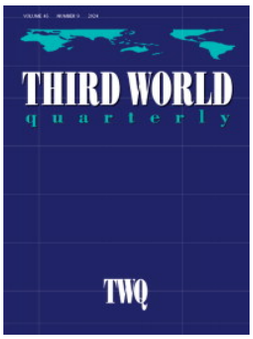

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Decolonisation agriculture: challenging colonisation through the reconstruction of agriculture in Western Kurdistan (Rojava)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the colonial homogenising policies of the Syrian Ba'ath regime and the subsequent decolonisation processes that led to the emergence of Rojava as a pluriverse. In 1963, the Ba'ath regime implemented nation-state colonialism in the predominantly Kurdish region, using agricultural modernisation as a tool for its colonisation efforts. This modernisation bolstered the central state, perpetuated the underdevelopment of the region as a periphery, and asserted control through the settlement and distribution of land to Arab families loyal to the regime. Following the regime's collapse in Rojava in 2012, the communities that comprise the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) dismantled the colonial agricultural system. They developed a decentralised governance and agrarian development approach, referred to here as the decolonisation of agriculture. Based on interviews and fieldwork in the region, this article explores the interplay between agricultural development and colonial politics, as well as the critical role of agriculture in the broader struggle for decolonisation. We conclude that in the anti-colonial struggle, people and the rhizomatic governance structures they develop challenge colonial submission to the central state, exploring life beyond the nation-state, which is crucial for a decolonial shift.

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Introduction

Prior to the implosion of the Syrian central state with the onset of the Syrian Civil War, Rojava[1] functioned as a colonial periphery under the Syrian government. However, Rojava emerged from this status through a process of political and economic decolonisation. In this article, we explore this decolonisation process through the lens of the political economy of agriculture, set against the backdrop of the colonial policies of the Syrian Ba'ath regime, which has been in power since 1963. We examine these policies as a form of nation-state colonialism, using the modernisation of agriculture as a key tool for the colonisation of peoples and places. This is followed by a discussion of the decolonisation processes since 2012, through

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which Rojava has been reconstituted as a pluriverse (Escobar 2018) with a decentralised governance structure.

Coloniality has been defined as the darker side of modernity, as it emerged as a structure of power built on western ideas of civilisation (Mignolo 2011). Though mostly discussed in terms of relation of the west to other parts of the world, we discuss the politics of the Syrian Ba'ath regime as colonial. We argue that its coloniality emerged as the darker side of agricultural modernisation. Promising progress and productivity, its agricultural modernisation has been a colonial vehicle resting on three main practices. First, agricultural modernisation played a role in bolstering the development of the central state in the region. Second, agricultural modernisation transformed the West Kurdistan region into a supplier of primary (agricultural) products, thereby underdeveloping the region as a periphery of the Syrian central state in the service of its national economy. Third, the distribution of land to and the settlement in Kurdistan of Arab families perceived as loyal to the regime aimed to assert control over the territory and its inhabitants. While these practices exhibited elements of franchise and settler colonialism, collectively, they not only targeted the extraction of wealth from Kurdistan or demographic change for the benefit of the greater Arab nation but also aimed at assimilating the Kurds and Kurdistan into that nation. Thus, the article discusses the agricultural development of West Kurdistan as organised by the administration in Damascus in terms of a disguised form of internal colonial politics. After the collapse of this Ba'ath regime in Rojava in 2012, the colonial agricultural system was dismantled by the newly instituted Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Unlike the pursuit of a nation-state as a model for political restructuring (Goeman 2008), AANES aimed to develop an interconnected network of locally administrated communities. This article thus seeks to explore two key aspects of the process outlined: (1) the interplay between agricultural development and nation-state colonial politics and (2) the Kurdish movement's practice in Rojava/AANES of decolonising agriculture.[2]

Data was gathered through online interviews in 2023 and fieldwork conducted from 26 April to 6 June 2024. In total, 18 online interviews were conducted. Fourteen interviewees (six women, eight men) were involved in cooperatives. They included co-chairs and spokespersons (one was a women's movement representative/manager). The other four people with whom we conducted in-depth interviews were two political activists, one environmental activist, and a lecturer in North and East Syria (NES). Following the online interviews, fieldwork was conducted in NES in two rural areas in the period April to June 2024: one near Dêrik and the other around Tirbespiyê. The fieldwork involved administering questionnaires and conducting interviews. In Dêrik, questionnaires were completed by 10 participants in three villages (7 men, 3 women; 4 Arabs, 6 Kurds). In Tirbespiyê, questionnaires were completed in five villages by 17 participants (11 men, 6 women; 2 Assyrians, 3 Yazidis, 2 Arabs, 10 Kurds). Although the questionnaires involved a limited number of participants, the outcomes provide an impression of what are considered contentious issues. In Dêrik, a group discussion was held with various local officials, including the co-chairpersons of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD), the head of the ecology department of the Dêrik municipality, the co-chair of the Dêrik agricultural committee, a staff member responsible for cooperatives, and the head of the Seed Institution (*Saziya Tov*). In addition, two agricultural cooperatives in Dêrik were visited. In Tirbespiyê, visits were also made to a cooperative farm and a fertiliser cooperative, where six interviews were conducted with the co-chairs of

the cooperatives. The interviews and questionnaires were mostly conducted in Kurdish and Arabic.[3]

In the first part of the article, we discuss the question of colonialism and how colonialism in Kurdistan distinguishes itself from franchise and settler forms of colonialism. In order to understand the form colonialism takes in Kurdistan, we introduce the terms *international* and *internal* colony. In the second part of the article, we discuss how agrarian development or modernisation policies operated as a vehicle for the colonisation of Kurdistan. In the third part, we discuss the features of decolonising agriculture in Kurdistan. The main conclusion we draw is that the rhizomatic agricultural restructuring in AANES disrupted the Syrian state's colonial design of West Kurdistan and its monocultural policies directed at the land, crops and people. Instead, it created locally administered economies of diversity.

