

Societybuilding & Autonomous Collaboration: **The Rojava Revolution and Statebuilding in the Middle East**

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CHAPTER 1

KURDISH ANARCHY AND STATEBUILDING IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Section 1. 1: Introduction

Two years following the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers, the United States invaded Iraq and toppled the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. As Iraqi society collapsed, an opportunity began to crystallize: the chance to resurrect Iraq in the image of America, to usher in a dawn of liberty and capitalism. From the rubble of a failed state, the phoenix of democracy would rise. The method of realization? A process known as statebuilding. There is no concrete definition of ‘statebuilding’— rather, it is an umbrella term that has been used to refer to a complex set of theories, initiatives and policies. Due to its ambiguous nature, this thesis conceptualizes statebuilding as a combination of policies and actions carried out with the goal of erecting a functioning state in place of a failed one.

Returning to Iraq, the year is now 2017 and it has become clear that the United States has largely failed to consummate its idealistic plan for the country. Iraq, along with almost every other state in the Middle East, has proven unable to withstand the instability of the Arab Spring— a series of civilian-led revolts that broke out across the region in 2010 (Eshel, 2012, p. 239). Creating a space where dissatisfaction with existing political and social realities could be expressed, the Arab Spring initiated the collapse of many society and state structures, creating a power vacuum where those with weapons could vie for territorial control and those without— flee. Terrorist organizations quickly took advantage of the chaos, leading to the emergence of the ruthless Sunni Islamic State (IS). A 21st century Pandora’s box, the Arab Spring rapidly swirled back into the depths of a brutal winter.

Now, news seems to be hurtling out of the Middle East faster than one can read the articles. “Islamic State claims blast that killed 17 in Baghdad” (“IS claims blast,” 2016). “Syrian government

troops reclaim 70% of rebel-controlled Aleppo” (“Aleppo battle: Syrian army presses advance,” 2016). “Saudi Arabian court orders the executions of 15 accused Iranian spies” (“Fifteen Saudi Shia sentenced to death,” 2016). “Iraqi Shi’a militias drive Islamic State extremists from territory southwest of Mosul” (“Iraqi Shia militias’,” 2016). “Ten Turkish troops are killed in two separate P.K.K. attacks” (“Ten Turkish troops,” 2016). And according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2016), there were over one million migrants who crossed into Europe in 2015 alone, hoping to escape the violence in the Middle East and Africa.

Statebuilding efforts in the region— primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan— have been relatively ineffective. This thesis demonstrates that statebuilding initiatives will fail to achieve any sustainable success as long as they remain influenced by a flawed understanding of ‘the state.’ I argue that the widely accepted Weberian definition of ‘the state’— as a governing institution that maintains a monopoly on violence over a designated territory and population— does not respect the agency of the individual. Focused on constructing governing institutions and relying on direct, external intervention to do so, statebuilding efforts have failed because the ‘states’ they created never gained legitimacy in the eyes of the people— mainly because they were never “of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln, 1863).

As an alternative to ‘the state,’ I investigate the practical application of “democratic confederalism” as a foundation that can be used to revise and enhance global statebuilding policy. Proposed by American anarchist Murray Bookchin in the late 1980s, democratic confederalism is based on the premise of “democracy without the state” (Öcalan, 2011, p. 21). Bookchin’s philosophy champions freedom in its truest of forms— that is, the freedom of religion, sexuality, language, expression, and self-determination, a radical application of gender equality, the dissolution of all hierarchies and the enacting of direct democracy (Biehl, 2012). Though it seems too utopian to be a

realistic model for society, there is currently a very serious experiment being carried out in the Middle East to apply democratic confederalism in its most authentic form.

In tandem with the Arab Spring, the Syrian Civil War erupted in 2011 (Salhani, 2014). Preparing to violently suppress the rebellion, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad withdrew his troops from a territory in northern Syria largely inhabited by an ethnic group known as the Kurds (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016). This territory would become known as Rojava– or “land where the sun sets” (Enzinna, 2015). Rojava is now the first place in the world that is attempting to incorporate Bookchin’s radical version of democracy, equality and ecology into its society. Though it remains to be seen whether or not Rojava will withstand the test of time, every moment it survives, it gains strength. Equipped with a constitution, a sophisticated system of government and a trained police and military force, Rojava has so far successfully declared its autonomy, secured its borders and maintained law and order within them. In 2005, Abdullah Öcalan– the imprisoned freedom fighter and ideological leader of the Kurds– wrote: “The system of nation states has become a serious barrier to the development of society and democracy and freedom...the only way [forward] is to establish a democratic confederal system that will derive its strength directly from the people.” If Öcalan is correct, then Rojava will not only survive the conflict in the Middle East, but it will flourish. As far reaching as those implications may be, Rojava may serve as an example for a new approach to international statebuilding.

At first, I attempted to apply the principles of democratic confederalism to statebuilding but it soon became clear that they are mutually exclusive. Statebuilding, as it is currently understood, is not a sustainable policy because it is based on the premise that foreign actors have the ability to structure societies other than their own. This is the logic of imperialism. Instead, I propose two models,

working in tandem, as an alternative to statebuilding. I will refer to them as Societybuilding & Autonomous Collaboration (SAC).

