



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

POSTNATIONAL UTOPIA:  
AN ANALYSIS OF ROJAVA'S DISJUNCTED MEDIATION

by  
NADA OMAR HOMSI

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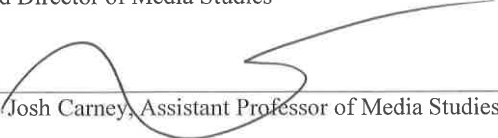
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by  
NADA OMAR HOMSI

Approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Greg Burris, Advisor  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. May Farrah, Assistant Professor Member of Committee  
And Director of Media Studies

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Josh Carney, Assistant Professor of Media Studies Member of Committee

Date of thesis/dissertation defense: April 1, 2020





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# AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Media has been integral to not only drawing international support for Rojava, but creating associations that have transformed it from a territorial entity into a symbol for utopia. In my research, I first analyze how the official media published by the ruling party in the *de facto* Autonomous Federation of North and East Syria (Rojava) mobilizes traumatic transnational memories to create local and transnational affect that interpellates recruits. Then I explore how such official narratives converge with international media and a cyberspace of transnational solidarity. Using elements of Rojava's online existence as a case study, I seek to understand how traditional notions of national belonging are challenged or reinforced, how identity is negotiated, and how transnational solidarity is mobilized to create a post-national, virtual utopia that reproduces Rojava's ruling party's rhetoric while also arbitrating it.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PYD - The Democratic Union Party.

A Kurdish political party established in Syria in 2003. It espouses democratic confederalism and is closely linked, ideologically and politically, to the PKK. The PYD is the dominant political party of Rojava.

YPG - The People's Protection Units or People's Defense Units.

A primarily Kurdish militia fighting in northern Syria under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces, in which it is a primary unit. Formed by the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

YPJ - The Women's Protection Units.

The all-female, primarily Kurdish militia and arm of the YPG. Both the YPG and YPJ fight in northern Syria, and were formed primarily by the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

PKK - The Kurdistan Workers Party.

A militant Kurdish liberation organization fighting for self-determination in Turkey. Initially founded by Abdallah Ocalan and espousing a Marxist/nationalist political ideology, it has since evolved along with the political evolution of its founder, now espousing



*Democratic Confederalism* -- a system of autonomous local councils linked to each other through a confederal network.

SDF - The Syrian Democratic Forces.

A multi-ethnic alliance of Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac (etc.) militias, led by the YPG -- the dominant militia in the SDF. The SDF is backed by the United-States led international coalition against ISIS, and its primary mandate is to territorially defeat ISIS.

IRPGF - The International Revolutionary People's Guerilla Forces.

A collective of international anarchists who had the stated aim of defending the revolution of democratic confederalism in Rojava, and defending/spreading anarchism and revolution internationally. They operated under the International Freedom Battalion, a group of international leftists of varying ideologies fighting alongside the YPG and who style themselves after the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War.

TQILA - The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army.

A queer anarchist subunit of the IRPGF, formed in Raqqa, Syria to fight against ISIS, in response to the Islamic State's persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals.

ISIS/IS - The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Islamic State.

A fundamentalist, Salafi jihadist group which aims to establish and enforce an Islamic caliphate based upon a strict, puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam.

At its height, ISIS held nearly a third of Syria's territory.

ANTIFA - Antifascist.

A current of autonomous, anti-fascist groups and/or individuals across the world, espousing various forms of left-wing ideology. The movement engages in direct action tactics and is primarily defined by its opposition to fascist ideologies and groups.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

On April 7, 2011, thousands of ethnic Kurds marched in northern Syria in solidarity with protesters across the country, chanting, “No Kurd, no Arab, the Syrian people are one! We salute the martyrs of Daraa!”<sup>1</sup>

Eight years later, on January 20, 2019, a car bomb on a bus exploded in Afrin, a city and Kurdish-majority district in northeastern Syria; it killed three people and injured at least ten<sup>2</sup>. No group claimed responsibility for the attack, but the bombing occurred on the first anniversary of ‘Operation Olive Branch’, when Turkey, with the help of Turkey-backed rebel groups, led a military campaign to seize Afrin from Syrian-Kurdish militia control. That military operation had resulted in the demographic displacement of many Kurds from the district, and their replacement by Arab rebels and civilians evacuating from previously besieged region of eastern Ghouta.<sup>3</sup>

It was yet another example of the demographic ‘musical chairs’ that has come to characterize much of Syria’s civil war. Both incidents are a blip within the larger narrative of

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<sup>1</sup> “Protesters Killed in Southern Syria.” *News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 9 Apr. 2011, [www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/04/201148131548860250.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/04/201148131548860250.html).

<sup>2</sup> “Bus Bomb in Syria's Afrin Kills Three, Wounds 20.” *Middle East Eye*, 21 Jan. 2019, [www.middleeasteye.net/news/bus-bomb-syrias-afrin-kills-three-wounds-20](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/bus-bomb-syrias-afrin-kills-three-wounds-20).

<sup>3</sup> Chulov, Martin, and Kareem Shaheen. “‘Nothing Is Ours Anymore’: Kurds Forced out of Afrin after Turkish Assault.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 7 June 2018, [www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/07/too-many-strange-faces-kurds-fear-forced-demographic-shift-in-afrin](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/07/too-many-strange-faces-kurds-fear-forced-demographic-shift-in-afrin).

death, mass displacement, and demographic change that have implicated all warring sides during Syria's eight-year war. But they are illustrative of a conflict that has strayed far from its origins. 'In the beginning', as it is often reflected -- activists are fond of this refrain -- a broad spectrum of Syrian strata was mobilized, calling for greater freedoms and for the fall of the Syrian regime.

*"No Kurd, no Arab, Syrian people are one"* -- this chant was 9 years, half a million deaths, and six million displaced people ago<sup>4</sup>. In the rubble of the present remains a fractured society. To generalize, the Syrian people are no longer one, if they ever were, and the authoritarian form of pan-Arab nationalism which once held Syrians together has regained its power through force rather than ideological fraternity. Certainly, the enforced ideology of the nationalist Syrian Ba'ath regime was not a unifying force for the Syrian people after 2011, when they sought an alternative unity in the downfall of the regime. Presently the Syrian government has forcefully and violently consolidated most of the territory it lost in earlier years with the help of its international allies. Extreme Islamist insurgencies have risen and fallen and remain scattered. The remaining elements of the amorphous opposition remain in existential limbo within the last remaining rebel enclave. And, finally, the role and future of Kurds in Syria has been sidelined out of every major international peace talk. What was once a unified desire for the self-determination of all people under authoritarian government rule became a competing landscape of legitimacy, engineered by foreign and regional political elites that exploited sect and ethnic identity to achieve competing goals.

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<sup>4</sup> "In about 93 Months... about 560 Thousand Were Killed in Syria since the Day of Claiming Rights to the International Human Rights Day • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights." The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, December 17, 2018. <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=108723>.

The imagined alternatives to the Syrian government regime that emerged following the uprising have, for better or worse, either been squashed or presently stand on their last legs. In practical terms, the Syrian revolution is dead. But the various incarnations of society which emerged from the embers of the uprising live on in their mediation, and in the interconnected online landscape that continue to document the war's history and present. These spaces, existing as 'places of conviviality'<sup>5</sup>, exist as forums for public discussion, negotiations of communal identity, and unfulfilled political imaginaries that flourish virtually. Following the loss of rebel territory, the post-2011 online and media landscape is the medium by which alternative versions of Syrian society have been and continue to be negotiated.

Most such imaginings have been envisioned within the structure of ethnic or religious nationalism. But one alternative which did not structure itself within the framework of nation, at least in terms of ideological rhetoric, has been the de facto autonomous 'Self-Administration of North and East Syria'.<sup>6</sup> More commonly styled by its colloquial Kurdish name, 'Rojava,' the entity is situated as a struggle for the self-determination of the Kurdish people while also emphasizing its multiculturalism -- the placement of ethnic and religious identities on equal footing. The ideology on which the political project is built attempts to negate the nation-state structure and presents itself as a solution to the failure of nation in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> Rojava is the Kurdish word for "West", and is considered by many Kurds to

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<sup>5</sup> Mills, Kurt. "Cybernations: Identity, Self-Determination, Democracy and the 'Internet Effect' in the Emerging Information Order." *Global Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 71.

<sup>6</sup> In 2016 its name was the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, in 2018 it changed to Self-Administration of North and East Syria, and for the sake of simplicity it will hitherto be referred to simply as it is colloquially and popularly known: *Rojava*.

<sup>7</sup> Ocalan, Abdullah. *Democratic Confederalism*. (Lulu Press, Inc, 2015), 6.

be the western part of a congruent Kurdish territory (a Western Kurdistan) -- a holdover of Kurdish nationalist sentiment. The self-administration's official stance remains that because of the confederalist, decentralized structure it aims for in all of Syria, the region is simultaneously West Kurdistan as much as it is Upper Mesopotamia (Gozarto) as it is considered by Syriac-Assyrians, and an Arab Syria, as it is considered by Arab nationalists -- allowing for the self-determination of all peoples residing under its umbrella. Thus, traditional notions of nationalism are both reinforced and deconstructed within this attempted project for autonomy.

The Kurds' attempt at autonomy has been met with antagonism by all surrounding factions of the war for varying reasons: the Syrian government and the neighboring Turkish state perceive the semi-autonomous entity as a threat to their state sovereignty. An armed rebel opposition largely pits the project as an opportunistic alliance with the Syrian regime. The self-named Islamic State, at one point occupying much of northern Syria, was defeated by the alliance of primarily Kurdish militias backed by an international coalition. Although the armed opposition and the Syrian government are seen to be antithetical, they share the conception that Rojava is an attempt at Kurdish separatism and 'Kurdification' of northern Syria.

With its existence precarious and international and regional recognition denied, Kurds have been largely sidelined out of the international peace process. The political coalition led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has sought to attain legitimacy through other means of direct action: the acquisition of territory gained from battles against the Islamic State, the establishment of a constitution, laws, and institutions, and finally - and importantly - through ideological dominance in the Syrian-Kurdish media.

Although Rojava is seen by some as an extension of the nationalist Kurdish struggle for territorial congruity with other Kurdish areas, and although it is controlled primarily by the leading Kurdish political party and militia, it has also become synonymous across the globe as an extension of the anti-fascist struggle. As other warring Syrian parties denied legitimacy to Rojava, its ruling party began focusing its media outward -- not only aiming for the support of major international actors, but also aiming for the recruitment of individuals globally. Anarchists, communists, and other individuals who fall into the spectrum of the radical left have been moved to travel to Syria and fight for Rojava's leading militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG).

### **1.1 Research Question**

Leftist and internationalist solidarity for Rojava has manifested in no small part due to international mass media coverage of the Syrian war, in combination with the varying and numerous independent media which emerged as state control over media degenerated.

Although significant academic attention has been given to the war in Syria and the various independent medias which emerged as a result of near state collapse, the space created in the ideological dissemination of Rojava's media -- intersecting at the crux of the international anti-fascist movement, Kurdish national identity, and the conception of a post-national self-determination -- has been largely ignored or dismissed as empty opportunism born of disguised nationalist sentiment.

In an interrogation of the contradictions and negotiations contained in Rojava's mass mediated online space, my research explores the following questions: *How does the mediation of Syrian-Kurdish trauma/memory activate international affect to create new,*

*transnational, and post-national imaginary landscapes, if any? Within these ideological manipulations of mass media, what kind of spaces are opened and negotiated? How have these disjuncted, interconnected practices of belonging interacted online? (I.e. The anti-fascist resistance's interaction with a highly localized Kurdish movement.) How does Rojava's media and online cultural production contribute to postnational discourses?*

This thesis argues that Rojava's mediated landscape, largely existent and easily accessible online, creates a platform that is beyond the territorialized confines of national struggle: international appeal for the political project is driven by the hailing of individuals to northern Syria through affect, such as the associations of past international traumas and memories with localized Kurdish traumas and memory. The corpus of this work is an exploration of why, and how the official narrative of Rojava has been successful in mobilizing adherents of vastly differing backgrounds, and what impact it has had on Rojava's identity.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

This research is inspired by a fascination for the theoretical foundation at the core of the Rojava project, and how the political project has translated internationally through media dissemination, leading to a negotiation of Rojava's identity. The ideology which Rojava has built itself around presents itself as a solution for the Middle East in a post-Sykes Picot nation-state modernity, rejects nationalism outright, and has drawn leftists to it from all over the world. Frequently referred to as a "Third Path" -- rejecting the authoritarianism of the Syrian regime and an opposition eclipsed by competing Islamist ideologies in varying



degrees -- it was branded as a seductive solution to what many perceived as Syria's impossible quagmire.

However, my fascination for its theoretical framework has butted heads with the practical and *local* reality of the semi-autonomous region, which at times has embraced themes of national struggle rather than rejecting nationalism. Further, despite the emphasis on direct democracy and co-governance, it has become evident that all laws are made under the ruling political party, while opposition parties are marginalized or persecuted: de facto, the PYD political party and Rojava function synonymously.

Therefore, my fascination with the political theory of an anarchy-based direct democracy has transformed into a fascination with how Rojava utilizes mass media and the internet to gain a de facto landscape of ideological legitimacy, and how it negotiates and disseminates the rhetoric of multiculturalism and democracy to draw in leftist ideologues and Syrian recruits of various sects and ethnicities. Sure, media is frequently used as an ideological apparatus to push propaganda: but what spaces are opened in the dissemination and reception of an ideological manipulation of mass media, if any? What draws an internationalist left to contribute to a project that is simultaneously courting Russia and the United States for assistance with its legitimacy -- the same capitalist, imperialist powers they seek to overthrow? And how is the overall project globally transmitting legitimacy for an alternative model?

Similarly, the ways in which nationalism is negotiated, renegotiated, and negated constantly within what is undoubtedly at its core a primarily and essentially Kurdish project for self-determination is an interesting experiment for notions of emancipation and self-determination, particularly on the internet, where much of this mass mediation takes place

and is then internally mediated by the spectator/viewer. The Rojava project, at least through its online existence if not de jure, has claimed a conscious intention to negotiate terms of national belonging.

### **1.3 A note on positionality and motivation**

It is my own conflicting views on the Rojava political project that motivated my desire to explore the contradictory components of its ideological output, and the reception of it. My aim is not to uphold or condemn a political project but to explore the spaces and implication born of Rojava's contradictory mediation: the channeling of affect to create a landscape that bridges ethnic, sectarian, and nationalist divisions.

Self-organization in coordination and civil documentation was a survival necessity in the earlier days of the Syrian revolution, and later the use of media grew out of armed struggle and state collapse.<sup>8</sup> Learning about the anarchic organizational structure of some of the early civil society coordinating efforts in Syria's revolution -- for example those motivated by Omar Aziz, the late anarchist organizer who emphasized local autonomy, self-governance, and horizontal cooperation<sup>9</sup> -- was particularly influential to my worldview and understanding of agency outside of a framework of 'national' liberation. Such efforts, like the Local Coordination Committees, organized and documented moments crucial to the uprising and created solidarity between cities and towns were little had prior existed. They

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<sup>8</sup> Robin Yassin-Kassam and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning country: Syrians in revolution and war* (London: Pluto Press, 2018) 1-262.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Shami, Leila. "SYRIA: The Life and Work of Anarchist Omar Aziz, and His Impact on Self-Organization in the Syrian Revolution." Tahrir, September 2, 2015. <https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/syria-the-life-and-work-of-anarchist-omar-aziz-and-his-impact-on-self-organization-in-the-syrian-revolution/>.

were actively repressed by a government regime which sought to delegitimize and quiet them, and drowned out by competing elements of the opposition.<sup>10</sup> Further, these crucial grassroots efforts (organized by activists across the Syrian strata, including Kurdish activists) were largely overlooked by a broad international media narrative focused on humanitarian crisis and war coverage.<sup>11</sup>

The memory of these early, grassroots organizing efforts have slipped into relative mythology as it pertains to the mainstream narrative of Syria, overshadowed by military interventions and the rise of an Islamist fundamentalism that largely served to countervail such organizational efforts,<sup>12</sup> aided in part by the narrative focus around them. The perceived overlooking of Syrian agency is commonly viewed by the Syrian activist community as failing of international solidarity.

Conversely, the Rojava political project, which is ideologically -- although not practically -- similar to previous Syrian attempts at self-organizing efforts in terms of its proposed societal structure, has drawn a wide international solidarity as well as a fair level of criticism.

The collapse/countervailing of previous attempts at liberated practice and the swiftness with which Rojava's institutions were established drew my attention during a specific phase of identity negotiation -- both the future potentials of Syria's identity and my

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<sup>10</sup> Shadid, Anthony, and Hwaida Saad. "Coalition of Factions From the Streets Fuels a New Opposition in Syria." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 1, 2011. [https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?\\_r=2&pagewanted=all](https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all).

<sup>11</sup> Ward, Patrick. "SYRIA: Syria's Forgotten Revolutionaries: an Interview with Leila Al-Shami." Tahrir, June 22, 2016. <https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2016/06/21/syria-syrias-forgotten-revolutionaries-an-interview-with-leila-al-shami/>.

<sup>12</sup> Wedeen, Lisa. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 8.

own. Rojava's ability to seemingly mobilize and rally subsets of non-state international actors to support a local struggle for self-determination, largely through the use of mass online media, left me wondering how it did so and why it has been so successful among the international left, while other forms of popular agency within Syria have drawn less attention.

In its online dimension, Rojava projects the image of willingness to undertake an intersectional mediation of identity construction that is not bound by national sentiment -- while simultaneously it projects the image of a primarily Kurdish national project. I seek to understand the contradictions and tension within Rojava's online spaces and how it has successfully drawn considerable international affect because -- at some point -- Rojava's negotiation on the subject of national belonging versus a different kind of belonging has mirrored my own.

My role in this study is worth noting, as a disclaimer. I'm a dual citizen of Syria and the USA. Having immigrated from Syria at a young age, I subsequently spent the majority of my youth and early twenties in the United States. Like most third culture individuals from immigrant families, a feeling of both affinity with and estrangement from both countries defined my development.

When I moved to Lebanon, my first roommate was an Assyrian Syrian refugee from al-Hasakah, in north-eastern Syria. He told me, "I'm not an Arab - I'm only Syrian." A year later, in a refugee squat in Athens, Greece, a Kurdish friend from Afrin stated matter-of-factly, "I'm Syrian. But I'm also Kurdish. Rojava means I don't have to choose between the two." At a recent journalism workshop in Beirut, some colleagues from Damascus were discussing their experiences of living through war. I listened in but felt estranged by the

conversation; it felt to me that being Syrian meant being defined by the localized experience of war, which I was not. A colleague agreed: “We also feel alienated. Our experiences in Damascus are completely different from people living in other parts of Syria.”

The war leaves behind a set of lived experiences that differ from one community to the next; the fracturing of nation has meant that many Syrians no longer know what it means to be Syrian. For many, their own perceptions of national unity and belonging have been unhinged. The lack of regime control in the early years meant greater agency for Syrians -- activists, civil society actors, and militants alike -- to negotiate their identity and question what it means to be Syrian, through media and on the ground. Although distant in proximity and minimally affected by the war, like others I too was re-negotiating my national identity, and whether it should even be framed in national terms.

My ‘Syrian-ness’ exists in relation to the sum of my experiences, and many of those experiences are not territorialized. Yes, my Syrian identity is shaped by childhood memories of Damascus, annual summer visits, interactions with family and childhood friends, etc. But it is also shaped largely outside of national borders: by humanitarian involvement with the early migrant crisis, a residency in a self-organized refugee squat in Greece which was erected in defiance to poor government response to the migrant crisis, and four years of living in Lebanon, where the small country is heavily affected by Syria’s war and resulting refugee influx.

These experiences intertwine considerably and are shadowed by my interaction with Syria’s online media landscape, which has always mediated my identity construction: through following the initial protests of 2011 on Facebook, monitoring the news, and by a close observation of the heated online discourse surrounding the war on social media.

Journalistically, I covered the war, Syrian-adjacent issues, and the refugee crisis in varying stages of intensity over the course of four years; this has put me in contact with many Syrians of varying backgrounds and dispositions. Although those interviews and discussions are not included in this research, they have significantly colored the framing of my thesis.

Overall, these experiences and discussions combined had the effect of mediating and dislodging my previously held notions of nation and national belonging, which I had never before questioned.

Finally, this note on positionality is written with the intent of conveying the disclaimer that I am not an impartial observer undertaking objective research. Inasmuch as this is an inquiry into media's role in the national/postnational imagination and the praxis of self-determination, it is also an extension of an ongoing reflexive discussion with myself as it pertains to belonging. However, my investment in and coverage of Syrian affairs do not prevent me from conducting academic research for this thesis. While I acknowledge that this research serves to push my own process and negotiations along -- a process, I imagine, that many both in the region and the diaspora are also undergoing, in varying degrees -- it is most important to note that I do not intend to, and cannot, speak for the experiences of the people of Syria who have lived through war, nor for the specific local and transnational struggle of the Kurdish people.

#### **1.4 Ethics**

Whether or not the self-administered region of 'Rojava' practices the initial ideals of democratic confederalism is not within the scope of this paper. I do not aim to do a

comparative analysis of political facts on the ground versus the theory of the political framework. Rather, the analysis will be a qualitative inquest into how the ideals of Rojava translate for the various subsets of society who have decided to join its framework, and how new, intersecting ideological landscapes are created through Rojava's mediation.