The colonial status of Kurdistan

Generally, colonialism is described as a spatial practice of dominance entailing the subjugation of one group or people by another. This domination is enforced by a political entity through military, economic and cultural means (Sunca 2023a, 72). Operating within this matrix of subjugation, various kinds of colonialism can be distinguished, which historically have their roots in two basic forms: franchise colonialism and settler colonialism (Shoemaker 2015).[4] In franchise colonialism, the colonial power is interested in the exploitation of the colony, and settlement is organised around the extraction of resources and the exploitation of labour for processes of capital accumulation. In settler colonialism, the objective is to displace the Indigenous population, making a permanent home for the settlers in the colonised area.

In the twentieth century, Marxist political thought inspired liberation struggles for decolonisation. The status of Kurdistan as a colony has been a fierce issue of debate within the revolutionary left in the region since the 1970s. The Marxist left generally recognised the existence of a Kurdish nation and its status as oppressed but denied the colonial status of Kurdistan for two reasons. First, although the Kurds could be considered an oppressed nation, the status of a colony, it was argued, had to be determined by analysing the status of the oppressing country. As colonialism was a phenomenon that occurred in the historical stage of imperialism, the countries occupying Kurdistan could not be considered imperialist, so the status of Kurdistan could not be that of a colony. Second, since the economy of Kurdistan was integrated into the economy of the occupying countries, one could not speak of a separate economy that was exploited. Hence, the main contradiction was not between coloniser and colonised, but between capital and labour, regardless of ethnocultural or national identity (Vali 2020; Jongerden 2024).

The lack of recognition of Kurdistan as a colony extends to much of the Marxian academic work. The world-system and centre–periphery Marxian discourse that became dominant in the period after the Second World War understood colonialism within a world system characterised by unequal economic relations between states and thus restricted its analysis of colonial pasts and neocolonial continuities to the inter-state level (Sunca 2023a). This approach made it difficult to recognise and analyse intra-state colonialism: the nationalist identity politics of states as colonial projects. Though numerous thinkers have considered how the exertion of power in post-colonial settings, frequently manifested through authoritarian governance, sustains a cycle of colonial oppression and violence, this analysis has

predominantly focused on the actions of past Western colonisers. It has overlooked the examination of such dynamics as a characteristic of internal colonisation perpetuated by a new hegemonic regime (Mbembe 2001).

It was the Turkish sociologist Ismail Beşikçi who introduced a novel approach to the question of the colonial status of Kurdistan. He argued that colonial projects in Kurdistan have derived their logic from (1) its location within (and not outside) the colonial states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) that have occupied a divided Kurdistan and, in relation to that, (2) the submission to an aggressive, nascent nationalism according to which the strength of the state was (and continues to be) determined by the extent to which the land and citizens over which it claims sovereignty comprise a single cultural identity (Beşikçi 1990, 2014). Beşikçi introduced the concept of 'international colony' to get at the status of Kurdistan as colonised by (four) states that had emerged during the course of the twentieth century from the Ottoman and Persian Empires. 'International' here does not refer to a relation between two entities (only), a dominating political entity (the coloniser) and a dominated political entity (the colonised), but (also) to the division of Kurdistan across the four different internationally recognised states.

As a colony of multiple states, Kurdistan became subject to homogenising nation-building projects that targeted geographies and peoples (Öktem 2005, 2008; Tejel 2009a, 2009b; Jongerden 2022). Beşikçi described extensively how Kurdistan, relocated within the borders of these states, became subjected to concerted assimilation efforts aiming at the dissolution of Kurdistan and the Kurds (Beşikçi 1990, 1991, 2014). The partitioned territories effectively became 'internal colonies' (Duruiz 2020), referring to the set of practices through which the central state erased the occupied lands as parts-to-be of their nation-states. In other words, internal colonisation abandons the idea of a spatial distance[5] between the coloniser and the colonised, connoting instead a culture-specific domination within state borders (Etkind 2011, 7).

Pan-Arabism and colonisation by agricultural means

In Syria, the Kurdish issue emerged as a colonial one within the context of a changing political landscape, primarily as a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the nation-states of Turkey (1923), Iraq (1932) and Syria (1946). Spread across south-eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, the Ottomans and their vassals had variously administered an empire of peoples and assemblage of systems of direct and indirect rule. They had lacked both the means and any need to mould, shape or otherwise create a unified population. By the time Syria was carved out from the remains of the empire, however – first as a French Mandate (in 1920) before gaining political independence – nationalism had become a vibrant and multifaceted political imaginary, a powerful colonial platform through which to realise political and territorial claims. The main objective of the state's internal colonialism, therefore, was the production of a 'nation' within the allotted borders. Military occupation and political control were quickly followed by economic means as the main vehicle for the colonisation of Kurdistan (Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2020; Yadirgi 2020). While Syria had gained its independence as a result of a struggle against France, it became itself a colonising state. Though presenting the self-image of a post-colonial state, it exerted a colonial politics over Kurdistan and the Kurds.

Exclusionary attitudes towards the Kurds began shortly after Syria's establishment as an independent state in 1946, and they took on a structural form with a population census in 1962 that resulted in the exclusion from citizenship of Kurds on the basis of their categorisation as 'foreign' (*ajanib*) or 'unregistered' (*maktumin*) persons. As a result, approximately 120,000 Kurds, some 20% of the Kurdish population in Syria, were stripped of their citizenship and lost their statutory (civil and political) rights, including the rights to receive an education, to own property, and to participate in elections (HRW 1996; McDowall 2004). The situation worsened when the Arab nationalist Ba'ath party, founded in 1943, gained control of the state in 1963 and promised to develop an Arab nation in Syria. Agricultural modernisation was to be one of the major vehicles driving the creation of this Arab nation, functioning as a means for the colonisation of Kurdistan through three intertwined projects: the modernisation of agricultural production, development of economic dependency relations, and instigation of a demographic politics.