Societybuilding stands in direct opposition to statebuilding. While it shares the goal of creating a sustainable society, it is a grassroots movement driven by locals, rather than a practice undertaken by international entities. The second component of SAC is autonomous collaboration (AC). It is a practical foreign policy that can be adopted by international actors wishing to assist societybuilders in their effort. Autonomous collaboration is based on the anarchic principle that local populations should maintain their own agency while engaging in societybuilding and external actors should assist, rather than usurp, the effort. In Chapter 4, I will delve into the theory and practical policy application of Societybuilding & Autonomous Collaboration, as well as provide a framework for determining which populations will qualify for assistance per autonomous collaboration.

Section 1. 2: Methods

The foundation of this thesis is based on existing academic literature related to statebuilding theory. I primarily focus on the United States' statebuilding effort in Iraq as a practical and historical example of statebuilding in the 21st century. My research regarding Rojava is based on a combination of news stories, first-hand accounts by journalists and scholars visiting the region and second-hand scholarship on the topic. For the purpose of this thesis, Rojava will serve as an example of successful societybuilding, while the evidence from my case study will demonstrate that anarchism is a viable alternative to the state. The feasibility of anarchism as a foundation for the creation of strong societies will overturn assumptions regarding the nature of 'the state' that support contemporary statebuilding theories and practices.

The current nature of this topic added a dynamic quality to my work, one that demanded I stay up to date with the latest news coming out of the Middle East. I have done my best to use reputable sources and to fact check news stories through a variety of media outlets.

Finally, I feel I must admit to a certain level of partiality within my approach to this research. I am prejudiced towards liberal democracy as the ideal form of government. Liberal democracy within this thesis will be understood as a form of government that functions on behalf of the people, in which the power to elect and remove politicians lies within the citizenry and in which there are strong protections of individual freedoms. Thus, this argument was crafted under the influence of such bias.

Section 1. 3: In the Chapters to Follow

Chapter 2 of this thesis will discuss the flaws of statebuilding theory and tradition as it is widely understood and will introduce anarchism as a viable lens through which to redefine the practice. Chapter 3 will delve into Rojava as a case study, detailing the project's antecedents, its current structure and its level of success so far. From there, Chapter 4 will apply Rojava's form of democratic confederalism to statebuilding in order to introduce societybuilding and autonomous collaboration as practical alternatives to statebuilding. Finally, Chapter 5 shall provide a summation of this argument, as well as an acknowledgment of this thesis's nuances and its potential implications.

CHAPTER 2 RETHINKING STATEBUILDING

Section 2. 1: Introduction to Chapter 2

This chapter will first outline the circumstances that create a need for statebuilding. Then, I will define ‘the state’ as it pertains to my argument, which will be followed by an investigation into past and present statebuilding theories. After engaging with the existing literature, I will argue that statebuilding fails to recognize the agency of individuals within populations in need of statebuilding. In response, I propose that anarchic theory may inform a more sustainable model than the one currently in place.

Section 2. 2: When ‘The State’ Fails– A Preface to Statebuilding

Unlike the 17th century when European powers began to conquer the Western hemisphere and were engaging in empire building, our modern era has seen almost every region of our world defined by national boundaries. Thus, statebuilding in the 21st century is only undertaken in certain situations, the primary one being state failure. In this section, I will describe the process of state failure as a precursor to statebuilding. It is particularly important to understand state failure in the context of recent events in the Middle East. The current conflict in Syria and the instability of the region, which has led to the failure of quite a few Middle Eastern states, will eventually call for statebuilding measures, highlighting the relevancy of this thesis and the necessity for reconfiguring the mainstream understanding of statebuilding.

The catalyst for the conflict in the Middle East was state failure. Bates (2008) defines state failure as “the implosion of the state... [via] the transformation of the state into an instrument of predation [and] the loss of the monopoly over the means of coercion” (p. 2). The state resorts to violence against its citizens to maintain power, but unlike authoritarian systems, there are non-state actors that have developed the ability to carry out violence against the state and/or its civilians. However, although this resembles revolution, Bates (2008) notes that there is one key difference:

though both lead to violence, “revolution creates a new order, whereas state failure yields disorder”

(p.3). Furthermore, in a global context, failed states are often juxtaposed to successful states.

Successful states control defined territories and populations, conduct diplomatic relations with other states, monopolize legitimate violence within their territories, and succeed in providing adequate social goods to their populations. Failed states, their dark mirror image, lose control over the means of violence, cannot create peace or stability for their populations...and cannot ensure economic growth or any reasonable distribution of social goods: They are often characterized by massive economic inequities, warlordism, and violent competition for resources (Brooks, 2005, p. 1160-1161).

Taylor (2013) approaches state failure from a different angle by reminding the reader that, although ‘failure’ is an ending, it is also a beginning. Albeit somewhat cryptic, this idea of state failure as ‘a beginning’ is quite compelling. As I shall discuss later on, Rojava needed the impetus of the Syrian civil war and the breakdown of the Syrian state as a catalyst for its formation. The instability created by the conflict provided the Kurds with the opportunity to organize in a manner that was restricted to them in the past.

State failure is a crucial condition for both statebuilding and societybuilding. It is certain that when ‘the state’ crumbles, violent conflict is inevitable, decimating entire cities and populations. In the aftermath of such bedlam, the question arises: what is the next step? How do the survivors of such a conflict reconstruct a sustainable, functioning society? Historically, the answer has been statebuilding. In the following section, I shall address current statebuilding theory and then make an argument against it, promoting a theory of societybuilding in its place.

