Rojava's Patriarchal Liberation: Solving the Feminist Anti-Militarism Problem?

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Once the Arab uprisings developed into Syria's 2011 civil war and the Syrian state withdrew from northeastern Syria, the Kurdish liberation movement saw their window of opportunity and declared its intention to create a radically different society around the concept of "democratic confederalism" – an autonomous society based on principles of democratic autonomy, environmentalism, feminism, and gender equality. Less than three years later, the Kurdish movement had transformed their revolutionary vision into a revolutionary society by liberating the three cantons Cizîre, Kobanî and Afrîn of Rojava (Western Kurdistan). In January 2014 the cantons united to issue a declaration of Democratic Autonomy manifesting their unique political ideology, grounded in the imprisoned Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan's writings and ideas (Knapp et al., 2016). While the Rojava revolution as a whole has challenged centuries of patriarchal, cultural, and nationalist domination by both Western colonial powers and the Syrian Assad-regime, women and feminism have particularly come to play a crucial role in the territorial, political, cultural, and ideological liberation of Rojava.

As this essay will show, the alternative forms of organization and structures brought by democratic confederalism have made this liberation possible. Yet, women's *military* engagement within the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the all-female unit Women's Protection Units (YPJ) is equally considered vital to women's emancipation and resistance against dominating patriarchal power structures (Bay, 2016; Knapp et al., 2016; Kocabiçak, 2016). However, feminists have often taken an anti-militarist standpoint, and argue that militarism and war itself is gendered and both depend on and uphold particular patriarchal gender relations (Cockburn, 2010; Cohn, 2013). This points to a potential problem of how Kurdish women manage to reconcile feminism with militarism, and equally to further questions. How is it possible for Kurdish female militants to resist domination and patriarchy using the same means, namely militarism, which risk upholding the very same structures they seek to fight? How can militarism nonetheless be a force of resistance against hegemony and patriarchy? And how do women and feminism challenge patriarchy and domination through democratic confederalism?

This essay seeks to consider these questions and discuss the ways in which women and feminism in Rojava have been central in the resistance against domination and hegemonic patriarchal power structures. Specifically, it aims to answer the question: in what ways have feminism and women represented a force of resistance against patriarchy and domination in the case of Rojava? While paying particular attention to women's engagement in militarism, the answer to this question is twofold. It first briefly considers the hegemonic, nationalist, cultural, and patriarchal structures of oppression and domination on Kurds in Syria and women.[1] It then considers the ways in which the ideas, structures and forms of organization brought by democratic confederalism and feminism challenge these structures of oppression. Next, it discusses the ways in which women's engagement in armed resistance and militarism can constitute a force of resistance against patriarchal power structures and domination in the case of Rojava. Finally, it considers the question of whether women in Rojava have simultaneously found a way to reconcile feminism with militarism and discusses the challenges arising from this dilemma. It argues that women and feminism have constituted a force of resistance against domination and patriarchy primarily through the merging of democratic confederalism and military resistance. Through democratic confederalism and feminism, women have created alternative forms of social organization which counter dominant patriarchal structures. Through engaging in militarism, women have also physically and directly resisted patriarchy and domination. Finally, it argues that

women's resistance also extends beyond the physical, organizational, and institutional challenge of patriarchy and domination, as women in Rojava demonstrate new forms of agency and subjectivities which counter dominant patriarchal gendered norms and conceptions.

Structures of Oppression: Nationalist and Patriarchal Domination

The roughly 30 million Kurds spread across parts of Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia constitute the world's largest stateless nation, of which two to three million reside in Syria predominantly around where now constitutes Rojava (Allsopp, 2015; Federici, 2015). In addition to centuries of colonial and imperialist domination by Western powers in general, the Kurds have long been subjected to pan-Arab nationalist domination which by definition excluded other non-Arab ethnic groups such as the Kurds (Knapp et al., 2016). In addition to severe political repression, Kurds in Syria under the authoritarian Assad-government have also been subjected to severe cultural repression and other forms of cultural genocide, including continued Arabization policies and criminalization of expressing Kurdish identity, culture, language, and interests (Allsopp, 2015; Schmidinger, 2018; Tax, 2016). In short, Syria's Kurds have for decades suffered from nationalist and ethnic discrimination, repression of Kurdish identity and culture by the Syrian state and by imperialist and Arab nationalist hegemony and domination.