First, the modernisation of agriculture under the Ba'ath functioned as a mechanism for the expansion of the state in rural areas (Schad 2001). From the late nineteenth century, a shift towards land privatisation led to the formation of large estates and specialised crop production, supported by urban investors from cities like Aleppo and Damascus. This shift caused tensions between smallholders and landlords, and between villagers and urban elites. The Ba'ath Party capitalised on this rural resentment, developing a strong support base in rural areas and among the rural poor. The envisioned transformation of the agrarian economy was to be accomplished through the establishment of large-scale state-run irrigated farms, as small-scale agriculture was considered inefficient (Hinnebusch et al. 2011). Advised by Soviet engineers, the Ba'ath regime embarked on several massive irrigation and land reclamation projects in the Kurdish regions (Springborg 1981). The Tabqa Dam was the hydrological centrepiece of this modernisation project. It aimed to transform the small-scale irrigation and dry-land farming in the Euphrates basin into large-scale irrigated agriculture for the production of 'strategic crops', mainly wheat, barley and cotton (Hinnebusch et al. 2011).

As political and technological assemblies that combine hydro-electrical and agricultural interventions with a centralised bureaucracy, dams were conceived and utilised as material agents of the central administration and colonial state power (Scott 1998; Mitchell 2002; Harris 2012; Akıncı et al. 2020). To paraphrase Tilly (1975): states build dams, and dams build states. Centrally planned and supervised by technocrats, agricultural production was regulated through medium- and long-term sector planning that involved a comprehensive annual plan with targets for key crops, areas for planting specified by crop, and instructions about the crops that farmers should grow (Hinnebusch et al. 2011, 5–6). Colonial practices came with high environmental degradation but poor returns. The ecological costs of these schemes were particularly high; soil quality was diminished due to the monocropping and extensive use of water and fertilisers, water quality was reduced as a result of salinisation and pollution,[6] and water availability decreased because of overexploitation and resource mismanagement, along with lower rainfall and upstream dam construction in Turkey (Haddad 2011; De Châtel 2014; Daoudy 2020).

The second way in which agrarian development enabled colonisation involved the creation of economic dependencies. The Ba'ath's economic politics had resembled the model developed by the economist Friedrich List, whose idea of a national economy replicated imperial centre–periphery relations domestically and developed an imperial colonial politics

to the level of the nation-state (Ince 2016, 380). The creation of added value through conversion of the produce into consumer products became planned in the western part of the country and typically turned the Kurdish regions into providers of resources for the centre. So, under the Ba'ath regime, West Kurdistan mainly produced primary products for processing, which was predominantly situated outside the region. Thus, Rojava became the wheat basket of Syria and produced most of its cotton, yet it was dependent for supplies of flour, bulgur wheat, pasta, and textiles on cities outside the region, such as Hama, Homs, Aleppo and Damascus. This unequal economic development, creating a centre and periphery, is referred to by various authors as a process of internal colonisation by 'de-development' (Roy 1995; Soleimani and Mohammadpour 2020, 742; Yadirgi 2020).

Third, agricultural modernisation was co-constructed with a demographic policy of Arabisation, a form of settler colonialism instrumental in the nation-state colonialism aimed at subordinating Kurdistan and dissolving it into the Arab nation. However, the Ba'athists considered any cultural integration of the Kurds into a Syrian identity to be 'delicate' at best and a 'malignant tumor' at worst (Tejel 2009b, 64). The issue was addressed through an 'Arab Belt' policy, which aimed to replace the Kurdish population of 332 villages with Arab settlers in a 280-km-long, 15-km-wide stretch of well-cultivated land running along the border with Turkey (Tejel 2009b). Extending 375 km in total to the Iraq border, the Arab Belt idea entailed (1) the displacement of the Kurds from their lands, (2) a divide-and-rule policy within the Kurdish community, (3) Arab settlement of the Kurdish areas, and (4) the establishment of an Arab *cordon sanitaire* along the border with Turkey with (5) collective farms for the Arab settlers (McDowall 2004, 475). Land was expropriated for this from Kurdish farmers (Selby 2005), and in the early 1970s, following the construction of the Tabqa dam for the irrigation of land, Arab families were armed and settled in 'model' farms in the heart of the Kurdish region (Tejel 2009b, 62).[7] A total of 41 model farms were established, and though the Arab Belt project was suspended in 1976, the model farms that formed the core of the belt were not dismantled and displaced Kurds were not allowed to return to their land, effectively keeping the belt project in place (HRW 2009).

Implosion and transition

The Ba'ath regime's colonial policies in West Kurdistan unravelled when its authority and presence there imploded. On the night of 18–19 July 2012, the local People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) seized control of Kobanî, a town with a population of 50,000 near the border with Turkey. This event, known as the 'Kobanî Revolution', swiftly spread to other cities and towns in the Kurdistan region, leading to the formation of the Rojava Autonomous Administration (Knapp et al. 2016, 54–55) – the region under autonomous administration adopted the name 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria' (*Rêveberiya Xweser a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê*) in 2018.

When the central state lost its control over the Rojava/AANES region in 2012, the agricultural modernisation and rural development policy in Syria co-constructed through a policy of Arabisation and dispossession was halted. Instead, a network of locally administered communities emerged. This not only interrupted the policies of dispossession but undertook the development of a new politics, involving a revolution in both the administration of the territory and its cultural and agricultural practices. Food provisioning for regional markets was made a key feature in the new economy along with the stimulation of family farms and

cooperatives and the development of local processing and manufacturing capacities (Jongerden 2021; Aslan 2023).[8] This would form the basis for regional food sovereignty (Yarkin 2015).

A rich body of academic literature has been produced in recent years about the revolution in Rojava. Much of it situates the radical transformation of governance structures in the region in the context of the ideological and political transformation of the Kurdish movement inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan (Sunca 2020; Cemgil 2021; Gerber and Brincat 2021; Matin 2021). This work explores how the movement has transitioned from a party that aimed at the establishment of a state as the means for decolonisation and societal transformation towards the twin concepts of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism, which emphasise the right to self-administration and the form of a confederation of autonomous assemblies that it takes.

