# A Kurdish response to climate change

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Conversations with the Kurdish Liberation Movement on ecological society and democratic confederalism.

Hasankeyf, Kurdistan, by Areed145, Wikimedia

For 4000 years since the breakdown of the Akkadian Empire in Mesopotamia, almost every major societal collapse has featured five trends: spiralling migration, state collapse, food shortages, epidemic disease and climate change.[1] What makes the present era distinct is that whilst previous collapses have been geographically contained, the globalisation of carbon-intensive industry since the 1800s and particularly over the last four decades means that the relationship between cause and effect has been obscured. Many of the people worst impacted by human-caused climate change today are also the least responsible for it. The Climate Stories project believes that averting further damage and building a different future means being led by those who are the first to hear the earth rise up in protest, have considered the causes and are innovating solutions. In this spirit, this article documents reflections from a series of conversations with members of the Kurdish movement on climate change.

## Exploring the roots of a 21st century ‘climate crisis’

Historically, two key opposing trends have run through environmental movements. The first is reformist and favours environmental engineering. This approach still views nature in terms of how it can serve human needs through “environmentally-friendly” reforms and technologies. For the Kurdish movement, this avoids the question of who has profited from environmental damage and delays an effective solution to the problem. The second is a deep ecology approach, which tends to be anti-technological and anti-human. This is also limited because like it or not, it is humans who have, over time, developed most capability to shape nature. This power can be used to renew and protect nature, or to destroy it. So when a deep ecologist says “humans are responsible for everything” they imply that the chiefs of the fossil fuel industries are no more guilty than our Kurdish grandmothers who live in their villages tending the land.

To move beyond these two approaches, we need to understand the positive role human technologies have played – and could play again – in the reciprocal relationship between biological nature and human society. Do we really need to have a bird inside a cage in our house to show our love to it, when it is its nature to fly outside?

We also need to understand the roots of today’s climate crisis. How did the idea of controlling nature arise in the first place? Can humans control ‘external’ nature if they don’t first create structures of domination among themselves? Our views on this are based on studying our 5000-year history. Imprisoned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan has written about how hierarchy began to be institutionalised for the first time in the temple complexes of ancient Mesopotamia, beginning with the rise of the male priest and the institutionalisation of patriarchy. From here followed the state, slavery, the standing army, private property; features of many societies we know even today.[2]

For Öcalan, two civilisational tendencies run side-by-side. Towards the end of the Neolithic Age, structures based on hierarchy, violence and subjugation became more prominent. Yet in the same era, around 2,300 B.C, the first word to express the concept of freedom – *amargi* - literally "the return to mother", also emerged. This is the foundation of what he describes as "democratic civilisation", which runs through many historic struggles and continues today, especially in indigenous societies that still practice communal politics; in Rojava, our most well-known model of what we can call "ecological society", many talk about "a return to our nature". In other words, returning to a society based on women's freedom, ecology and democracy in all spheres of life.

## Women and land

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This takes acentral place in our theory of liberation, and women's science, named *jineology*, has become a fundamental tenet of the Kurdish movement. For centuries, Woman was the keeper of knowledge about food, nature, growing, medicine, healing. She was vital to the system of agricultural production in which crops were shared equally among communities and held important social power.

Today, according to the World Food Organisation, women still make up the majority of the world's farmers, cultivating more than half of all the world's food. In Kurdistan too women are central to the rural economy. Many Kurdish households in rural Turkey are headed by the mother, with fathers and sons often lost to war or disappeared. Our local examples make us wonder about the social contradictions we observe: today's global agricultural output can feed one and half times the world's population, and yet roughly 800 million people are chronically undernourished. In our view, this is a symptom of how capitalist modernity has functioned over time, with very particular kinds of political infrastructures and social processes being institutionalised.[3] These have privileged moving resources to a minority, even across great distance, impoverishing many in the process. This has its roots in the earliest form of domination, of men over women.

## The Kurdish context today

Understanding the echoes of the past in the present is crucial to understanding the Kurdish context. Kurds are one of the oldest peoples living in Mesopotamia. We number 40 million but have never had our identity as people attached to a nation-state. Kurds are also among the earliest practitioners of Zoroastrianism, based on harmony with nature and revolving around four elements: water, air, fire and earth. From these roots Kurdish culture developed, connected to the lands we inhabit – literally, *agri*-culture. The region's rich biodiversity gave rise to some of human civilisation's earliest settled agricultural societies. Millions of hectares of irrigated land in the Tigris-Euphrates river basin produced barley, wheat, cotton, livestock, fruits and vegetables and the Kurdish regions of both Syria and Iraq were often referred to as the 'breadbasket' of those countries.