One fear maintained throughout my research is that it will inadvertently lend favor or legitimacy to the PYD-run Rojava project as one which is a legitimately horizontal, democratic enterprise. In reality, there has been significant literature and coverage which implicates the PYD as an authoritarian party with little tolerance for political opposition. This focus on Rojava as an independent case study rather than a comprehensive inquest into the umbrella of overall Syrian uprising is also a primary concern: my concern is that skirting discussion of the overall labor and practices of the Syrian uprising in favor of a specific media focus on Rojava will lend to the further mythologization of overall Syrian agency -- particularly as media was a primary tool of the uprising. However, there has been significant research done on media's role in the Syrian uprising and within the Syrian national imagination, while little attention has been given to Kurdish Syria's political project in the north from a media studies perspective. In my view, the academic neglect of Kurdish affairs within the scope of the Syrian uprising/war has been a failure of much literature on Syria and reflects a broader, socio-political neglect and deflection of the overall Kurdish question in the Middle East.

I see my research on Rojava as an extension of pre-existing literature on the Syrian imagination during and after the uprising. It is essential to emphasize that the two run parallel and intersect in multiple ways: just as international intervention by state actors and the rise of Islamist fundamentalism has opportunistically eclipsed a bottom-up popular

uprising across Syria, so too has the PYD come into power while suppressing opposition, courted international intervention, and dominated a political project while claiming to emphasize a democratic a bottom-up society.<sup>13</sup> Although the Syrian opposition is largely framed in national terms and Rojava makes claims at rejecting such terms, in both, there is much to be said of the centrality of self-determination, media countervailing practices, the negotiation of identity, and mass media's role in transmitting affective interpellation.

### **1.5 'Work of the imagination'**

While the Syrian uprising has been territorially defeated, elements of it continue to exist online, in archives and online communities, through the efforts of individuals and networks who continue to call for the fall of the regime. Alternatively, Rojava's mediated existence is an effect of the uprising, representing a constant arbitration between an alternative imaginary for Syria/post-Syrian society and praxis, while courting internationals not as colonial others but as equal subjects. While the contradictions between political practice and mediated imaginary exist, its mediation represents a confederation of subjects.

As print capitalism promoted fraternity based upon ethnic, religious, or territorial affinity,<sup>14</sup> so too does electronic media and the internet. But it has also given us access to vast reservoirs of information and put us into close relational contact with others that exist beyond our national and territorialized affinities. The internet, in particular, has always

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<sup>13</sup> Harriet Rump. "A Kurdish-Speaking Community of Change: How Social and Political Organising takes Shape in the PYD-controlled Areas in Syria." (2014), 65-67.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. (London: Verso books, 2006), 1-256.



represented elements of cosmopolitanism and postnational imagining. In his exploration of the postnational potentials of globalization, Arjun Appadurai argues that electronic media has become a medium for “new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds”.<sup>15</sup> It would be irresponsible not to acknowledge that the role of the imagination in reconstituting nationalist and post-nationalist potentials as a subjectively defined one. However, as Appadurai argues, electronic media’s absorption and dissemination into the public discourse ensures that such imaginings are produced, consumed, and reproduced, forming the basis for an imagination that “transforms pre-existing worlds of communication and conduct”.<sup>16</sup>

## **1.6 Methodology**

The research employs a discourse analysis of the case studies by analyzing them according to their interactions with news articles and online social networks. Through a qualitative discursive exploration of the following case studies I assess the messaging of each case study based on content, context, and subtext, taking note of any emergent themes and discourses throughout the texts. Where relevant in the studies the analysis will also employ a visual analysis, paying attention to content and placement of imagery. The analysis is supported by a range of literature on Kurdish and Syrian history, the Syrian uprising, and media theory.

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<sup>15</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 3.

*Part one*

In the first half of this thesis, I analyze the political identities of Rojava's internal media projections and address how they position themselves towards issues of identity and belonging, and mapping how official narratives of Rojava's ruling political party and militia have mobilized local and transnational affect in their search for legitimacy. This will be done by assessing specific videos published by the official YouTube press channel of the People's Protection Units (YPG) during times that Rojava's existence was either threatened or reinforced.

Considering the frequency with which the YPG is in the news media spotlight, and because it has gained significant international support throughout the war, becoming the 'face' of Rojava in many ways, I found it to be the most publicly representative of a political project that is defined by armed conflict. I theorize that trauma and affect are channeled by Rojava's official media to various audiences in different ways, broadcasting beyond pre-circumscribed ethnic or nationalist prisms. Borrowing from Allison Landsberg, I explore the concept of 'prosthetic memory' and how it is activated by the YPG's video dispatches to encourage "social responsibility and political alliances that transcend the essentialism and ethnic particularism of contemporary identity politics."<sup>17</sup>

This section analyzes official party-controlled local and international projections of Rojava, and necessarily establishes a foundation for the following half of his thesis. By exploring a facet of 'official' Rojava media, I aim to develop a further exploration of how

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<sup>17</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The transformation of American remembrance in the age of mass culture* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34.

memory and trauma mediate notions of radical internationalist solidarity with and belonging to Rojava.

## *Part 2*

The second half analyzes three specific representations of Rojava's international projection as they exist online, examining their discursive mediation and the effect they have on Rojava's external identity construction, the extent to which YPG-dominated affected their mediation, and the ways in which they have demonstrably evolved away from party discourse.

These explorations will revolve around the mediations of: Robert Grodt, an American anarchist and activist who died in combat in Raqqa; the formation of the Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA), a highly publicized queer battalion formed to fight against the Islamic State; and Willem Van Spronsen, an American anti-fascist who was killed taking action against a US immigration detention center and who, in a manifesto, cited Rojava's Women's Protection Units (YPJ) as exemplars of revolutionary action. These three cases were selected because they caused considerable tension in Rojava's online existence and contributed to mediations of Rojava's affective identity.

It would be disingenuous to discuss Rojava's online projection as a homogeneous entity that exists and in perfect cohesion with its praxis. Because Rojava exists at the center of an intersection between the Kurdish struggle, the Syrian uprising and civil war, the anti-fascist movement and a radical international left, Rojava's electronic existence (its online space) is not precisely defined, manifesting through various intersecting online communities: from party-owned or affiliated media, mainstream news coverage, international Rojava

solidarity communities, the virtual communities of the left, social media, and various other online niches. Simply, there's a lot of Rojava content on the internet -- and it's overwhelming. Because these online niches all intersect and demonstrate Rojava's broad online existence and its international appeal, the most challenging part of my research has been in selecting case studies that best embody the utilization of memory and affect in their international representations, and which contribute to Rojava's virtually negotiated identity construction. This research does not consider Rojava's mediascape, cyberspace, and imagined existence to be mutually exclusive from each other. Various cases were examined through their online mediation, be that through YouTube videos, mainstream news coverage, or online community centers. I do not claim that my case studies concretely represent the electronic discourse on Rojava, but I do aim to explore how they further aid in its negotiation.

Therefore, the analysis of the tensions and negotiations of its mediated existence is not confined or limited to one online medium. The only qualification considered was the online shelf-life of the case studies: That they contribute to Rojava's overall identity, and that they are easily accessible online.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### **2.1 Background and Literature Review**

In order to situate ourselves historically and theoretically, it is best to engage with the following intersecting points as they relate to the Kurds of Syria: a broad history of the erasure of Kurdish identity in modern Syria (with respect to Kurdish trauma inflicted by neighboring nation-states hosting significant Kurdish populations); a recounting of the Syrian uprising; an overview of the alternative ‘Syrian’ political imaginaries which took form as a result of state collapse; and an overview of the media landscape in Syria after 2011, with a focus on the Kurdish media landscape. By no means is this a conclusive background, but it serves as a foundation for the remaining chapters.

Kurdistan is considered by Kurds to be comprised of parts of modern-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. As a result of their spread across four nation-states, each territorial subset of the Kurdish people has characteristics unique to their past and present circumstances, while still retaining strong transnational kinships. The Kurdish identity is therefore as strongly localized as it is transnational.

#### ***2.1.1 The French Mandate and the emergence of a nationalist minority consciousness***

The Kurdish question is directly linked to the rise of nationalism as a consequence of the following factors over the past century: the fall of the Ottoman empire and the rise of the nation-state following World War I, the implementation of the Sykes-Picot agreement which split the Middle East into French and British spheres of colonial influence, and the

subsequent anti-colonial independence movements that took shape as reactive nationalisms attached to a majoritarian Arab identity.

The implementation of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement after World War I created new borders within the Middle East for the sake of claiming spheres of influence within Europe. New, imperial nation-states were subsequently created with little understanding for the region's ethnic makeup nor regard for ethno-linguistically distinct groups, clan and tribal affiliations, class groupings, or lifestyle. In *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, Benjamin Thomas White traces the emergence of the concept of 'minorities' in opposition to 'majorities' a relatively new phenomenon in the Middle East that was congruent with the creation of nation-states; whereas previously under the Ottoman empire, such groups had 'communal identities,'<sup>18</sup> living in what he characterizes as multi-national or non-national states<sup>19</sup> sometimes known as *millets*.

From 1923 until 1946, Syria was under the mandate of the French, where it was split into five official administrative units. The states of Aleppo and Damascus were united under the state of Syria (a Sunni state), while the remaining states were administratively independent and split on homogenizing religious lines that created confessional majorities: an Alawite state, Jabal Druze, and Greater Lebanon (Christian).<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, the Kurds --

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<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: the Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>19</sup> White, *Emergence of Minorities*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

concentrated in certain areas that encompassed the soon to be nation-states of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, as well as Iran -- “inherited no state whatsoever from the ruins of Ottomanism.”<sup>21</sup> With regards to mandate Syria, the French consistently rejected requests for Kurdish autonomy, as it “invalidated the religious distribution of power”<sup>22</sup> and threatened Syrian/Arab nationalism as well as the territorial claims of the neighboring states of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Turkey in particular pressured the French mandate in Syria to reject Kurdish autonomy.<sup>23</sup> While autonomy was denied on ethno-linguistic terms, France did not shy away from exacerbating such divisions for political leverage.<sup>24</sup> White attributes this emergence of minority consciousness in Syria as a direct result of French Mandate policies implemented to “structure and exacerbate divisions between Syria’s diverse communities” by creating statelets,<sup>25</sup> i.e.: upholding some minorities but not others in service of a divide and rule strategy.<sup>26</sup>

## **2.12 *Kurdish Cultural Renaissance & Minority Consciousness***

Whereas under Ottoman rule Kurdish communities had not been threatened directly by Ottoman policies, the dissolution of the Ottoman empire and the rising tide of nationalism in the region simultaneously saw the emergence of a Kurdish nationalism which “was

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<sup>21</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> White, *Emergence of Minorities*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

growing around Kurdish history and literature,”<sup>27</sup> in reaction to the spread of Turkish and Arab nationalism and state centralization. While aspirations for autonomy were rejected by colonial powers, the Kurds of mandate Syria were undergoing a cultural renaissance that included newspaper periodicals and radio transmissions that reached Turkey, leading to an increasing Kurdish national consciousness across national borders.<sup>28</sup>

I provide this very concise (and by no means complete) sketch of the emergence of a nationalist *minority consciousness* in French Mandate Syria order to illustrate the somewhat arbitrary marginalization of Kurdish aspirations for autonomy in favor of ‘majoritarian’ national aspirations, at the same time that the Kurdish people were given a measure of freedom for self-expression. With Kurdish populations hosted across four neighboring countries, each with distinct yet interweaving histories, it is impossible to isolate any one Kurdish movement from the aspirations of Kurds in nearby states.

### **2.1.3 Syria’s institutional racism & dispossession of Kurds**

Throughout the French Mandate period and the various ensuing incarnations of independent Syrian governance, Kurds, Assyrians, and other ethno-linguistic minorities were sidelined.<sup>29</sup> During the time of the Syrian Arab Republic under Nasser (1958-1961), Kurds were prohibited from publishing or possessing books in the Kurdish language. Then, in 1962 -- amidst a political climate in Syrian officials referred to Kurds as a “malignant tumor... in

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<sup>27</sup> Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 23-24.

<sup>29</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 41; Gerard Chaliand. *The Kurdish Tragedy* (London: Zed Books, 1994), 84.



the body of the Arab nation”<sup>30</sup> and which Syrian media dubbed the “Kurdish menace,” a special census was conducted in the Jazira region which revoked the Syrian citizenship of 120,000 Kurds, or 20% of the Kurdish population.<sup>31</sup> This effectively left those affected stateless, and severely limited their access to basic rights such as education, property ownership, legal marriage, and admittance into public hospitals,<sup>32</sup> although military service was still required.<sup>33</sup> Those who lost their nationality also lost any property they had seized by the government without compensation<sup>34</sup> -- the strategic reasoning behind this census was to undermine Kurdish nationalist sentiments and territorial congruence with other Kurdish areas in Syria. By 2011 the number of stateless Kurds had risen to 300,000.<sup>35</sup>

The Syrian Ba’ath Party officially seized power in a military coup d’état in 1963, further entrenching what was by then an institutionalized racism against Kurds. Ba’athism, a political ideology built upon the pan-Arab movement building on the struggle against European imperialism, “saw the Arabs as a nation outside history, as an eternal creative force embodying a unified will.”<sup>36</sup> As an exclusive Arab nationalist ideology, all “political

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<sup>30</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 52; 61.

<sup>31</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Chaliand, *Kurdish Tragedy*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> “State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Syria.” *RefWorld*. June 28, 2020. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4fedb3eec.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 8.

and social groups established in the Arab fatherland which did not actively share the Arab national ideal were illegal”.<sup>37</sup>

As such, Ba’athism is an ideology that simultaneously invites and repels minorities: ethnic minorities were acknowledged as existing within the ‘Arab nation,’ but the solution Arabism and the Ba’ath party presented was to establish a program of assimilation into Arab culture, or ‘Arabization’. In the Kurdish case this was implemented through policies of dispossession and repression of basic rights and cultural identity, as any perceived irredentist ambitions were held to be a threat to Arab unity.<sup>38</sup>

In the 70s a Kurdish expulsion from land saw the replacement of 140,000 Kurds with Arab settlers in a policy called the ‘Arab Belt’, intended to prevent Kurdish national aspirations for congruent territory with Turkey and Iraq:<sup>39</sup> it cleansed portions of northern Syria of Kurdish peasants and replaced them with Arab settlements<sup>40</sup>. Kurdish towns were re-named in Arabic. Moreover, any expression of Kurdish culture was considered illegitimate: in the 80s, celebrating Nowruz (a new year’s holiday celebrated by Kurds and Iranian people) was banned and any subsequent attempts to celebrate it were met with mass arrests.<sup>41</sup> All mention of Kurds in Syria was excluded from Syrian school books in 1967<sup>42</sup> -- meaning that Syria’s Ba’athist government not only relegated Kurds to second-class citizen

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<sup>37</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Annika Rabo, “Conviviality and conflict in contemporary Aleppo,” (Hamilton, 2012), 126.

<sup>39</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 65.

<sup>40</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 65; Chaliand, *Kurdish Tragedy*, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds*, 65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

status within the Arab state, but furthermore denied acknowledgement of their identity by the very institutions they attended and participated in. As late as the year 2000, a resolution was passed which ordained “the closing of all stores selling cassettes, videos, and disks in the Kurdish language” and re-emphasized the prohibition of using the Kurdish language during public meetings and festivities,<sup>43</sup> and reinforcing a policy of Kurdish-language linguicide.<sup>44</sup>

Collective identity feeds into the fraternal allegiances of imagined communities. Thus, through a policy of repression and dispossession the Syrian state replaced, erased and/or negated Kurdish territory, history, and all forms of cultural expression such as language from its physical and rhetorical landscape, restraining Kurdish collective memory and identity.

Although this section dwells on Syrian institutional dispossession of its Kurds, it must be emphasized that these policies were implemented in conjunction with a plethora of anti-Kurd policies and massacres occurring in neighboring countries-- namely neighboring Turkey and Iraq -- which served to incur deep and lasting trauma in the Kurdish national memory.

#### ***2.1.4 Transnational Trauma***

The trauma historically inflicted on Kurds by their host nations, despite being local and specific to each host country’s circumstances, has had a considerable hand in ensuring transnational Kurdish kindships across all four countries and the diaspora, becoming woven

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>44</sup> Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan* (San Francisco: Edwin Mellen Pr, 1992), 48.

into the fabric of Kurdish identity. On glaring example in Kurdish collective memory is that of the al-Anfal genocide in Ba'athist Iraq in 1988, a campaign which killed or disappeared up to 100,000 Kurds: in one phase of the campaign, the small Kurdish town of Halabja was gassed by Iraqi warplanes, killing up to 5,000 people.<sup>45</sup> The collective trauma of the Anfal genocide remains patched into the collective memories of Kurds everywhere and is not exclusive to Iraq.

A comprehensively detailed history of the Kurds and their trauma since the emergence of the Middle Eastern nation is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, although it is my intent to convey that localized experiences of trauma, although carrying significantly different weight for those directly affected, have nonetheless transnationally impacted a feeling of collective Kurdish trauma in neighboring states.

### ***2.1.5 Syrian state repression***

Although particularly repressive towards its Kurdish minority, the ruling Ba'ath party in Syria practiced repressive authoritarian practices over all aspects of Syrian society. A strict state of emergency was imposed from the time of the Ba'ath party's takeover in 1963 until the 2011 uprising, when current president Bashar al-Assad lifted it in an attempted concession.<sup>46</sup> The emergency law was described as "the most repressive law [affecting] the rights and freedoms of all Syrian citizens without exception" by the Syrian Human Rights

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<sup>45</sup> Jaffer Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 107.

<sup>46</sup> "Syria Protests: Assad to Lift State of Emergency." BBC News. BBC, April 20, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13134322>.

Committee,<sup>47</sup> and as a result freedom of expression was heavily restricted and political opposition brutally suppressed. Moreover, state control extended to the everyday life of citizens, wherein they unconsciously reproduced state power through decisions and actions “in compliance with how the state organizes and controls time, and space.”<sup>48</sup>

Before the uprising in 2011, attempts at political self-determination by minority groups or unsanctioned political parties were met with violent repression. The following episodes demonstrate the extent of government repression against perceived opposition or separatist groups:

In 1982, the city of Hama was the scene of a retaliatory massacre against the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, a dissident political party that had attempted to spark an Islamist insurrection. The disproportionate counter-attack of the regime saw the slaughter of between ten and twenty thousand people.<sup>49</sup>

In March 2004 a spontaneous Kurdish uprising ignited in the north-eastern city of Qamishli after security forces violently repressed a football riot that erupted at a match between rival supporters: the guest team, from the Arab city of Deir Ezzor which borders Iraq, held up provocative posters of Saddam Hussein, who is responsible for the violent repression and massacre of hundreds of thousands of Kurds in Iraq during the al-Anfal military campaign (a genocide). This angered supporters of the host team, predominantly Kurds, who flooded the stadium. The governor of al-Hasakeh responded by ordering security

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<sup>47</sup> “Syria Protests: Assad to Lift State of Emergency.”

<sup>48</sup> Carpi, Estella, and Andrea Glioti. “Toward an Alternative ‘Time of the Revolution’? Beyond State Contestation in the Struggle for a New Syrian Everyday.” *Middle East Critique* 27, no. 3 (July 2018): 232.

<sup>49</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 51.

forces to open fire on rioters, leaving six Kurdish protesters dead -- three of them were children.<sup>50</sup> The response was spontaneous and quick to spread: the resulting mass protests and riots spread across the predominantly Kurdish areas of Jazeera, Afrin, and Kobani, where state symbols and institutions were attacked. There was also considerable Kurdish solidarity in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, where Kurds are distinctly minorities.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the Muslim Brotherhood insurrection, this was not a party-mobilized uprising; rather, it was a clear manifestation of the frustrations of the Kurdish population, long victims of ethnic and economic marginalization.<sup>52</sup> But like all dissent in Syria, it too was violently and disproportionately repressed, according to Kurdish historian Jordi Tejel:

“At the end of March, the final count was 43 dead (7 were Arabs), hundreds wounded, around 2,500 arrested, and more than 40 Kurdish students thrown out of Syrian universities. Reports indicated that torture had been routinely used against Kurdish detainees, causing the deaths of five prisoners.”<sup>53</sup>

The uprising served to heighten the visibility of the Kurdish issue through worldwide media coverage, marking “the emergence of anti-establishment protests on the Syrian political scene,” and reinforcing “the symbolic unity of the Syrian Kurdish arena”.<sup>54</sup>

### ***2.1.6 Syrian state repression of media***

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<sup>50</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 115.

<sup>51</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 116.

<sup>54</sup> Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 108.

In addition to repressive state practices such as the outlawing of political opposition and the violent repression and intimidation of protesters, the Syrian state applies a strong ideological control.

Strict censors and regulations on media output in the country are in place as well as restrictions on media from outside Syria. Although the Syrian constitution technically enshrines freedom of speech and press, these are nominal guarantees. In practice, “the regime controls most domestic news outlets, substantially hindering access to information,”<sup>55</sup> while all media must operate under the permission of the Interior Ministry.

Private media is owned by individuals with close political, military, intelligence, and/or business affiliations to the regime,<sup>56</sup> reinforcing government propaganda. Self-censorship is practiced widely in regime areas, while prior to the uprising social media outlets such as Facebook and YouTube were banned internally by the state, although such restrictions were easily bypassed through the use of proxy servers.<sup>57</sup> As a result of tight state control and a private media with close links to the regime, Syria’s media landscape (before the war and currently in regime-held areas) prevents a true public discourse.<sup>58</sup> Finally, arrests of political dissidents such as bloggers and activists occur with frequency.