When using an intersectional lens, however, it becomes clear that Kurdish women are moreover subjected to a "dual oppression" based on both ethnicity and gender (Çaha, 2011, p. 436; Shahvisi, 2018, p. 12). Feminism understands patriarchy, literally "rule of the father", as a system in which men exercise power and domination over not only their wives and children, but also women in general by controlling societies' cultural, religious, economic, social and governmental institutions (Cohn, 2013, p. 4). Moreover, by using gender as an intersectional analytical tool, one can also understand patriarchy as a structural power relation of masculine hegemony and control over women and femininity. As Cohn (2013) explains, gender then becomes the way in which power is ordered, categorized and symbolised, where relations amongst people of different categories, identities, or ethnicities become hierarchically structured. Understanding patriarchy and gender as a structural power relation demonstrates how gendered binaries, hierarchies and inequalities between men and masculinity and women and femininity are reproduced, where that which is associated with masculinity is socially constructed as of superior value to that associated with femininity. Femininity and women are often objectified and symbolically coded as passive, submissive, soft, victimized, and without agency, whereas men and masculinity are symbolically associated with action, strength, power, violence, and aggression, particularly in discourses relating to war (Cohn, 2013). This demonstrates how patriarchy is not only a form of institutional and political domination, but also a form of cultural hegemony.

Weiss (2018) points to feminists and Kurdish nationalists who have criticized Kurdish society for its patriarchal structures and adherence to traditional gender roles. Although a patriarchal society is certainly not unique to Rojava or the Middle East, the patriarchal structures referred to in Kurdish society is often associated with Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "classic patriarchy" (Weiss, 2018). Kandiyoti's (1988) description of "classic patriarchy" mirrors a society of masculine dominance where the most senior man in the family exercises power and authority over everyone else, and where girls are married off into new households where they are subordinate to both the men *and* the more senior women in the family, culminating in a patrilineal life cycle of subordination (pp. 278 – 282). Thus, Kurdish women in Rojava have experienced domination and oppression not only by virtue of their ethnicity, but also of their gender. Resulting from these patriarchal power structures and gendered hierarchies, women in Rojava have in general remained absent from public life, experienced physical and mental harm, and been subjected to male control and domination over their lives.

These structures of oppression are precisely what the Rojava revolution has sought to overcome. Grounded in the later writings and ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the revolution sought to create a new society aspiring to replace the dominating structures rooted in the state, nationalism, capitalism, and not least patriarchy. Patriarchy, through its normalisation of masculine hegemony, domination, and violence, is the reason for the oppressive structures of the state, capitalism, and nationalism. In Öcalan's view, patriarchy gave rise to the systematic structures of inequality and coercion by the state, masculine dominance, hierarchical gendered identities of 'male' and 'female', and the enslavement of men and women (Knapp et al., 2016). Öcalan (2017) argues that capitalism is the perpetuation of deep-rooted exploitation of nature and society and that along with the nation-state it represents an institutionalised

dominant male. Central to the liberation from these dominating structures that arises from patriarchy, is thus the liberation of women. Summarised in the words of one Rojava woman: "you can't get rid of capitalism without getting rid of the state. And you can't get rid of the state without eliminating patriarchy" (Graber, 2016, p. xviii).[2] Through overcoming patriarchy, one can thus emancipate women while at the same time eliminating the nation state that is responsible for the oppression of the Kurds. The antidote was to be found in "democratic confederalism".

