

Exploring Peace in the Midst of War: Rojava as a Zone of Peace?

Journal of Peacebuilding

& Development

1-15

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1542316620949838

journals.sagepub.com/home/jpd**Anders Nordhag**

Umeå University, Sweden

Abstract

War and peace are often depicted as mutually exclusive phenomena; where there is violent conflict, peace is absent. This assumption is problematic because it obscures cases where groups, networks, or communities create peaceful situations for themselves in the midst of, or in close proximity to, war. This article focuses on Rojava, a predominantly Syrian Kurdish area in northern Syria. Since the start of the Syrian war, Rojava was for a long time an island of relative security in an otherwise violent context. This article explores Rojava between 2011 and 2014 through theories and empirical examples of zones of peace where local communities in violent conflicts create spaces that are off limits to violence. The article concludes that because violence is not prohibited in Rojava, it cannot be considered a peace zone. Yet the case shows that peacebuilding is possible beyond minimising effects of violence even during a violent conflict.

Keywords

zones of peace, Syrian Kurds, Rojava

This article sets out to explore the region called Rojava in the northern part of Syria and, by doing so, challenge common, dichotomous conceptions of war and peace. War and peace are often depicted as mutually exclusive phenomena; where there is violent conflict, peace is assumed to be absent. This assumption is problematic because it obscures cases where groups, networks, or communities create

This article sets out to explore the region called Rojava in the northern part of Syria and, by doing so, challenge common, dichotomous conceptions of war and peace.

peaceful situations for themselves in the midst of, or in close proximity to, war. Approaching war and peace as mutually exclusive thus risks creating blind spots which, in turn, often have practical consequences. As Autesserre (2009) has argued in the case of the Congo, discursive frames shape which

interventions are deemed legitimate. In the Congo, a representation of the situation as one of post-conflict peacebuilding legitimised and facilitated procedures and policies designed for a post-conflict environment, while action to address the continued violence was neglected. In the end, this categorisation caused peacebuilding efforts to fail.

Corresponding Author:

Anders Nordhag, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden.

Email: andersnordhag@hotmail.se

Similarly, building on extensive fieldwork in war zones, Nordstrom (2004) has argued that “if war starts long before the firing of the first bullet, peace is set into motion long before peace accords are engineered” (p. 177). Yet, attempts at creating peace in the midst of war often go unrecognised, since they are not formal peace processes with states, statesmen, and diplomacy (Nordstrom, 2004, pp. 171, 177). In Syria, the next to least peaceful country in the world in 2019 (Vision of humanity, 2019), few would argue that there have been peaceful developments. As a result, local attempts at peacebuilding in the midst of war are obscured, and opportunities to support these efforts might be lost. This is not to propose that one should adopt peacebuilding efforts rather than peacemaking or peace enforcement approaches to manage armed conflict. Instead, I argue that war and peace should not be treated as dichotomous but rather as potentially existing simultaneously.

Today, Rojava (or the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria) is fairly known to the outside world mainly because of the siege of Kobani in September 2014, when international media reported on Kurdish female fighters who fought against ISIS (Tank, 2017, p. 405), and more recently due to the 2019 Turkish invasion and through global campaigns rejecting the invasion, both on social media and through demonstrations in the streets. But before 2014, few people knew about the developments in the region. Yet, between 2011 and 2014, a relatively stable peace was developed in Rojava, and a radical transformation of society began through the creation of autonomous, direct democratic communes and semi-autonomous regional cantons underpinned by values of feminism and ecologism. Thus, while the rest of Syria started to deteriorate in the wake of the uprisings in 2011, Syrian Kurds managed to utilise the window of opportunity that the civil war created and shape the trajectory of Rojava into one that was more peaceful than the rest of the country. As Asya Abdullah, one of the chairpersons of the PYD (the Democratic Union Party), put it: “Even as Syria descended into a firestorm, Rojava, on the fringes of the war, in a climate of peace, witnessed the rise of a just system” (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 266).

This transformation should be understood in the light of what is called “the Kurdish question.” The Kurdish question refers to the desire among many Kurds for a country of their own (or at least, Gunter, 2004, p. 197, argues, cultural autonomy in the countries they inhabit) in order to escape marginalisation and violence in the nation-states where Kurds are minorities. Syrian Kurds—the biggest ethnic minority in Syria—have long suffered from oppression perpetrated by the Syrian regime. This is exemplified through police brutality, suppression of Kurmanji (Kurdish dialect in Rojava), removing of Kurdish ethnicity from schoolbooks and even stripping between 120.000 and 150.000 Syrian Kurds of their Syrian citizenship (Karlsson, 2017, p. 218; Tejel, 2008, p. 62). In order to achieve greater independence, Kurds have used armed struggle, diplomacy, and attempts at building cross-ethnic coalitions (Tezcür, 2019, p. 3).

In Rojava, the advocated solution to the Kurdish question is not a Kurdish nation-state. Instead, Rojava has sought to implement a version of democratic confederalism, which is a political idea that is essentially non-statist. What is being established is not a separate Kurdish country, but a direct democratic society which promotes ethnic and religious heterogeneity in its structures.

The aim of this article is to examine Rojava as a case of peace in the midst of war. In order to do this, the article will draw on theories and empirical examples of zones of peace (ZoPs), which are attempts by local communities to distance themselves from violence and create a more peaceful context, and explore to what extent the literature on peace zones can explain developments in Rojava. In particular, the analysis focuses on the institutional structures and organisation of the Rojava experiment, as well as its underlying ideas; its relationship to armed actors in the region; and its relationship to external actors. Furthermore, by using the theories on ZoPs, the article will discuss why the Rojava experiment is currently under severe pressure. The literature on ZoPs is applied because it is one of few systematic attempts to understand and theorise the emergence and existence of peace in conditions of ongoing war. As the previous literature on ZoPs has not covered cases in West Asia, this article makes an empirical

contribution to this literature. Further, by discussing the developments in Rojava in relation to scholarship on peacebuilding, the article provides new insights into peacebuilding in violent conflicts.