These areas also contain some of the largest regional oil reserves and thirst for fossil fuels has made Kurdistan a prize geostrategic region. Since the 19th century, British and French interests have circulated around Mosul and Kirkuk, influencing deals between international powers, demarcating Kurdistan's boundaries and complicating access to the region's natural resources. International oil companies and the wealth they've accumulated dominate the cities of Iraq in the form of skyscrapers, the symbol of international finance capital, while agricultural production has dropped as conflict has raged across the region.

In Turkey, agricultural mechanisation of the 50's and 60's (financed in part byUS Marshall aid money), pushed Kurds away from their ancestral home to the shanty areas of cities in the west of Turkey and forced assimilation policies

severed them from the land. To simultaneously undermine the identity of those that remained, historical and cultural sites were destroyed. Nuclear plants and radioactive sites were built in rural Kurdistan threatening crops, animals and livelihoods. When the latest wave of Kurdish resistance began in the 1980s, the Turkish state's response included burning 5000 villages and hundreds of acres of forests. That violence continues today. Between July 2015 and April 2016, nearly 400 civilians were killed by Turkish special forces and 300,000 people displaced during curfews and military attacks across southeast Turkey. Once again, reports are that the army targeted not only cities but also the surrounding forests. Just recently, on November 4th elected Kurdish officials were detained and continue to be held in solitary confinement, as part of an ongoing crackdown on the movement.

Displacing Kurds from their land has destroyed life, land *and* culture, which is the basis of identity. Our experiences have made clear to us how closely culture, identity, and so well-being, are influenced by the environment a people live in.

If agriculture was the foundation of our society, water was its mother. Today, the Euphrates and Tigris rivers – vital sources of life that flow through Kurdish areas across Turkey, Syria and Iraq – have taken on addedgeopolitical significance with water scarcity, like food scarcity, becoming adriver of regional conflict. Rivers know no borders and ignore the map of states. Observing this reasoning of the earth's arteries, peoples, nations and governments should work jointly for the preservation and equitable use of the water, which belongs to the earth. This has not been the case, however. Water development projects have on several occasions brought Turkey, Syria and Iraq to the brink of war, with the unrecognised people of Kurdistan, living where the rivers pass, caught in the middle. Today, theSoutheastern Anatolia Project (GAP) is being rolled out across the Kurdish regions of Turkey, where 22 dams will be built. The Ilisu dam on the Tigris river will reduce water flow to Iraq and Syria and displace hundreds and thousands of people from places like Hasankeyf, one of the oldest continually inhabited towns in the world. Whilst projects such are these are almost always justified as 'development and progress', for many locals, the GAP project is a deliberate attempt to depopulate the area, force locals into the cities, undermine the social fabric of Kurdistan, and create a sort of 'natural' barricade against the PKK guerrillas.

## Moving towards 'Ecological Society'

As the natural environment shapes human identity and culture, so human society shapes nature. Devotion to profit-making through overproduction has pushed global society towards self-destruction, resulting in a world where one of the most profitable industries is the weapons industry; where economies empower monopoly and the colonisation of other countries directly or indirectly; where agriculture has lost its value through resource-intensive technologies, irresponsible genetic engineering and loss of seed diversity. We have arrived at a point in which humans must act to make democratic changes in all aspects of our lives, otherwise we will separate ourselves from nature completely.

For the Kurdish movement, ecological society starts with breaking down the patriarchal system. The western press hasmade much of the fact that Kurdish women have organised themselves in the armed struggle, including recently in the self-defence forces of the YPJ forces in Rojava and YJA-STAR forces in other parts of Kurdistan. The dehumanisingorientalism of these stories obscures the full picture: that women's self-determination is central to the success of our struggle and ourvision of a liberated, democratic and ecological society. Women are now running academies across Kurdistan, establishingwomen-only villages for victims of abuse, and are the most active members of civic and political life, in councils, communes and as representatives in political parties. At least 40% of each gender must be elected to political office at every level of society, through a co-presidential system in which only women have the right to elect the female co-chair whilst everyone elects the male co-chair. This shares power, has an educational impact and promotes a fair consensus in all political decisions.

Ecological society is based on democratic confederalism within democratic nations rather than representative democracy within nation-states. Most states were founded through divisive nation-building projects – including war – sometimes exploiting existing tensions, other times creating them, driving apart families and long-standing communities and drawing the highly militarised, yet artificial borders that prevent humanity from taking collective

responsibility for today's problems.[4] This is a legacy of 19th century white-supremacist science that 'proved' the existence of 'superior' and 'inferior' races, which European political philosophy tied to the nation-state as having a singular ethnic or cultural identity. In contemporary times, this echoes in many ways, including through the belief that it is more difficult for people of different cultures to co-exist within the same state, rather than seeing that the problem lies in the exclusionary principles of modern statehood.