Resistance Through Democratic Confederalism

"Democratic confederalism" is Öcalan's own idea of a "democracy without a state" (Öcalan, 2017, p. 39). The tenets of democratic confederalism are radical democracy and democratic autonomy. Democratic autonomy entails a society that is structured around self-organizing, self-governing, participatory, decentralized, and bottom-up units of decision-making (Knapp et al., 2016). The bottom-up participatory units of government enables the broad participation and free expression of all societal groups, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, cultural identity, party-affiliation, or ideology (Öcalan, 2017). In practice, democratic confederalism in Rojava was introduced already in 2011 by the PKK-linked PYD (Democratic Union Party), one of the main Kurdish Syrian-opposition parties and the political counterpart of the Kurdish military unit YPG/YPJ, who initiated the establishment of the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK) (Knapp et al., 2016). The MGRK organized the new society into councils, commissions and coordinating bodies, and elected the coordinating body TEV-DEM (Democratic Society Movement— Tevgera Civaka Demokratik). According to Knapp et al. (2016), the MGRK system consists of four levels of autonomous and self-organized councils, connected through a bottom-up pyramid structure. The smallest council is the commune, which further extends through the neighborhood and district level up the to the MGRK or People's Councils, who in turn represent each of the cantons of Rojava (Shahvisi, 2018).[3] While each level is represented at the higher levels of organization, power and authority arise from the lowest level, the commune. In the commune, each resident is free to be involved in all forms of decision-making processes, thus ensuring a decentralized, participatory, bottom-up, and grassroot structure of organization (Öcalan, 2017). This system of self-organization constitutes the radical participatory democracy, ensuring a non-hierarchical, non-discriminatory, and autonomous society which renders both borders and the state superfluous.

Through these autonomous levels of societal organization, democratic confederalism therefore offers an alternative to a unitary, centralized, top-down, and militaristic nation state. In this sense, democratic confederalism challenges domination through challenging the nation state. However, by placing feminism, gender equality, and women at the centre of the revolution and integrated in new all forms of organizations, the Rojava revolution is also challenging patriarchy. As described in detail by Knapp et al. (2016), the principle of gender equality manifests itself in the societal structures of Rojava in multiple forms. First, the principle of dual leadership applies everywhere – where every level of commune, council, commission or court must have two democratically elected co-chairs of which one must be a woman. Second, a gender quota applies in a similar way to all mixed-gender institutions to ensure equal political representation, in which democratically elected women must make up minimum 40 percent. Third, there are separate women's communes and women's councils in every district in addition to the mixed-gender councils aiming to advance women's interests.

Finally, there have been made several changes to laws and the justice system. Child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, dowry payments, honour killings, and gender-based violence, including rape and domestic violence are illegal, and abortion is legalized (Shahvisi, 2018). In addition, the justice system aims to follow a non-hierarchical structure, where reconciliation of legal disputes aim to be reached through consensus rather than a formal vote (Kakaee, 2020). The security forces are trained in feminist theory and non-violence before they are allowed to use weapons (Graber & Ögünç, 2016). There are separate women's Peace and Consensus Committees resolving cases of patriarchal and gender-based violence, which consist solely of women in order to limit any patriarchal or gendered biases that may influence the decisions (Kakaee, 2020). Hierarchical forms of control and domination have thus been replaced by non-hierarchical forms of participation, explicit patriarchal forms of control such as forced marriage, honour killings, and gender-based violence criminalized, women exercise control and autonomy over their bodies and matters pertaining to themselves, and women and men may participate equally in politics and society at large. These institutional and structural changes made to the societal organization in Rojava that integrate the principle of gender equality in all levels and forms of society, thereby demonstrate the way in which women and feminism constitute an

important force of resistance against domination and patriarchy.