To provide a comprehensive account of the structures that are being implemented in Rojava, this article uses secondary sources from both academia, newspapers and civil society organisations. The criteria used for selecting academic articles were that they discussed developments in the region between 2011 and 2014. Newspaper articles were selected from established newspapers and discussed background information and developments in Rojava. Reports from civil society organisations were used to provide information in order to understand events, structures, and relations that exist to other actors (these sources are, however, open with their support for the Rojava experiment). Included are also parts of Abdullah Öcalan's writings on democratic confederalism, which has acted as an inspiration for the Rojava experiment and thus helps to develop an understanding of its underlying ideas. The case study is limited to developments in Rojava from the inception of the civil war in 2011, to the introduction of the Social Contract—a type of constitution—in early 2014.

In the next section, I outline the theoretical framework that I use to inform and structure the empirical analysis. Thereafter, the case of Rojava is introduced. The context, organisational structures, and ideas that form the basis for developments in Rojava are explored, as is the relationship of these to armed actors and external actors. In the conclusion, the contribution and wider implications of the analysis are highlighted.

ZoPs

Throughout history, non-combatants in violent conflicts all over the globe have become victims of different types of violence perpetrated against them. To avoid this, people adopt different strategies: The

A ZoP is a way for non-combatants—in or in close proximity to a violent conflict—to distance themselves from war through creating a space, often geographically defined, that is off limits to direct violence.

most common to date is (probably) the seeking of refuge in another part of the country or even abroad (Mitchell, 2007, p. 13). However, since escaping is sometimes not possible or even wanted, local communities might use other strategies to distance themselves from violence. One such strategy is the establishment of a ZoP. A ZoP is a way for non-combatants—in or in close proximity to a violent

conflict—to distance themselves from war through creating a space, often geographically defined, that is off limits to direct violence. Hancock and Mitchell (2007) argue that peace zones

emerge as expressions of collective will and are a function of the negotiated relationships within the zone as well as those outside the zone; these negotiations form the basis of a set of rules or norms that maintain ZoPs as a place that is off-limit to violence. (p. xiv)

Thus, ZoPs are commonly built on relationships between actors both within and outside of a zone, and the use of violence is prohibited. Idler et al. (2015, pp. 53, 59), who discuss two cases of ZoPs in Colombia, also include impartiality as a principle. To take sides or to collaborate with armed actors is in general unacceptable since a peace zone then risks becoming a target of the opponent. Impartiality is, however, not easy to sustain. Allouche and Jackson (2019, pp. 75–76), for instance, point out that many inhabitants of peace zones have friends and relatives who are part of armed groups, thus complicating the principle of impartiality. Mitchell (2007) has furthermore argued that if the peace zone contains a potential target to any armed group (such as armed opponents or refugees) or if the existence of the ZoP in itself is an insult or challenge to outsiders, “it is less likely to remain inviolable than those without such temptations” (pp. 16–17).

ZoPs can originate from different levels of society. While some zones are initiated by local populations who do not want to be involved in a violent conflict, others are put in place by international actors such as the United Nations. Srebrenica is an example of an attempt by the UN to create a peace zone where civilians would be safe from attacks (Hancock & Iyer, 2007, p. 31). A typology of origins can thus be as follows: a local grassroots initiative, established by local authorities, initiated by national or international NGOs, or even by International Organisations such as the UN (Hancock & Iyer, 2007; Idler et al., 2015, p. 54). On which level in society a ZoP is created and who is included and excluded in creating it seems to matter when their success or failure is analysed. Srebrenica, for instance, is an example of a peace zone that failed. The reason for this, Hancock and Iyer (2007, pp. 44–45) argues, is that it was initiated and implemented by outsiders. While their intentions may be good, outsiders might lack the will to support a peace zone over an extensive period of time, and if a zone is developed without the recognition of all warring parties, the peace zone risks becoming a target. In other ZoPs, where the process has been driven by communities on a grassroots or local authority level, there has been greater success.

The most common examples of peace zones are from the Philippines and Colombia (Allouche & Jackson, 2019, p. 72). In both countries, local communities initiated peace zones through convincing or demanding belligerent groups to stay out of their village or town (Garcia, 1997; Sanford, 2003, p. 108). While peace zones are often geographically defined, Colombia is an example of where many ZoPs have created networks or associations to be able to educate and support one another and be able to influence peacemaking on a larger scale (Hancock & Iyer, 2007, p. 33). There are also several NGOs and institutions on national level that help to develop and coordinate ZoPs. This is exemplified by the peace zone of Samaniego. Samaniego is a town located in the south-west of Colombia, which has been affected by the war through both guerrilla groups, paramilitary and state forces. To limit the effects of recurring fighting, Samaniego declared itself a peace zone. This decision was initiated by the mayor, who invited the national NGO REDEPAZ to support with organisational assistance. REDEPAZ for their part received support from an European Union-funded project (Hancock & Iyer, 2007, pp. 34–35; Idler et al., 2015, p. 54). According to Idler et al. (2015, p. 54), the support from REDEPAZ and thus subsequently the EU has been imperative for the survival of the ZoP. Here it is possible to discern the different levels in action and how they interact. While international support was crucial, the initiative of creating a ZoP emerged from the local level, which allowed for local legitimacy and sustainability.