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<sup>55</sup> “Freedom in the World 2016: Syria,” Freedom House, [www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/syria](http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/syria), (December 1, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria, Origins and Developments*. (Lausanne: s.n., 2018), 123.

<sup>57</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 21.

<sup>58</sup> Daher, Joseph. “Syria, the Uprising and the Media Scene.” openDemocracy, October 26, 2017. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/syria-uprising-and-media-scene/>.

In essence, media's potential to either threaten or reinforce existing power structures was/is tightly controlled in Syria by a regulated flow of information; ideological agendas and critical thought were regulated and suppressed.

### ***2.1.7 The uprising: emergence of political imaginaries, and the mediatized war of ideologies***

In 2011, inspired by the protests of Tunisia and Egypt, a group of schoolboys fatefully scrawled graffiti on walls in the southern city of Daraa: "*Freedom,*" "*Down with the regime,*" and, pointedly, "*Your turn, Doctor.*" Within days Syrian security forces had rounded them up and detained them, setting off a chain of events which led to mass protests in the city of Daraa, and, later, across the country. There is no one event that can be credited to sparking the revolution: this is one instance of many now elevated to folkloric status, occurring during a particularly incendiary timeframe. But the infamous story of Daraa's



graffiti and the state's torture of schoolchildren stands as a primary illustration of<sup>5960</sup>

media's role in undermining the Syrian regime -- a role that it would continue to play throughout the war, in the hands of every conceivable faction.

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<sup>59</sup> Figure 2.1



The events of the Syrian ‘Arab Spring’ uprising and the early years of the war left a power vacuum, in which the Syrian government, under president Bashar al-Assad’s regime, was unable to consolidate control of territory nor the various forms of ideological discourse pervading the country. After a consequent and violent crackdown on protesters, the mass defection of army officers, and the arming of the opposition -- all of which eventually spiraled into the civil war we know today -- the Syrian government’s monopoly on the state and therefore the media collapsed. Within this chaos, the various groups of Syria challenging either Ba’athist rule or its Arab national ideal took the opportunity to fill the power vacuum. Various forms of grassroots direct action erupted in the forms of coordination committees and citizen’s councils.

Media’s role throughout the uprising has of course been well documented, particularly in Robin Yassin Kassab and Leila al-Shami’s book *Burning Country*, which dedicates a chapter to grassroots activism and the emergence of civil media. Early on, graffiti and social media were key to undermining state propaganda, organizing, and claiming public space.<sup>61</sup> In conjunction with the various forms of direct action (such as the establishment of civil councils in opposition areas) came the rise of a corresponding media output. Content was distributed on social media platforms at first to counter the regime narrative and mobilize/organize Syrians around the country,<sup>62</sup> and then later through established media institutions such as radio, magazines, newspapers and news agencies.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 86.

<sup>62</sup> Yazan Badran and Enrico De Angelis. “‘Independent’ Kurdish Media in Syria.” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 1.

<sup>63</sup> Yazan Badran and Enrico De Angelis. “‘Independent’ Kurdish Media in Syria.” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 2.

An example of this exists in the strategies of the Local Coordination Committees (*tanseeqiyat*), which were horizontal, collective action coordination committees committed to documenting regime abuses through non-violent civil disobedience.<sup>64</sup> They coordinated and organized protests and general strikes across the country through online media, employing thousands of citizen journalists and also forming a media office in an effort to “counter the regime’s narrative to both domestic and foreign audiences.”<sup>65</sup> Kurds were also active, either organized around pre-existing youth movements or also forming their own local coordination committees.<sup>66</sup> They organized with other LCCs on Facebook and other social media, “seeing themselves as part of the national movement against the regime,”<sup>67</sup> and echoing the same infamous slogans heard across the country in solidarity -- “Al sha’b yureed isqat al nizam” (“The people want the fall of the regime”).<sup>68</sup>

But the regime didn’t fall: in what has become the most covered war in history, the country fractured into factionalized territories over the course of the last eight years. The conflict gave space for the birth of alternative media in areas free of regime control, witnessing a swell of opposition media centers, newspapers, and radio and television programs.<sup>69</sup> The self-named Islamic State, too, produced its own news and programming,

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<sup>64</sup> Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 58.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>66</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 294.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>68</sup> “Syria’s Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle.” Crisis Group, August 18, 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-kurds-struggle-within-struggle>.

<sup>69</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 155.

although its territorialized existence has now largely been subdued due to military losses. Finally, the Kurds in northern Syria took the opportunity to produce spoken and written media in their own language, which had previously been outlawed.

Therefore, as the country fractured, ‘independent’ media flourished on all ethnic, religious, and ideological spectrums, reshaping coverage of the region. As with most wars, a newly diverse media became yet another battlescape of warring ideologies within Syria, flooding and affecting the local and international media landscape. Certainly, but not exclusively, various kinds of media from and about Syria have filled a role of ideological apparatus, adding fire to a civil war now largely perpetuated by foreign powers - even hailing individuals internationally into various causes, as is the case with recruitment for the Kurdish People’s Protection Units and the Islamic State.

The slip of the authoritarian government’s grip necessitated a “reckoning with memory” that has brought repressed memories and experiences to the front of the political sphere -- such as that of the Kurds<sup>70</sup> -- making room for a re-negotiation of national and public identity which challenges “state-centered narratives of national memory.”<sup>71</sup>

### ***2.1.8 Sidelining of Kurds in the opposition***

From the sparks of this reckoning, ‘Rojava’ emerged as a self-governing territory in northern Syria. The establishment and situational precarity of this semi-autonomous region

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<sup>70</sup> Sune Haugbolle and Anders Hastrup. “Introduction: Outlines of a New Politics of Memory in the Middle East.” *Mediterranean Politics* 13, no. 2 (2008): 21.

<sup>71</sup> Sune Haugbolle and Anders Hastrup. “Introduction: Outlines of a New Politics of Memory in the Middle East.” *Mediterranean Politics* 13, no. 2 (2008): 21.

symbolizes the first time in modern Syria's history that Kurds have been able to live as Kurds, rather than Arabized subjects of the Ba'ath regime.

The Kurdish national question re-emerged with the uprising's re-negotiation of national identity. As the protest movement dwindled and took on the shape of an increasingly armed conflict, the inclusiveness of the movement was called into question as the "various actors of the Arab opposition, whether within the country or outside, were unable to answer to the demands of the Kurdish population in Syria."<sup>72</sup> The increasing alignment of the Arab opposition with the Turkish government, which has a bloody history of antagonism with the Kurdish liberation movement, placed the two camps at odds. Furthermore, "the Kurdish national question was completely denied by the main actors of the Arab Syrian opposition," showing "the same attitude of refusal and chauvinism as the regime."<sup>73</sup> A powerful illustration of the Arab opposition's chauvinism occurred in July 2011, when the Syrian National Council (then a leading coalition representing the opposition) refused Kurdish requests to change the name of the country from the "Syrian Arab Republic" to, simply, the "Republic of Syria"<sup>74</sup> at the Istanbul gathering, leading Kurdish politicians to walk out.<sup>75</sup>

### **2.1.9 'Counter revolution' and PYD domination**

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<sup>72</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 452.

<sup>73</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 452.

<sup>74</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 304.

<sup>75</sup> For further reading on the splintering of the uprising, with an excellent chapter on the marginalization of the Kurds from the increasingly-fragmented opposition, I refer readers to Joseph Daher's dissertation, "*Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria: Origins and Developments*" which situates the Kurdish question alongside the origins of Syria's revolution.

A discussion of national memory and Kurdish identity would be incomplete without an understanding of how the project for political autonomy came about. While initially Kurdish protesters formed coordination committees and organized in collaboration with the Arab committees, the same obstacles met and ultimately splintered both camps. Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, in their crucial book narrating the grassroots origins of the revolution, as well as Joseph Daher's situated historical materialist analysis of the revolution's processes, have all attributed mounting political pressures and the militarization of the uprising as significant traits in the formation of a 'counter-revolution'. Importantly, they recognize that some forms of Kurdish self-determination, while finally being exercised, have also been hijacked by the PYD, the dominant political party.

#### ***2.1.10 Understanding Rojava and the PYD's role***

As the Kurds were progressively sidelined from the Arab opposition, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) -- a Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) which had existed in Syria since 2003 -- took the opportunity to become the dominant Kurdish party<sup>76</sup> by establishing institutions and organizing society based on the teachings of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, a revered political figure who had led a Kurdish insurgency in eastern Turkey since the 80s. This was facilitated by the formation of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the PYD, after the tacit abdication of the Syrian government from Kobane in 2012 left a governance vacuum. With the help of the YPG militia, the PYD was able to dominate the Kurdish political scene by sidelining other prominent Kurdish

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<sup>76</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 452.

parties, coalitions, and grassroots efforts.<sup>77</sup> Since then a pact of non-belligerence has existed between the PYD and the Syrian government, which has more or less remained in place. In its rhetoric and propaganda, the PYD has always asserted the ‘revolution’ which established the semi-autonomous region now known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria to be one which was bottom-up, demanded and formed by the people.

This is an important distinction: that the current expression of Kurdish self-determination is not a current of the grassroots movement which began in 2011; that some Kurdish opposition see the PYD as authoritarian hijackers of Kurdish self-determination in Syria; that this single party controls much of Rojava’s formation and media output; and that, despite all this, the mediatization of Kurdish trauma and the international effect it has drawn has served to create a new kind of political imaginary that exists separate from the territorialized reality.

### **2.1.11 *The ideology***

In the 1990s, the leader of the Kurdistan People’s Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan underwent an ideological paradigm shift from that of Marxist nationalism to a socialist-anarchist model. Inspired by various social thinkers (namely Murray Bookchin, an American social and political theorist), Ocalan came to espouse that nationalism and the modern nation-state were failed imperial projects in the Middle East that had served to instigate ethnic and religious divisions in the region, with nationalism favoring certain people over others. From prison Ocalan conceived his political-theoretical framework of Democratic

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 452-453.

Confederalism, a system of self-governance based on anarcho-communalism and direct democracy. In this framework, the Kurdish struggle is directly aligned with the whole of the Middle East's emancipation from the powers of capitalism and imperialism, which are tied directly to nationalism. Situated as a struggle for "the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people," as well as an international issue which "affects the whole of the Middle East," Ocalan attempts to place the Kurdish question along with, and not apart from, the struggle for decolonization in the region and worldwide.<sup>78</sup> It is presented as a transnational and decolonial struggle,<sup>79</sup> with ethnic egalitarianism, sustainability, ecology, and feminism at the core, and purports to provide a political, economic, and social alternative to the modern nation-state.

This framework of Democratic Confederalism, already espoused by some Kurdish political parties in Turkey, became the model for the constitution and implementation of the semi-autonomous region of Rojava.

After the PYD assumed authority over the region abdicated by Syrian government forces, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was officially declared by the PYD-led governing coalition in a move not officially recognized by the Syrian government or the international community.<sup>80</sup> Rojava's existence has therefore been tenuous since inception.

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<sup>78</sup> Ocalan, Abdullah. *Democratic Confederalism*. (Lulu Press, Inc, 2015), 6.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>80</sup> Karam. "Syria's Kurds Declare De-Facto Federal Region in North." AP NEWS. Associated Press, March 17, 2016. <https://apnews.com/882b101de1024e63bd9525bb32c708e3>.

In line with the framework of Ocalan's Democratic Confederalism, the PYD advocates a self-administered, self-governance structure at the local level, "unified only by a common vision of societal reform rather than by the rule of a centralized government."<sup>81</sup>

'Rojava' is considered by many Kurds to be the western part of a congruent Kurdish territory, a holdover of nationalist sentiment. The Self-Administration of North and East Syria's official stance remains that because of the federalist, de-centralized structure it aims for in all of Syria, the territory is simultaneously West Kurdistan as much as it is Upper Mesopotamia (Gozarto) as it is considered by some Syriac-Assyrians, and an Arab Syria, as it is considered by Syrian Arabs. Thus, notions of nationalism are reinforced as much as they are deconstructed.

#### **2.1.12 *Kurdish media and identity***

The majority of work available on Kurdish media is understandably related to the direct links between media and identity. The relationships of identity construction through language and media is emphasized in much of Jaafer Sheyholislami's body of work, particularly "Identity, Language and New Media", a paper dedicated to exploring Kurdish identity construction through the use of language and transnational media (satellite and internet). In it, Sheyholislami charts the history and progression of Kurdish language and media, contending that with the exception of Iraqi-Kurdistan post-1991, "Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have nearly always held a monopoly on broadcasting to serve and promote their own dominant and official culture, language and political agenda, and to work towards

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<sup>81</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 318.



assimilating the Kurds and other minorities.”<sup>82</sup> This hegemony of state controlled media was first undermined by Kurdish satellite television in the mid 90s, followed by the proliferation of Kurdish language internet spaces.

Sheyholislami expands on the link between identity and language in his book, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media*,<sup>83</sup> where he explores the interrelations between ethno-national identity and transnational discourses within cyber spaces and other transnational media.<sup>84</sup> Because the Kurds, across the four nation-states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, could not easily communicate with one another for nearly a century, “they had no effective means of articulating and sharing discursive identity constructs.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore Sheyholislami asserts that the content of transnational communication technologies embodies a “meaning-making” towards a national Kurdish identity.<sup>86</sup>

### **2.1.13 Rojava’s media**

In some of the few academic works to exist on Rojava’s independent media landscape, Yazan Badran and Enrico De Angelis reiterate that the emergence of Kurdish media must be considered holistically as an extension of the evolution of Syrian journalism. To an extent, a ‘Kurdish journalism’ had never existed because real ‘Syrian journalism’

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<sup>82</sup> Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media*, 293.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 23.

couldn't exist in the repressive landscape either<sup>87</sup> -- but they also emphasize that Kurdish media must simultaneously be regarded on a level removed from the Syrian landscape, within the context of Kurdish-specific and transnational historical circumstance.<sup>88</sup>

The precarious position of Rojava's existence between the regime and the opposition has allowed for local journalism from many Kurdish perspectives, as well as an outlet for cultural expression.

Calling attention to a common refrain heard amongst the local journalists and politicians they interview -- that "the situation of media and freedom of speech is better in Rojava than in any other Syrian region"<sup>89</sup> -- Badran and De Angelis nonetheless emphasize that this statement comparing Rojava to other authoritarian practice is one which is strictly and dangerously relative. Prior to the establishment of the de facto autonomy, Kurdish cultural expression had been practically nonexistent beyond the illegal circulation of pamphlets and newspapers by Kurdish political parties.<sup>90</sup>

Presently, while independent media exists to an extent, the PYD's hegemonic dominance in Rojava has enforced pressures on civil society, political life, and journalistic freedom.<sup>91</sup> The implementation of the Union of Free Media, established in 2014, is seen by many local journalists as a tool of the PYD to enforce restrictions and control on

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 335

<sup>89</sup> Yazan Badran and Enrico De Angelis. "Journalism in Rojava (I): Media Institutions, Regulations and Organisations." SyriaUntold, March 29, 2019. <https://syriauntold.com/2019/03/29/journalism-in-rojava-i-media-institutions-regulations-and-organisations/>.

<sup>90</sup> Yazan Badran and Enrico De Angelis. "'Independent' Kurdish Media in Syria." Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication 9, no. 3 (2016): 336.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 340.

independent media.<sup>92</sup> At a time when the Kurdish identity is politicized and publicized, much of the discourse in Kurdish media is related to military victories and the resilience of the Kurdish people against multiple adversaries:<sup>93</sup> the PYD, through the YPG and international backing, has committed itself to ousting ISIS, gaining considerable local popularity and international leverage in its push for political gain. Badran and De Angelis stress that although the PYD's administration stresses inclusivity, direct democracy, and women's liberation, the party has pressured media run by rival parties and independent groups, effectively marginalizing civil society and behaving as obstacles to democracy.<sup>94</sup>

This is not to discount the existence of independent media, which exists in limited capacities. Born mainly in the aftermath of uprising by the same Kurdish civil society that had initially supported the Syrian uprising, and with no overt links to dominant political parties and funded mainly by international NGOs and western governments, they remain smaller in capacity than party media.<sup>95</sup>

Some independent media from Rojava appears to reject an exclusively pan-Kurdish identity or a Syrian one, choosing instead to identify as 'Syrian community radio'.<sup>96</sup> The language of independent news websites, radio, and television programming is often

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>95</sup> Badran and De Angelis, "Journalism in Rojava (I): Media Institutions, Regulations and Organisations." SyriaUntold, March 29, 2019. <https://syriauntold.com/2019/03/29/journalism-in-rojava-i-media-institutions-regulations-and-organisations/>.

<sup>96</sup> Badran and De Angelis. "'Independent' Kurdish Media in Syria." Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication 9, no. 3 (2016): 344.

presented in multiple languages:<sup>97</sup> Kurdish, Arabic, English, and sometimes Syriac, giving Kurdish equal weight to Arabic and emphasizing the region's multi-ethnic demography, while also normalizing its use. However, this is also the case for the majority of PYD media. In this way, both independent media and PYD's have emphasized Rojava's multi-cultural landscape, while simultaneously underscoring Kurdish self-determination.

The discourse of the PYD party-media is of course highly politicized, focusing on military, political, and geopolitical updates.<sup>98</sup> When social issues are covered it is in order to highlight the achievements of the Rojava project (referred to among PYD supporters as the "Rojava Revolution") such as greater strides in gender equality or the successes of the so-called horizontal political structure.<sup>99</sup> According to research done by Badran and De Angelis from inside Rojava, local journalists admit that the PYD media remains the most relevant and followed.

Badran & De Angelis provide valuable insight into the landscape of Rojava's local independent media at a time when little academic insight on Rojava exists from a media perspective. Although they recognize that the PYD has more funding and capacity, and acknowledge the PYD's repressive and ideological dominance, they stop short of recognizing the weight of this hegemonic dominance in affecting local and -- importantly -- international media. This dominance heavily affects the broader international discourse on Rojava. While they highlight the limited existence of a civil society in Rojava through their

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>98</sup> Badran and De Angelis, "Journalism in Rojava (I): Media Institutions, Regulations and Organisations." SyriaUntold, March 29, 2019. <https://syriauntold.com/2019/03/29/journalism-in-rojava-i-media-institutions-regulations-and-organisations/>.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

engagement with local independent journalists, there remains little academic work available on the PYD media's discursive effect on the international landscape.

The examples of PYD dominance of Rojava discourse is telling. International journalists will frequently contact YPG and PYD spokespeople for updates and quotes regarding battle advances with which to feed the breaking news cycle; they require PYD approval to cross into Rojava; and they are sometimes deterred, in multiple ways, from effectively covering certain issues.<sup>100</sup> The control of international media output is a fundamentally important component to understanding how Rojava's identity is constructed and negotiated.

#### **2.1.14 *Kurdish revival***

While the legal prohibition on Kurdish language and media technically exists to the present day, it hasn't been enforced since the war destabilized state control, making way for the re-introduction of the Kurdish language into the daily life of Kurds.<sup>101</sup> New primary education curriculums have replaced the old Ba'athist curriculums, with some schools teaching in Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac. Universities (unrecognized by the Syrian government) have also been established, providing focuses such as Kurdish literature<sup>102</sup>-- a

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<sup>100</sup> Personal and peer experience.

<sup>101</sup> Massoud Hamed. "After 52-Year Ban, Syrian Kurds Now Taught Kurdish in Schools." *Al Monitor*, April 11, 2018. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/syria-kurdistan-self-governance-teach-kurdish-language.html#>.

<sup>102</sup> Daher, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Syria*, 322; Hamed, "Syrian Kurds Now Taught Kurdish in Schools," *Al Monitor*, 2015.

far cry from the days when unregistered Kurds were forbidden from pursuing education. And, as mentioned previously, media in Rojava has begun to publish in numerous languages.

The enforcement of the Kurdish language in curricula, after being long banned in Syria, has remarkable implications due to the possibility to export a variety of media from Rojava. National and collective identity are constructed through language,<sup>103</sup> and the ability to publish and broadcast in Kurdish, within Rojava and abroad, has allowed for a construction/re-construction of Kurdish identity without fear of repression.

### **Cultural Production**

While a flowing Kurdish cultural production exists in Kurdish regions outside of Rojava such as in Turkey and Iraqi-Kurdistan (where the Kurdish language is no longer outlawed and/or a Kurdish insurgency has long waged), and while Kurdish cultural production has, by necessity, always been transnational in nature, Rojava remains an exception. A true Kurdish cultural production “aimed at Kurds and centered on Kurdish issues”<sup>104</sup> from Syria hadn’t existed since the end of the French Mandate period, and the free production of such work remains in its early stages. The capacity for such production has opened within the last few years -- since the creation of the de facto autonomy -- and understandably revolves around the themes of Rojava’s surrounding conflict, Kurdish-specific trauma, conceptions of resistance, and notions of identity, belonging, and memory. It’s too soon to tell whether such work will continue to flourish and whether a cultural

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<sup>103</sup> Sheyholislami, *Kurdish Identity, Discourse, and New Media*, 107.

<sup>104</sup> Badran & De Angelis. “‘Independent’ Kurdish Media in Syria.” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 36.

production will be permitted continuity (given the insecure military situation and future of northern Syria, which will almost certainly see a regime win).