However, it is clear that women's resistance also extends *beyond* institutional and structural changes. Women are exercising greater autonomy over their own lives, gaining greater economic independence, and gaining greater marital independence as more women choose to divorce their husbands (Knapp et al., 2016). Women are finding new forms of expression, in history, art, science and aesthetics. Women have since 2011 developed the concept of *jineology*, the "science" of women (*jin*), a particular form of Kurdish feminism aiming to correct the absence of women in the writing of history and science, arguing that knowledge too has fallen victim to patriarchal domination (Knapp et al., 2016; Shahvisi, 2018). Both men and women are receiving training and education in jineology and the history of oppression, and men are taught how to overcome gendered, stereotypical, and oppressive behavior, thus aiming to reform masculinity as well (Shahvisi, 2018). All this demonstrates the clear existence of women's agency and subjectivity, contrary to the patriarchal paradigm that paints women as objects, submissive, and passive. As Şimşek & Jongerden (2018) suggest, the Rojava revolution and women's "embrace of the political" came together with Kurdish women's performance of new subjectivities and the emergence of women as "self-determining actors" (p. 17). Thus, women in Rojava have through democratic confederalism and feminist principles resisted against domination from oppressive nationalist and patriarchal structures, by countering gendered perceptions of women as agentless and submissive and instead performed enacted new forms of political and cultural subjectivities.

Resistance Through Militant Feminism

Abdullah Öcalan (2017) states argues that women's liberation and equality can only be achieved through a democratic struggle, and that patriarchy, capitalism and violence derives from and is upheld by militarism and sexism. Many feminists share Öcalan's standpoint. The feminist scholar Cynthia Cockburn (2010), for instance, argues that war deepens pre-existing gendered divisions and produces gendered identities such as armed masculinities and subordinate victimized femininities. Crucially, Cockburn argues that such patriarchal gender relations perpetuate and normalize war and violence, and therefore are causal in militarization. Patriarchal gender relations "make war thinkable" and "peace difficult to sustain"(Cockburn, 2010, p. 149). In a similar fashion, Cohn (2013) argues that militarism and armed groups depend on these same gendered binaries in order to function, which moreover legitimize and normalize gender-based sexual violence. This understanding of how patriarchal gender dynamics relate to war, militarism, and women informs the feminist stance of anti-militarism, precisely because militarism is perceived to uphold oppressive and violent patriarchal gendered structures. Likewise, as Cockburn (2010) further suggests, an end to patriarchy is crucially also necessary to end militarism. How is it then possible for Kurdish women to reconcile their feminist ideals with engaging in militarism?

The problem facing the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava thus arises from the dilemma of how a women's movement grounded in feminist principles aiming to achieve gender equality and end patriarchy can simultaneously engage in militarist activities that perpetuate the very same structures they are fighting to challenge. Kurdish women had engaged in militarism long before the Rojava revolution, especially in the PKK all-female unit YJA-Star (Kocabiçak, 2016), but the all-female Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) in Syria that grew parallel to the mixed-unit YPG only came to exist in April 2013 (Knapp et al., 2016). According to Knapp et al. (2016), the YPJ grew parallel to the understanding that a liberation of the society required a liberation of women (p. 135). While the YPG and YPJ are considered of equal value, the YPJ is a women-only autonomous space (Shahvisi, 2018). Shahvisi (2018) argues that these autonomous spaces is precisely what has been key to the overcoming of patriarchal gender roles and combatting masculinity. The autonomous structure of the YPJ, its commitment to democratic confederalism and gender equality fused with its commitment to combatting masculinity and patriarchal gender relations, offers one explanation for how Kurdish militant women are solving the dilemma of engaging in militarism while challenging patriarchal structures and domination at the same time. Women in the Rojava revolution have demonstrated this in at least two ways.

First, one can argue that women combatants are directly and physically fighting against patriarchy and domination through its military resistance against patriarchal groups such as the Islamic State. Women in the YPG and YPJ have had leading roles in the resistance against the Islamic State in Syria, a group notoriously known for its extreme forms of patriarchal oppression and domination of women (Dirik, 2017). It is estimated that women constitute 35 percent of

the entire Kurdish forces, and women have played an active role in the fight, and eventual defeat, against the Islamic State and similar groups (Bengio, 2016). There is moreover evidence of what one might consider to be "gendered" military tactics. One female combatant interviewed by Knapp et al. (2016) explains how Jihadists believe that if they are killed by a woman, they will not go to paradise. Women use this to their advantage by trying to scare their opponents: "'they're afraid of women,' said another fighter. 'When we fight, we trill loudly, so they'll be sure to hear our voices'" (Knapp et al., 2016, p. 143). Women's active involvement in the defence of Rojava has thus been more than simply symbolic. In this sense, women's military resistance against the Islamic State can be interpreted as a physical force of resistance against patriarchy and domination.