While examples of ZoPs in the Philippines and Colombia are well-known, literature on peace zones in other regions or countries remains sparse (Allouche & Jackson, 2019, pp. 72–73). In order to expand on the knowledge of peace zones, Allouche and Jackson have analysed local peace attempts in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire. They argue that depending on the nature of the war, ZoPs will likely develop differently. What is visible in Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire is that while local peace zones still depend on the willingness of violent actors to accommodate them, as these wars have been “extremely fluid, subject to rapid change and included actors who may have been acting for both sides” (Allouche & Jackson, 2019, p. 86), relationships became harder to maintain and ZoPs were, therefore, often unstable over time. The protracted war in Colombia thus provided a more stable context for developing peace zones. In West Africa, peace zones are less institutionalised and more dependent on short-term deals, temporary arrangements, and central actors (Allouche & Jackson, 2019, p. 86).

Another distinction between ZoPs is in terms of time frames, which depends on when they are created in relation to a conflict (Hancock & Iyer, 2007, p. 30). The most common example of a peace zone, or at least the one that is most often discussed in the literature, is one that is created during ongoing violent conflict. This is the *first* time frame, and the ZoP is developed and maintained in order to minimise the effects of violence upon a population. In a similar vein, Idler et al. (2015, p. 54) points out that the concept of peace might differ from zone to zone. Where there is direct violence, the idea of peace is often more limited, referring to the non-use of violence. But in areas where fighting is less intense, peace might

take on a broader meaning and include work against structural violence. The *second* temporal type of peace zone is created during a peace process and is often established in order to function as a safe area for combatant groups or as a safe zone during disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration initiatives. The *third* time frame refers to ZoPs in post-conflict contexts. These zones are often set up to address more structural issues, such as lack of economic and social development and as responses to human rights abuses and gang-related violence in post-conflict environments (Hancock & Iyer, 2007, p. 30).

What role might peace zones play in peacebuilding? Much of the above discussion relates to how ZoPs might be effective against direct violence. However, ZoPs in post-conflict contexts (the third time frame) are working on a more structural level to ameliorate economic and social situations that are often among the root causes of conflicts (Lederach, 1997, p. 8). To Hancock (2017, p. 260), peace zones are an important, yet underexplored, approach to peacebuilding. His point of departure is the issue of local ownership in peacebuilding. Hancock (2017) argues that

the zones of peace model of post-conflict peacebuilding can help to address the primary problem resulting in the underperformance or failure of many peacebuilding efforts, namely a lack of sufficient local agency to encourage locals to take ownership of their projects and to work hard to ensure their success. (p. 267)

Local ZoPs are essentially attempts by local communities to exercise agency vis-à-vis other local or national actors.¹ They are furthermore, at least in the beginning, institutionally weak and are, therefore, dependent on cohesion within the community. Institutional weakness allows for agency and makes peace zones participatory in their mode of governance; most ZoPs, for instance, exercise consensus in decision making. Interestingly, peace zones have also been shown to engage in a plethora of peacebuilding activities. Hancock ascribes this to agency and cohesion because local communities recognise that issues they are experiencing go beyond physical violence. Examples of peacebuilding activities range from educational and economic initiatives to parallel governance structures (Hancock, 2017, pp. 261–263).

In order to structure the analysis of Rojava in relation to previous literature on peace zones, key themes are drawn from this literature to create an analytical framework. Through this framework, the article will be able to explore developments in Rojava from the perspective of ZoPs, highlight similarities and differences, and draw conclusions on whether Rojava can be considered a peace zone or not (and why this is). The themes are as follows: (1) the context where a ZoP is developed, (2) the structure and organisation of the ZoP, (3) the relationship of the ZoP to different armed groups, and (4) the role of external actors in supporting and maintaining the ZoP.

This is further operationalised through subcategories that guide my analysis in the table below.

Analytical Framework

1. Context	Time frame of the peace zone (during conflict, during peace process, or in post-conflict environment) Nature of the conflict
2. Structure	The origin of the peace zone, its forms of organisation, level of institutionalisation, and underlying ideas Geographically delineated or based on networks/associations
3. Relationships with armed actors	Impartial or closely connected to any armed group Harbouring of potential targets to armed groups Challenge to belligerent groups
4. External actors	External support received by the ZoP

In the next section, developments in Rojava (Please see figure 1 for a map of Rojava) will be analysed drawing on this analytical framework. This is done through close examination of the data and

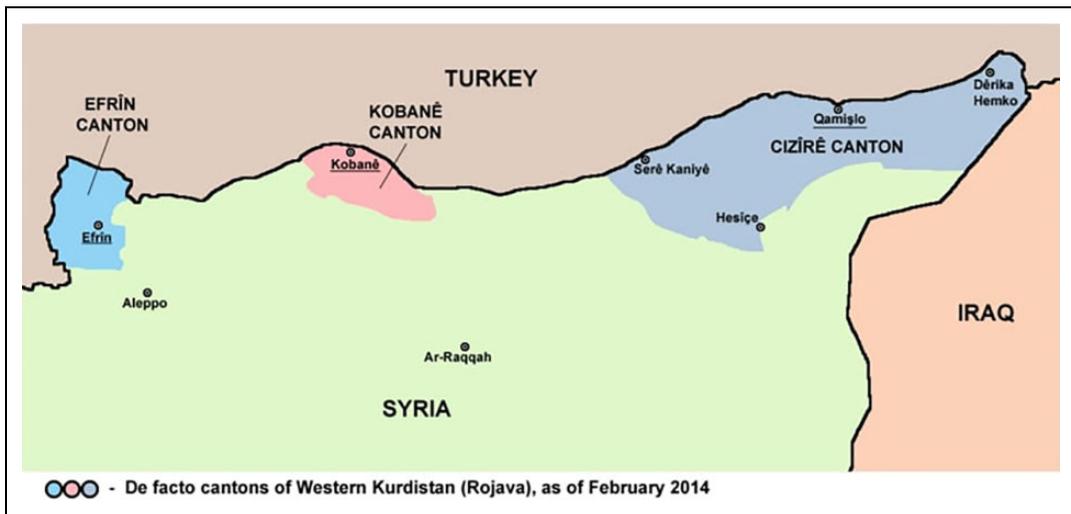


Figure 1. Map of Rojava in february 2014 (Wikipedia Commons, 2020).

validating its accuracy through comparing with several sources (when possible) to get an in-depth understanding of these four features of the Rojavan peace experiment.