Section 2. 3: Responding to State Implosion– Statebuilding in the 20th and 21st Centuries

This section shall engage with existing literature on statebuilding in order to demonstrate both the merits and inadequacies of statebuilding philosophy. I will then address a shift that occurred

within statebuilding theory in the early 21st century as a response to the very limited success of 20th century statebuilding efforts.

In order to define statebuilding, there must first exist an understanding of ‘the state.’ One of the most popular frameworks for defining the state in political science is that of the German sociologist and political economist, Max Weber. Weber defines the state as “a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Lemay-Hébert, 2009). Thus, according to Weber, the state is an organization that controls a defined territory via a monopoly on violence within that space. However, this definition seems too broad to serve as our sole understanding of ‘the state’ within the context of statebuilding. I have decided to include a more nuanced definition of ‘the state,’ outlined by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD (2011) refers to states as the “principal institutional and organizational units that exercise political and public authority in modern times.” Thus, per the OECD, statebuilding is the process of “enhancing [the] capacity, institutions and legitimacy” of the state. Yet this definition implies that statebuilders are working with an existing state structure rather than attempting to construct one from scratch. This definition is not applicable to a post-conflict country where ‘the state’ simply does not exist, requiring an expansion of the definition.

Upon further research, it has become clear that statebuilding literature written prior to 2010 is already outdated. Twentieth century statebuilding was dominated by neoliberal philosophy, which is based on the premises that democratic countries are both the most stable in the world and much less likely to declare war on one another, and that strong government institutions are necessary for the endurance of both ‘the state’ and democracy (Samuels, 2011 & Fukuyama, 2004). Thus, the goal of 20th century statebuilders was to erect strong, centralized government institutions that were modeled after those of Western democracies, insinuating that neoliberal establishments are paramount to the

existence of democracy. There wasn't much evidence to disprove this in the past because there wasn't any other democratic system existing without such institutions— until the emergence of Rojava, that is.

Focusing in particular on US statebuilding, Lake argues that it takes on three different forms: the first extending from the 1890s to the end of the Cold War, the second beginning in 1990 and the third in 2001 (2010). The version of statebuilding most relevant to this thesis is the one that the US is 'field testing' in Iraq and Afghanistan and which, according to Lake, takes on the form of seeking to build legitimacy for new states by providing security and essential services to local populations (Lake, 2010). However, Al-Ali refutes this by pointing out that the Iraqi constitution and government produced by the US, which was modeled after their own own, never retained any legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, particularly because most Iraqis were living without basic necessities such as food and water (Al-Ali, 2014). This directly contradicts Lake's argument and suggests that even statebuilding literature written in 2010 may have its shortcomings.

By 2013, it seems that scholars in the international affairs community picked up on this disconnect between statebuilding theory and the actuality of its application. With both Iraq and Afghanistan beginning to spin out of control by 2013, the two 21st-century examples of statebuilding efforts in the Middle East have fallen short. This reality is captured by Richmond, who proposes 'peace formation' as an alternative to statebuilding (2013). My thesis supports Richmond's critique of the emphasis placed on creating neoliberal institutional frameworks and his argument that statebuilding strategies have failed to connect with local target populations (2013). 'Peace formation' attempts to understand how local-scale politics attempt to create and maintain peace, as well as studies their relationship with both state and international actors (Richmond, 2013). While democratic confederalism is driven by the desire to maintain peace and is indeed an example of 'local-scale

politics,' it does not inherently have a space within it for international statebuilding. Furthermore, Richmond's theory fails to elaborate on how 'peace formation' can concretely be used to inform statebuilding strategy.

Chandler structures a different ideological argument based on the concept of "resilience" (2013). He opposes the theory that Western interventionist discourses have blamed statebuilding failures on local culture instead of taking responsibility for the outcomes. Chandler argues that the ideology of resilience applied to statebuilding demonstrates that conflict, underdevelopment and a lack of democracy are 'self-generated products of communities or societies themselves' (2013). He goes on to say that resilience posits that "we cannot fix their problems, but equally they cannot be expected to break out of the reproduction of these traps without external assistance" (Chandler, 2013). His argument is one of the first statebuilding literatures that acknowledges the utility of local actors, albeit negatively. I would agree that Western rhetoric often attempts to take the blame for the world's shortcomings, but this assumption of responsibility still lies within an inherent sentiment of superiority. Nevertheless, Chandler's argument contradicts itself. While stating that societies that have experienced state failure— and thus have a need for statebuilding— do require external assistance, Chandler also simultaneously argues that intervention cannot fix the underlying problems. More so, the 'blame' for statebuilding failure should be distributed based on the level of involvement of statebuilders, both local and foreign. As Brahim (2007) posits, statebuilding efforts have largely ignored the local populations they are attempting to help. Thus, blame cannot be placed on those who did not participate in the process.