Moreover, one can extend the argument regarding physical military resistance against external aggressors to Rojava's emphasis on self-defence against oppressive forces and the protection of democratic confederalism and feminist principles. In this sense, the use of militarism could on the contrary be defended as a means to *protect* feminist principles and gender equality. Paradoxically, the engagement in patriarchal militarism then becomes a way of resisting patriarchy precisely through protecting feminist ideals. Knapp et al. (2016) argue that Rojava came under attack by the Islamic State and its allies beginning with the attack on Kobanî in 2014 especially because of its resistance to patriarchy, capitalism, and its democratic confederalist and feminist principles. This not only demonstrates the fragility and vulnerability of Rojava's political project to outside threats, but it also provides an argument for strong self-defence forces and the maintaining of a minimum level of military defence in Rojava. Such need for adequate self-defence forces has more recently been reinforced after the increased military aggression exhibited by Turkey. Knapp et al. (2016) contends that Rojava would not exist without strong self-defence forces, and without them, the Kurds would have been driven out a long time ago.

Dirik (2017) expands the argument concerning self-defence even further. She argues that self-defence is more than the mere physical protection of oneself. Rather, democratic confederalism is in itself a form of self-defence. Democratic confederalism becomes the fortification that makes a life without domination possible. Democratic confederalism becomes the enabling structure that protects the identity, existence, freedom, and autonomy of the Kurds in Rojava. As Dirik (2017) puts it: "if the women in Kobane and elsewhere were able to defend themselves against ISIS's attacks, it is because their fight was accompanied by a deep social revolution happening inside the society" (p. 79). Self-defence through military resistance and democratic confederalism thus go hand in hand. Put differently, if self-defence through military resistance is a form of physical defence, then democratic confederalism is a form of ideological defence.

Second, women's militarisation simultaneously challenges hegemonic gender roles and stereotypes. By making possible new conceptions and expectations of gender roles, the process of militarisation may itself lead to the challenging of dominating patriarchal power structures. Much of the literature on Rojava has criticized Western media's orientalist and sensationalist portrayal of Kurdish female fighters for objectifying, fetishizing, disempowering, and depoliticizing their political and militant efforts (Begikhani et al., 2018; Dirik, 2014; Kardaş & Yesiltaş, 2017; Shahvisi, 2018; Şimşek & Jongerden, 2018). Contrary to the Western depoliticization of Kurdish female guerrilla fighters, women have rather transcended the patriarchal gender norms by entering traditional hyper-masculine spaces such as the military and defying the dominant gender norms. Indeed, female militants within the YPJ have emphasised that their main task is not only to fight, but rather a recreation of society and freedom for all genders (Bay, 2016). They stress that the war has *accelerated* the process of transformation, and that the war has allowed a breaking down of gendered perceptions, such as that women cannot hold guns, fight, or undertake male-dominated tasks, which could not have been proven otherwise. One YPJ-fighter says: "the YPJ have broken down the stereotypes and subsequently women have said 'we do not belong only to the kitchen, to the home, to men for childbirth, we too exist in all spheres of this society'" (Bay, 2016, p. 58).