Öcalan's work expressing ideological and political reorientation was written while he was in detention and preparing his defence against allegations of treason. Around the turn of the millennium, having previously proclaimed the establishment of an independent state as the sole legitimate political objective of a national liberation movement and following a critical examination of liberation struggles worldwide, Öcalan began to question whether independence really *should* be conceived and implemented through the construction of a nation-state (Jongerden 2016). Thence, taking the state out of the equation for measuring self-determination, the idea of an ideological and political framework based on the notion of self-government within a stateless society was developed (Gunes 2019; Jongerden 2019).

Rather than leading a state-formation struggle and then becoming its new elite, the party-movement would be centred on a strengthening of society through a form of self-administration. This followed in a radical way the idea that post-colonial states should not be imitations of European states (Fanon 1963). Not only should they not just become a different state, they should not become a state as such at all (Karasu 2009); instead, they should formulate an alternative perspective on modernity (Yarkin 2015). Öcalan named his proposed alternative 'democratic modernity', which was made up of democratic autonomy[9] and democratic confederalism[10] as the constitutive pillars of every democratic nation or community (Öcalan 2020). Relatedly, many have discussed Öcalan's theoretical engagement with post-anarchist and post-Marxist scholars – particularly Murray Bookchin (Jongerden 2019), but also Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (Dinc 2020), Samir Amin (Grubacic 2019, 1075), and Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein (Aslan 2022). While some have focused on the post-capitalist turn of the movement inspired by Öcalan (Aslan 2023), others have emphasised the feminist dimension (Tax 2016; Dirik 2022; Piccardi and Barca 2022), the ecological dimension (Hunt 2019) or both (Aslan 2022; Piccardi 2022). Yet much of the literature emphasises the anti-capitalist struggle over the anti-colonial struggle of the Kurdish movement. While some works do mention how the politics of the Kurdish movement addresses colonialism (Yarkin 2015; Matin 2021; Piccardi and Barca 2022; Sunca 2023a, 2023b), the focus tends to be placed on overcoming the problem of capitalist development. Although the Kurdish movement aims to develop a social economy as an alternative to the capitalist economy, the main contradiction is between a colonial state and its modernisation politics, on the one hand, and, on the other, the constitution of Kurds and Kurdistan as identities through which these are to be dissolved.

Decolonisation and agriculture

We have argued that agricultural modernisation was a colonial project in three respects. It bolstered central state development in the region through projects around which the central state's authority was built; it made West Kurdistan a supplier of primary agricultural products, which marginalised Rojava, positioning it as a peripheral supplier to the Syrian central state, rather than allowing it to develop its own economy; and it involved the distribution of land to Arab families perceived as loyal to the regime in order to exert control over the territory and its inhabitants with the long-term objective of dissolving the geography and the people into the Arab nation. In the new governance struggle that emerged after 2012, these three pillars of the colonisation project were addressed in three different ways. These involved the parallel, opposing development of (1) a rhizomatic democracy as an alternative to the central state, (2) diverse agroecologies in response to the de-development of peripheralisation, and (3) a communal economy against Arab nationalist identity politics. These are discussed below.

(1) Rhizomatic democracy

When the central state's control in the region collapsed with the war, a new governance model was established. In line with Öcalan's revised thinking, the governance structure has been organised into a network of councils, with communes or local communities organised in assemblies, serving as the fundamental units. Each commune comprises an executive committee and various working committees, including those focused on economics (or agriculture), education, and women's affairs. The commune functions as both a decision-making body and an executive institution. Its coordination is overseen by two co-chairs and members representing the committees. Communes are grouped into neighbourhood councils, which, in turn, are organised into district, city and regional councils, collectively forming the Autonomous Administration. While the names of the councils may have changed over the years, their fundamental principle remains the same: the establishment of a network governance model in which decision-making authority is decentralised to communities rather than centralised in a bureaucracy, ensuring the active participation of all members of the community.

This new political model is mostly defined negatively, as 'non-state' or 'non-statist', but it can also be referred to positively, as a rhizomatic democracy. The concept of rhizome comes from the book *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 1993), where the metaphor of the rhizome is employed to describe a way of thinking about structure and organisation that contrasts with centralised and hierarchical models. Instead of a vertical branching structure, rhizomes have horizontally oriented stem systems that lack a central organising point. Deleuze and Guattari argue that this offers a superior model because the non-centralised, non-hierarchical structuring enables heterogeneous connections between parts (Somers-Hall 2013, 2).

We borrow the concept of the rhizome here to describe how the agrarian economy was reorganised in NES. This emphasises not only the importance of horizontal relations but also the immanent potential for new rhizome formation from its parts and how, in every social organisation, forms of verticality are produced. Thus, although the rhizome metaphor emphasises the 'scaling out', we recognise that there are also forms of 'scaling up' (Garcia-Arias, Tornel, and Flores Gutiérrez 2024). This is the logic of democratic confederalism.

The interrelation of self-administered communes as a horizontal network also creates a mechanism for joint decision-making through confederal clustering (see Figure 1), in which assemblies at the village level form new assemblies for deliberation and decision-making. The assemblies that emerge from such clustering do not possess higher authority; rather, they result from recognising the relational nature of our existence. Consequently, there is a necessity to consider wider responsibilities when making decisions at the local level.