The fundamental issue with this category of literature is that it remains theoretical and untested. Lake's differentiation between US statebuilding policy prior to 2001 and his argument that the actions carried out in Iraq and Afghanistan were somehow different, are incorrect. The Bush

administration applied a 20th century, neoliberal institutional approach in both countries. Indeed, this approach is heavily embedded in most of the literature I have found so far and leaves a more nuanced definition of statebuilding to be desired. Lemay-Hébert seeks to understand statebuilding through the sociological conceptualization of the modern nation-state (2009). The nation-state can be viewed through the lenses of Weberian institutionalism and Durkheimian legitimacy: the former focuses on institutional structures, the latter on socio-political cohesion (Lemay-Hébert, 2009). Lemay-Hébert differentiates between ‘nation-building’ and ‘state-building,’ stating that within the first Weberian lens, statebuilding and nationbuilding are two separate processes, while within the second, they are not.

While I would agree that socio-political cohesion is fundamental to a sustainable society, Lemay-Hébert’s schematic becomes tricky due to the failure to clearly delineate between nationbuilding and statebuilding. Per this discourse, ‘nation’ and ‘state’ become two different entities, with my perception of ‘the nation’ as referring to a population with a shared identity and ‘the state’ as a defined territory governed by one or more authoritative outfits. However, I must challenge this notion that ‘the nation’ and ‘the state’ are separate. The differentiation between the two assumes that one has a characteristic the other doesn’t. There is a trend within statebuilding literature that suggests that ‘the nation’ is somehow less arbitrary and more legitimate than ‘the state.’ And yet, the concept of ‘the nation-state’ is widely used in the field of international affairs. More so, Brooks (2005) writes: “The emergence of nation-states in particular was far from a simple or natural development. National identity for the peoples of Europe had to be created...Monuments were built and national anthems composed; regional dialects and various particularisms were stamped out by central authorities, often ruthlessly” (p. 1170).

To view ‘the nation’ and ‘the state’ as separate, and especially to legitimize one over the other, ignores human history. Finding both to be undeniably entangled with one another, societybuilding does not make a distinction between the two terms, choosing to discard both from its framework.

It has become clear that tracing the existing theories and critiques of statebuilding is difficult due to an overabundance of terms used to refer to the practice. For example, Richmond differentiates between ‘state formation,’ ‘peace formation’, ‘statebuilding’ and ‘peacebuilding’ (2013). While it is simple to distinguish one aspect of a concept from another within a single paper, it is an entirely different experience when trying to trace a common thread through multiple arguments because each researcher proposes his personal set of definitions with each argument. Furthermore, a good portion of the literature assumes an inherent understanding of ‘the state’— which I found to be a disservice to the author’s argument.

One of the more persuasive discourses I came across on the topic proposed that statebuilding be viewed “against the backdrop of long-term historical processes emanating from the intervening states, leading to the emergence of regulatory forms of statehood and associated risk management rationalities” (Hameiri, 2014). Using Kanishka Jayasuriya’s (2004) definition of ‘regulatory forms of statehood’ as “rule-making, standard-setting, coordination, [and] market design - within the core executive, in tandem with the relative marginalisation of the institutions of representative democracy,” Hameiri (2014) suggests that such increasing regulation is the reason behind the involvement of new types of actors (such as consultants, private security companies and transnational police forces) in the intervention of foreign governments. Positioning statebuilding as a reflection of domestic statehood is particularly useful for two reasons: 1) it acknowledges the increasing regulatory nature of Western democracies and the inverse relationship such regulations have to ‘true freedom’

and 2) it demonstrates that current statebuilding strategy is complicated by a set of actors who have become involved due to a perceived necessity of their roles in highly regulated Western bureaucratic processes, rather than any positive or effective impact those actors actually have on the statebuilding effort.

In short, there is a large amount of academic discourse on statebuilding theory but there is little agreement amongst scholars regarding the exact nature of the practice and how it should be carried out. Much of the statebuilding literature written prior to 2013 applies a neoliberal institutional approach to statebuilding policy, which I found elevated Western democratic political models above other forms of governance, implying that a successful statebuilding endeavor will construct states in the likeness of Western democracies. Scholars who contributed literature after 2013 were more critical of this approach. Citing a disconnect between statebuilders and the local populations of Afghanistan and Iraq, scholars were hesitant to promote the statebuilding practices of the past. Yet, despite critiquing neoliberal statebuilding, I found the most recent literature to be focused on evaluating past statebuilding literature, but lacking in concrete suggestions for future statebuilding policy. This thesis shall build upon the rejection of 20th and 21st century statebuilding practices, but will expand upon this critique by offering a practical model in its stead.

Section 2. 4: The Inherent Flaw of Statebuilding

In this section, by detailing the inadequacies of the US's statebuilding effort in Iraq, I shall demonstrate that statebuilding has historically been unsuccessful due to a top-down approach to the process. Statebuilding is based on the construction of 'the state,' understood by statebuilders as a set of government institutions. However, this prioritizes government over people. Instead, I shall argue

that statebuilding practice should be reversed, transforming it into a bottom-up process, elevating people and society over government.

Following the 2003 Iraq War and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, the United States undertook the mission of statebuilding in Iraq, determined to create a Middle Eastern democracy that would serve as an ally to the US. Yet despite constructing a political system and drafting a constitution modeled after that of the United States, the "institutions created by [the US] and the Iraqis drafted to serve under occupation never acquired any credibility in the eyes of the people of Iraq" (Brahimi, 2007). Furthermore, although the nation held its first free parliamentary elections in 2005, many Iraqis lived, and continue to live, without basic necessities such as electricity and running water (Al-Ali, 2014). By 2016, the United States Institution of Peace described Iraq as being "ravaged by warfare and the violent spread of the Islamic State...with government institutions [remaining] weak, and corruption and poverty endemic." It appears that statebuilding requires more than simply erecting political institutions and drafting constitutions.