The militarisation of women made possible new understandings of dominant gender roles for men too. Knapp et al. (2016) suggest that young men in the mixed-military units were tasked with performing typical female-dominated tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry for the first time. This implies that the war itself has created a necessary window of opportunity to accelerate the resistance against domination and patriarchy, particularly the challenging of dominating gender norms. PKK's all-female military unit, YJA-Star has echoed this standpoint. They suggest that the militarization of women was both instrumental and *necessary* in realizing feminist principles and

achieving women's emancipation (Kocabiçak, 2016). Militarisation was considered an "instrument of equality" and constitutive in the Kurdish woman's self-creation and self-consciousness, and the only way possible to liberate their gender and "becoming a power" in societies where oppressive structures dominate (Kocabiçak, 2016, p. 63). Militarism has enabled the assertion, reconceptualization and reimagination of patriarchal gender roles, where both men and women have entered gendered spaces that were previously reserved for patriarchal interpretations. Whereas women have entered previously masculine spaces, men have entered previously feminine spaces. The result has been a crumbling of gendered binaries and a blurring of patriarchal gender roles and structures of domination, which simultaneously work to mitigate the patriarchal nature of militarism. In this sense, women's engagement in militarism in Rojava has proven to be an avenue of liberation, a realization of feminist principles, and a force of resistance against domination and patriarchy. In the following and final section, limitations of these findings, including the question of whether Rojava have simultaneously found a way to reconcile feminism with militarism, will be discussed.

Discussion and Conclusion

This essay argues that women and feminism constitute a force of resistance against patriarchy and domination through the conjunction of democratic confederalism and military resistance. Women's engagement in democratic confederalism has allowed the growth of new societal structures and forms of organisations ensuring a non-hierarchical, non-discriminatory, feminist and gender equal society which challenge oppression and patriarchy. The upholding of democratic confederalism, precisely aiming to end oppressive structures such as capitalism, patriarchy and the nation-state, could moreover be interpreted as force of resistance in itself. Women's efforts to protect, promote, and participate in democratic confederalism and feminist principles has thus been vital to the resistance against domination and patriarchy. This has particularly proven to be the case through their engagement in militarism. Their engagement in militarism has in this sense not only physically challenged domination and patriarchy through the defeat of patriarchal organizations such as the Islamic State, but it has also ensured the protection of the feminist and democratic confederalist structures necessary to end the oppression of women and Kurds in general in Rojava. Thus, through the participation and protection of democratic confederalism, women in Rojava are also challenging domination and patriarchy. Moreover, this essay has argued that women's resistance against domination and patriarchy also extends beyond institutional and organizational changes. Through both their promotion of feminism and militarisation, women have simultaneously demonstrated new forms of agency and subjectivities which not only challenge dominant masculinities, but also dominant femininities. Women's reconfiguring of masculine gendered spaces has enabled reimaginations of hegemonic gender roles to take place. The challenging of hegemonic gendered norms is an essential component in their resistance against patriarchy and domination.

Challenges nevertheless remain. This essay has also raised the question of whether women in Rojava have found a way to reconcile feminism with militarism. As has been discussed, their engagement in a traditional masculine militarism undeniably poses a conceptual problem. Feminists have long argued that militarisation deepens patriarchal power relations and thereby normalize and perpetuate war and violence. Women's militarisation thus risk inadvertently upholding the very same structures of domination and oppression they seek to resist. This implies that women in Rojava striving to uphold traditional feminist principles of anti-militarism and gender equality will have to avoid adopting gendered militant masculinities normalizing war and violence. Duzel's (2018) research on former female PKK-guerrillas in Turkey preceding the Rojava revolution sheds light on how this dilemma can unfold. She shows how female militancy can both disrupt and reinforce gendered binaries of militarism. She shows how female fighters initially "understood their femininities through stereotypical gender binaries", and new ideals of "masculine womanhood" emerged, where women adopted masculine bodily traits and values and rejected traditional feminine traits (Duzel, 2018, pp. 144-145). Indeed, Begikhani et al. (2018) reiterate how women's participation in militarism can be part of a "problematic increase of the militarisation of Kurdish society", coupled with a growing mindset that justifies the use of violence as a provider of justice and hope (p. 10). If a normalization and justification of militarisation is, or continues to be, the case in Rojava, then women in Rojava will struggle to reconcile their feminist values with their engagement in militarism. Then, militarisation risks being a threat, rather than a force of resistance, to their challenging of domination and patriarchy.