What we can be sure of now is that presently, cultural expressions have re-integrated into Syrian Kurdish culture: a Kurdish civil society now exists, where previously it did not. Newrouz, a previously forbidden New Year's holiday celebrated by Kurds (among other groups), is now celebrated freely in PYD-held areas; Kurdish music, dance, and cultural expression is no longer repressed; Kurdish-language education is available; and a local journalism industry, publishing/transmitting in Kurdish and other languages, has sprouted.

Nevertheless, the majority of academic literature available on Kurdish cultural production remains relegated to the nations which have long hosted histories of Kurdish liberation struggles, such as in Turkey and Iraq, or diaspora communities. And while cultural studies must not negate the transnational nature of the Kurdish question, it remains true that minimal work is available pertaining to Rojava from a media or cultural studies perspective.

I am not Kurdish, nor do I have an intimate understanding of Rojava's culture. Although I have brought attention to this gap in the academic field, as an outsider I am not well situated to engage in a discussion on Syrian-Kurdish culture or cultural production. Rather, I aim to analyze PYD discourse's possible effect on the future of such products, as well as on a specific niche of western cultural output that has been *affected by* the dominant PYD rhetoric.

An increased international interest has also had a heavy hand in affecting the production and reception of Kurdish media,<sup>105</sup> due to the presence of war coverage and the

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<sup>105</sup> Smets, Kevin, and Ali Fuat Sengul. "Kurds and Their Cultural Crossroads." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 248.

role of the Kurdish movement in defeating ISIS in Syria -- a media presence that the PYD has both invited and controlled, to an extent -- leaving the Kurds of Syria to become heavily mediatized subjects locally and globally. This mediatization is especially palpable in media representations of women in the YPJ, the all-female Women's Defense Unit of the YPG, which has garnered significant international attention, and in the representations of international fighters in the YPG.

## **2.2 - Theoretical Framework**

### **2.2.1 *Cyber-nations or cyber-confederalism: "The revolution will be digitized"***

In his invocation of the concept of 'cyber-nation' Kurt Mills references spoken word musician Gil Scott-Heron's famous song, 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' to make a somewhat obvious point: the revolution *will* be televised, and "digitized, faxed, emailed, uploaded, and generally will be available electronically to a large portion of humanity."<sup>106</sup>

"What revolution am I talking about? It is the revolution taking place with the digitization of identity, the wedding of selfhood and the electronic age, the redefinition, or, conversely, the reification, of communal affiliation via cyberspace, and the use of cyberspace to further self-determination and democratic reform"<sup>107</sup>

Although I sincerely doubt that fax has played a significant role in the Syrian revolution, nor the Rojavan, Mills' prophecy has generally come to pass: Syria's was a revolution which spiraled into the most heavily covered war in media to date. Owing to the

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<sup>106</sup> Mills, Kurt. "Cybernations: Identity, Self-Determination, Democracy and the 'Internet Effect' in the Emerging Information Order." *Global Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 69.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



nature of the conflict as an international proxy-war, the battle over territory and ideology has naturally spilled into the local, regional, and international landscape to create confusing regional and international rifts/alliances -- reflected and negotiated in various ideologically battling mediascapes. Rojava has played a significant part in this ideological battleground: as a territorialized entity, as a transnational form of identity construction for exiled/diaspora Kurds, and as a project conceptualized around an ideological framework that has appealed to a portion of the international left.

Kurt Mills' conception of 'cyber-nation' extends naturally from a globalized hyper-mediatization of news and conflict. The 'cyber-nation' -- "a non-territorially bound imagined community"<sup>108</sup> -- is a possible evolution of nationalism, the next phase of postmodern existence, where technology and global communications further enmesh nationalist ideologies. Arguing that cyberspace has shrunk time and space, rendering territorialized boundaries less significant (although borders continue to affect people in very real ways), Mills identifies the contradictions that come with globalization and telecommunications:

"On the one hand, the internet is making non-territorially based identities more viable or 'virtually' more real. On the other, the same bundle of technologies is reifying old-fashioned ethnic/national/communal territorially based identifications."<sup>109</sup>

The "deep, horizontal comradeship" characterizing citizens who are part of an "imagined community"<sup>110</sup> has become deterritorialized, where interactions taking place online generate virtual fraternities and communions. These online communities, 'places of

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>110</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

conviviality’, which Mills likens to the Agoras of ancient Greece, represent public forums and safe spaces for identity construction, supporting the “connected, yet contradictory, processes of the reification and the realignment of communal affiliation and identity.”<sup>111</sup>

In the case of Syria, virtual places of conviviality have replaced physical manifestations of cultural expression. In Rojava’s case especially, we see the placement of such virtual places of conviviality taking place at the intersection of the transnational Kurdish community and the solidarity/community networks of a subset of the internationalist left, in which a ‘Rojava’ communal identity is negotiated globally rather than locally.

Transnational self-determination movements like that of the Kurds’ have used the internet to strengthen communal identities,<sup>112</sup> furthering engagement with identity construction that would not otherwise be accessible within the borders of a repressive nation-state like Syria. In many regards, the ‘Rojava Revolution’ (and the PYD’s dominance over it) is an extremely localized and territorialized revolution which has served to construct and reify Syrian-Kurdish identity -- an identity which has never before had the opportunity to thrive.

Mills’ hypothesis on the potential for reification of identities through global telecommunication contains the caveat of global imbalance and inequality, where unequal levels of access to telecommunications technology could restrict “the ability of many to use cyberspace to reify alternative identities and challenge traditional state authority.”<sup>113</sup> This is a fundamentally important point, not relegated to a simple socio-economic dynamic of

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<sup>111</sup> Kurt Mills. “Cybernations: Identity, Self-Determination, Democracy and the ‘Internet Effect’ in the Emerging Information Order.” *Global Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 71.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

global inequality but also acknowledging the role of authoritarian state censorship which could prevent the access and distribution of alternative information. In the case of Rojava, where identity construction is a process in its infancy in many ways, the PYD's financial and hegemonic dominance over media hints at an unequal production/reception of information. On the local level, a limited independent media acts as a watchdog for the PYD in whatever capacity it can,<sup>114</sup> while globally, the PYD discourse prevails over others' -- meaning that it has created spaces for very specific kinds of cultural production, where one cannot dissociate 'Rojava' from the PYD. The unequal balance between party-media and civil society is bound to affect, perhaps reify, the identities of many Syrian and/or diaspora Kurds, as well as the international perception around Rojava.

That the internet has allowed for a negotiation of identity which transcends ethnic divisions and territorial communal identities, hailing internationals who have been mobilized by the PYD's anti-nationalist liberation discourse to fight for Rojava. In other words, the PYD mediates perceptions of Rojava to the world outside its territorial confines, making Rojava and the PYD virtually indistinguishable from each other from the outside.

At the same time, Rojava solidarity groups from around the world, performing as both physical virtual places of conviviality, intersect and combine with other virtual niches -- anarchist/anti-fascist communities, environmental activism communities, LGBTQ communities, etc. -- to create a network that ultimately serves to construct and further negotiate Rojava's online identity and political imaginary. These convivial spaces almost always take on a similar rhetoric as the PYD's, in terms of unequivocal support for the

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<sup>114</sup> Badran & De Angelis. "'Independent' Kurdish Media in Syria." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016): 343.

revolution and condemnation of the actions of the ‘fascist’ Turkish state (according to the PYD’s rhetoric, as we will see in later chapters), while upholding the progressive aspects of Rojava’s political framework. This will be elaborated upon in the next chapters.

Although Mills’ work on identity in a world rapidly changed by global telecommunications is useful, his choice of terminology -- “cyber-nation” -- falls short of translating the extent to which the ‘nation’ structure is neutralized in cyberspace (as much as it is reinforced). Rather than thinking of these networks in terms of ‘cyber-nations’, in my research I find it more useful to engage with them as emergent, post-national ‘virtual confederations’, where identity is reified through interactions with other communities within a network. Drawing from Mills’ engagement with Deibert’s theory that nationalism is giving way to ‘nichelism’ -- ““A polytheistic universe of multiple and overlapping fragmented communities above and below the sovereign nation-state” made possible by the vast offerings of transnational identities and ““niche’ communities” in cyberspace,”<sup>115</sup> -- I intend to argue the idea that virtual confederacies work in concert outside the nation-form, freeing identity from territoriality, and creating post-national alternatives for intersecting forms of self-determination that are not bound to the model of nation-state.

It is these virtual confederacies that enmesh to define Rojava’s online space and political imaginary. There exists a true cognitive dissonance in the tensions and negotiations of the network of confederations that comprise its online imaginary -- a reflection of a territory at war. However, throughout this work, I argue that the cognitive dissonance of Rojava’s media and imaginary further pushes the arbitration of its deterritorialized identity.

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<sup>115</sup> Cited in Kurt Mills, “Cybernations: Identity, Self-Determination, Democracy and the ‘Internet Effect’ in the Emerging Information Order.” *Global Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 73.

### 2.2.2 *The “work of the imagination”*

For those with access to the internet, identity and its relations to territory or religion are no longer strictly bound. The combination of mass migration with electronic media (global flows) impels what Appadurai calls the “work of the imagination” in which a contestation between individuals and groups “seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.”<sup>116</sup> The virtual places of conviviality espoused by Mills combine with Appadurai’s ‘work of the imagination’ to “create new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds.”<sup>117</sup>

This imagination provokes agency and doubles as a platform for action, rather than escapism,<sup>118</sup> where ordinary individuals now exercise these imaginations throughout the practice of the everyday, which has become a field of contestation.<sup>119</sup> Just as collective memory and experience affects one’s relation to nation, so too does collective experience of mass media create solidarities. Appadurai argues for the postnational potential of convergent solidarities, because by nature they function beyond national borders.

The inundation of rapid-flow electronic media, through a globalized mass mediation, has created deterritorialized modern subjects. We now have what Appadurai refers to as “diasporic public spheres” that emerge from what he asserts is a postnational world order<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 4.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

and formed by overlapping and disjunctured ‘scapes’ -- conduits to globalized modernity that further push transnational imaginings. These practices, resulting from and contributing to the work of the imagination in concert with the various ‘scapes’ of globalized flows, are contradictory in nature -- creating disjunctured, heterogeneous societies “free of the constraints of the nation form.”<sup>121</sup>

The basic premise is a simple one: that self-determination and identity construction can be achieved through the cultural practice of daily agency thanks to electronic mediation, that imagined communities can be re-imagined, and that self-determination does not need to be framed, by necessity, as national liberation or territorial sovereignty.

Appadurai theorizes that the postnational is practiced unconsciously, from the practice of the everyday to transnational networks of international aid groups. Diasporic spheres of guest migrant workers, refugees, ‘transnational intellectuals’, immigrants, and others have made it so that nationalism is now only partially territorially defined.<sup>122</sup> This is not to say that nationalism is any less relevant -- today just as ever, ethnic constructs are pitted against others in efforts to mobilize nationalist sentiments, while the counter-nationalisms of the subaltern are conceived in direct response.<sup>123</sup> Subaltern agency need not be defined by nation-state discourse or the nation form<sup>124</sup>, although “many movements of emancipation

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 163.

and identity are forced, in their struggles against existing nation-states, to embrace the very imagery they seek to escape” due to the logic of the nation-state form.<sup>125</sup>

Appadurai has no conception of what a model would be for the popular mobilization of postnational praxis, but he is useful here for his articulation of the implications of such a complex, emergent framework of postnational formations:

“The first is temporal and historical and suggests that we are in the process of moving to a global order in which the nation-state has become obsolete and other formations for allegiance and identity have taken its place. The second is the idea that what are emerging are strong alternative forms for the organization of global traffic in resources, images, and ideas -- *forms that either contest the nation-state actively or constitute peaceful alternatives for large-scale political loyalties*. The third implication is the possibility that, while nations might continue to exist, *the steady erosion of the capabilities of the nation-state to monopolize loyalty will encourage the spread of national forms that are largely divorced from territorial states*. These are relevant senses of the term postnational, but none of them imply that the nation-state in its classical form is as yet out of business. It is certainly in crisis, and part of the crisis is an increasingly violent relationship between the nation-state and its postnational Others.”<sup>126</sup>

These three implications directly feed into each other. While nations and nationalism are by no means obsolete -- remaining firmly rooted in the midst of a modernity warring more than ever on the basis of national and ethnic affiliations -- we see that allegiances, identities, and counterpublics have formed, organized, and interacted with each other as alternatives to the nation-state. Appadurai focuses much of his postnationalism-through-globalization theory strongly on transnational diasporic publics and consequent loyalties formed through migration and refuge, arguing that a Palestinian diaspora in the United States (for example) retains transnational loyalties to not only to Palestine and the idea of returning

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 169. Emphasis mine.

to it, but also to the Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon, or Chile -- in turn articulating much of their politics around these loyalties and alternate patriotisms.

I argue that this loyalty is not merely relegated to ethnic and national diasporas, allowing non-diasporic citizens of countries to feel transnational loyalties to concepts, solidarities, and alternative ideologies. I'd like to focus on the efficacy of transnational solidarity networks that are equally reliant on the flow of "resources, images and ideas." These solidarity networks thrive online, often in tension or at odds with traditional patriotism, and are not always or exclusively diasporic. Rojava solidarity networks, for example, are comprised of Kurds, but also various confederate tribes of non-Kurdish feminists, communists, anarchists, environmentalists, LGBTQ activists, and anti-fascists who have been motivated to take up support for Rojava's perceived self-determination as a cause.

### ***2.2.3 Prosthetic Memory***

Finally, Alison Landsberg's conception of prosthetic memory is foundational for the following chapters. To what extent do memories shape those who do not 'belong' to them? In her book, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, Landsberg explores the dissemination of individual and collective memories through technologies of mass culture. Prosthetic memory uses mass culture -- "technologies of memory"<sup>127</sup> -- by transporting individuals through time and space, allowing

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<sup>127</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: the Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2006), 1.



them to live through “memories of events through which they did not live,”<sup>128</sup> and to bypass ethnic particularism. This leads to her ultimate exploration of how individuals are affected by mass culture technologies and, consequently, how identities are built. Landsberg’s conception of ‘prosthetic memory,’ disseminated through a mass culture industry, is capable of forming “imagined communities that are not necessarily geographically bounded and that do not presume any kind of affinity among community members.”<sup>129</sup> It is in this prosthetic memory, which creates ties and affinities that challenge the essentialism inherent to political identities through a prosthetic mode of experience, that carries potential for radically constructive ways of challenging the world. By considering the memories, trauma, and experiences of the ‘other’ - and thus experiencing being the other - prosthetic memory “creates the conditions for ethical thinking.”<sup>130</sup>

In so empathizing with another’s lived experience, the prosthetic memories “thus become part of one’s personal archive of experience, informing one’s subjectivity as well as one’s relationship to the present and future tenses.”<sup>131</sup> For Landsberg, this is a form of affect which is capable of being disseminated only through advanced capitalism, portable through a commodified mass culture which proliferates “images and narratives about the past,”<sup>132</sup> ultimately helping to alter and re-shape the subjectivities of those on the receiving end.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 26.

While collective memory is bounded and finite, relating to specific groups of people, the incepted affect produced by prosthetic memory allows for intersectional modes of empathy.

Landsberg's conception of prosthetic memory is one which is "disseminated only through advanced capitalism"<sup>133</sup> to a commodified mass culture. While her theory foregrounds the potential for radical or progressive developments and allows for deep affective engagement with past (and feeds into the present), she focuses on the radical potential contained within technologies of late capitalism and leaves little critique of their potential to flatten heterogeneous discourses.

When applying Landsberg's logic to Rojava, one must keep in mind that while the PYD has used mass technology to its benefit, providing a counter-hegemonic narrative which affectively raises the memory of Kurdish trauma to a global level, it has simultaneously used the same technology to help it become the hegemonically dominant Kurdish group in Syria. This ensures that the PYD narrative rises above all other Kurdish narratives in terms of global mediation, flattening a heterogeneous Kurdish community and ensuring the overlooking of local counter-hegemonic Kurdish narratives.

In this chapter I've provided a preliminary history of repressive institutional practices against Kurds in Syria and the region, and an overview of the Syrian uprising which, among other things, created a vacuum which allowed for the emergence of a liberated Kurdish identity. In mapping media's role and evolution throughout Syria's history as a nation-state and throughout the revolution, I've highlighted the importance of media in reinforcing or challenging state repression, and, importantly, its utilization as a means of liberated practice and identity construction which challenges Syria's monolithic Arab and Ba'athist identity.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 26.

# CHAPTER 3

## IDENTITY AND INTEPELLATION IN THE YPG'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL

In this chapter and the following chapters, I focus on the role of global flows in constructing alliances and an emergent 'post-national' identity from Rojava's highly localized project for Kurdish self-determination. The chapter will elaborate on the basic premise of the PYD's hegemony over the global media sphere of Syrian Kurdish issues by attempting to bridge the internet's role in how the 'Rojava revolution' has mediated international perceptions of Kurdish identity and international solidarity, through an analysis of the 'YPG Press Channel' account on YouTube.

The analysis focuses on two specific and divergent time periods where Rojava as a political project was threatened or reinforced: Raqqa in 2017 (reinforced) and Afrin in early 2018 (threatened). I study the People's Protection Units (YPG/J), as the military arm of the PYD, because it is the strongest and most primary Kurdish force in Syria militarily and ideologically. YPG's placement in the limelight is the most publicly representative of a political project that is defined by armed conflict. Further, as the lead militia within the 'Syrian Democratic Forces,' the U.S.-supported alliance of militias formed to defeat the Islamic State, it has gained considerable international media attention as a result. The People's Protection Units are the most often quoted Kurdish element in Syria, with press officers and officials providing direct access to international journalists, by phone and email, as well as physically; therefore, they employ a significant degree of control over the flow of information. The YPG's placement in the limelight is the most publicly representative of a

political project that is defined by armed conflict. It has also courted broad international support, from official state sponsors like the United States, to non-state individuals that include war adventurers, ex-military, far right Christian fundamentalists, and, primarily, a spectrum of far-left ideologues.

### **3.1 Methodology**

On YouTube, any lay person seeking to understand the Rojava revolution would inevitably end up on the YPG's media channels, where they post the majority of their content. It is therefore an efficient media barometer for observing the political identities of the PYD's project and addressing how they position themselves towards issues of identity and belonging.

The YouTube channel will be examined holistically, paying attention to the emergent themes and discourses of the two temporally and spatially selected places (Afrin and Raqqa) that stood to affect or reinforce the territorial integrity of the Rojava project during critical periods for its existence, and analyze how such propaganda is discursively conducted. In the holistic reading of the channel, selected videos within these time periods will be analyzed in order to demonstrate the emergent themes, although only those with Arabic or English subtitles were analyzed due to my own language limitations.

I used a key word search ("Raqqa" and "Afrin" in English and Arabic) in order to list all videos uploaded to the YPG Press Office about Raqqa between 2017 and 2018. YouTube does not contain an advanced search function inside of channels, and therefore filters were not feasible for specific time frames. The video results appear without a specific date, showing up as having been uploaded 'X days/weeks/years ago' until the video is clicked

into, when the date is revealed. For the purpose of this study I only considered videos uploaded between ‘one’ and ‘two years ago’.

### ***3.1.1 A Note on the multiple YPG YouTube channels***

There are two active channels that act as official channels of the YPG on YouTube: the “YPG Press Channel” and “YPG Media Office”. The purpose of broadcasting from two channels is likely to bypass YouTube’s system of checks should one channel be deemed in violation of the Terms and Services and taken down. There are also numerous subsidiary militias under the umbrella of the YPG which have their own official channels -- the YPJ, the Manbij Military Council, the Syriac Military Council, etc. In the analysis, I focus attention onto the YPG Press Channel and not others, for two reasons:

- 1) The YPG is the umbrella militia and as such the Press Channel posts videos representing the official channels of all its subsidiary militias;
- 2) Active since 2013, it is the longest running channel and contains the most content. At one point it boasted over 900 videos, although it appears many have since been taken down; the channel now hosts a total of 197 videos.

### ***3.1.2 A comparative analysis of Arabic versus English language messaging through titles***

First, establish that the YPG tailors its projected image differently to different audiences, I discursively compare the titles of Arabic and English pertaining to Raqqa. I did this by comparing the titles of English and Arabic language videos after searching for the term “Raqqa”. Below is a sample of the results compiled into a table for easy comparison:

Table 3.1

English	Arabic ( <i>titles translated by me</i> )
<i>The story of a liberated city in Raqqa</i>	<i>The rebirth of civilian life in Raqqa</i>
<i>Why are the Kurds fighting to liberate Raqqa?</i>	<i>After the liberation of the north of Raqqa, citizens return home</i>
<i>A witness of ISIS's hell in Raqqa</i>	<i>A [Arab] fighter in the Syrian Democratic Forces from Raqqa participates in the liberation of his city</i>
<i>An American YPG fighter tells his story of coming and joining the fight.</i>	<i>The words uttered by those fleeing ISIS: 'Thank God you freed us'</i>
<i>Kurdish women battling Daesh inside Tabgah, southwest Raqqa</i>	<i>The liberation of a hundred more civilians from the hands of mercenaries</i>

The English titles are aimed at an international audience, upholding the themes of Kurdish liberation of the region, international solidarity, and women's liberation. In contrast, the Arabic language titles appear to emphasize the Arab identity of Raqqa and return of its citizenry, perhaps implicitly in response to allegations by many Arabs that the YPG is undergoing a policy of 'Kurdification' and demographic change through the Rojava project in the north.