The primary *nodes* in the agrarian structure are the *village communes*. All households are entitled to participate in the commune. The commune is a space for deliberation and decision-making. Every village commune has an agricultural committee where matters related to production, crop rotation, and water management and distribution are determined. However, villages are not spatial envelopes, each separated from places outside; decisions that have an impact beyond the commune or problems that cannot be solved by one commune alone are discussed in a broader context. In the first instance, this is the district or neighbourhood council – the *Bajarok* – in which 40–60 village communes are clustered. Several *Bajarok*s make up a city council – *Bajar* – which combine to create a canton, which themselves make up AANES. It is according to this logic of clustering that the territory is governed, with the rhizome not only spreading out through a horizontal logic but also rising, following a (bottom-up) vertical logic. To support this network of councils, Agricultural Centers for Consultancy and Services (*İrşadi* or *Erşadi*, meaning 'consultancy') have been established, which provide various forms of advice, support and resources related to veterinary needs, licensing, irrigation, seed distribution, diesel subsidies and pest control, while the Agriculture Development Agencies (*Sirketa Pêşxistina Candini* or *Sirket*) are responsible for coordinating technical and infrastructural innovations. The region inherited a centralised water and energy infrastructure controlled by Turkey and Syria. To address the vulnerability of this centrally planned system – exacerbated by Turkey's regular energy supply cut-offs through drone attacks and its withholding of water from upstream dams to disrupt production – a decentralised system has been introduced.

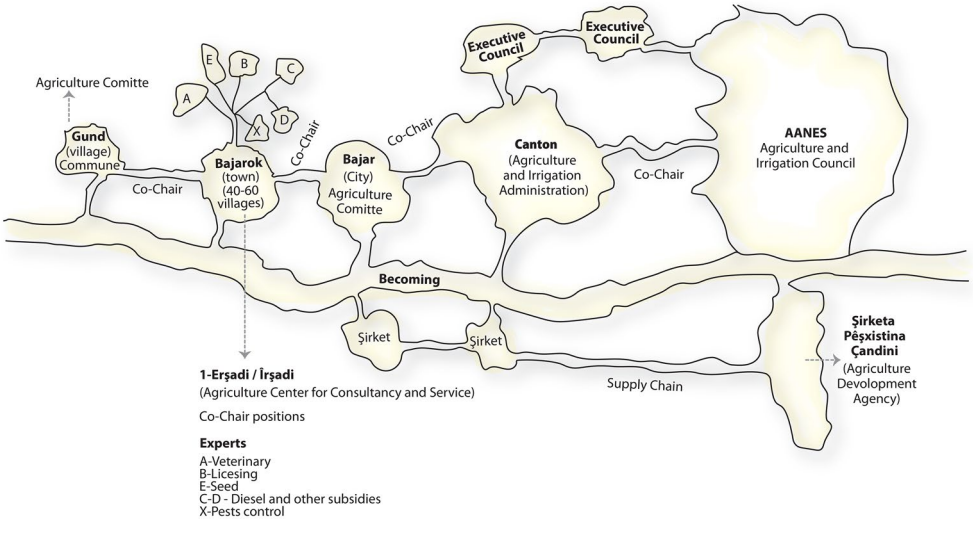

Figure 1. Map of the administrative network in Rojava/Autonomus Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

This system includes solar panels for energy and water management techniques such as drip irrigation and water harvesting (Figure 2).

The decentralised organisational structure proliferates in diverse directions, and is supported by the AANES Agriculture and Irrigation Council (*Desteya Candini*) which encompasses several autonomous units and institutions, including the Public Land Administration (*Rêveberiya Erdên Giştî*), Water Institution (*Saziya Avê*), and Seed Institution (*Saziya Tov*). For instance, the Public Land Administration is tasked with distributing land and has allocated some 25,000 acres to agricultural cooperatives and 44,000 acres to women's cooperatives. The latter are the product of and enable further new rhizomatic structures. As an autonomous movement, the women's organisation *Kongreya-Star* formed its own governance structure, which includes the establishment of women's cooperatives, which, in turn, form a network referred to as the Women's Economy (*Aboriya Jin*), but which we will not discuss here.

The establishment of a cooperative system does face various difficulties, and this highlights a difference between the cadres in the movement and the peasants. Cadres attribute the difficulty of expanding cooperatives to the people's ingrained statist and individualistic habits, while many peasants argue that unequal contributions (the problem of free riders) and abuse of the cooperative system for personal gain or allocation to family members (corruption/nepotism) are major issues. Consequently, the Kurdish movement's concept of communalising natural resources, particularly land and water, has faced resistance from peasants. Instead of communalisation, they demand land reform and increased individual agricultural subsidies for diesel, fertilisers and electricity. This situation highlights a critical vulnerability within the movement: a significant tension exists between the ideological

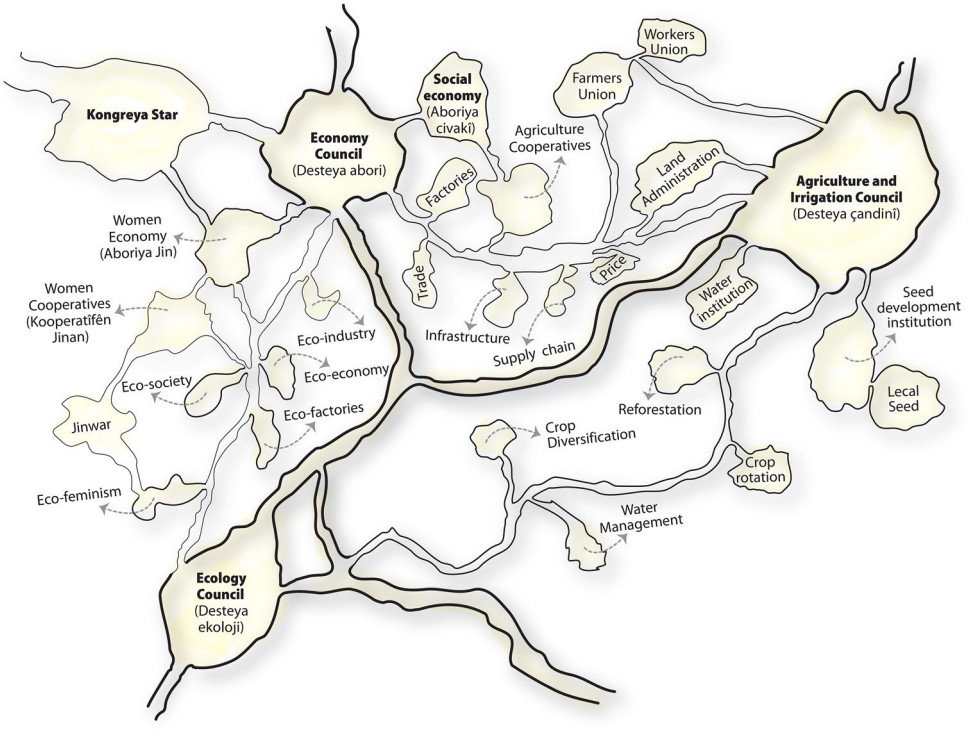

Figure 2. Confederal relationality of organisations in agriculture.