In contrast, we believe and have experienced that the more diverse a nation is, the stronger its democracy. This is why the People's Democratic Party, or HDP in Turkey is the most diverse party in the Turkish Parliament, with representation from all the communities of Mesopotamia and Anatolia; Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Assyrians, Muslims, Alevis, Christians and Yazidis. In Turkey's 2015 elections, the HDP gained a historic victory, winning 59 seats. Yet on Nov 4th 2016, 11 of the elected officials, including the two co-chairs, were detained by the Turkish state.

Why is this so significant? We have to remember that if different ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East are unified, it would be more difficult to divide and rule the region. As one Arab member of the Rojava administration explained to Kurdish academic and activist Dilar Dirik:

> *'The democratic autonomy system in our three cantons shakes and upsets the whole world because the capitalist system does not want freedom and democracy for the Middle East, despite all its pretensions. That is why everyone attacks Rojava. The different forms of state exemplified by the Syrian Arab Republic under Assad and the Islamic State are two sides of the same coin as they deny and destroy the diversity mosaic of our region. But more and more Arabs from the rest of Syria come to Rojava to learn about democratic autonomy because they see a perspective for freedom here.'*

Most nation-states centralise decision-making power so that little political activity happens where it is most needed. Democratic confederalism, however, is based on direct democracy. With the codification of the "Social Contract" in Rojava, people from various nations and faiths come together to run politics through direct participation in commissions, committees, councils, communes from street-level, to areas, to regions, to cities and so on. This also takes place in Turkey, where, for example, the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement wasrecently restructured into local and provincial councils. Each council is autonomous, but is networked with others as part of a confederation that forms the political structure of the Kurdish movement.

Democratic confederalism challenges capitalist modernity's ideas of ownership, a challenge taken up by indigenous movements whose experience of violence during modern state-formation led them to depart from this route and work towards self-determination beyond borders. Much like the Zapatistas in Mexico, in Rojava, decisions on social issues, from infrastructure and energy to education and domestic violence are all discussed and resolved together. Here, a national 'managerial' or 'owning' government becomes redundant – the aim is for people themselves to manage the society they live in together.

This does not mean that there are no tensions, disagreements and sometimes even conflict, especially since internalised oppression and authoritarian structures run deep, leading to both political apathy and abuse of political power. But this is why re-educating ourselves is vital. Our education academies promote a more conscious mentality; while our commitment to regenerating a co-operative society means that this approach is reinforced through people making and witnessing real changes on the ground.

For example, we are building a collective economy through co-operatives. This not only creates non-hierarchical relations between workers, but also with the earth. This is in direct contrast to today's globalised economic system, which favours over-exploiting nature for the short-term interests of a few, rather than economic justice. In Rojava, hundreds of co-operatives have been established. Both need and the historical economy of the region mean

prioritising agricultural co-ops, with local lands tended to by local people – many of them women – with the communes ensuring its equitable distribution, allocation and use. But this applies across all sectors in Rojava; workers cooperatives manage the economy, including small textile, oil and food-processing sectors, while doctors committees are working to design a free healthcare system.

Ecological society serves nature and humans in constructive ways, using appropriate technologies. For example, renewable energy like solar panels, wind and hydro turbines or biogas digesters – responding to the diversity of gifts nature offers us in our local regions – are better alternatives than oil or dams and nuclear plants. With much of the region destroyed by recent conflict, a space has opened for experimenting with approaches that reduce the ecological burden through sustainable building methods and communal principles. A project to build a new health and social centre in Kobane, for example, will use thermal insulation, an integrated biological wastewater treatment, and solar energy. This is not a superficial nod towards 'sustainability'; if the roots of the climate crisis lie within capitalist modernity's own destructive nature, ecological economics must challenge the idea of growth itself and move towards a re(constructive), cyclical relationship with nature.

Whilst the movement's approach developed through conversation with like-minded people from across the world, it speaks to the history, culture and natural landscapes of the Kurdish people, which is why it comes to life here, even under the most repressive of circumstances. Our mothers remember times without borders, when life was nomadic and barter and exchange were common practice. For them, forming cooperatives with other women to make bread is both a reclamation of their past as well as a vision for their future, liberated from patriarchal feudal structures that denied them full rights. And not just patriarchy. In July, fighters from the YPJ sent a message of solidarity to the Black Lives Matter movement, recognising that sexism developed together with racism and capitalism and until we end all forms of domination, no one can say they are truly free.

To build an ecological world, we need new mindsets, cultures and strong institutions to protect it. We mustn't deny those people already laying down the stones on this path.

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[1] See Foragers, Farmers, Fossil Fuels by Ian Morris for a partial discussion of this.

[2] See oD's Beyond Trafficking and Slavery section for discussions of contemporary slavery.

[3] See this overview of the development of industrial versus ecological agriculture as well as groups such as the Institute for Ecology and Culture for discussions on the urgent need for contemporary 'localisation'.

[4] See for example, Mahmood Mamdani's Citizen and Subject (whose significance is commented on in the link) and Benedict Andersons' Imagined Communities for some discussion of this.