Nevertheless, as Duzel (2018) further shows, the dominant identity of masculine womanhood was in turn challenged

amongst female guerillas in the PKK as well. As the female units gained greater autonomy, so did their efforts to undo their masculinization and cultivate feminist militant ideals. The transformation made by female guerillas in the PKK not only illustrate the risk, but also the opportunity, of militarism to both constrain and empower women and feminist efforts. Likewise, it illustrates how militarism and resistance towards one form of hegemony can be a source of new forms of hegemony and dominating subjectivities. Al-Ali and Tas (2018) describe how social conservatism regarding sexuality has come to dominate the Kurdish movement, also in Rojava. Female and male militants, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are required to refrain from engaging in sexual relations. They argue that sexuality and sexual freedom has become more a taboo and gendered conceptions of women's purity more significant. Militants are subjected to new moral subjectivities of enforced celibacy and becoming "sexless militants" (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018, p. 18). Others have shown how Rojava still conforms to a heteronormative order, where LGBTQ people face discrimination, lack of rights, physical insecurity and fear of attacks due to their sexual orientation (Ghazzawi, 2017).

These points illustrate how women and feminism's resistance against patriarchy and domination has not yet reached at an end point. On the contrary, Rojava's experience of democratic confederalism and the continuous challenging of hegemonic gendered norms has since the beginning been a process. Rojava is an ambitious political project still under development. Indeed, word "resistance" implies a persistent struggle as opposed to an ultimate victory. Whether women in Rojava have managed to reconcile militarism with feminism might then still be too early to determine. For the time being, however, this essay has defended the use of militarism for current self-defence purposes and out of a necessity for protecting democratic confederalism and feminist principles from external aggressors. This defence of the use of militarism would naturally be weakened should Rojava continue to normalize and justify militarism for self-defence purposes if outside threats no longer exist. However, in the current political landscape, outside threats are unlikely to disappear in the nearest future.

Finally, this essay has argued that women's militarisation in itself can be instrumental in challenging domination, hegemony, and patriarchal gendered structures. Moreover, it has suggested that the specific conjunction of democratic confederalism and feminism with militarism that Rojava demonstrates mitigates the patriarchal and masculine nature of militarism. Its simultaneous resistance to patriarchal forms of domination has particularly made this possible. The presence of democratic confederalism and feminist principles and practices in Rojava which allows for this resistance to patriarchy thereby resolves some of the inherent tensions between militarism and feminism. The strongest argument for Rojava's reconciliation of militarism with feminism is thus its protection of democratic confederalism and its insistence on challenging all other forms of patriarchal domination. Cynthia Cockburn (2010) points out that an end to militarism and war requires an end to patriarchy, nationalism, and capitalism too – precisely the purpose of democratic confederalism. The conjunction of militarism with democratic confederalism is consequently Rojava's strongest feminist alibi. Despite its limitations, the lesson that women in Rojava paradoxically demonstrate for feminist anti-militarism is thus that militarism can sometimes be a necessary avenue to end the oppressive structures that in turn legitimizes it. This balancing of militarism with feminism might always prove a difficult task.

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Notes

[1] Due to the limited scope and space of this paper, the primary focus will be on Kurds and Kurdish resistance in Western Kurdistan and Syria after the Rojava revolution, thus granting limited attention to the PKK and forms of Kurdish and feminist activism in Turkey and elsewhere.

[2] While ecology, environmentalism, and an end to capitalism are central aspects of Rojava's ideology, a further discussion of this beyond its relation to patriarchy is outside the scope of this paper.

[3] In addition, each canton has formed a democratic-autonomous administration (DAA) consisting of a legislative, executive, and municipal councils. While remaining autonomous, the cantons and liberated areas declared on March 17, 2016 a Federal System in Rojava/Northern Syria (FRNS), which became the new official body of Rojava (Knapp et al., 2016).