There are few examples of successful statebuilding because the problem lies within a misguided notion of 'the state' and a subsequently misguided philosophy behind the practice of statebuilding. If 'the state' is understood as a unit that maintains a monopoly on violence within a defined space and the population existing within that space, then this implies that 'the state' functions as a territory's ultimate authority with instruments of violence at its disposal— i.e. weapons and the manpower to use them. In simpler terms, our understanding of 'the state' has thus transformed into a governing body with command over an army. Logically, it would then follow that statebuilding must mean constructing government and an army.

Yet, as was previously noted, the construction of government and the training of the Iraqi army were still not enough to stabilize Iraq and prevent it from being swept into the chaos of the

conflict in the Middle East. The commonality between Iraq and the toppled dictatorships of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya and the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria is that every one of those governments lost legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The Arab Spring protests demonstrated the disconnect between Middle Eastern governments and their citizens— by responding violently, these regimes alienated themselves (Eshel, 2012, p. 240).

In order to maintain legitimacy, political scientists largely agree that there must be a level of civilian participation in politics but, in order for that to occur, the state must also be able to provide basic necessities to its people— things such as food, shelter and water. Civilians cannot care about political processes, let alone actually participate in them, if their homes are destroyed and they cannot feed their families. People make up society and there must first be society before there can be a functioning political state. The countries that require statebuilding are shells hollowed out by war. It is unsurprising that it takes years for government to begin operating at some level of efficiency in a post-conflict society. Thus, it is futile to spend time and effort creating a political system, while everything else in the country is in disarray. The ultimate priority of statebuilders should be the protection of citizens and the assistance in the rebuilding of their homes and cities. The top-down approach applied by statebuilders in the past elevated government above people, trapping the 'reconstructed state' in the same cycle of lacking legitimacy, increasing instability and ultimately, state failure.

In the same vein, statebuilding inherently calls for the intervention of foreign forces in the country of question, but due to weak or non-existing local institutions, there is a massive inequity in power distribution between local and external actors. Thus, statebuilding initiatives attempt to exert "policy-making authority dominated by experts and insulated from the influence of domestic political leaders and populations" (Hameiri, 2010). This level of intervention is an antithesis to truly free,

democratic processes. The prioritization of rebuilding government before society, combined with an unequal distribution of influence within the statebuilding process— which places foreign statebuilders above local ones— are the reasons statebuilding efforts have largely failed in the Middle East. But these are merely symptoms of a larger flaw in statebuilding strategy, one that is grounded in ideology.

Current statebuilding practice has been influenced by a neoliberal emphasis on institutions, rather than an awareness of the needs of local populations. It has been carried out in a manner that is almost tyrannical, lacking the consideration and participation of the people that the newly erected state is to exert authority over. This does not create a sustainable environment, conducive to a stable society. Thus, statebuilders must depart from an institutional understanding of ‘the state’ and engage with locals, rather than ignore them. However, this simple reorganization of priorities transforms the notion of statebuilding into an entirely different practice, one that does not rely whatsoever on ‘the state.’ The absence of ‘the state’ then moves this new practice into a realm that is, more than anything, suggestive of anarchism.

Section 2. 5: *Anarchism as An Unexpected Alternative to Statebuilding*

The idea of anarchy informing statebuilding policy is novel. But as I pointed out in the previous section, this thesis does not perpetuate statebuilding as it has been understood or practiced in the past. Instead, this argument proposes a new model— one comprised of societybuilding and autonomous collaboration. Unlike statebuilding, these theories are inspired by a form of anarchism known as democratic confederalism. The following section shall demonstrate the validity of using anarchism as a lens through which to rethink statebuilding.

In post-conflict countries, if it will take government years before it can begin to function effectively, why are government institutions often the first priority of statebuilders? Perhaps the

concern lies within the idea that a democratic society cannot function without a government. Yet this betrays a “basic respect for the agency of non-elites” (Scott, 2012). In his work *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, Scott (2012) argues for the ability of the people to cooperate without the oversight of an authority. Though disorder and bandits presided for a few days over an “adventure playground” in which children were given tools and materials to build and play without the imposition of the authority of adults—simulating anarchy—“salvage drives” were created by the children in response to the thieves and a “system for sharing tools and lumber,” as well (Scott, 2012). In a post-conflict country, the survivors and refugees are the ones who should play the largest role in rebuilding their society. After all, they have the most vested interest in the process. Statebuilding, with its preoccupation on structuring government institutions, has resulted in “the national interest of the local population [being] totally ignored” (Brahimi, 2007).

Brooks (2005) writes that:

There is no reason to view the state as a particularly successful or benign mode of social organization... even in Europe, the birthplace of the modern state, the history of the state is a history of repression and war. As states expanded, they... trampled on other, weaker social systems; as they vied for dominance they sent millions to be slaughtered on battlefield[s]; and as they sought to create unified national cultures, they cannibalized their own citizens” (p. 1173).