The table above is used to provide an easy visual comparison and is also representative of the videos on the channel as a whole: the People's Protection Units and its female counterpart (YPG and YPJ) are emphasized in the English-language videos, and the multi-ethnic umbrella of the 'Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) appear to be named more frequently in the Arabic videos. The emphasis on the SDF, and Arabs fighting in it, serves to highlight the ethnic inclusivity of the umbrella of militias fighting to defeat ISIS in its then-capital, rather than highlighting the YPG's participation and therefore the Kurdish predominance within the battle. Conversely, the emphasis on YPG media in the English videos underscore and legitimize the ideology of the Kurdish militia to an international audience. In both languages, themes of democracy and liberation feature prominently, asserting the democratic and inclusive nature of the militias fighting to liberate Raqqa. The dominant theme is that citizens will benefit from the democratic confederalism structure of the PYD, even if words like democratic confederalism are not explicitly stated. There is also a concerted effort to feature the voices of various Syrian ethnicities and the internationals who support the PYD's project -- either those who are fighting under its jurisdiction, or those who have been the beneficiaries of its liberation from ISIS.

Although throughout this chapter my analysis will focus on the messaging of YPG propaganda to the international community, the aim of this preliminary view into the YPG Press Channel's titling of video dispatches about Raqqa is to establish a baseline of how similarities and differences between the Arabic language videos and English language videos manifest themselves. This baseline establishes that the political identity and messaging of the English videos varies from that of the Arabic, with an emphasis on *Kurdish* liberation of an Arab city and on Kurdish and international solidarity. The Arabic language videos,

meanwhile, focus on the *Arab* liberation of Arab citizens from oppressive fundamentalist rule through their cooperation with the SDF.

### **3.2 Raqqa emergent themes: Sympathy or empathy, victim or liberator**

The following pages will demonstrate how the YPG channel controls and disseminates the representation of different groups in its ranks. In their messaging, the YPG press videos displayed different approaches in their portrayals of Arabs, who are mostly presented as victims, and Kurds, who are presented as liberators. The testimonies of international fighters were simultaneously given prominence, but unlike Arab victims of ISIS who are portrayed as having no choice but to await liberation, international fighters are presented as ethically responsible individuals who were moved to fight for Rojava's stated values through an affective interpellation. The viewer, by virtue of watching videos targeted at international audiences, naturally relates more to the international fighters than to portrayals of Arab victimhood. The videos invite viewers to place themselves in the 'shoes' of the fighters and feel an empathetic kinship for what Rojava embodies as a concept, rather than encouraging them to relate to Raqqa's evacuating residents.

Many of the Raqqa videos place emphasis on footage of refugees evacuating the city during battles or celebrating the SDF's liberation of villages. Their representation as grateful, nameless victims conjures sympathy within the viewer, who watches Raqqa's traumatized evacuating population carrying their belongings and earthly possessions out of the city. In such videos the testimonies of women escaping the Islamic State are emphasized, as is the narrative of their liberation. Nameless women explain on camera (in Arabic, with English subtitles) that under Islamic State they were forbidden to walk the streets, go to the



hospital, or do anything without male guardianship. [In a video](#)<sup>134</sup> depicting interviews following a territorial liberation of a village, a happy female resident remarks on female YPJ soldiers' participation in the Raqqa offensive:

“We were watching you secretly on the TVs. It was like a dream to see you enter Raqqa. I was wondering how other women are fighting!” She points at her dress: “Now that you’re here we can finally wear color. Look at my red jilbab.”<sup>135</sup>

Later in the same video, calm, idyllic oriental music accompanies a pastoral scene of an outdoor picnic between villagers and SDF fighters. It is apparent that the picnic is being held for dialogue and documentation purposes, as the camera moves in closely on an unidentified man, perhaps a village elder due to his speaking role: “Under Daesh we were completely silenced. We couldn’t discuss anything. They would force you to do what they wanted. We had no right to choose.” As he speaks, the camera pans to his children, who are eavesdropping near the picnic mat. In the next shot, SDF soldiers methodically and beneficently hand packets of biscuits to the children.

The woman in the red jilbab and the village elder are merely representational examples of depictions of Arab populations to western/international audiences. Such videos often depict liberated citizens of Raqqa upholding the YPG/J as saviors -- women are depicted taking off their hijabs or black *abayas* to reveal colorful clothes, while the men shake hands with and kiss the cheeks of their liberators on camera. This representation evokes sympathy for the victims, unable to speak freely until their liberation by the SDF and

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<sup>134</sup> YPG Press Office. “The story of a liberated village in Raqqa.” *YouTube*. Video File. March 30, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8iIGgik\\_E&t=181s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8iIGgik_E&t=181s)

<sup>135</sup> YPG Press Office. “The story of a liberated village in Raqqa.” *YouTube*. Video File. March 30, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8iIGgik\\_E&t=181s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1r8iIGgik_E&t=181s)

their accompanying camera crew; victims are depicted as anonymous, displaced, grateful and dependent on the YPG for their freedom.

In contrast, Arab residents of Raqqa are presented as participating in the act of their own liberation when they enlist in the YPG/SDF. Arab as well as Kurdish members of the YPG or SDF are always named in interviews, represented as liberators who are in possession of their agency and, therefore, their dignity, while refugees remain nameless.

The inclusion of English translations in many of these videos, which depict streams of refugees praising the YPG as liberators from their captures, indicate that their intended audiences are international, namely western, communities. Presented to an international audience, the pointedly gendered platforming of the testimonies champion the YPG as the liberator of women -- calling back the frenzied liberatory discourse of the Bush administration during the post 9/11 invasion of Afghanistan<sup>136</sup> -- the bringer of democracy, and the savior of Syria's multi-ethnic fabric. It is a conscious manipulation of the West's predisposal to digesting (and driving) these orientalist tropes for the sake of garnering Western support from state actors.

It is optimistic to expect official YPG media -- the equivalent of state media in Rojava, rather than the media of a citizen uprising -- to resist varying self-orientalist tropes in its depiction of Kurds, Arabs, and other ethnicities in northern Syria. It is, after all, the easiest discourse to embody when seeking Western military aid and legitimacy, which the YPG depended on. And it is certainly not to say that the ideals of female liberation, democracy, or ethnic equality are inherently orientalist, but rather that the YPG consciously

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<sup>136</sup> Adam Shatz. "Orientalism, Then and Now." The New York Review of Books, May 20, 2019. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/20/orientalism-then-and-now/>.

uses these Raqqa testimonials as tools to garner sympathy for the Other, indulging and reinforcing the occident's perceptions of the Middle East.

### ***3.2.1 The distinction between English and Arabic language videos***

The observations made in the previous sections are not meant to imply that Arabs are only depicted as victims in all YPG videos, but rather that this is the prevalent role they play in the internationally targeted English language videos. In the Arabic language videos, local fighters provide their names, giving their individual reasons for joining the SDF to fight against ISIS oppression and to free their hometown. These videos often lack translated subtitles, transmitted almost exclusively to Arabic speaking audiences, and highlighting the liberatory agency potentially available to Arab residents should they enlist in the SDF.

Meanwhile, the messaging of the internationally-targeted videos differs considerably, focusing on primarily sympathetic portrayals of Raqqa's residents, some minor testimonies of Arabs in the YPG or SDF, and, mostly, they place emphasis on testimonies of international fighters who speak of Rojava in quixotic terms, as will be discussed in the following section.

### ***3.2.2 Disjuncture and interpellation in the testimonials of international subjects***

In contrast to the YPG Press Channel's representation of Arabs, international fighters are routinely given special attention through individual video spotlights. In such testimonials, the subjects provide their personal and political justifications for joining the Rojava revolution, in which they inevitably explain their fascination with the implementation of autonomous direct democracy in the Middle East, provide context on

their activism at home, and emphasize the concept of international revolutionary solidarity. In short, the video spotlights are generated to create emotional and ideological links with audiences watching from home.

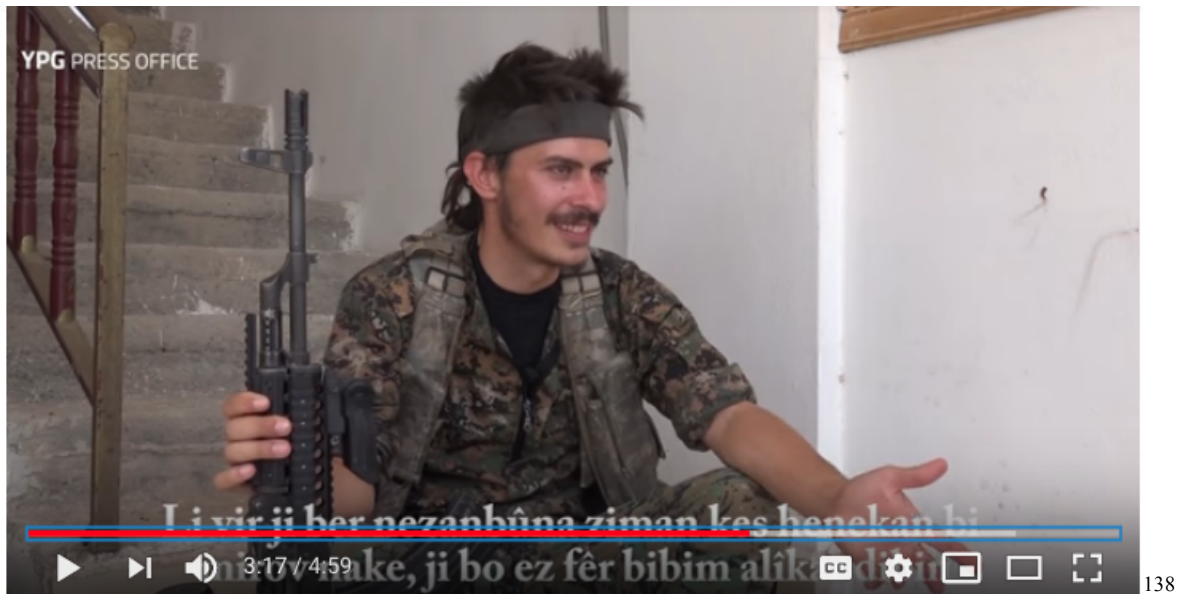
In a video posted less than a month before his death in combat, the American activist Robert Grodt -- nom de guerre “Demhat Goldman” -- expresses his motives for joining the YPG.<sup>137</sup> He holds an assault rifle and speaks of Rojava with bright eyed, idealistic conviction. Grodt briefly glosses over his activism in the United States, declaring that he later left his family and came to Rojava to “contribute to the revolution.”

He had watched from his home in New York as Kobani was besieged by ISIS and later liberated itself in 2015 -- a turning point in the war against ISIS which propelled the YPG into the public eye. Later, the stories of friends who went to Rojava and fought there inspired him to leave his family and travel to Rojava to fight for the political project. “This is a fire that started here,” he says in his video, “but it can kindle elsewhere.” From his testimony it can be inferred that ideological conviction in what Rojava represents is the primary driver for his enlistment, as he articulates a desire to see the framework of democratic confederalism applied not only for the Kurds in Syria but to the whole of the

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<sup>137</sup> YPG Press Office. “American YPG fighter tells his story of coming and joining the fight.” *YouTube*. Video File. June 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee4U0918UYo&t=82s>

Middle East.



From his perch in Raqqa, Grodt makes comments about the Kurdish struggle throughout the five-minute clip: “I started paying attention to the Kurdish struggle when...” and “Most people don’t know about Rojava, they don’t know about Kurdistan. You don’t see Kurdistan on a globe.” Although engaged in a battle to fight ISIS within the predominantly Arab city, the interview he gives from Raqqa is disconnected from the reality of his presence there. In the published clip, no mention is made of the Islamic State in Raqqa or in Kobani, while the rhetoric of transnational Kurdish liberation and democratic confederalism are reinforced. Neither is the fact of the international coalition’s role in the offensive mentioned.

Robert Grodt’s physical existence in Raqqa is tangential to the message expressed within the video, intended as recruitment material by demonstrating through Grodt that Rojava is worth supporting. His testimony from his position as an active, well-known

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<sup>138</sup> Figure 3.1

member of the American left reinforces the ideal of Rojava as a field of democratic values and anti-nationalist, anti-colonial struggle. This is done by presenting Kurdish self-determination as a necessary element to the self-determination of the whole Middle East, and democratic confederalism as key to the rejection of imperialism and colonial borders.

Like that of Grodt's, there are similar videos of international YPG members in Raqqa speaking highly of the framework of the anti-nationalist Rojava revolution, while also acknowledging Kurdistan as a national struggle; both self-determination and a rejection of nationalism are presented as necessary for the liberation of the remainder of the region. In the meantime, empire's practical role in supporting the YPG is neglected in these video spotlights of international members. In practice, this propagandic arbitration services a strategy for international legitimacy for Kurdish autonomy through the defeat of ISIS and the leveraging of territorial gains. Meanwhile, the ideological idealism perpetuated by the testimonials of fighters like Robert Grodt from within Raqqa serve to gloss over the political reality of the conflict. In presenting such videos of foreign nationals supporting the YPG, the disjuncted messaging of the YPG's press channel serves to contribute to an interconnected, ideological arbitration of Rojava's overall identity -- at the cost of a practical reality.

### ***3.5 Media events as prosthetic memory***

While Arabs are given largely sympathetic portrayals in the videos targeted toward international viewers, empathy is used as a site of ethical thinking in representations of minorities through the hailing of past memories. A three-minute English-language explainer

video<sup>139</sup> seeks to provide a rationale for the YPG's presence in the ISIS capital. In captions set against a montage, the video outlines a number of reasons for Raqqa's liberation by the YPG: that Arab tribes called upon the SDF to liberate Raqqa, that Raqqa has a 20% Kurdish and 10% Christian population, and that it's the morally right thing to do.

A female Yazidi fighter is given the only speaking role throughout the video, in which she declares that her unit (a Yazidi unit) is present in Raqqa to avenge the thousands of Yazidi girls and women who were abducted and sold into sex slavery by ISIS following the Yazidi genocide in Iraq in 2014.



Although it is a brief snapshot of a minority woman reclaiming agency to seek justice, her presence in the video is also a stand-in for a particularly traumatic event in recent Kurdish memory: the persecution, rape, murder, and enslavement of Yazidis -- a Kurdish

<sup>139</sup> YPG Press Office. "Why are the Kurds fighting to liberate Raqqa?" *YouTube*. Video File. August 21, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9O96IYVd3Pk>

<sup>140</sup> Figure 3.2

ethnic minority -- by ISIS. The Yazidi genocide of August 2014 was one of the first widely mediatized acts of terror by ISIS, shortly after the group was propelled to wide international consciousness following major territorial advances in Iraq. The memory of the genocide is a tragically traumatic one for the Yazidi community, a religious community which has endured centuries of persecution. It also represents a landmark international awakening to the scale and horror of ISIS, which took shape around the media event of the Yazidi exodus from Sinjar: news of ISIS was still new to public perception in 2014, before media had become saturated with coverage of the group's actions, and as a media memory is still holds significant weight in the memory of the international community. The 24-hour news cycle was dominated by coverage of the ISIS takeover of Iraq's Sinjar province and the Yazidi exodus at the time: unrelenting images of Yazidi refugees, trapped and besieged, huddled beneath shade in the Sinjar mountains, awaiting aid drops.

This is a collective memory specific to the Yazidi people, while also observed and, to a lesser degree, experienced by the international community through the mass coverage of the massacre and exodus in 2014. The collective memory of the Yazidi genocide, then, functions on two levels: as a private memory and as a public, mass mediated recent past.

The memory scholar Alison Landsberg refers to the collective memory resulting from a mass mediation of events that leads to an emotional and experiential transfer as "prosthetic memory" -- memories that are implanted through mass media to audiences or spectators that are far away, and who did not live through events such as the Yazidi genocide. This cultural commoditization of private, collective memories (memories that belong to the Yazidi community first and foremost) "challenge the concept of private



property,”<sup>141</sup> through a continuous process of dissemination and reception in which the meaning of these memories is perpetually arbitrated. The memory of the Yazidi genocide is continuously affected by media representation of the event, existing as a collective private memory for those who survived it, or within the consciousness of the spectator. The mediation of the event generates empathy and affect within spectators that create ties and affinities that challenge the essentialism inherent to political or ethnic identities through a prosthetic mode of experience. By considering the experiences of the other - and thus prosthetically experiencing being the other - Landsberg asserts that prosthetic memory “creates the conditions for ethical thinking.”<sup>142</sup>

The memory of the Yazidi genocide was commodified in the images and coverage that emerged as the crisis progressed, monitored by millions of news consumers globally. Because prosthetic memories are acquired through the engineering of human empathy, Landsberg argues that mediated, commoditized memories acquire new meaning-makings in their reception (in this case by consumers of news), opening up “collective horizons” that create new, unexpected alliances which are not dependent on one’s own lived experiences.<sup>143</sup> Through a commoditized appropriation of “memories of a culture or collective past,” the collective affect embodied in prosthetic memory is capable of disseminating memories, pasts, and histories across “existing stratifications of race, class, and gender”<sup>144</sup> -- the affective component then stirring the motivation for action.

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<sup>141</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 147.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

This is the case for the international fighters in Rojava, like Robert Grodt, who watched the coverage of Kobani's liberation, or the Yazidi genocide and its fallout -- and who were ultimately compelled to travel across the world to fight a war (or revolution) they had little material stake in. In the act of travelling to Rojava and becoming part of the coverage, their mediated memories of these media events leave the realm of prosthetic by taking on the sensually tactile trauma of the other.

### ***3.2.4 Prosthetic memory and interpellation***

In the Yazidi fighter's proclamation of her unit's intent to destroy ISIS as vengeance for the Yazidi genocide, the spectator is reminded of the recent past of the Yazidi people. The viewer remembers the Yazidi genocide through their memory of the mass mediation of the event and, therefore, as a distant horror they observed from across the world. Through the global flow of media, it has become a mass memory imbued with its own meaning-making, spurred on by the western individual's growing fear of ISIS's effect on the fabric of the world in recent years, and associated with other mass atrocities committed throughout modern history.

In the meantime, the YPG Press Office's use of international fighter testimonials combine with empathetic and sympathetic portrayals of local Kurdish and Arab individuals, becoming a vessel for the ideological reproduction for Rojava. The combination of affective victim and fighter testimonials has the intended result of hailing viewers to action. The implication is that the international fighters chose to fight in Rojava to ensure that ISIS and forces like it may never commit similar atrocities; that they actively fought against fascism,

rather than watching as it happened, and that you, as a spectator of the same atrocities, are faced with the same decision.

This is the case for the international fighters in Rojava, like Robert Grodt, who watched the coverage of Kobani's liberation, or the Yazidi genocide and its fallout -- and who were ultimately compelled to travel across the world to fight a war (or revolution) they had little material stake in. In the act of travelling to Rojava and becoming part of the coverage, their mediated memories of these media events leave the realm of prosthetic by taking on the sensually tactile trauma of the other.

The YPG Press Channel is the ideal vessel for sparking mass memory associations, engineering empathy, and therefore transporting prosthetic memories to international audiences -- a mode of address which permits an "imaginative identification"<sup>145</sup> wherein a viewer identifies with people on a screen. While collective memory is bounded and finite, relating to specific groups of people, the incepted affect associated with prosthetic memory is boundless, encouraging intersectional modes of empathy and consequent action. Through the press channel, the international fighters who are filmed participating in the YPG become the prosthetic eyes of international spectators. The YPG Press channel functions as a vessel, first conveying agency for Kurds and minorities who have endured traumatic events, and second, relying on fighters to remind international viewers of their ethical responsibility in relation to pre-existing, already commodified prosthetic memories. While the testimonials of Kurds and Arabs are affective snapshots meant to bring international viewers adjacent to the experiences of those half a world away, it is through the testimonials of international fighters that viewers are truly brought into the experience of being in Rojava, and through which

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<sup>145</sup> Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 29.

viewers experience the call for revolutionary solidarity by being propelled into virtual proximity with the revolution.

### **3.3.1 *Afrin: local and transnational***

In recent times, Afrin's situation is a tale of military occupation and demographic change -- unfortunately a characteristic of Syria's conflict. But it was a predominantly Kurdish district prior to the Turkish-led military operation which displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurdish civilians in an attempt to evict the YPG and threats to Turkey's territorial unity.<sup>146</sup> The military operation in Afrin is quite different from that of Raqqa, because it is considered a spillover of the decades-long Kurdish-Turkish conflict, where a Kurdish insurgency led by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) wages in parts of Turkey. Because it was seen geopolitically as an extension of the Turkey-Kurdish conflict, the United States' backing did not extend east of the Euphrates to Afrin out of respect for the NATO alliance, of which Turkey and the US are members.

As a result of their sudden isolation -- faced with existential threat and left with few powerful allies -- the YPG's discourse near the time of Turkey's military operation to take Afrin was particularly charged, and as localized as it was transnational. Afrin therefore represents a key time period that reflects the YPG Press Office's discourse during the winter and spring of 2018.

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<sup>146</sup> Ahmad Obeid. "Afrin on the Road to Arabization: SyriaUntold: حكاية ما انحكت." Afrin on the Road to Arabization. SyriaUntold , August 13, 2018. <https://syriauntold.com/2018/08/13/afrin-on-the-road-to-arabization/>.