ideals of the politically motivated and the desires of a large part of the farmers and villagers. When asked whether communal use through cooperatives or individual distribution to the peasants would be better, nearly 70% of respondents preferred individual distribution to the peasants, while 24% believed that a well-established cooperative system would be more beneficial.

As Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (Ploeg 2013) shows in his treatise on the agrarian question in the twenty-first century, the radical left has long been divided over this issue of peasant production. Historically, the controversy was epitomised in the debates between Vladimir Lenin and Alexander Chayanov in early twentieth-century Russia and the Soviet Union, reflecting differing views on land reform and the role of peasants in society. Lenin and most of the Bolsheviks advocated for the nationalisation of land and the replacement of individual cultivation with cooperative cultivation. In contrast, Chayanov, representing the Narodniks, believed in the emancipation of peasants rather than their imposed dissolution from above. In 1917, Chayanov argued that the socialisation of land cannot be realised through 'enlightened absolutism' but is to 'result from the involvement of local and democratically elected councils', yet this is not necessarily in contradiction with peasant production (Ploeg 2013, 109).

The question of how to implement land reform – through Leninist depeasantisation or Chayanovian peasantisation – featured in developments and discussions worldwide throughout the twentieth century, from Italy and Portugal to Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau, from Mexico and Cuba to Viet Nam, China and Japan – and today, in Rojava. From our interviews and discussions with cadres, it became apparent that the Kurdish movement faces a challenging paradox. Excessive idealisation of the cooperative system in combination with resistance from peasants makes practical implementation difficult. This may foster another issue: the emergence of a bureaucratic elite or managerial class seeking to lead the cooperative movement.

(2) Diverse agroecologies

To date, approximately 500,000 hectares of land formerly under the regime's control has been communalised as public land (*Erdên Gişti*). The Public Land Administration had allocated approximately 80% of this land to agricultural cooperatives, women's economy and cooperatives, families, forests/agroforestry, parks, associations, and camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) as outlined in their report dated 20 December 2023.[11] Contrary to the old monocropping approach, crop diversification is now a cornerstone of agricultural policy. This encompasses a variety of vegetables and pulses, as well as agroforestry crops such as olives, pistachio nuts, figs and grapes (vineyards).[12] Chickpeas, lentils and beans are now being cultivated, none of which were previously grown, collectively occupying 25% of the cooperative's agricultural land. Cotton production has decreased to 10%, while vegetables now cover 5% of the cultivated area. This diversification initiative was further strengthened by the planting of several hundred thousand fruit-bearing trees. (Aslan 2023, 151). Through the Seed Institution, AANES focuses on selecting drought-resistant and locally adapted seeds, catering to both agroforestry and crop diversification. Relatedly, AANES has dedicated significant investment and resources to rainwater harvesting for water-efficient irrigation utilising the 'drip' method.[13] This comprises a major departure from the old large-scale, centralised and monopolistic water-management practices, including the dams and irrigation channels in Syria and Turkey, along with the associated water politics.

The Cezire canton, in the eastern part of Rojava, aims to satisfy at least 50% of the region's vegetable needs through the Khabur project, which involves vegetable cooperatives, and it offers products directly to the public at fair prices through a cooperative (MED). Its fruit production is also integral to the agroforestry practised; approximately 138,000 fruit-bearing trees have been planted.[14] Ecological regeneration and agroeconomic reconstruction efforts are reinforced by crop rotation, organic composting, recycling/reusing practices, and the localisation of production, processing, and supply chains through some 500–600 agricultural cooperatives and other economic, ecological and agricultural coordination bodies in addition to the committees and assemblies.

The regime's colonial periphery–centre design was not only directed at exploitation in order to build its Arab national economy but was also a political engineering mechanism that de-developed the Kurdish region. In this design, none of the cities in the Kurdistan region had processing capacities, so an AANES priority is to develop processing infrastructure.[15] Mehran Ahmed, Co-Chair of the Agriculture and Irrigation Council, illustrates this situation thus:

> We took all 30,000 tons of cotton from the farmers in NES last year and removed the seeds, but we could not process and sell it …. Another example, our farmers have concluded that they should plant sunflowers, but after the harvest of our crops, how will we get oil from the products?[16]

The Autonomous Administration has managed to establish production facilities. Over the last decade, AANES has developed wheat, flour, bulgur, pasta and lentil processing factories along with an olive oil production facility, almost to the level of self-sufficiency, while the Economy and Agriculture Councils are currently engaged in building sugar, sunflower, soybean and cotton processing and textile production factories over the next five years.[17] The AANES social/communal economy approach – ie through agricultural cooperatives – has made significant progress in terms of dairy products. For instance, the Zozan plant has the capacity to process six tons of milk daily (for cheese, butter, yogurt and buttermilk).[18] It is also noteworthy that Rojava is now able to meet its red meat demand (mostly lamb/mutton and beef), although it is not yet self-sufficient in white meat (poultry, primarily chicken).[19] This model of developing production and processing capacities for the provisioning of food in local markets not only addresses the colonial de-development policy but also creates the foundation for an approach emphasising social and communal values (use value, social benefit), and democratic and ecologic principles (deconstruction of all forms of domination, including gender, class, and nature) (Öcalan 2020).