The existing dynamics of global power have convinced us that Western democracies, and therefore Western *states*, are the ultimate model for government and society. But that is based on the assumption that there are no better alternatives which— to be fair— in the past, there weren't. However, that has changed in recent years. The democratic confederalist project of Rojava, an experiment in autonomy and bottom-up government, is an increasingly viable alternative to the existing nation-state system. For this reason, I offer societybuilding and autonomous collaboration (SAC) as an alternative

to statebuilding. Both theories are dependent on one another, infused with anarchic principles, and will focus on creating sustainable societies rather than functioning states.

Section 2. 6: Chapter 2 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the precondition for statebuilding in the 21st century, namely, state failure. I went on to discuss current academic literature on the topic, noting a lack of consistency in scholarly opinion, as well as a shift in statebuilding philosophy prior to 2010 and 2013. Prior to 2010, neoliberal institutionalism influenced statebuilding theory, which promoted the creation of government institutions as the basis for statebuilding. Following 2013, there was wider criticism of this approach but very little offered by way of alternative solutions. In response, I propose dual-models that diverge from traditional understandings of statebuilding. They are called societybuilding and autonomous collaboration. These theories are influenced by an anarchic approach to ‘the state,’ one that rejects government institutions in favor of building sustainable societies. Chapter 3 will delve into the source of the inspiration for societybuilding and autonomous collaboration, a current geopolitical experiment known as Rojava. Chapter 4 will then apply a Rojavan model to statebuilding with the result being societybuilding and autonomous collaboration. I will then conceptualize SAC in terms of practical foreign policy.

CHAPTER 3 ROJAVA AS A CASE STUDY

Section 3. 1: Introduction to Rojava

Rojava, located in a swathe of territory in northern Syria, is currently the world’s first and only viable anarchic project. For the purpose of this thesis, Rojava shall serve as the closest example

of a legitimate societybuilding effort. This section will delve into the history of the Kurds and their resistance to cultural and ethnic genocide as a foundation for the creation of Rojava, followed by a demonstration of Rojava's practical application of democratic confederalism. This will illustrate the methods the founders of Rojava used to structure their society from the ground-up, engaging in a process that shares the same goals as statebuilding, but approaches it from the angle societybuilding would. After an investigation into Rojava— its antecedents, its merits, and potential threats to its continued survival— as well as a deeper analysis of the theory of democratic confederalism, Chapter 4 will use Rojava as a model to apply democratic confederalism to statebuilding practice, with societybuilding and autonomous collaboration as the result.

Section 3. 2: Rojava's Roots— Repression, Resistance and Anarchy

In order to understand the process Rojava underwent as it applied the principles of democratic confederalism to its newly formed society, we must first understand the conditions that preexisted its adoption. It is through sheer determination on the part of the Kurds that Rojava has transformed into a legitimate anarchic project. This determination was spurred on by a past of brutal oppression and the desire to form a society that would not recreate a cycle of violence carried out by the state against its people. Rojava, inspired by the liberal ideals of democratic confederalism, would serve as an alternative to the authoritarian and theocratic regimes that had ruled the Kurds for decades.

A Brief History

The Kurds are an ethnic majority group that exists in an area that spans western Iran, northern Syria and Iraq, and southeastern Turkey (Ali, 2014). Numbering over 30 million, they are the largest 'nation' in the world without an independent state (Hevian, 2013). Although the Kurds cannot be

defined by a singular linguistic and religious characteristic, 90% of them identify as Sunni Muslim (Hevian, 2013 & Enzinna, 2015).

Upon the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, Russia and France signed the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that divided up the Kurdish region between the three powers (Ali, 2014). The agreement disregarded ethnic, religious and language groups— particularly that of the Kurds. Their desire for sovereignty ignored, the Kurds have been fighting for autonomy from governments that have enforced policies of cultural assimilation and violent repression (Jain, 2016).

The P.K.K., Öcalan and Bookchin

On March 20th, 2005, a leader and international labeled terrorist, imprisoned on an island off the coast of Turkey, sent his people a message: develop their democracy in spite of political boundaries and declare democratic confederalism in Kurdistan (Öcalan, 2005). After his arrest in 1999, Abdullah Öcalan, the infamous leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (P.K.K.)— experienced a dramatic shift in ideology upon reading American anarchist Murray Bookchin's work (Biehl, 2012). Labeled a terrorist organization by NATO, the US, the UK and the EU, the P.K.K. was originally founded by Öcalan in 1984 as a Marxist group whose mission was to wage an insurgency against the Turkish government on behalf of Kurdish independence (Jain, 2016). The P.K.K.'s armed struggle is estimated to have taken the lives of over 40,000 people so far and, amidst the current crisis in the Middle East, the P.K.K. has resumed its fight against Turkey ("Turkey counts cost," 2016).

Despite his violent history, in prison Öcalan transformed from "Stalinist caterpillar into libertarian butterfly" (Enzinna, 2015). Beloved of the Kurds, Öcalan's "Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan" was embraced. The anarchic philosophy is based on a "confederation of citizens' assemblies [that would] form an [ecological, democratic] counterpower against the nation

state” (Biehl, 2012). The nation-state is rejected due to the increasing distance between the source of state power, which has moved beyond ‘politically accountable national and subnational institutions,’ and accountability to its citizens (Hameiri, 2014). It has become obvious in recent years that there is a problem with the assumption that the current state system, with its “national, territorial, legal-technical and extra-economic” nature, still protects and champions the republican sense of freedom as ‘non-domination’ (Cemgil, 2016). Democratic confederalism recognizes the nation-state system as dominated by elites and not representative of people.