Rojava: A ZoP?

In March 2011, civil war broke out in Syria. The violent response by Syrian security forces to protesters who demanded political reforms and an end to corruption led to violent retaliations. Kurds were part of the demonstrations from the beginning, which was not surprising, since they had a long history of discrimination and violent oppression at the hands of the regime (Tank, 2017, p. 415). In an attempt to minimise enemy fronts, the Syrian regime successfully appeased the Kurdish population by granting them citizenship rights, and it subsequently withdrew from the northern parts of the country to fight against what the regime saw as their main opponent, the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This tactical retreat was done with the assumption that “a poorly equipped Kurdish force would be easily defeated and was thought to be tolerable as an interim placeholder” (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 60). However, the power vacuum that arose when the Syrian army left allowed for the PYD (People’s Protection Units), which is a close affiliate to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), and TEV-DEM (the Movement for a Democratic Society) to start organising a new political order in Rojava based on the model of democratic confederalism (Egret et al., 2016, p. 33).

The article is limited to the period between 2011 and early 2014, when the constitution called the Social Contract was introduced. The constitution led to substantial changes in the structures of Rojava, changes that, according to Colasanti et al. (2018, p. 812), allowed for a formal government to take form. For the purposes of my analysis here, it is more interesting to explore the less formalised structures of Rojava prior to this—as this arguably makes it more similar to a ZoP. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the period between 2011 and 2014.

Context

Approaching Rojava through the above-mentioned time frames, it is clearly a case of efforts to create a peaceful context *during conflict*. While not always at the conflict’s epicentre, as Asya Abdullah (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 266) has pointed out, the Rojava experiment was developed during the war and

still exists in a context of war—be that through direct fighting or through other effects such as embargoes. However, where other empirical examples of ZoPs during conflict point to an emphasis on minimising the effects of violence, actors in Rojava instead took advantage of the conflict to go beyond this. The subsequent developments in Rojava, which are further discussed below, following the tactical retreat of the Syrian armed forces, seem to correlate with developments that have been witnessed both during conflict and in post-conflict contexts, where more structural peacebuilding efforts have been made. Idler et al. (2015, p. 54) suggest that where fighting is less intense, as it was in Rojava in the early stages of the Syrian civil war, peace might take on a broader meaning, which can help to explain why developments in the region could be more comprehensive than in many other ZoPs.

The other aspect to context regarding ZoPs is the nature of the war—more specifically for how long a conflict has been ongoing. Allouche and Jackson (2019) argue that the more recently a violent conflict started, durable peace zones are less likely to be developed. When a conflict started more recently, it is more difficult to grasp the nature of key conflict relationships and motivations for fighting (who is fighting for whom and/or for what cause?). As this article focuses on the period between 2011 and 2014, in the early stages of the war, presumably then this would mean that the Rojava experiment was developed in a fragile and volatile context, in the sense that relationships are not yet clearly demarcated. Indeed, these tendencies are discernible in Rojava. Encountering an Arab sheikh who was co-chair in a district, Ross (2015) learnt that “the sheikh had been on the Isis side until the extremists massacred members of his tribe. Inevitably, in a country where ethnic groups and allegiances are thoroughly scrambled together, the front lines are not always well defined.”

Structure

The origin of the idea of democratic confederalism, as practiced in Rojava, can be found in the writings of Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan, the imprisoned founder and leader of the PKK, changed the course of the party from a Marxist-Leninist party (Özcan, 2006, p. 8) to a party influenced by especially the writings of the eco-anarchist and later communalist Murray Bookchin (Leezenberg, 2016, p. 675). This was a paradigmatic shift from the view of the need for a separate Kurdish state in order to achieve Kurdish emancipation (Özcan, 2006, pp. 88–89) to rejection of the state altogether. A different system was instead argued for: democratic confederalism. According to Öcalan (2011), democratic confederalism is a political system that

is based on grass-roots participation. Its decision-making processes lie with the communities. Higher levels only serve the coordination and implementation of the will of the communities that send their delegates to the general assemblies. For limited space of time they are both mouthpiece and executive institutions. However, the basic power of decision rests with the local grass-roots institutions. (p. 32)

It is, in other words, a non-statist system where autonomy for communities is at the core. Democratic confederalism is underpinned by the three intrinsic values of grassroots democracy and participation, women’s liberation, and ecologism (Colasanti et al., 2018, p. 810). This, Üstündağ (2016, p. 199) argues, is because there is nothing that guarantees that decisions made in small communities will be fair simply by the virtue of them being localised decisions.

To facilitate decision-making processes at the local level, a four-level system was introduced (Please see figures 2 and 3 for an overview). The *first level*, and the most important one, is the commune. Communes are the entity where people deal with their everyday issues and participate in collective decision making. According to Colasanti et al. (2018, p. 808), the commune also serves an educational purpose, aiming at inspiring participation so that decision making is “as reflective of local needs as possible.” Every commune has an elected coordination board that is composed of a man and a woman, who also

represents the commune on the second level of organisation where they serve as recallable delegates. Communes are furthermore comprised of a People's House (Mala Gel) and coordination boards—together with anyone who wants to participate discuss political activity; a Women's House (Mala Jinan), an all-female house where women's autonomy is discussed; and eight different committees (that exist on every level). The committees are the implementing organs of the different levels, and members are elected and key positions are rotated. The eight committees are the women's council, economy, politics, defence, civil society (similar to unions), the free society (the equivalent of NGOs), ideology, and justice.