(3) Demography of the communal economy

The third vehicle for colonialism involved the application of a demographic policy that aimed to assert control over the territory and its inhabitants: the distribution of land to and settlement in West Kurdistan of Arab families perceived as loyal to the regime. The response of the Autonomous Administration to the Arab Belt project was notably measured. Instead of adopting a nationalist stance that would displace Arab families settled in the region decades ago and redistribute the land to Kurdish locals, the Autonomous Administration chose a different path. They did not seize the land of former Arab settlers, not only to avoid sparking ethnic conflict between Arabs and Kurds but also in recognition that some families had lived

in Rojava for several generations and had become locals themselves. Moreover, a fundamental principle of the Autonomous Administration is the idea of a democratic nation, which, unlike the concept of a nation-state, is based not on creating a singular identity but on fostering a society where multiple identities coexist. Therefore, rather than taking land from those settled under the Arab Belt project and redistributing it among the Kurds, the land policy of the autonomous communities has focused on distributing state-owned land to those in need. However, three-quarters of Kurdish respondents to our questionnaire strongly criticised the Autonomous Administration on this issue, viewing it as a policy of de-Kurdification that should be reversed. One-fifth of the respondents considered this a political issue that is difficult to resolve, while the remaining 5% refrained from giving an answer. Nonetheless, all respondents agreed that those dispossessed should be compensated. Interestingly, Arabs who were resettled in the region under the Arab Belt policy also believe the project was wrong. However, they argue that the regime, not they themselves, was responsible for this injustice, implying that they should remain on the land.

While the demographic policies in the past are a highly sensitive issue, demographic change as a result of current developments is an issue of concern. Important drivers of demographic change are the worsening economic conditions due to drought, the war in Syria and Turkish interventions, and an embargo imposed by Turkey and its Kurdish partner in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq were cited as the most important causes of emigration (65%), especially a dramatic increase in emigration after the Turkish military occupation of Afrin and Serêkaniyê. Among Kurds, Assyrians and Yazidis, almost every household reported having one or more members who had emigrated. Among Arabs, just 1 in 10 households reported this. When asked for an explanation of this difference, the answer given by Semo, a 74-year-old Yazidi farmer, ran thus:

> No one feels safe except the Arabs. Whether it is ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Turkey, or the regime, if they come again, we are the first ones they'll slaughter. Nobody touches the Arabs. Look at Afrin and Serêkaniyê; Kurds, Yazidis, Assyrians, and Armenians have been massacred and driven out.[20]

Discussion

This article has delved into the intricate dynamics of Kurdistan's dual colonial status in the context of four nation-states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Occupied and colonised by these, it is an international colony; fragmented within the nation-state borders, it has been made into four internal colonies, subject to dissolution under the influence of hegemonic national identities. This is the logic of the colonialism to which the Kurds and Kurdistan were subjected. Focusing specifically on Syria and Rojava, the article has examined agricultural development as a tool of the central state for internal colonial politics, extending beyond the standard franchise and settler ideas of colonialisation as resource extraction and population resettlement. It has looked at how agricultural modernisation became a vehicle for state-building, economic peripheralisation and demographic engineering with the aim of dissolving Kurdistan within the new nation-state.

Jan Yasin Sunca (2023a, 86) has argued that to 'genuinely achieve decolonization', it is necessary to 'dismantle all structures that perpetuate originally colonial hierarchies' and instead 'establish a system of direct, radical, and democratic self-rule for communities'. This

echoes the words of Frantz Fanon, who wrote in *Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1963, 315) 'Let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her' since humanity was 'waiting for something from us other than such an imitation'. The recent history of the decolonisation struggle in Rojava is such a search for something new. It does not aspire to establish a new state – the traditional route of national(ist) independence – but rather focuses on challenging the authority of the intrinsically colonising state itself in which power is hierarchically ordered and centralised. That is, the movement aims for the delimitation of state power through the development of self-governance. In the spirit of decolonisation, the movement has sought new directions (Fanon 1963).

These new directions involve a double movement of a new governance structure in which the agrarian economy has been and is being reorganised. The aim of this governance structure is to empower communities to manage their affairs in relation to others, a kind of distributed or network governance that we have characterised, following Deleuze and Guattari (1993), as *rhizomatic*. We have shown how, in this network, decolonisation became equated with a decentralisation and (re)diversification of agriculture. This also implied a similar situation with regard to production infrastructure, including the development of a decentralised resource mobilisation (eg energy, water) and processing industry (eg wheat, cotton, vegetable oils). It is in and through this diversification that the colonial past as a legacy of political submission to a centre, economic dependence, and demographic engineering has been revealed and challenged. We have also shown how this rhizomatic network makes clusters – a grouping of assemblies in districts, cities and cantons forming the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, that comprises both Rojava or West Kurdistan and parts of Syria predominantly inhabited by Arabs.

This decolonial, transformative shift occurred in the Rojava/AANES region from 2012 on, when the regional authority of Damascus collapsed with the beginning of the civil war. In this process, local communal councils emerged as key actors in the reorganisation of political and economic affairs. However, we have also pointed towards two important challenges. The first is the question of legacies and the impossibility of going back to a forgone past. Particularly difficult is the issue of how to deal with the demographic engineering (Arab Belt) employed in the region in the 1970s. While a considerable number of Kurds want this policy to be reversed and the land reclaimed, many Arab families have now lived in the region for several generations. A retropolitics that would restore a past in the present stands in contradiction to the principle of building a common future, yet the Autonomous Administration is also aware that this would trigger ethnic tensions between Kurds and Arabs. This, in turn, reveals the current operation of political power.