It is crucial to understand that Rojava was born from the frustration and suffering of the Kurdish people— an ethnic group that was intimately aware of the status quo of the Middle East. It is precisely due to their oppression at the hands of traditional Middle Eastern states that they sought to model their society after that which had never been done before. In the next section, I shall discuss the actual events that created the space for Rojava to solidify from ideology into reality. Then, I shall delve into the principles of democratic confederalism and the manner in which these principles were applied to Rojava.

Section 3. 3: From Birth Until Today

In Chapter 2, I argued that state failure was the precondition for statebuilding. Though I have rejected statebuilding in favor of societybuilding and autonomous collaboration, state failure is still an integral step in the SAC effort. This section discusses the impact (and necessity) of the Syrian Civil War on the formation of Rojava, as well as the process that was undertaken to see the project to fruition. This exemplifies the characteristics that will most likely be present in future societybuilding efforts, which are relevant to Chapter 4’s discussion on the practical application of societybuilding and autonomous collaboration as foreign policy.

The Syrian government has been brutally targeting and oppressing the Kurds from the moment it was established in 1924 (Hevian, 2013). The Syrian Ba’ath Party labeled Kurds as “*ajaneb* (aliens) or *maktumin* (registered/concealed) and deprived them ‘of the rights to be employed, own property, enter into a legal marriage, or participate in elections...The government also prohibited many forms of Kurdish cultural expression, including use of the Kurdish language and celebration of Kurdish festivals” (Federici, 2015, p. 81-82). This reality of repression is unfortunately common to almost all Kurds living within the Middle East– one of the reasons they are sympathetic to Jews and Israel (Spyer, 2015). With many Syrian Kurds active in the P.K.K. or being closely related to the organization’s members and martyrs, there is a militancy that runs parallel to that of the Islamic State (Hevian, 2013). The difference lies within their objective– the Kurds maintain one of the most liberal ideologies in the region, influenced as they are by Öcalan (who they refer to as “Apo” or “Uncle”) and democratic confederalism.

Though it is tempting to attribute the emergence of the Rojava Revolution solely to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the groundwork for the movement was laid out years in advance. Democratic confederalism is driven by the idea that local populations can engage in conflict resolution and mete out justice amongst themselves, rather than relying on a higher authority– such as a Supreme Court– to carry out these functions. In 2006, two years after Öcalan’s declaration, ‘guerilla-initiated village assemblies’ began to appear in Kurdish regions, creating an internal system of conflict resolution, one that ran parallel to the emergence of all-female military units tasked with defending women from cultural and social violence (Üstündag, 2016, p. 202). Thus, the paradigm of democratic confederalism had been adopted for quite a few years before the outset of the Syrian Civil War.

As it became more apparent that the conflict in Syria was serving as a catalyst for instability in the Middle East, thousands of Kurds mobilized to government army posts in northern Syria and, through civil disobedience, effected peaceful resignations from the smaller number of soldiers stationed there (Üstündag, 2016, p. 202). Once Assad's forces withdrew from the territory, the Partiya Yekita Demokrat (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC)— both of which were existing as underground Kurdish political parties— went to work establishing the People's Protection Units (YPG), a fighter force that would be deployed to protect Kurdish communities (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016).

After this, the formation of Rojava occurred at an impressive rate. A year after the eruption of civil war in Syria, the YPG had gained control of the Kobani, Amuda and Afrin regions (Ali, 2014). By 2013, the PYD abandoned the KNC and established TEV-DEM, also known as “The Movement for a Democratic Society,” a set of six political parties that would participate in Rojava's electoral politics (Enzinna, 2015). Following the establishment of TEV-DEM, popular assemblies were formed in the YPG-controlled regions and in January, 2014, the Afrin, Jazira and Kobani cantons (as they are referred to) declared their autonomy and their unanimous approval of Rojava's constitution, so called “The Charter of the Social Contract” (*Charter of the Social Contract*, 2014). Federici (2015) argues that the PYD's 2012 rise to power was attributed to the party's “discipline, organization and remarkable ability to take advantage of conflict dynamics, [while] its close relations with the PKK also provided the group with the necessary training, manpower, and arms supplies to solidify its current position” (p. 83). Further pushing the PYD to the forefront of the Rojava Revolution was the threatening presence of terrorist organizations like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra— they forced Syrian Kurds to join or support the YPG as their only legitimate source of protection, despite any misgivings

about the group itself (Federici, 2015, p. 84). The PYD and YPG were simply the best alternatives to a very dangerous and unpredictable situation.

Despite lack of international recognition, Kurdistan has since then operated as a completely autonomous region, with its militias having proven themselves as capable of defending Kurdish territory against the Islamic State (Jain, 2016). Throughout 2014 and 2015, the YPG (and its female counter-part, the YPJ) successfully repelled ISIS attacks– the most famous one being known as the Siege of Kobani (“Syria rights group,” 2015). Many scholars agree that the liberation of Kobane strengthened the Kurdish resolve to grow and maintain their autonomy, which advanced their gains against ISIS (Federici, 2015, p. 85). This, in turn, gained the Kurds and their quest international recognition. As they transformed themselves into a viable movement and force, Western media began describing them as “ the United States’ most effective local partner in the fight against ISIS” (Federici, 2015, p. 86). Later in 2015, the United States began airdropping weapons and ammunition to the YPG. Such international support gave the Kurds of Rojava an edge against their enemies and, I would argue, substantiated their claim to legitimacy.