Because the YPG was not given any international sponsorship east of the Euphrates (the international coalition's mandate extended only to ISIS, not Turkey), only staunch supporters of the Rojava project remained to protect Afrin and, by extension Rojava: Kurdish conscripts of the YPG, and a collection of militant international leftists. These anarchist and socialist battalions, who style themselves after the International Freedom Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, are comprised of internationals from all over the world who joined to combat the resurgent wave of global fascism that has reactively stemmed, in part, from the conflict in Syria and the subsequent migrant crisis.

As Turkey amplified its threats to invade Afrin in the weeks prior to the operation, the YPG's YouTube channel released a two-minute video featuring European, Assyrian, and Arab fighters<sup>147</sup>, all of whom emphasized their commitment to defending Rojava. Those in the video speak of Turkish complicity in tolerating the movement of ISIS fighters across its border into Syria, and its alleged role in sponsoring al-Qaeda affiliated fighters with weapons and training. Some fighters equate Turkey to ISIS, while others claim that Turkey is a greater threat.

Here, their varied ethnicities are of note because no Kurds are present in the video. Their absence in a video specific to a primarily Kurdish city's tenuous future conveys the YPG's official projection that Rojava's ideological existence as a multi-cultural political project hinges upon its continued existence -- an attempt to erase the perception of Afrin as the extension of an ethnic conflict with Turkey, and a reminder to viewers that Rojava is a democracy worth saving.

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<sup>147</sup> YPG Press Office. "Fighters to defend #Afrin in case of any attacks by Turkey." *YouTube*. Video File. November 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEhUNbbgZ1A>

Perhaps because the YPG could not depend on the United States and the global coalition to stand against Ankara as it had stood against ISIS, the language against NATO's second largest army became much more mired in the language of resistance than liberation. The sympathetic civilian testimonials praising the YPG as liberators, which were so heavily emphasized in the YPG's media during the offensive on Raqqa, are nowhere to be found in Afrin's media. Unlike Raqqa, no civilian testimonies were present in any of the Afrin videos analyzed. Instead, Afrin's media consists largely of statements by YPG spokespeople, statements by international units, testimonials of fighters, and recorded battle scenes, which ultimately combine to portray Afrin as a city in the midst of a popular resistance.

Despite the global threat ISIS poses with the stated purpose of destroying all who do not conform to its ideology, the international YPG fighters in Afrin are portrayed with significantly more vitriol for Turkey. While ISIS was not a primary topic of discussion in the depiction of international fighters in Raqqa (its universal threat was seemingly taken at face value, not often discussed on camera, and Rojava's liberatory potential was highlighted over ISIS's persecution), the anti-Turkey messaging in the internationally projected videos is significantly more charged, and militantly anti-fascist. In the five-minute clip of Robert Grodt in Raqqa analyzed in the previous section, Grodt expresses a desire to contribute to revolution throughout the region, and highlights the global ignorance of the west towards the Kurdish struggle. Yet his speech contains no explicit references to a specific enemy, revealing instead an earnest ideological conviction for the political project. The same is true of other dispatches from international fighters in Raqqa.

In contrast, the YPG's media demonstrated a marked shift during Turkey's offensive on Afrin. Two days after Turkey's military offensive began, an on-camera press statement

by a group called the ‘YPG International Antifascist Battalion’ was uploaded to the YouTube channel.<sup>148</sup> Masked and armed with machine guns, the members of the battalion, made up of anarchists and socialists “from Germany to China, from the United States to Britain” who style themselves after the International Freedom Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, stand against a backdrop of YPG flags and a poster of Abdullah Ocalan. A masked member of the battalion reads a statement, in English, which makes clear their intent to defend Afrin against “the fascist Turkish state.” In the statement, he also calls for international solidarity with Afrin.



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<sup>148</sup> YPG Press Office. “YPG International on the way to Afrin.” *YouTube*. Video File. February 21, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1Qj-wMVyxA&t=53s>

<sup>149</sup> Figure 3.3

The dispatch is positioned as a call for support and action from sections of the international community who identify on the left. An early reference to the liberation of Kobani (“*Most of the world watched as Kobani burned and bled and learned that Rojava will not bow*”) sets the tone of the dispatch as one which recalls the past in service of the present. The liberation of Kobani in 2015 was a key component of the constructed Rojava imaginary, an oft-mentioned symbol of resistance to terror. First, Kobani is considered to be a considerable Kurdish trauma, which ignited a trans-border Kurdish solidarity following its liberation by the YPG after an Islamic State siege displaced about 300,000 Kurds from the city.<sup>150</sup> Secondly, Kobani is a story of resistance, agency, and triumph against an existential enemy during a time when little international assistance was available. Finally, Kobani is a victory credited with propelling the Rojava project into the international consciousness and accruing significant international solidarity: according to a *Mother Jones* analysis from January 2015, “Stories of the brave Kurdish fighters defending the small border city against ISIS swept international headlines last September, and the public demanded that the US step in to prevent a humanitarian disaster.”<sup>151</sup>

In the video statement by the Antifascist Battalion, any threats to Syrian Kurds -- ISIS and the Turkish state -- are equated to fascism: “*We now confront the fascist terrorism under a new flag: The Turkish flag.*”

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<sup>150</sup> Mroue, Bassem. “ISIS Admits Kobani Defeat after U.S.-Led Airstrike Campaign in Syria.” CTVNews. Associated Press, January 31, 2015. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/isis-admits-kobani-defeat-after-u-s-led-airstrike-campaign-in-syria-1.2214806>.

<sup>151</sup> McLaughlin, Jenna. “Most US Airstrikes in Syria Target a City That's Not a ‘Strategic Objective.’” *Mother Jones*, June 24, 2017. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/airstrikes-syria-kobani-statistics-operation-inherent-resolve/>.



Notably and importantly, the YouTube channel uses international fighters to communicate terms like ‘fascism’ in relation to Turkey, which upgrades the viewer’s perception of the conflict in Afrin from one of regional territorial rivalry, to one of international responsibility. The specific, ethnic, and regional conflict for Afrin is presented as a transnational fight against oppression and for democracy, to which those with ethical, humanitarian, and progressive leanings have a responsibility to defend:

*“This invasion is a threat to the accomplishments of years of struggle for women’s liberation, pluralism, and democracy. Any attack on Rojava is an attack on those values. We will stand to defend these values.”*

In emphasizing the threat to democracy, pluralism, and women’s liberation, viewers are forced to make historical associations to past events: shared traumas that exist in both private memory and collective, mediated memories. The YPG’s invocation of past traumatic associations like Kobani combine with calls for solidarity to create transferential spaces “in which people are invited to enter into experiential relationships to events through which they themselves did not live.”<sup>152</sup> Through invoking the word, “fascism,” the YPG’s YouTube channel is asking individuals from other parts of the world to collectively recall traumas inflicted by nations and fascist regimes upon minorities in the past. Through the Antifascist Battalion's statement, the viewer associates the persecution of minorities in Rojava at the hands of modern nation-states with that of past historical traumas -- the video invites viewers to express solidarity, take action, and, if possible, attend the site of struggle itself. Short of physical attendance, it invites the creation of a transferential arena through solidarity, information dissemination, and other forms of action be they on the physical or virtual plane.

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<sup>152</sup>Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 113.

Given the historic resonance of fascist movements throughout the 20th century to now, the equivocation and mediation of the battle for Afrin as a fight against fascism reverberates strongly in the present. By association, the video statement requires viewers to recall events that have transformed into embedded, mass mediated prosthetic memories which culminated in the atrocities and repercussions of World War 2, urging them to consider their own ethical responsibility. Through this video, the YPG situates the Kurdish cause as part of a global subaltern fight against fascism, imperialism, and nationalism. The video also seeks to forge what it projects as radical, transnational alliances and communities within and for Rojava, styling itself as an anti-fascist force against ISIS and Turkey.

By associating a traumatic collective past with a resurgent global threat, international viewers are forced to reconsider their identities as bounded subjects or spectators. Given that “memories are domains of the present,”<sup>153</sup> international viewers are invited to consider Afrin’s present via their implanted experiences of the past. Through the language of the video statement of the YPG International Battalion, viewers consider the experiences of Kurds in combination with their own mediated memories of past atrocities (WW2 and the Holocaust, historical events which have been commodified through film and television so repetitively that they exist in our international consciousness as pre-built prosthetic memories), and are encouraged to take a hand in the outcome of the future. While collective national memory is bounded and finite, relating to specific groups of people, such as the Kurds, the manipulation of memory in the video encourages an intersectional empathy that crosses borders, encouraging non-Kurds to associate Kurdish trauma with their own prosthetic traumas.

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<sup>153</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 191.

### 3.3.2 Rojava as ANTIFA

The memories of separate but conjoined traumas -- the public, prosthetic trauma of the rising tide of fascism throughout the last century, and private, collective trauma incurred by nation-states onto the Kurdish identity -- have seemingly shaped the international fighters' sense of responsibility for Rojava, creating tension with the concept of a bounded national identity. When the masked fighter in the video announces that the international community "cannot grow numb to such atrocities. Fascism is fascism. We ask the world to speak out against it," his statement functions as a reconciliation between the Kurdish desire for self-preservation and, simultaneously, allows space for ethical responsibility and political alliance that "transcend the essentialism and ethnic particularism of contemporary identity politics."<sup>154</sup>

It is not merely empathy and memory which is generated for viewers in the dispatch of the International Antifascist Battalion, but a sense of belonging which transcends borders, deterritorializing solidarities. Just as collective memory and experience affects one's relation to nation, so does the collective experience of mass media carry the potential to create a deterritorialized sense of belonging. The video statement turns the locality of Afrin into a new "staging ground for identity"<sup>155</sup> and annexes the issue of Afrin's identity and territoriality into what Arjun Appadurai calls the work of imagination:<sup>156</sup> although the issue of Afrin is highly localized and deeply rooted to the Turkey-Kurdish conflict and the

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<sup>154</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 9.

<sup>155</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 41.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

transnational struggle for Kurdish autonomy, it has also become entrenched in the psyches of individuals with no tangible relation to the conflict, but who nonetheless feel a sense of social responsibility to defend Afrin -- a province that is key to Rojava. And Rojava, as a local territory, is a highly territorialized conflict which nonetheless belongs to a broader social revolution through the engineering of its own party media. The YPG Press Office's representation of Rojava, culminating in the calculated production of propagandic material such as this video, has discursively created "new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds"<sup>157</sup> in the YouTube channel's reception by outside audiences, who then are moved to activate the international work of the imagination through their interaction with online spaces. Online, the YPG's YouTube channel works to create a radical cyber imaginary, marrying the Kurdish cause to that of the international, far-left antifascist movement. Through the production, circulation and reception of the YPG's dominant media narrative, Rojava and Antifa have become intertwined.

### **3.4 Summary of emergent themes**

In my comparison of the official YPG discourse during the key time periods of the Raqqa and Afrin military operations, I've endeavored to chart the evolution of emergent themes during the timeline of Rojava's negotiation as an attempted autonomous entity. When Rojava was at the height of its administrative and military strength, the YPG was considered by the United States and the international coalition to be the only armed Syrian faction suitable for an alliance to defeat ISIS and oust the group from its so-called capital -- a

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<sup>157</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 4.

case of pragmatic realpolitik which attained the YPG considerable media attention and carried it favor in the eyes of international spectators.

The official English-language YPG media during the time of the US-backed Raqqa offensive reflected the YPG's attempts to leverage its international spotlight to attain ideological legitimacy globally. The discourse subsequently focused on pushing the rhetoric of democracy and pluralism by snapshotting civilians as victims who were grateful for the YPG's role in fighting the Islamic State. The footage especially focused on women who testified to the oppressive practices of ISIS and praised the YPG as liberators, leaning heavily into orientalist portrayals of oppressed Arab women liberated by democratic values. The channel also spotlighted soldiers of varying non-Kurdish Syrian ethnicities, such as Arabs or Assyrians, thus asserting the multi-cultural agency possible through the YPG in the fight against ISIS, and Rojava's image as a utopia within the Middle East. What is especially worth noting is the emphasis on Rojava's democratic values over an emphasis on ISIS's oppressive practices. There are no politicized portrayals of Kurdish nor Arab YPG soldiers denouncing ISIS as a fascist force in the Raqqa testimonials, although many testimonies are given by victims which provide a scope of its repression.

The YPG's Raqqa coverage therefore does more to build the image of Rojava in the international spotlight than it does to destroy the image of the Islamic State (already a negative association internationally). Rather than denouncing ISIS in militant terms, the mediated memory of the collective trauma of the Yazidi genocide is projected to the international psyche, evoking a sense of social responsibility created by invoking past historical traumas within viewers. Finally, international fighters, well known in left-wing activist circles, are invited to speak about their experiences in Rojava on camera. Through

their experiences, Rojava becomes physically accessible to international spectators. Rather than watching from afar, viewers now have a pair of prosthetic eyes with which to see and experience what is presented as a social revolution. This prosthetic sight, combined with the interpellative intent behind the mediation of past traumas, hails viewers to leave home and fight for a propagated revolution, or to express outspoken solidarity from home.

This summoning of mediated memories is used more deeply in the case of Afrin, illustrating the time period during which a key province of Rojava was threatened by a nation antagonistic to Kurdish ambitions. The videos carry a charged sense of urgency, and the collective traumas of the 20th century are incurred repeatedly throughout the YPG channel. This is accompanied by urgent, and overt, calls for direct action against the rising tide of fascism, which the YPG associates with the Turkish state. Through the Afrin discourse, the YPG is equated with the anti-fascist movement worldwide, while in Raqqa, Rojava is portrayed as a utopia for those seeking a democratic, multi-cultural, non-hierarchical society free from the oppression of states. The legitimacy of Kurdish self-determination is emphasized more in Afrin, while the Arab identity of Raqqa is highlighted. It is notable that the YPG channel portrays the multi-ethnic identity of northern Syria by underscoring the mutually cross-collaborative efforts of all ethnicities in both Afrin and Raqqa. For example, Kurds and Yazidis are portrayed defending Raqqa, while Arabs of varying religious affiliations are portrayed defending Afrin.

The international messaging of the YPG for both cities are complementary, aiding in the depiction of Rojava as a legitimate entity and a radical existence, projecting an international perception that it is a key player in the fight against fascism, and a society built upon the tenets of radical direct action and multi-ethnic mutual aid.

## **Absent discourse**

There remains a certain discursive lack contained in the YPG's official media channel. Such absences from the YPG's discourse must be considered when discussing the militia's portrayal of Rojava to the international psyche. First, the YPG Press Office channel does little to address the role or extent of the United States' pragmatic military support in Rojava. No mention of the United States or the US-led coalition is made in any of the videos perused, despite the coalition's role in in Raqqa (in the process killing or injuring thousands of civilians and razing Raqqa to the ground during a devastating air campaign to oust ISIS.<sup>158</sup> Little mention of Raqqa's collateral damage is made in the YPG rhetoric, beyond a few visual shots of Raqqa in ruins. Further, the United States maintains military bases and presence in northern Syria into the present time of writing. Despite these practical realities, the media of the YPG maintains adherence to the framework of democratic confederalism. Although adherence to the political framework of democratic confederalism manifests in a rejection of imperial and colonial intervention, for the most part the YPG's media does not call attention to US involvement in Raqqa. This adherence to democratic confederalism is maintained symbolically, in the ubiquitous imagery of Abdullah Ocalan on posters and on uniforms, and in the failure to mention the US-led coalition in its official media discourse.

Secondly, from the videos analyzed from the YouTube Press Office, there is no mention nor explicitly acknowledgement of an ideological antagonism for the Syrian regime

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<sup>158</sup> Oakford, Samuel. "Raqqa: a City Destroyed Then Forgotten." Airwars, March 12, 2018. <https://airwars.org/news-and-investigations/raqqa-a-city-destroyed-then-forgotten/> "Rhetoric versus Reality in the War in Raqqa." War in Raqqa: Rhetoric versus Reality. Accessed February 16, 2020. <https://raqqa.amnesty.org/>.

and its allies. Throughout the conflict, the Syrian regime has committed countless atrocities against its own population, including its Kurdish population: it boasted at pushing out hundreds of thousands of dissidents to achieve a “healthier and more homogenous” society,<sup>159</sup> courted foreign intervention, and encouraged openly fascist European parties to support it while being openly embraced by far-right movements globally.<sup>160</sup><sup>161</sup> The YPG media, while by no means embracing the regime in its discourse, does not call attention to its atrocities. This is easily explained if we are to acknowledge that the practical reality binds the future of Rojava to that of the Syrian regime, which, as a result of military gains made through Russian and Iranian backing, holds the key to Syria’s future. However, the YPG’s press channel makes no acknowledgement of this, preferring to adhere to talking points which ignore the practical reality, promoting a pretty portrait of itself as an anti-fascist entity.

Viewers of the YPG Press Channel who are less informed about the Syrian conflict could easily dismiss the YPG’s involvement with a foreign power, or its ongoing negotiations with the Syrian government. As the YPG channel courts members of the anti-fascist movement to build international alliances and solidarities through its media, it neglects to provide a holistic image of its reality, and projects itself as the only viable resistance -- a “third path” (as it is often said by PYD adherents), an alternative to fascist and

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<sup>159</sup> Hazem Al-Sabbagh. “President Al-Assad: Everything Related to the Destiny and Future of Syria Is a 100% Syrian Issue, Unity of Syrian Territory Is Self-Evident and Not up for Debate.” Syrian Arab News Agency, August 20, 2017. <https://sana.sy/en/?p=112238>.

<sup>160</sup> Mariam Elba. “Why White Nationalists Love Bashar Al-Assad.” The Intercept, September 8, 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/08/syria-why-white-nationalists-love-bashar-al-assad-charlottesville/>.

<sup>161</sup> Patrick Strickland. “Why Do Italian Fascists Adore Syria's Bashar Al-Assad?” Syria News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, February 14, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/italian-fascists-adore-syria-bashar-al-assad-180125115153121.html>.



totalitarian ideology. These contradictions have far-reaching implications on the radical imaginary the international left has been drawn to.

The online representation of Rojava by the YPG's YouTube channel as an anti-fascist, anti-imperialist utopia is not matched by the reality of a complicated, often contradictory conflict in which alliances are made for power and military gain rather than revolutionary solidarity. This rupture between Rojava's reality and its mediated imaginary is critical, and it would be unethical to engage in an analysis of its radical imaginaries without mentioning this disassociation.

## CHAPTER 4

# INTERNATIONAL ARBITRATION AND COMMODIFICATION OF ROJAVA

While chapter three was critical for establishing a baseline understanding of how Rojava's predominant political party depicts Rojava internationally, producing party propaganda for western consumption, this chapter focuses on how its representation is created, circulated, and finally internalized and recirculated by the international viewers who have mobilized and rallied around Rojava, as well as by international media. This chapter will also further elaborate upon Rojavan media's use of prosthetic memory to create traumatic and affective associations with non-Kurdish viewers, and how the self-orientalized depictions of Kurds and other Syrian ethnicities has affected non-Syrian actors who have joined Rojava's revolution.

Finally, and most essentially, it will explore how non-Kurds have further carried their own mass mediated prosthetic memories beyond the conflict in Syria -- transforming and negotiating a localized, territorialized struggle for Kurdish autonomy into an internationalist ideal, and the ramifications of such a transformation.

### **4.1 Robert Grodt's Mediated Funeral**

Two weeks after the video interview of Robert Grodt was uploaded to YouTube's YPG Press channel, he died in combat, in Raqqa. A video commemoration of his martyrdom was uploaded a few days later -- an online funeral service typical in the YPG's media arm,

particularly (although not exclusively) for its international fighters. In the event they die in combat, such commemorations -- online funeral services of sorts -- are filmed prior to fighters' battle deployment functioning primarily as a final goodbye for the benefit of family and friends, and secondarily as further propagates the idea of Rojava as a cause worth dying for within the international arena. These videos are posted to the YPG Press Channel and subsequently transmitted by the YPG's social media and the social media of its affiliates, by transnational Kurdish press, and by the international press -- thus reinforcing the discourse on Rojava globally through the process of mass mediation and dissemination.



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<sup>162</sup> Figure 4.1

Robert Grodt was a well-known activist in anarchist and organizing circles. He'd participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement, where he volunteered as a street medic.<sup>163</sup> During this tenure he treated the eye injury of Kaylee Detric, one of the pepper spray victims assaulted by New York police early in the Occupy protests -- an incident of violence which had "helped propel the movement into the spotlight".<sup>164</sup> As the two activists fell in love, the idiosyncratic nature of their meeting was reported widely in the media, as was the birth of their child -- a baby girl who was infamously conceived at the protest camp and immediately dubbed "Occubaby" by American media.

As a well-known activist in American circles, it is this highly mediated portrayal of the perfect leftist -- a good looking, revolutionary romantic dedicated to his political convictions -- which American viewers of Grodt's commemoration video are likely to recall. In a posthumous *New York Times* profile of Grodt entitled "First, a Symbol of Occupy Wall Street. Then He Waded into Syria,"<sup>165</sup> the details of the trajectory of his life and activism are recollected. As most obituaries and posthumous profiles tend to be, it's a description of Grodt as someone of sound moral character driven by an intrinsic nobility: he had participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement to protest against social and economic injustice, and he went to Rojava out of a deep belief in the Kurdish cause, a desire to see ISIS defeated, and a wish to help establish an egalitarian society and "ignite revolution" in a

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<sup>163</sup> Megan Specia. "First, a Symbol of Occupy Wall Street. Then He Waded Into Syria." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, July 12, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/12/world/middleeast/occupy-protester-robert-grodt-dies-in-syria.html>.