Relatedly, in grappling with the complexities of establishing a cooperative system within the Kurdish movement, we pointed to the agrarian question that underlies choices currently being made. While some emphasise the development of communal forms such as cooperatives, others believe this development should start with peasants' fields. Here, we drew parallels to historical debates on peasant production, particularly as exemplified in the ideological schism between Lenin and Chayanov in early twentieth-century Russia/USSR. At the level of practice, the Kurdish movement finds itself ensnared in a paradox, as an overemphasis on the cooperative model clashes with peasant resistance. A major challenge is overcoming the dichotomy between family farms and communal economic principles, allowing them to coexist without merging land and resources into cooperatives.

Conclusion

We have argued that there is a wealth of scholarship on franchise and settler colonialism, two historical forms of colonialism in the modern world, yet little has been written about the colonial projects of and within nation-states (Bhabba 1994; Bhambra 2018). While the primary objective of franchise colonialism is the appropriation of resources, and that of settler colonialism is the appropriation of land, nation-state colonialism, we have argued, has as its main aim the destruction of ethnocultural difference through dissolution in a hegemonic national identity. Ultimately, the Ba'ath's internal colonialism was oriented towards the erasure of Kurdistan and the Kurds.

In much of the last and present centuries, Kurdistan has been subjected to a project of nation-state colonialism. That is, the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have occupied Kurdistan with the objective of ridding their national imaginary of the Kurds and Kurdistan. In this article we have focused on agricultural modernisation as such a vehicle. The state-led modernisation of agriculture (agrarian developmentalism) in Syria performed this function. Making the area a producer of agricultural products – the state's primary supplier of these goods – while locating their processing for the manufacture of secondary goods – the addition of value through production – outside of the region, the state (re)produced Rojava as an ecologically degraded periphery of the state, a form of colonisation by de-development.

The implosion of the state in the Kurdistan region offered an opportunity for the establishment of a new governance model. An alternative development approach based on distributed responsibilities within a network of autonomous communities was pursued. In this article, we have referred to this in the context of an anti-colonial struggle as people and governance structures (the councils, committees, cooperatives, etc.) have addressed the conventional (modernist) logic and power relations of political and economic submission to the central state. The development of this new, rhizomatic governance structure stands in the best tradition of post-colonial thought as it entails the creation of distinct conditions of life and living beyond the nation-state, which is perceived as an inappropriate means through which to effect a decolonial shift (Paradies 2020; Walsh 2020).

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Notes

1. 'Rojava' means 'west' in Kurdish and stands for 'West Kurdistan'. In Syria, West Kurdistan is divided into the governates of Afrin and Al-Hasakah, previously the Ottoman province of Al-Jazira; historically, it is part of the region of Upper Mesopotamia.
2. The article does not address Turkey's politics of occupation and resettlement or the dynamics of the war economy in Rojava. In 2018, Turkey invaded and occupied Afrin in the south-west of Rojava; a year later, it invaded and occupied a strip of land in north-east Rojava. On 24 September 2019, during the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Turkey's President Erdoğan presented plans to settle (Arab) Syrian refugees in much of Rojava – a manifestation of Turkey's settler colonialism politics in the parts of Kurdistan occupied by Syria. Meanwhile, the war economy in Rojava had highly detrimental effects on the environment and agriculture through the conditions in which oil was produced.
3. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the research. Participants were verbally briefed on the research and its objectives. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that they had the option to refrain from answering questions, decline to complete the questionnaire, or withdraw from the study at any time.
4. These emerged, along with colonial epistemologies, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and, with developmentalism as a form of colonialism, in the twentieth century.
5. This 'salt-water' thesis of colonialism defines it as a relationship between a Western metropole and an overseas territory, which has led to the neglect of colonial projects within states (Nelson 2009).
6. Among other reasons, due to deposits of sewage, agricultural chemicals, and the discharges of factories, tanneries and oil refineries.
7. A recent version of this type of idea appeared with the Turkish plan presented to the United Nations in 2019 by President Erdoğan to replace the Kurdish population on the Syrian side of the Turkish–Syrian border with Syrian Arabs (moving the Kurds to the desert in the south). See also https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/18/turkey-pitches-plan-settle-1-million-refugees-northern-syria-erdogan-kurds/.
8. Interviews: Leyla Saruxan and Mehran Ahmed, Co-Chairs of the Agriculture and Irrigation Council, 21 November 2023; Karker Ismail, Co-Chair of the Office of Community Projects and Cooperatives of Cezire Region, 21 November 2023; Emin, Union of Kurdistan Communities (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK) Economy Committee and Economy Council of AANES, 17 May 2024.
9. A major thrust of democratic autonomy is the delimitation of state power though the acceptance of the principle of self-governance. This involves the creation of an institutional framework of citizen assemblies, through which communities develop capacities to manage their own affairs.
10. Democratic confederalism concerns the relational form citizenship takes, namely the strengthening of local administrative capacities through the organisation of councils at the hamlet/village, neighbourhood, district, town/city and region levels. Presenting his perspective on autonomy and confederalism, Öcalan aligned with the radical eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin, who emphasised comprehending autonomy and confederalism as interrelated concepts. In this framework, the economy is organised through the confederal councils.

11. Unpublished report provided by the Public Land Administration (Rêveberiya Erdên Gişt̂i) on 18 December 2023.
12. Leyla Saruxan and Mehran Ahmed, 21 November 2023.
13. This involves a slow supply of piped water directly to the stem/root area of individual plants, which minimises evaporation and runoff, thus maximising water usage.
14. Karker Ismail, 21 November 2023.
15. Leyla Saruxan, 21 November 2023.
16. Mehran Ahmed, 21 November 2023.
17. Leyla Saruxan, Mehran Ahmed, 21 November 2023.
18. Leyla Saruxan, 21 November 2023.
19. Interview and reports, Dr Ahmed Al-Mohamed, Livestock Departments, Office of Agricultural Affairs of AANES, 19 November 2023.
20. Interview, Til Xatûn village/Tirbespiyê, 5 April 2024. Semo's family village and land were confiscated by the regime in 1974, and Arabs were settled there.

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