophy. While the cantons of Rojava display a sincere commitment

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17 A Small Key Can Open a Large Door: The Rojava Revolution. ed. Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness (Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, 2015)
to women’s rights, ecological preservation, and religious and ethnic pluralism,\textsuperscript{19} Human Rights Watch-backed reports of child soldiers enlisting in the YPG\textsuperscript{20} as well as accusations of the PYD’s use of violence to silence oppositional political parties, and alleged razing of Arab cities as punishment for harboring ISIS fighters plague, to a degree, international opinion of the movement. Along with these accusations, an environment which encourages a cult-like fetishization of Abdullah Öcalan permeates throughout the Rojava cantons. Not only are his writings taught religiously to the entirety of the citizens of Rojava, the treatment of his visage as a ubiquitous emblem adorning banners and posters across the region evokes the sort of obsession usually reserved for father-leaders of autocratic dictatorships. Öcalan’s status as the undisputable face of Rojava’s ideological underpinnings is notably ironic, as his current position mirrors closely that of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s, the founding father of the Turkish Republic and a critical figure in the erasure of Kurds from Turkey’s national identity, whose face also finds considerable worship among the Turks. The people of Rojava, however, would counter that their reverence for Öcalan (or Apo, as he is affectionately called, which means “uncle” in Kurdish) and his teachings come from a genuine belief that they are right.

While Rojava is not recognized by the international community as a legitimate territory (making it, in Wes Enzinna’s words, “just as illicit as the Islamic State,”) its constitution formally includes the language of international law, stating in Article 21 that

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{A Small Key Can Open a Large Door: The Rojava Revolution}. ed. Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness (Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, 2015)

\textsuperscript{20} People’s Protection Units, a military branch of the Partiya Yekita Demokrat, a PKK affiliate and the dominant political party in Rojava. See \textit{A Small Key Can Open a Large Door} and \textit{The Revolution in Rojava} for more detailed accounts of these organizations and their relations with one another
“The Charter incorporates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as well as other internationally recognized human rights conventions,” and in Article 22 that “All international rights and responsibilities pertaining civil, political, cultural, social and economical rights are guaranteed.” So while Rojava is in the eyes of international bodies illegitimate, it is, internally, not seen as incompatible with the realpolitik of international law. In this way, Rojava’s present success, where it is successful, is dependent upon a certain adherence to the respecting of the borders of nations as they are described by the international community. Rojava has been allowed to exist by (particularly Western) military powers because of its non-threatening position on national borders, within which Öcalan’s Rojava exists without any stated intention of degrading those borders or supplanting the sovereignty of those nations. While Turkey’s president Erdoğan sees the Rojavan revolution as a threat to Turkey’s borders and national security, Öcalan has made clear that his plans for the democratic confederalist homeland for the Kurdish people and all others that live in Kurdish territory do not include the dissolution of established nationalities that lie within that territory, rather that Kurdistan should exist as a set of autonomous bodies that exist necessarily outside of “nationhood” while geographically existing within nations.

Rojava is crucial in understanding the performances of feminisms within Kurdistan as an example of a non-state Kurdish-dominant region that is formally

concerned with women’s issues. In contrast to the 20th century Kurdish Republic, which, like all nationalist movements, relied upon the fabrication of a particular national identity (which is not to invalidate the Kurdish *ethnic* identity) to legitimize its authority, Rojava’s constitution actively avoids ascribing an identity to its citizenry, avoiding even Kurdish ethnonyms as descriptors of typical Rojavans so as to not enshrine, even in a Kurdish majority region, a legal hierarchy in which Kurds are the dominant faction. In this way, Rojava relinquishes the need for the creation of a legitimizing mythology, which typically in nationalist movements includes the relegation of women to specific gendered roles. Rojava’s constitution includes language which, like many state constitutions, calls for general equality, with Article 28 stating that “Men and women are equal in the eyes of the law,” and that the Charter “mandates public institutions to work towards the elimination of gender discrimination,” while further codifying that commitment in Article 47, which, in more concrete terms, lays out a system by which governance is obliged to practice gender equality, stating that “The Legislative Assembly must be composed of at least forty per cent [sic] (40%) of either sex according to the electoral laws,” and in Article 87, which more broadly states that all governing bodies must be made up of at least 40% of either sex.22 Built into Rojava’s legal bedrock is not just the ideological desire for equality but the tools by which feminism can root itself in Rojavan society.

The Rojava project, however, is in the tenuous position of war-time revolution, and it is unclear how it will distinguish and continue itself beyond the conflicts currently

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raging in the region, whether or not it will thrive in a peaceful Syria, without the fatal
distractions of the Islamic State and Syria’s civil war. Tenuous as it is, however, Rojava
remains at the very least a symbol of hope for a society in the Middle East whose
democratic government is self-imposed and seemingly resistant to the nepotistic
autocracies of states whose borders and governments were dictated by Western
colonial and imperial powers. It also stands as a counterpoint to those who feel that
the conclusion of Kurdish struggles for independence is necessarily a Kurdish state,
and those who feel that the rights of Kurdish women can only be buttressed by a
national home for the Kurdish people.

Ultimately, with the patriarchal foundation of the Nation-State in mind, the call
for gender equality in any society can not be heeded in good conscience without a
serious commitment to the dismantling of statehood entirely. In Rojava, the opportunity
to develop a feminist non-state without the burden of such a body replacing an
established state is particularly exciting.
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