The *second level* is the neighbourhood, where delegates from different communes meet to discuss matters relevant to the area. They in turn elect a board that represents the neighbourhood on the *third level*—the district. The district is comprised of the representatives from different districts, which can be around 100–200 individuals plus the TEV-DEM movement which includes civil society organisations and political parties that are tied to the overarching structure. The *fourth level* is the highest level of coordination in Rojava. This level includes the three district councils of the cantons of Rojava—Cizîrê, Kobanî, and Afrîn—and the TEV-DEM movements from the different districts. (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 64; Colasanti et al., 2018, pp. 813–814; Egret et al., 2016, pp. 33–36; Knapp et al., 2016, pp. 87–95).

In relation to the spatiality of peace zones, democratic confederalism in Rojava is based both on a geographically demarcated area in northern Syria and also on networks. There are networks between different communes and neighbourhoods and also between different commissions. As the region is in constant change due to the war, networks allow for sustainability.

These structures, according to Gerber and Brincat (2018, p. 14), are put in place due to the belief that the best form of social organisation is through democratic amateurism, as compared to bureaucratic specialisation. Matters that were seen as apolitical have become politicised. Thus, institutions that often are considered expert domains have become public (Cemgil, 2016, p. 426). This includes the economy, defence (see below), law, and education, which have become democratised through the committees.

The economy is divided into two sectors: the social economy and the war economy (Colasanti et al., 2018, p. 816). The social economy, which echoes Öcalan's (2016, p. 47) ideas of communal economy (which are closely tied to ecology according to Öcalan), is mainly based on cooperatives who are under democratic control through the communes, thereby reflecting the needs of the commune. Private companies and property ownership is not forbidden, due to the idea of peaceful coexistence between capitalist and cooperative production, but socialisation of land and cooperatives is encouraged (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 67). Because of the war, however, the war economy is much larger and, according to Colasanti et al. (2018), amounts to 70% of the total budget of Rojava (p. 816). In terms of how this relates to ecology, the most visible part is perhaps the attempts by communes to diversify crop production from earlier enforced monocultures (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 67).

Internal security in Rojava is based on the *asayîş*, the central security force—who have both received praise and criticism (Egret et al., 2016, p. 39; Knapp et al., 2016, p. 171)—and on a communal judicial system that is made up of peace committees who act on the behalf of the commune (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 64). The role of the peace committees is to find common ground between the disagreeing parties and deliver “social peace.” Social peace is premised on reconciliation instead of punishment, and the accused is not incarcerated (Ross, 2015). There are also parallel women's peace committees that focus solely on domestic violence and violence against women. According to Duman (2017), these committees have “contributed to peaceful coexistence and reconciliation at the individual and communal levels by preventing and reducing violence” where individual disputes might otherwise transform

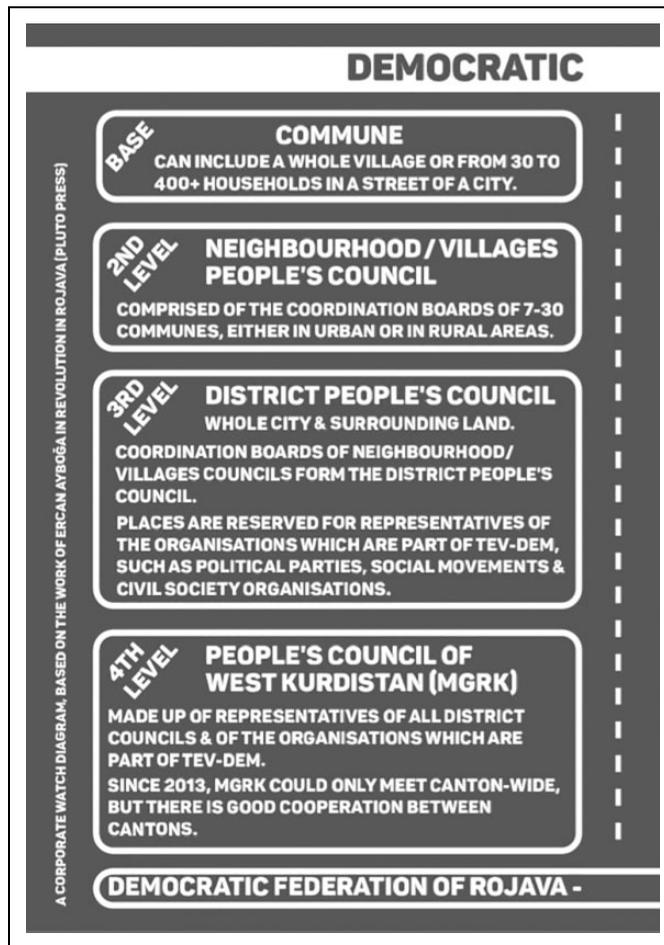


Figure 2. The structure of Rojava (Egret et al., 2016, pp. 34–35). Note. Democratic Autonomous Administration structures are post-2014.

into conflict between different identity groups (pp. 87–89). While the formalisation of this system is new, the peace committees were established in the 1990s by Kurdish activists and are, according to Graeber (2016), based on traditional Kurdish methods for conflict resolution (p. xx). When an issue is not solvable on communal or neighbourhood level, the problem moves up to the higher levels of the system, where courts that are similar to those in states exist (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 65).

Finally, changes have been made to the education system. While schools are still using Arabic as a general language, Kurmanji, Aramaic, and other minority languages have been added to the curriculum as voluntary subjects (Knapp et al., 2016, pp. 175–178). Higher academies have also been established, which focus on a range of subjects that are often combined with “intense self-criticism on overcoming Eurocentrism and the colonial mindset, of uncovering local and Middle Eastern knowledge, and speculating on the question of what type of society should be built” (Gerber & Brincat, 2018, p. 15).