<sup>164</sup> Specia, "First, a Symbol of Occupy Wall Street. Then He Waded Into Syria." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, July 12, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/12/world/middleeast/occupy-protester-robert-grodt-dies-in-syria.html>.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

tumultuous region.<sup>166</sup> The article, among others circulated by other media following his death, functions as a mainstream spotlight on a respected member of the American left, unwittingly portraying him as a role model and impelling others who identify on Grodt's political spectrum or empathize with his decision to fight in Rojava and perhaps to take on a similar ethical responsibility.

In the *New York Times* article, an excerpt of his martyrdom commemoration video is embedded in addition to clips of the video analyzed in the previous chapter, in which he explains his reasons for supporting the Rojava revolution. In his commemorative video Grodt is filmed kneeling before an idyllic pasture. He announces: "My reason for joining the YPG is to help the Kurdish people in their struggle for autonomy within Syria and elsewhere."<sup>167</sup> The wildflowers and the sound of birds chirping in the background are a contrast to the assault rifle in his arms, but when he begins speaking, the spectator realizes that the bucolic pastoral background is meant to be a visual and aural representation of the ideals which propelled Grodt to leave his home and die for. The message depicted of a utopia worth dying for, as depicted in the YPG's YouTube channel, are reiterated in the decision of the *New York Times* to embed this depiction of Rojava in their obituary of Grodt.

Other mainstream media outlets also commemorated Grodt's passing. CNN dedicated a narrative feature story to deceased international fighters<sup>168</sup> -- half of which revolves around Grodt's real-life funeral service, held in an old anti-fascist performance

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<sup>166</sup> YPG Press Office. "American YPG fighter tells his story of coming and joining the fight." *YouTube*. Video File. June 24, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee4U0918UYo&t=82s>

<sup>167</sup> YPG Press Office. "YPG Martyr Robert Grodt (Demhat Goldman)." *YouTube*. Video File. July 11, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Euk63IYGbM&t=31s>

<sup>168</sup> Fox, Kara. "America's Other Fighters." CNN. Cable News Network, December 2017. <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2017/12/world/americas-other-fighters/>.

space in New York City -- through descriptive narration and photographs. In one image shared by CNN, his wife displays a newly inked tattoo in his memory: the prominent logo of the YPG on her shoulder, captioned with his nom-de-guerre and the phrase “Martyrs never die” in Kurdish. In a photo of a platform commemorating Grodt, a YPG flag hangs next to an Antifa flag. On the same wall, a banner: “DESTROY FASCISM from Brooklyn to Bakur. DESTROY SEXISM from New York to Rojava. Support YPJ. Support YPG.”<sup>169170</sup>

I repeat the same narrative details shared by CNN and the New York Times (two of



many articles written following Grodt’s death in Rojava) to illustrate the depth and extent of the association between the Rojava movement and that of the umbrella of the international anti-fascist movement: a non-linear process whereby YPG media is reproduced and reified in online communities and mainstream media, and finally interpellated by subsets of the international far-

left.

The circulation of Robert Grodt’s martyrdom is an effective introduction for the scope of the projection of YPG propaganda into the international consciousness. In the previous chapter, I applied Landsberg’s conception of *transferential spaces* to the YPG’s propagandic use of the Kurdish struggle in conjunction with the traumatic legacy of fascism, drawing upon historical trauma to evoke an ethical responsibility. Transferential spaces take the site of Kurdish struggle from a localized niche (northern Syria-Rojava) to an

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<sup>169</sup> Fox, Kara. “America’s Other Fighters.” CNN. Cable News Network, December 2017. <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2017/12/world/americas-other-fighters/>.

<sup>170</sup> Figure 4.2

international virtual space through the experience of viewing, reproduction, and interpellation. International spectators are impelled by official YPG discourse and its global mediation to defend Rojava through experiential, prosthetic viewings of the revolution. In the case of Robert Grodt and many international volunteers, this manifests in the physical attendance of the site of struggle: an ethical hailing to the territory of Rojava and physical participation in the YPG. For others, it means participation in solidarity actions within their own localities -- such as politicized funeral services that reinforce Rojava's utopian anti-fascist associations with those ideologically aligned to progressive, leftist causes.

These spaces of transferential solidarity are encouraged in both mainstream media discourse (such as in the case of Robert Grodt) and in the nichelized online spaces of antifascist/anarchist activity through a negotiation and reinterpretation of YPG propaganda, explored in the following section.

#### **4.2 TQILA: Queers Smashing the Caliphate**

The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army -- TQILA, pronounced Tequila -- was the first and only LGBTQ+ sub-unit to fight against the Islamic State in Syria. Formed in 2017 under the banner of the *International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces* (IRPGF), an exclusively foreign anarchist militia fighting within the YPG, TQILA was announced ceremoniously with a photograph uploaded to Twitter,<sup>171</sup> followed by a longer

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<sup>171</sup> Irpgf. "These Faggots Kill Fascists! We Shoot Back! The Black & Pink and Rainbow Flag Fly in Raqqa. #Queers Smashing the Caliphate. #TQILA #YPJ #YPG Pic.twitter.com/EBCssrbjMI." Twitter. Twitter, July 24, 2017. <https://twitter.com/irpgf/status/889445690656608256?lang=en>.

press statement which circulated quickly in the news and on the internet.<sup>172</sup> Staged against the ruins of war-torn Raqqa, the image features two armed and masked individuals stretching a banner reading “These Faggots Kill Fascists” while, in the middle ground, other fighters hold up the flag of the new subunit and a rainbow flag to represent the interlinked struggle of LGBTQ+ communities worldwide.

Despite the group’s affiliation with the YPG, the Syrian Democratic Forces (under



the leadership of the YPG) released a statement distancing themselves and denying affiliation with TQILA, which had apparently not consulted with the SDF prior to its creation. Still, TQILA’s announcement instantly made international headlines and circulated on social media networks thousands of times.<sup>173</sup>

News of its formation was either sensationalized in mainstream news media (Ex: the Independent, the Sun, Newsweek,

<sup>172</sup> Irpgf. “The Formation of The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA), a Subgroup of the IRPGF. Queer Liberation! Death to Rainbow Capitalism! Pic.twitter.com/Tp1x2PZ079.” Twitter. Twitter, July 24, 2017. <https://twitter.com/irpgf/status/889460892450115588?lang=en>.

<sup>173</sup> Figure 4.3



the NY Post, HuffPost Spanish, and the New Arab),<sup>174</sup> or met with scrutiny, such as with the Intercept and Al-Jazeera.<sup>175</sup> The discourse of most articles praised the bravery of the brigade, while others questioned its existence as a publicity stunt, called attention to the brigade's membership as an exclusively foreign endeavor, or questioned the perception of the social acceptance of homosexuality and queer individuals in Rojava's society. The SDF's distancing from the unit fortified those doubts.<sup>176</sup> Still, TQILA's iconic image and press statements (also released on Twitter) were subsequently shared, written about, or given a platform in the mainstream press and in the online communities of the far left.

TQILA's press statement explains its ambitions best: the group seeks to “smash the gender binary and advance the women's revolution as well as the broader gender and sexual

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<sup>174</sup> Moore, Jack. “The First LGBT Unit Has Been Created to Fight ISIS in Syria. Its Name? The Queer Insurrection.” *Newsweek*, July 26, 2017. <https://www.newsweek.com/first-lgbt-unit-created-fight-isis-syria-its-name-queer-insurrection-641148>.

Benjamin Kentish. “The Queer Insurrection': Coalition Forces Fighting Isis in Syria Form First LGBT Unit.” *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, July 25, 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/queer-insurrection-isis-lgbt-unit-gay-islamic-state-fight-forces-coalition-syria-middle-east-a7858651.html>.

Esteban, Nacho. “TQILA, Un Mal Trago Para La Homofobia.” *El Huffington Post*. El Huffington Post, August 23, 2017. [https://www.huffingtonpost.es/nacho-esteban/tqila-un-mal-trago-para-la-homofobia\\_a\\_23045767/](https://www.huffingtonpost.es/nacho-esteban/tqila-un-mal-trago-para-la-homofobia_a_23045767/).  
Wilkinson, Matt. “Armed Militia of Gay Men Are Fighting Homophobic Isis in Syria.” *The Sun*. The Sun, July 25, 2017. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4097885/armed-militia-of-gay-men-named-the-queer-insurrection-and-liberation-army-are-fighting-homophobic-isis-in-syria/>.

<sup>175</sup> Miller, Anna Lekas. “Is the Queer Brigade Fighting ISIS in Syria a Force for Liberation or Alienation?” *The Intercept*, August 10, 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/08/10/is-the-queer-brigade-fighting-isis-in-syria-a-force-for-liberation-or-alienation/>.

Ghazzawi, Razan. “Decolonising Syria's so-Called 'Queer Liberation'.” *Al Jazeera*. Al Jazeera, August 5, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/08/decolonising-syria-called-queer-liberation-170803110403979.html>.

<sup>176</sup> “LGBT Unit Not Officially Part of SDF, Says Kurdish Official.” *Middle East Eye*, 2017. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lgbt-unit-not-officially-part-sdf-says-kurdish-official>.

revolution.”<sup>177</sup> Their formation as an LGBTQ+ subunit was in response to the “images of gay men being thrown off roofs and stoned to death by Daesh” and the attacks of “Christian conservatives in the global northwest” which exemplify forms of “fascism, tyranny and oppression.” (The group is careful to clarify that it does not oppose religion, but those who use religion as a pretext for queer-phobia.)

#### 4.2.1 *This Image Kills Fascists*

In the rhetoric of their press statement it is clear that TQILA attempted to navigate past a colonial, Eurocentric homo-normativity in favor of bridging the specificity of the local queer struggle with that of the transnational. However, the inaugural image that TQILA is most remembered for contributes a more confused interpretation. Released before their press statement, the first visual introduction to TQILA is a staged photograph consisting of its members carrying a banner reading “*These Faggots Kill Fascists*” amidst the ruins of Raqqa. As first introductions go, it’s visually provocative and impassioned, linking queer liberation to generations of anti-fascist action through a western pop-culture reference.

During World War II, popular American folk singer Woodie Guthrie painted “This machine kills fascists” in large font on the face of his acoustic guitar.<sup>178</sup> The iconic message thereafter became a constant slogan on the face of Guthrie’s instrument, and well after his death the message continues to resonate through a counter-culture appropriation of the

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<sup>177</sup> Irpgf. “The Formation of The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA), a Subgroup of the IRPGF. Queer Liberation! Death to Rainbow Capitalism! Pic.twitter.com/Tp1x2PZ079.” Twitter. Twitter, July 24, 2017. <https://twitter.com/irpgf/status/889460892450115588?lang=en>.

<sup>178</sup> Crisler, Robert J. "This Machine Kills Fascists: Music, Speech and War," (2016, 4).

slogan in the US and much of the occident,<sup>179</sup> appearing in various cultural products of the modern era.

TQILA's emulation of this folk memory -- a potent visual artifact that has survived generations -- may one day hold equal weight in the realm of our own modern popular memory. Just as Guthrie's guitar is a staple of western culture, the imagery of TQILA's bold proclamation is seared into the international memories and annals of Rojava and the Syrian war. The image of fighters proclaiming that "these faggots kill fascists" is recalled with more clarity than any discourse surrounding its conception, and even those who do not know intimately of Syria's war are nonetheless likely to have come across the image due to its nature as a targeted cultural projection, its mass mediation in news and on the internet, and its cult prominence online.



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<sup>179</sup> Crisler, Robert J. "This Machine Kills Fascists: Music, Speech and War." (2016, 4).

<sup>180</sup> Figure 4.4

Although staged against the ruins of Raqqa, then then-falling capital of the so-called caliphate, its linguistic, visual, and cultural message addresses international and primarily Eurocentric audiences over the local population: if TQILA's concern is to assert Queer existence and resistance, it does little to address audiences beyond those who would understand its references. The image is unconcerned with the local perception or reception of its message. Its resulting projection, despite TQILA's identity as a militia formed in Raqqa to fight enemies within Syria, is clearly not intended for local, physically-present audiences. American pop culture is referenced amongst the ruins of a town ravaged by US-led coalition strikes while queer foreign fighters promise to smash the caliphate, harkening a sense of colonial liberation for the 'other': foreign queers liberating Syrians from ISIS, while seeking the international queer community's recognition for their local presence.

Although textually and visually, the image is overtly Euro-centric and transnational rather than speaking to local queer experience, the image contains a coded understanding of the specificity of local struggle and how it intersects with other local/transnational struggles. In a nod to local-transnational struggles worldwide, members of the subunit have covered their faces in a combination of ski masks (attire associated with the global antifascist resistance), kufiyahs (associated with the Palestinian resistance), and floral shawls (associated with Rojava-specific resistance). The latter brightly colored floral scarves are typically worn by Kurdish women in the YPJ and are famously adopted by male fighters in the YPG as a show of solidarity and equality with their female counterparts, doubling as a conscious 'subversion' of masculine gender normativity. None of the fighters are identifiable due to their obscured faces, a tactic used globally by protestors and resistance fighters to avoid identification by governments and security forces. The assortment of head coverings

reads as a subtle, coded nod to resistance movements and marginalized groups worldwide. However, such small attention to detail is overshadowed by the bold and provocative proclamation on the banner. Ultimately, the image stops short of speaking to the local experience of queers living under Rojava's administration or, more broadly, in the region.

#### ***4.2.2 The convergence of memory and trauma in the formation and coverage of TQILA***

Shortly before TQILA was formed, a mass shooting had taken place at Pulse nightclub, a gay club in Orlando, Florida that had left 49 dead and which was claimed by ISIS. The massacre was a particularly traumatic event in the US's history of mass shootings, and especially to the LGBTQ+ community. Due to ISIS's claim over the incident, the massacre's significance had highly local *and* transnational connotation, as it was not a territorially isolated incident but, rather, linked to the torture and murder of queer and minority communities in Syria at the hands of the same group claiming to have perpetuated the PULSE massacre. When TQILA announced its formation a month later, the militia stated clearly that it had been specifically motivated by "images of gay men being thrown off roofs and stoned to death by Daesh" as well as attacks on the queer community by "fascist and extremist" forces -- connecting of the traumatic persecution of queer Syrians compounded with the persecution and trauma felt by LGBTQ+ communities globally.

Mainstream press connected the massacre at Pulse in its coverage of TQILA, further solidifying the transnational links between the mass shooting and the massacre of queer individuals under the self-styled caliphate. To a global, and specifically western public, TQILA's discourse and the subsequent coverage of its creation compelled spectators to make connections with the more immediate public trauma of the massacre at PULSE at the hands

of an alleged ISIS affiliate, creating links of solidarity between two events and two communities half a word from each other. In TQILA's imagery as well as its discourse, the statement maintained clear links with, and called upon, the resurgent and growing international networks of the anti-fascist resistance (a movement which explicitly attaches itself to the queer liberation movement).

#### ***4.2.3 The erasure of queer voices in the coverage of TQILA and Rojava in mainstream media***

In one of the few existing mainstream media critiques of TQILA, Syrian-Palestinian activist Razan Ghazzawi penned Al Jazeera English op-ed challenging the colonial western-centric discourse of TQILA's specific brand of internationalist solidarity, perceiving it as damaging to queer liberation, as well as to the Syrian conflict. In her reaction, Ghazzawi accuses TQILA of selling the most "hegemonic narrative of the 21st century: the 'War on Terror'"<sup>181</sup> -- replicating and lending legitimacy to an imperially constructed narrative of international liberation from terror over that of local self-determination. Ghazzawi's op-ed shines a light on the social conservatism still inherent to parts of Rojavan society, through interviews with queer subjects: she argues that the nature of a *foreign* force fighting for queer liberation in Rojava erases the struggles specific to the *local* LGBTQ+ community, who do not have rights or protections enshrined in Rojava's law and who still face discrimination on a daily basis.

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<sup>181</sup> Razan Ghazzawi. "Decolonising Syria's so-Called 'Queer Liberation'." Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 5, 2017.

It is through Ghazzawi's interview with a Kurdish queer refugee transwoman from the Rojava administration that we are given a lens into the Rojava administration's detachment from LGBTQ+ issues, in direct contrast to the rose-tinted media narrative sold by TQILA of Rojava as a social utopia. Importantly, we are reminded that many of the safety concerns of queer members in Rojavan society are rooted internally within a socially conservative society, and not exclusive to 'outside' threats such as ISIS, as TQILA's mediated projection would lead spectators to believe. The presence of TQILA, then, erases the difficulties and lived experiences of the queer community in Rojava in service of the broader, imperially driven war on terror queer discourse, and in the mass mediated reproduction of the YPG's rhetoric of Rojava as a utopian society.

While Ghazzawi's critique was focused on TQILA's existence and method as a largely foreign queer-anarchist import, the international coverage surrounding the group serves to illustrate her point. Her op-ed presented a critical, alternative framing to TQILA that was hardly picked up by international mainstream news, which for the most part simply lifted TQILA's statement and propagated the same romantic tropes regularly presented in the YPG's official media: Rojava as a utopia of ethnic and gender equality. In an on-the-nose illustration of Ghazzawi's overarching point, the majority of the international, mainstream media neglected to interview any LGBTQ+ subjects of Rojava's administration -- with the exception of Ghazzawi's op-ed and a feature published by the Intercept,<sup>182</sup> which interviewed transgender Kurdish refugees from Rojava. Beyond these articles, the experiences of local queer individuals were virtually overlooked and silenced by

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<sup>182</sup> Miller, Anna Lekas. "Is the Queer Brigade Fighting ISIS in Syria a Force for Liberation or Alienation?" The Intercept, August 10, 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/08/10/is-the-queer-brigade-fighting-isis-in-syria-a-force-for-liberation-or-alienation/>.

international media in favor of TQILA's press statement. Although the SDF distanced itself from TQILA's formation, the style of TQILA's development seems a natural evolution of YPG policy to project party-specific media that does not, in reality, encapsulate the nuances, worries, and realities of Rojava's civil society.

The narrative of Rojava's utopian ideals is reproduced, time and again, through the circulation of press statements and martyr videos in international news stories. The international coverage of TQILA provides some insight into the extent of the dominance of the YPG's ubiquitous international narrative, accomplished through the reproduction of a utopian discourse on Rojava, and in the international media's circulation of official TQILA and SDF press statements, rather than giving prominence to queer voices from within Rojava's civil society. In the previous chapters we examined conscious forms of mediation: how the YPG maintains dominance over Rojava's narrative through the dissemination of its official media, and how past traumas are used to evoke radical empathy that transcend national identity. TQILA, while embodying those forms of mediation, is also a case study into the *reproduction* of the YPG's discourse within mainstream media and in anarchist virtual communities. Much of the coverage of TQILA uncritically repeats the YPG's party lines by portraying Rojava as a revolutionary project of radical democracy and gender equality, while, simultaneously, privileging the statements of foreign fighters over the experiences of the local queer community within Rojava's civil society. TQILA, a foreign militia speaking on behalf of Rojava's queer communities, reinforces the dominant media narrative widely circulated by the YPG.



This uncritical coverage has the effect of entrenching the romantic narrative of Rojava as a social utopia in the international imaginary, and in creating a good versus evil binary that erases the experience and agency of queers living in the region.

#### ***4.2.4 Online cult status***

Despite the relevant criticism raised by the questionable mediation of TQILA's formation, and while TQILA echoes the utopian media discourses of Rojava's ruling party, the group's existence is simultaneously a testament to the PYD's lack of control over its own media narrative.

Although the YPG officially distanced itself from TQILA, the propagation of TQILA as a subunit fighting for Rojava alongside the YPG was upheld in mainstream media regardless, and, notably, also disseminated in the spheres of the online far-left. While the ruling party's public distancing of itself from the formation of TQILA hints at a lack of control over the interpretation and reproduction of its discourse, the accommodation of TQILA in the online communities of the far-left are a testament to the runaway arbitration of Rojava's YPG-dominated imaginary. Here, I wish to illustrate how the ruling party's dominance over Rojava's identity is negotiated by allied virtual communities.

Through its uncritical repetition of Rojava's usual media tropes and talking points, TQILA used the PYD's party rhetoric of "gender revolution" as a bridge to launch an overarching queer insurrection, seeking to "smash the gender binary" and enact a "broader gender and sexual revolution" -- what it thought to be a natural extension of Rojava's women's revolution. The discursive bridge from female liberation to queer revolution is a significant deviation from PYD rhetoric. This is evident in the military administration's

quick distancing of itself from TQILA's principles, implying a discomfort with such arbitration of Rojava's identity.

It seemed inevitable Rojava's rhetoric would naturally evolve and that its identity would undergo an evolution following conscious efforts by the YPG to recruit foreign enlistment and support, and in the export of its media narrative. This is evident in many virtual communities affiliated with the far-left (online blogs, magazines, bulletin boards or libraries) who position themselves as ideological allies of Rojava, and who shared the TQILA press statements. For example, the press statements were posted on platforms such as *It's Going Down* and *Insurrection News*, which are decentralized online community centers that promote news, communiqués, calls to action, and revolutionary theory from "anarchist, anti-fascist, autonomous anti-capitalist and anti-colonial" perspectives.<sup>183</sup> It is worth noting that these spaces -- they contribute to online communities which comprise the virtual agoras of Kurt Mills' preoccupation -- are not direct online forums on which users can comment but function more like bulletin boards, where users can then interact with the subject matter and communicate through social media or in person. Because they typically post the communications of organized collectives, such aggregation websites are niched public spaces -- places of conviviality for the arbitration of political identity construction on the individual and collective level, supporting the "connected, yet contradictory, processes of the reification and the realignment of communal affiliation and identity."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> "About." *It's Going Down*. Accessed February 17, 2020. <https://itsgoingdown.org/about/>.

<sup>184</sup> Mills, Kurt. "Cybernations: Identity, Self-Determination, Democracy and the 'Internet Effect' in the Emerging Information Order." *Global Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 71.

As they broadly belong to international networks of anti-fascist/radical left wing organizing communities, these spaces are not officially affiliated with the YPG. They are nonetheless outspokenly ideologically allied with the tenets of the ‘Rojava revolution’ and are frequently considered part of its broad solidarity network, regularly posting news of Rojava or posting calls to action on its behalf. During Turkey’s operation on Afrin, for example, such websites prefaced Rojava-related news bulletins with #RiseUpForRojava, a hashtag intended to call upon global solidarity for Afrin. And, TQILA’s statement -- itself influenced by the YPG’s own tightly controlled but precarious media identity -- was posted verbatim on several sites like *It’s Going Down* and *Insurrection News*.

My intention here is not to over-inflate the importance of these websites, nor to homogenize a convivial network of anti-fascist spaces by reducing them to a monolithic affiliation with Rojava’s discourse. Rather, I aim to illustrate how such sites help to articulate and construct Rojava’s overall imaginary by borrowing from, as well as enhancing, the official YPG discourse. These convivial, independent, international platforms circulated the rhetoric used by TQILA -- rhetoric which intentionally advances and elevates the predetermined liberatory discourse established by the YPG. For example, in a second communique written by TQILA and uploaded to *It’s Going Down* and *Insurrection News*, the language of liberation from patriarchy is elevated by the armed subunit, which uses of the term “kyriarchy” -- a term that encompasses the complex interwoven system of oppression and submission that contribute to patriarchal domination, including economic or racial privilege, etc. The communique is clearly inspired by the YPG’s quotidian broadcasts of “autonomy, gender equality, and direct democracy” rooted in “women’s liberation,

ecology and communalism,”<sup>185</sup> but its language is elevated from the binary language of the YPG. In using terms such as kyriarchy, the language of TQILA elevates from the gender binary enforced by YPG rhetoric.

Because the news cycle had moved on from TQILA by the time this press statement was released, it wasn’t shared by or aimed towards mainstream media coverage, nor was it circulated by the YPG itself. TQILA’s discursive negotiation remained firmly housed in the domain of the separate but conjoined virtual communities of the anarchist left and Rojava.

Because this second statement by TQILA circulated in virtual spaces inhabited by an international network of allies that are not beholden to the YPG’s discourse, it is the housing such a statement within the communities of the international far-left which pushes Rojava’s negotiation outside the dominion of the YPG. Importantly and ultimately, this online negotiation is a deterritorialized one, taking place largely in the virtual sphere and far removed from the physical reality of life in Rojava.

#### ***4.2.5 Constructed for virtual consumption***

Woodie Guthrie’s guitar itself never physically killed any fascists, nor did his music. But the Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army may have killed a few. It’s also possible they didn’t see much battle, as the subunit held little military significance. After the initial media buzz died down, there were no new reports of TQILA. Little was heard of the

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<sup>185</sup> Contributor, — Anonymous. “Not One Step Back: TQILA-IRPGF Speaks from Rojava.” *It’s Going Down*, August 3, 2017. <https://itsgoingdown.org/not-one-step-back-tqila-irpgf-speaks-from-rojava/>.

“Not One Step Back!”: TQILA-IRPGF Communique (Rojava / Syria).” *Insurrection News*, August 4, 2017. <https://insurrectionnewsworldwide.com/2017/08/04/not-one-step-back-tqila-irpgf-communique-rojava-syria/>.

formation again, even on their own social media channels, and it seems possible that TQILA witnessed more views and shares online than it did considerable battle.

The existence of TQILA was primarily constructed through its imagery and the mass mediation of its own press statements. Although it claimed to, at no point did TQILA use its media spotlight to call attention to pre-existing grassroots activists in Rojava, nor, despite its high-flying rhetoric, did it directly draw attention to the specific existences and struggles of queer people in the region. Rather than using its international platform to facilitate the voices of those facing persecution in Syria/Rojava, TQILA largely drew attention to itself: coverage in mass media drew heavily from TQILA's own press statements and the statements of Rojava's military administration, while the experiences of queer persons in Syria were left out of this mediation, save for a few notable examples. Ultimately TQILA's creation and propagation achieved the opposite of its intent, deflecting attention away from the localized experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Syria and Rojava.

Yet TQILA's presence persists in the nether regions of cyberspace, within the annals of a mass media that arbitrated the meaning of its existence (and implicitly, Rojava's), and tethered permanently to the numerous anarchist websites which heralded its formation. TQILA and the discourse surrounding it has become a permanent fixture of Rojava's virtual imaginary, forever part of its public memory. It's a contradictory existence: on the one hand, the Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army is forever part of the Rojavan imaginary. On the other, TQILA is likely remembered not by members of Rojava's local population (queer or otherwise) but primarily by international, western subjects. Still, like iterant variations of Guthrie's guitar, the memory of "These Faggots Kill Fascists" is an image which prevails in public memory, remaining a cult symbol of the global battle against the resurgent,

transnational forces of division and intolerance rising throughout the world, linking anti-fascism with queer self-determination. That it comes at the expense of the local, territorialized experiences of people in the region is one of its biggest legacies, leaving us to question the nature of Rojava's radical imaginary and its disjuncture from its precarious reality.

The relation of media to radical empathy and international solidarity is not a tenuous one: What are the implications of a mass media which in many instances reproduces a single party-dominated utopian narrative at the expense of the lived experiences of civilians? If a transnational solidarity precipitated upon mass mediation ultimately serves to construct a utopia that is isolated from the political reality, then what can a healthy international solidarity look like? I hope the corpus of my thesis proves the problem is not, necessarily, with the politicized concept of international solidarity. Rather, the dilemma lies in Rojava solidarity's dependence on a globally mediatized one-party media, which, in seeking international validation, inadvertently works to detract from local agents.

4.3 Living the Dream: *"We should all be looking at the photos of the YPJ heroes should we falter and think our dreams are impossible"*

In July 2019 Willem Van Spronsen, a carpenter and anarchist, was killed by police while taking action against an immigrant detention facility operated by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Tacoma, Washington. Armed with a rifle and incendiary devices, the 69 year old had attempted to disable a fleet of buses used by ICE to transport

immigrants to detention and to the airport for deportation.<sup>186</sup> Aware that his actions amounted to suicide, Van Spronsen had prepared a goodbye note -- shared online widely after his death -- which conveyed that he was taking action against the raids, detention, and deportations carried out by ICE against asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants. Intended as a radical call-to-arms, his final statement was rooted in the prosthetic memory and trauma of 20th century fascism, with numerous references to concentration camps and World War 2.

The transition from Rojava to Tacoma, Washington may at first seem startling, but in choosing Willem Van Spronsen's action as a case study, I hope to illustrate the ways in which Rojava's negotiated existence has taken on the role of a commodified utopian ideal, inspiring actions even outside of its territorial mandate. At a cursory glance, Van Spronsen's fatal protest against a migrant detention center in the US may seem far removed from Rojava and the Syrian conflict, but his final statement makes a passing reference to the YPJ -- a link worth dwelling on.

Excerpt from Willem Van Spronsen's manifesto:

*"I'm a head in the clouds dreamer, I believe in love and redemption.  
I believe we're going to win.  
I'm joyfully revolutionary. (We all should have been reading Emma Goldman in school instead of the jingo drivel we were fed, but I digress.)  
(We should all be looking at the photos of the YPJ heroes should we falter and think our dreams are impossible, but I double digress. Fight me.)"*<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> La Resistencia. "Statement on Shooting Death of Northwest Detention Center Protester." Facebook, July 14, 2019. [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2424667040927495&id=671796032881280](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2424667040927495&id=671796032881280).

<sup>187</sup> Excerpt from Willem Van Spronsen's final statement, shared online widely across radical left news sites and community bulletins.

Collective, — CrimethInc. Ex-Workers. "On Willem Van Spronsen & His Final Statement." It's Going Down, July 14, 2019. <https://itsgoingdown.org/on-williem-van-spronsen/>.

## Commodification and the erasure of local agency in service of a global narrative

The YPJ's considerable role in the conflict has been championed by media worldwide as an example of women's empowerment in a society attempting to dismantle patriarchal structures. Simultaneously, international media's celebration of this empowerment has had a notoriously fetishistic element, garnering a fair amount of criticism for the objectification and minimization of YPJ fighters. An often-cited example is that of deceased 19-year-old Asia Ramazan Antar, 'the Kurdish Angelina Jolie', whose photos circulated the internet and whose looks were frequently referenced in news media despite her young age. Coverage of Antar reduced her to her physical qualities, her gender, and her opposition to ISIS -- minimizing her enlistment and the YPJ's considerable role in defending Rojava into a 'Kurdish Women versus ISIS' counterterrorism binary. This type of international coverage, contradictory as it was to the ideals of women's emancipation, nonetheless proliferated coverage of Rojava and has since become a significant facet of Rojava's media and online landscape.

By now there have been several studies into the YPJ's sensational media representation, which tends to erase a long history of women's involvement in the Kurdish struggle and positions it within a hegemonic Western discourse to service a *war on terror* narrative.<sup>188</sup> Rather than interpreting western coverage of the YPJ from a gendered lens, I would like to focus on Van Spronsen's mention of the YPJ in his goodbye note, his

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<sup>188</sup> For more, see: Dilar Dirik's work on the Kurdish Women's Movement; Malmgren & Palharini's 'Martyrs and Heroines' vs. 'Victims and Suicide Attackers,' etc.



conscious mention of the *images* of the YPJ and what they represent, and his reception of the YPJ resulting from their commodification and circulation in the media. As one of the largest Kurdish militias, the YPJ is an inseparable facet of the territory of Rojava; consequently, western media's objectification and reduction of the female fighters has become an inseparable part of its imaginary, which manifests through news coverage and online. The influence of this is illuminated in Van Spronsen's statement, where Rojava is placed on a pedestal through the objectification of YPJ fighters. In referring to the "photos of the YPJ heroes," Van Spronsen is clearly speaking of the inspiration he derived from the international coverage framing the all-female fighting unit -- in other words, the method in which they were mediated, largely visual. His perception that these photos could inspire others to take action towards a utopian vision implies an awareness of the process of the power of such images.

Van Spronsen does not speak of the YPJ as a fighting force in a complex, nuanced, and precarious territory in northeastern Syria. Although his solidarity is well-intentioned, he uses the YPJ as models for revolutionary ideals. His reference to the female fighters shows how media representations of Rojava and its subjects have reinforced a version of radical solidarity that manifests at the expense of its subjects' identity and agency, presenting an aesthetic utopia -- an inspirational narrative, a coveted idea ready to be obtained -- rather than a complex social, political, and territorial entity.

Van Spronsen's commodification of the YPJ demonstrates the effects of overall commodification which Rojava has undergone, with an imagined meaning that has grown far beyond its initial territorial and ideological existence. For him, the imagery of far-off YPJ fighters are symbolic of a conflict far beyond Syria's: they represent an interconnected

global effort to cast out forms of oppression and achieve daunting revolutionary ‘dreams’. Just as the existence of TQILA illustrates the runaway arbitration of the PYD’s hold on Rojava, the excerpt in Van Spronsen’s goodbye note demonstrates the extent to which the *idea* of Rojava has overtaken the PYD’s representation of it through a process of globalized mass mediation. In its comprehensive, globally negotiated incarnation, Rojava is represented as a prototype of a better world, an archetype of what Van Spronsen and others in the radical anarchist/anti-fascist niches of society dream and fight for: a place which (according to its mediated projection) embodies empathy for others, equality for all, and self-governance.

#### ***4.3.1 Reciprocal coverage and the trans-local circulation of commodity***

Like the international martyrs of Rojava, Van Spronsen was celebrated and commemorated in the virtual neighborhoods of anti-fascist/anarchist communion: the transcript of his final statement was shared widely,<sup>189</sup> and a commemorative digital ‘tombstone’ with an epitaph was disseminated on social media in emulation of the virtual funeral services given to YPG/J martyrs.

While these virtual ceremonial observances predictably further entrench the marriage between Rojava and international anarchism in public memory, it was foreseeable for such commemorations to manifest in the communities of the American left given the local nature of Van Spronsen’s action. But in a surprising and rare role-reversal of coverage, a Kurdish publication closely linked with the PKK -- the Turkish progenitor and affiliate of Syria’s Democratic Union Party (PYD) -- published news of the attack and quoted Van Spronsen’s

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<sup>189</sup> For example: Collective, — CrimethInc. Ex-Workers. “On Willem Van Spronsen & His Final Statement.” *It’s Going Down*, July 14, 2019. <https://itsgoingdown.org/on-willem-van-spronsen/>.



manifesto praising the YPJ.<sup>190</sup> Most significantly, although the YPJ connection is mentioned in the headline, the body of the story focuses on the context behind Van Spronsen's action, and his death at the hands of police over what amounted to property damage<sup>191</sup> -- surprising for an outlet which primarily covers regional issues that affect Kurdish life. The Kurdish coverage of a local political act in America functionally serves to

reinforce the link between Rojava and the international far-left as fighters against all structural forms of injustice. Further, the reversal of coverage (a Kurdish outlet usually concerned with news of Kurdish interest suddenly covering local American news, rather than vice versa) indicates the lessening emphasis on spatial affinities in Rojava, and the strengthening of a relational identity built upon collective social movement: in this case, relational affinities based upon radical solidarity for marginalized groups and against repressive state apparatus.<sup>192</sup>

## Chapter summary

Rojava as an idea: International construction of an imagined place

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<sup>190</sup> "US Anarchist Shot Dead by Police Had Words of Praise for the YPJ." ANF News, July 16, 2019. <https://anfenglish.com/news/us-anarchist-shot-dead-by-police-had-words-of-praise-for-the-ypj-36283>.

<sup>191</sup> "What is striking is that four police guns fired Van Spronsen until the magazine of their guns was empty." Given that the US police have a heavy track record of extrajudicial execution, the police's methods of shooting Spronsen are also suspected." - excerpt from ANF News, July 16, 2019. <https://anfenglish.com/news/us-anarchist-shot-dead-by-police-had-words-of-praise-for-the-ypj-36283>.

<sup>192</sup> Figure 4.5

Throughout the case studies of cross-solidarities in this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate how Rojava's internationally mediated identity has come to be defined by "relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial" terms,<sup>193</sup> encompassing meaning beyond its territorial confines. Rojava's existence as a globalized virtual locality has affected and influenced its precarious and spatial existence, and vice versa. Despite this, a clear, albeit intersecting, disjuncture endures between the territorial and virtual planes of Rojava's existence -- occasionally affecting each other, as evidenced by Van Spronsen's American action and his inspiration from the YPJ, and the subsequent Kurdish coverage of the attack. Ultimately, he, an entity far away from the territorial conflict, was a product of Rojava's mass mediated existence, just as, in naming the YPJ in his goodbye note, he contributed further the commodification of Rojava as a stand-in for international utopia. Likewise, the case of TQILA illustrates the slip of the ruling party's grasp over Rojava's discourse and the natural transmutation of its rhetoric: a direct result of the PYD's insistence on international projection. Having never before included LGBTQ+ matters in Rojava's society in their party platform, TQILA represented a significant rupture from the PYD's party-dominated rhetoric, although it was a clear evolution and manifestation of the PYD's own utopian language. And, finally, the mediation of Robert Grodt's funeral service in New York demonstrates the role of international media has taken in deepening and reifying the marriage between Rojava and the international far-left -- a marriage that has taken on new meanings and contexts through a reproductive process of circulation and interpellation, allowing for new associations to be formed around Rojava, not as a territorial entity, but as an idea and legacy.

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<sup>193</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large*, 178.

## CHAPTER 5

### A POST-NATIONAL UTOPIA DETERITTORIALIZED IDENTITIES AND THE WORK OF THE IMAGINATION

I have analyzed the ways in which, through a discursive media cycle, Rojava has evolved from a party-dominated regional project hinged upon territorial aspirations into, simultaneously, an ideological symbol for a post-nationalist ideal. At its core, this thesis attempts to push beyond an analysis of how party-led propaganda and its globalized reproduction in international mass media work in concert to draw in foreign recruits.

I first provided an overview of how international media mass valorizes the existence of foreign fighters in the YPG, while also reinforcing the PYD's narrative of Rojava as a utopian society. Then, through various case studies, I demonstrated how the international media's reproduction of party media invites foreign recruits to join Rojava's mediation, in the process inadvertently encouraging an 'outside' arbitration of Rojava's discourse to create a global imaginary: a Rojava that is produced, consumed, and reproduced, forming the basis for an imagination that "transforms pre-existing worlds of communication and conduct."<sup>194</sup>

All three case studies demonstrate the results of the marriage and affiliation of online Rojava networks with those of global leftist networks. The processes and structures of globalization and a globalized media work to transmute Rojava from a territorial locality to a global idea symbol of the anti-fascist movement, a process which has led to the creation of

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<sup>194</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large*, 3.

“new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds”<sup>195</sup> through a mediation that inspires and recruits direct action. If Kevin Robins believes that “cyberspace is often imagined as a utopia divorced from the social, material, and political landscape of the ‘real world’”,<sup>196</sup> then Rojava’s online existence is often a reflection of its divorce from the reality of its territorial existence, while also nurturing the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds.

In Willem Van Spronsen’s action against the immigration facility half a world away, Rojava’s utopian projection affected the “social, material, and political” landscape of the physical plane as a result of the Rojavan imaginary. The mediated projection of the YPJ -- in which the viewer is compelled to make empathetic associations engineered through prosthetic, reductive, highly-gendered portrayals that highlight the traumas and tribulations of the female fighters while sensationalizing their agency -- was implicitly mentioned by Van Spronsen as a partial inspiration to his action, and explicitly mentioned as a utopian aspiration. Van Spronsen’s interaction with Rojava’s cyberspace, and with the online projection of the YPJ, was an attempt to marry the utopian cyberspace with the real world.

In the case of TQILA, the field of contestation between the PYD and queer foreign recruits further embodies a virtual imaginary that doubles as a platform for action.<sup>197</sup> And, in Robert Grodt’s testimony as a recruit in the YPG and the mediation of his life and death in the international press, the collective experience of mass media has created transnational, post-national solidarities between Rojava and the global anti-fascist movement.

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<sup>195</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large*, 3.

<sup>196</sup> Alison Landsberg. *Prosthetic Memory*, 153.

<sup>197</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large*, 7.

Rojava's liminal meaning is maintained through its virtual projection: between local, territorial Kurdish autonomy and a broader, deterritorialized utopian society. The YPG's YouTube channel is an example of the PYD's method of discursive propagation, mediating a combination of Kurdish and international trauma to engineer empathy and solidarity in viewers. Then, this media is distributed by a globalized mass media. Simultaneously, the collective experience of Rojava's mass mediated coverage creates relational and contextual solidarities, negotiating and contributing to the overall imagined existence of Rojava as both an existent utopia worth defending *and* a vision to be achieved at any cost. These solidarities thrive online, in interconnected virtual neighborhoods ("spaces of conviviality") creating deterritorialized subjects of an imagined and idealized Rojava -- one that has discursively become synonymous with 'Utopia'.

Arjun Appadurai's conception of the "post-national" is "free of the constraints of the nation-form."<sup>198</sup> Unfortunately, the dissemination and internalization of such post-national imaginings is dependent on a form of globalization which relies on dominant forms of media: in the case of Rojava it is PYD media which transmits globally, reinforced by an international mass mediation. Thus, self-determination and identity construction within Rojava's imaginary is achieved through an electronic mediation which recruits Kurds, Arabs, and foreigners through varying methods, and where Rojava is imagined and re-imagined through the filter of its ruling party. The mediation of Rojava illustrates "the steady erosion of the capabilities of the nation-state to monopolize loyalty" as in the case of foreign recruits who leave their homeland to fight a war half a world away on the basis of tribal solidarity -- 'tribal' in this case being a loyalty to anarchist values, LGBTQ+ issues, etc. --

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<sup>198</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large*, 23.

while encouraging the spread of alternative national forms that are “largely divorced from territorial states,”<sup>199</sup> as in the case of Rojava’s virtual symbolism.

Thus, a cycle of liberatory discourse is perpetuated that is built upon a dominant PYD ideology. Such a post-national existence is liberatory in many ways -- creating broad alliances established on the basis of empathy, ethical responsibility, and the self-determination of a previously subaltern people -- and detrimental in others, such is in the erasure or loss of agency for individuals who do not follow the party line, and therefore the creation of a new subaltern.

Here, I do not intend to erase the agency of those working towards (and dying for) a more equitable, democratic, and autonomous society in northeastern Syria, but merely to point out the ways in which Rojava has become an aesthetic placeholder for post-national utopia due to a global process of mediatization and commodification. Finally, I do not wish to detract from the concept of radical solidarity, but to analyze the affective use of Rojava’s party-dominated propaganda, the circuitous process of globalized mediation it has undergone, and Rojava’s resulting meaning and identity. Rojava is no longer solely a territory in Syria, but has transformed into a symbol for a radical utopia that is subject to the whims of hegemonic western discourses: a global commodity and aspiration accessible to all, and a heaven-on-earth worth dying for.

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<sup>199</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large*, 169.



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