Ubiquitous to all of these developments is the idea of gender equality, which is mirrored in most developments in Rojava during the studied period. From the commune, where there is a gender quota, to the Women’s House (Mala Jinan), the all-female YPJ (The Women’s Protection Units), women’s



Figure 3. The structure of Rojava (Egret et al., 2016, pp. 34–35). *Note.* Democratic Autonomous Administration structures are post-2014.

committees at every level of the system, and women’s peace committees that deal with violence against women. These attempts at implementing gender equality have not been without friction (Graeber, 2016, p. xv)—traditional Kurdish society, according to Tank (2017, p. 411), is conservative and patriarchal, but the situation is slowly improving (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 80).

The Rojava experiment is a process of the democratisation of political and social functions from the bottom up. This is partly promoted as a solution to the “Kurdish question” of Kurdish self-determination. Nonetheless, even though Kurds have been the driving force behind the implementation of this new society, and have been the first to participate, it is based on the idea of heterogeneity. “[U]niformity is seen as deformity, poverty-stricken and boring. Pluriformity, however, offers richness, beauty and tolerance. Freedom and equality flourish under these conditions. Only equality and freedom that rest on diversity are valuable” (Öcalan, 2016, p. 53). While decades of hostility and mistrust between different ethnic groups is not easily mended (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 64), more and more people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds are starting to participate in this voluntary association (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 71; Knapp & Jongerden, 2016, p. 99).

Compared to other peace zones, which have been argued to be institutionally weak, Rojava in the 2011–2014 period was relatively well organised and institutionalised. However, the democratic confederalist system builds on bottom-up participation and is not rigid. Therefore, while not necessarily institutionally weak, the new system encourages a considerable amount of local agency. The peace commissions are a

Events in Rojava suggest that even in the context of a violent conflict, structural peacebuilding that aims to counteract the impacts of both direct and structural violence can be implemented.

building. Most peace zones have been dealing with direct violence during war and structural violence when wars end (in the cases where ZoPs have existed in post-conflict environments). Events in Rojava suggest that even in the context of a violent conflict, structural peacebuilding that aims to counteract the impacts of both direct and structural violence can be implemented.

case in point, showing how local agency can mediate and restore fragile relationships in a violent conflict and “ensure a violence-free society even amid a civil war” (Duman, 2017, p. 89). The structural aspects that are being implemented in Rojava correlate best with what has above been called the third time frame for ZoPs, that is, post-conflict peace-

Relationships With Armed Groups

The most striking difference between democratic confederalism in Rojava and the discourse on peace zones is the sanctioned use of violence. The use of violence as self-defence is a central part of the democratic confederalist idea. Öcalan (2016, p. 56) argues that everyone should have the right to defend and protect one’s community through military action. However, this can only be thought of as defensive, not offensive, action. Interestingly, a close reading of democratic confederalism will demonstrate sympathies for non-violence. When deciding on how to establish democratic confederalism, Öcalan is, at least in his writings, leaning towards compromise and diplomacy (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 200). That these ideas matter to Rojava can be seen in the attempts at still being a part of a united Syria (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 117), which might be because of ideological conviction or a pragmatic decision made due to the costs of war. Regardless, the fact that the use of violence as self-defence is endorsed makes Rojava hard to reconcile with the key principles of other ZoPs.

What problematises things even more is that due to the war and various armed groups that were hostile to the Kurds, the armed Kurdish militias likely played a determining role in the survival of Rojava. These Kurdish defence forces were created in the wake of the Qamishli revolt in 2004, where Kurds clashed with Sunni Arabs and Syrian security forces (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 48). Trained by experienced PKK guerrilla fighters (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 134), the YPG and the YPJ were put under control of the councils and parliamentary structures of Rojava and thus supposedly under democratic control.² These forces were part of the organisation that took power after the Syrian armed forces left. As external defence, the primary role of the YPG/YPJs has been to fight against threats to Rojava. This includes the Syrian government, whose remaining forces in Rojava have engaged in frequent skirmishes with the YPG/YPJ (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 60), various Islamist organisations (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 205), and the FSA.

Why there is a need for safety provided by the YPG/YPJ becomes clear when analysing the situation through Rojava’s relationship with armed actors. While argued with prudence, there seem to be very few “positive” relationships developed between the Rojavan society and the armed actors in the region. Agreements seem to have been made only between the Syrian regime and Rojava and sporadically with the FSA, which were based more on pragmatism than on the idea of creating a zone that was of limits to violence. These developments can partly be understood through the “newness” of the conflict. The relationship with the FSA is a case in point: Sometimes, the YPG/YPJ and the FSA have been cooperating and other times they have clashed with each other (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 60). However, I would argue that this is not sufficient to explain why there are few arrangements in Syria between the Rojavan

society and belligerent groups. The non-impartiality of Rojava, the harbouring of potential targets, and the challenge the idea of Rojava poses to the Syrian state are equally significant here.

When the civil war started, Syrian Kurds saw the development of Rojava as a platform that would facilitate Kurdish self-determination. They took a position in the conflict: the “third way” (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 50), not being on the side of the opposition nor the regime, but ready to defend itself if attacked. This position clearly articulates a challenge to many of the belligerent groups in the region. To the Syrian regime, the existence of a society that is based on grassroots decision making poses a threat to the legitimacy of the state. To ISIS, an extreme fascist group, the idea of what Öcalan calls pluriformity is a threat. Finally, due to the presence of YPJ/YPG, the region is harbouring a potential threat in the form of a militia. Essentially, to enable accommodating, impartial relationships with these armed groups, people in Rojava would have to give up on many of their revolutionary ideas.

Yet, Cemgil and Hoffman (2016, p. 70) point out that the most significant danger to the Rojavan experiment is the risk of militarising society. Rojava has been relying heavily on YPG/YPJ for protection, and these militias have received critique for acting oppressively and for making alliances without consulting the direct democratic institutions in Rojava (Egret et al., 2016, p. 39). Even if peace was reached and Rojava was granted some type of autonomy, “demobilising and transforming a society that has gained not only its freedom from domination through military means, but which has also transformed itself under the catalytic conditions of hierarchical militarism itself, will be major tasks” (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 70).

External Actors

In examples from other peace zones, external actors have played an ambiguous role. While Srebrenica was briefly mentioned as an obvious failure by the UN to establish and maintain a ZoP, in Colombia, the EU’s support was vital to the sustainability of the peace zone.

Any relationship of Rojava to external actors, such as the state, INGOs, or IOs, is barely existing. In fact, the reason actors in Rojava made the decision in 2014 to create a transitional government was because they hoped this would mean some international legitimacy (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 111). To date, Rojava is not recognised by the so-called international community (Colasanti et al., 2018, p. 822) and has not been invited to conferences that discuss the future of Syria (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 114). Some INGOs seem active in the region, but few are supporters of the political and social changes that have been implemented in Rojava. As Cemgil and Hoffman (2016) points out, due to the de facto embargo on Rojava, “conventional donor communities do not provide aid” (p. 72). Instead, Rojava receives support from different left-wing, libertarian, and anarchistic organisations and networks (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 72). These organisations and networks have campaigned to collect money and material for Rojava and have, through demonstrations, tried to influence public opinion in their home countries. Support has not only been provided through financial aid but also through physical activities, which range from the building of infrastructure to participating on the side of YPG/YPJ in the war against ISIS (Knapp et al., 2016, pp. 256–258).

In many ways, this is not a one-way relationship, as one might see in the structures of conventional NGOs, where there is a provider and a recipient of assistance. It is solidarity envisaged as a relationship where movements learn from and support each other. When responding to the question of what form of solidarity the Rojava project needs, a common response from people in Rojava is to “build a strong revolutionary movement in your own country” (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 256). Gerber and Brincat (2018) have called this a reimagining of space and place, where “‘space’ [is] rooted in concepts such as internationalist solidarity, rather than the strictly geographic ‘places’ which form the boundaries of state sovereignty” (p. 7). This allows for a two-way, reciprocal relationship. Rojava receives support through networks and movements and supposedly informs, influences, and inspires movements outside of the region.

Conclusion

This article aimed to examine Rojava as a case of peace in the midst of war, drawing on an analytical framework derived from the literature on peace zones. The analysis focused on four factors: the conflict context, the structure and organisation of Rojava, its relationship with armed actors, and its relationships with external actors.

The analysis of the *conflict context* and the *structures and organisation* that make up the Rojava experiment shows that Rojava, during a violent conflict, managed to implement structural changes that correlate with structural peacebuilding witnessed in other ZoPs mainly after a violent conflict. This points at Rojava being a case that works on, and indeed achieves, peaceful conditions that goes beyond the absence of direct violence even during a violent conflict, which differentiates Rojava from most other examples in the literature. The broader definition of peace that emerged in Rojava was likely possible since fighting in Rojava was less intense than in other parts or Syria in the early stages of the civil war. However, not being in the conflict's epicentre might also be the main reason to why direct violence was avoided rather than being the result of negotiation with armed actors to create a zone that is off limits to violence.

When exploring *relationships with armed actors*, Rojava has established few positive relationships with armed actors in the region due to its non-impartiality, the harbouring of potential threats, and the challenge Rojava poses as an idea. Furthermore, Rojava is predicated on the idea of legitimate self-defence, which clearly deviates from the core idea of peace zones as non-violent. Because of the challenge Rojava poses to belligerent parties in the region, it became a target, and as the zone came under attack by different actors, violence as self-defence became necessary for its survival.

Finally, regarding *external actors*, it was pointed out that conventional external actors have yet to support the developments in Rojava (military collaborations excluded). Instead, networks and organisations who act in solidarity with Rojava have taken their place and provide support to the region.

Analysing Rojava through the ZoP framework showed on the one hand that, while there are developments in the region that share similarities with ZoPs, since violence is not prohibited, the region cannot be considered a peace zone as defined in this literature. The legitimate use of violence as self-defence has allowed the region to sustain its existence and implement structural changes that are positive for peacebuilding, and that would likely not be possible if Rojava did not have the YPG/YPJ. Yet, as Cemgil and Hoffman (2016, p. 70) have argued, the necessary militarisation of Rojava might also be its downfall as a direct democratic project.

By exploring the developments in Rojava through the ZoP framework, the article highlights a key issue and indeed a weakness with peace zones: their need for recognition from all warring parties. Without recognition, a peace zone risks being attacked and, therefore, needs to defend itself if it wants to survive—but when doing so, it is no longer a peace zone. The importance of recognition was epitomised

Paradoxically, the security that the militias provide might both enable and endanger Rojava.

in 2019, when Rojava came under severe pressure as Turkey invaded the region. As Rojava can be seen to harbour potential targets, represented by Kurdish militias with ties to the PKK, it could—

from a Turkish perspective—be perceived as a threat to Turkish national security. However, without the militias, as was pointed out earlier, the developments in Rojava would not have been possible. Paradoxically, the security that the militias provide might both enable and endanger Rojava.

On the other hand, the Rojava experiment represents a case where peacebuilding is occurring in a violent conflict. It is an interesting example of how local agency, which Hancock (2017) suggests is crucial to peacebuilding, can be translated into locally anchored peace processes. Several of the

implemented features are working to improve social and economic situations, as well as participation in decision making and attempts at mediation. That these attempts to reforge broken or fragile relationships and create peace-conducive institutions exist in the midst of war clearly shows how individuals, communities, and networks are actively trying to improve their situation, going far beyond just minimising the effects of violence.

While peace zones in different contexts will develop differently, what they all share is the idea of a more peaceful present and future—often in the midst of a violent conflict. “Peace does not wait for

While peace zones in different contexts will develop differently, what they all share is the idea of a more peaceful present and future—often in the midst of a violent conflict.

the end of war to make its debut,” as Nordstrom (2004, p. 141) aptly put it. For both peace researchers and practitioners, exploring and supporting attempts at peacebuilding during violent conflict could yield positive results for civilians and, if a ZoP continues to exist after a formal end to a war,

provide an important infrastructure for post-conflict peacebuilding.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Agency is defined as when “actors have some power or control over their actions and a reasonable chance of influencing the outcomes” (Hancock, 2017, p. 258).
2. There is, however, no agreement on whether they are under democratic control. Leezenberg (2016, p. 681) has argued that they are under control of the PYD. The YPG/YPJ have also received criticism from Amnesty International for forcibly displacing people who the Kurdish militias accused of having helped the Islamic State (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 65).

References

- Allouche, J., & Jackson, P. (2019). Zones of peace and local peace processes in Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone. *Peacebuilding*, 7(1), 71–87.
- Autesserre, S. (2009). Hobbes and the Congo: Frames, local violence, and international intervention. *International Organization*, 63(2), 249–280.
- Cemgil, C. (2016). The republican ideal of freedom as non-domination and the Rojava experiment: ‘States as they are’ or a new socio political imagination? *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 42(4–5), 419–428.
- Cemgil, C., & Hoffmann, C. (2016). The ‘Rojava Revolution’ in Syrian Kurdistan: A model of development for the Middle East? *IDS Bulletin - Institute of Development Studies*, 47(3), 53–75.
- Colasanti, N., Frondizi, R., Liddle, J., & Meneguzzo, M. (2018). Grassroots democracy and local government in Northern Syria: The case of democratic confederalism. *Local Government Studies*, 44(6), 807–825.
- Duman, Y. (2017). Peacebuilding in a conflict setting: Peace and reconciliation committees in de facto Rojava autonomy in Syria. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 12(1), 85–90.
- Egret, E., Anderson, T., Magpie, J., & Martin, A. (2016). *Struggles for autonomy in Kurdistan & corporate complicity in the repression of social movements in Rojava & Bakur*. Corporate Watch Cooperative Ltd c/o Freedom Press.
- Garcia, E. (1997). Filipino zones of peace. *Peace Review*, 9(2), 221–224.
- Gerber, D., & Brincat, S. (2018). When Öcalan met Bookchin: The Kurdish Freedom Movement and the political theory of democratic confederalism. *Geopolitics*, 1–25.

- Graeber, D. (2016). Foreword. In M. Knapp, A. Flach, & E. Ayboga, (Eds.), *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic autonomy and women's liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (pp. xii–xxii). Pluto Press.
- Gunter, M. M. (2004). The Kurdish question in perspective. *World Affairs*, 166(4), 197–205.
- Hancock, L. E., & Iyer, P. (2007). The Nature, Structure and Variety of Peace Zones. In L. E. Hancock & C. R. Mitchell, (Eds.), *Zones of peace*. Kumarian Press.
- Hancock, L. E., & Mitchell, C. R. (Eds.). (2007). *Zones of peace*. Kumarian Press.
- Hancock, L. E. (2017). Agency & peacebuilding: the promise of local zones of peace. *Peacebuilding*, 5(3), 255–269.
- Idler, A., Belén Garrido, M., & Mouly, C. (2015). Peace territories in Colombia: Comparing civil resistance in two war-torn communities. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 10(3), 115.
- Karlsson, I. (2017). *Inga vänner utom bergen: Kurdernas historia* [No friends but the mountains: history of the Kurds]. Historiska Media.
- Knapp, M., Flach, A., & Ayboga, E. (2016). *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic autonomy and women's liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*. Pluto Press.
- Knapp, M., & Jongerden, J. (2016). Communal democracy: The social contract and confederalism in Rojava. *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 10(1), 87–109.
- Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Leezenberg, M. (2016). The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: The Kurdish movement in Turkey and ROJAVA. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16(4), 671–690.
- Mitchell, C. R. (2007). The theory and practice of sanctuary: From Asyilia to local zones of peace. In L. E. Hancock & C. R. Mitchell, (Eds.), *Zones of peace* (pp. 1–28). Kumarian Press.
- Nordstrom, C. (2004). *Shadows of war: Violence, power, and international profiteering in the twenty-first century*. University of California Press.
- Öcalan, A. (2011). *Democratic confederalism*. International Initiative Edition.
- Öcalan, A. (2016). *Democratic nation*. International Initiative Edition.
- Özcan, A. K. (2006). *Turkey's Kurds: A theoretical analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan*. Routledge.
- Ross, C. (2015, October 23). Power to the people: A Syrian experiment in democracy. *Financial Times*. Retrieved January 20, 2020, from <https://www.ft.com/content/50102294-77fd-11e5-a95a-27d368e1ddf7>
- Sanford, V. (2003). EYEWITNESS: Peacebuilding in a war zone: The case of Colombian peace communities. *International Peacekeeping*, 10(2), 107–118.
- Tank, P. (2017). Kurdish women in Rojava: From resistance to reconstruction. *Die Welt des Islams*, 57(3–4), 404–428.
- Tejel, J. (2008). *Syria's Kurds: History, politics and society*. Routledge.
- Tezcür, G. M. (2019). A century of the Kurdish question: Organizational rivalries, diplomacy, and cross-ethnic coalitions. *Ethnopolitics*, 18(1), 1–12.
- Üstündağ, N. (2016). Self-defense as a revolutionary practice in Rojava, or how to unmake the state. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 115(1), 197–210.
- Vision of Humanity. (2019). *Global Peace Index 2019*. Retrieved January 27, 2020, from <http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/global-peace-index/>
- Wikimedia Commons. (2020). Retrieved April 06, 2020, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rojava_february2014_2.png

Author Biography

Anders Nordhag holds a BA in peace and conflict studies and an MA in crisis management and peacebuilding. He has focused on linkages between the environment, conflicts, and peacebuilding and on local attempts at building peace. He has previously interned at the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and at PeaceWorks.