In February 2016, the Shaba region became Rojava’s 4th canton and on March 17th of this year, the Federation of Northern Syria-Rojava was officially established, united under one constitution (Cemgil, 2016). As Spyer (2015) puts it, “In entirely different and opposing ways, both the Kurdish and the jihadi projects [IS] were successor entities to the fallen Syrian state, fighting over its ruins. The effective eclipse of Syria was the main outcome of the war.”

The Syrian Civil War, as an ideal example of state failure, created the opportunity for Syrian Kurds to mobilize and realize their goal of creating a society that is independent of the state and inspired by democratic confederalism. Following state implosion, the Kurds organized themselves and engaged in an autonomous societybuilding effort. Section 3. 4 will examine the major principles

of democratic confederalism, followed by a discussion of how these principles have been applied within Rojava.

Section 3. 4: Principles of Democratic Confederalism

There are three essential components to Democratic Confederalism: autonomy, freedom as non-domination and radical self-defense. These principles serve as the anarchic foundation of Rojava and are the most important aspects of the experiment, thus making them chief features of societybuilding. This section will explain each of these components in detail, which we will then use to evaluate Rojava in terms of democratic confederalist philosophy in Section 3. 5.

Autonomy

For democratic confederalism to be a viable option for a system of governance, it is vital that autonomy be established over a given territory. Merriam-Webster defines autonomy as “the quality of state of being self-governing; especially: the right of self-government” (2014). This means that the autonomous unit– be it a territory, a group or an individual– cannot have an external force exerting power over it. The autonomous unit, for the purpose of this paper, is the territory under Kurdish control in northern Syria. Despite its proximity to three threatening power-bases (the Turkish government in Ankara, ISIS’s stronghold of Raqqa, and Aleppo, recently overtaken by Syrian president’s Bashar al-Assad’s forces), Rojava remains free from the control of any besides the Kurds who occupy the area. Though Rojava is situated within the existing state of Syria, it makes no claim to statehood. “Abandoning its desire to form a separate nation-state, the movement redefined its goal as the introduction of democracy, equality and freedom to the Middle East as a whole” (Üstündag, 2016, p. 202).

Democratic confederalism and the requirement for autonomy does not run counter to the existing global layout of nation-states, rather:

“It [Rojava] rests on an awareness of the historical emergence of the national state and of its coercive and repressive historical roots as well as of its tendency to abstract or carve out a demos for itself within a multiplicity of religious, ethnic, cultural and/or sectarian communities and homogenize it” (Cemgil, 2016, p. 424).

Thus, the autonomy promoted by democratic confederalism is a form of democracy that exists without an established state.

The Rojava movement uses the term ‘socialization of politics’ as another way to delineate its particular flavor of autonomy. Instead of using their control over the Rojavan region to establish a Kurdish state, the Kurds have engaged in a counter-process, one that Bülent Küçük and Ceren Özselçuk (2016) define as: “The patient and continual process of decomposing state power and its bureaucratic centralization by way of instituting diverse and discontinuous organizations of self-governance from the bottom up, thus, redistributing sovereignty to local formations” (p. 190). While self-governance may take on the appearance of certain state structures in a way, its alternativeness can be found in the distribution and flow of true power within an autonomous society. For example, despite being situated in Syria, the Syrian government does not have authority over any individual within Rojava. Within Rojava, though there is a system of governance with elected officials (which will be explained shortly), in theory, not a single politician has any more or less power than his constituents. Autonomy is infused within the Rojava experiment at a multitude of levels.

Radical Self-Defense

The second requirement for the practical application of democratic confederalism is radical self-defense. With autonomy the primary condition for the existence of democratic confederalism,

self-defense is the only method through which autonomy can be maintained. In this sense, democratic confederalism resembles ‘the state’ because it must ensure that the autonomous region maintains a monopoly on violence. However, the difference between ‘the state’ and the autonomous zone practicing Bookchin’s anarchism is that ‘the state’ can monopolize violence against both external threats and against its people, whereas violence against the inhabitants of an autonomous zone directly contradicts the principles of the project.

Üstündag (2016) expands the definition of self-defense by applying it to, not only physical violence, but also to symbolic and cultural forms of violence. Thus, he argues that self-defense can and must be applied to all organizations and people within a society, transforming into a process that requires the equal participation and distribution of power among all societal members– male, female, young, old and so forth– which directly supports democratic confederalist philosophy (p. 199-200). It is important to note that self-defense only comes into play in threatening situations, otherwise Öcalan’s plan for Rojava strongly emphasizes diplomacy as the first recourse for self-defense, characterizing Rojava, not as a “self-sustained, closed and fixed entity but one that is open, changing, and co-dependent” (p. 200).

Freedom as Non-Domination

Rojava distinguishes itself from existing Middle Eastern political and social systems through the “ontological premise that there is not only a diversity of peoples but also differences within groups of people, in every locality, [raising] the question of how each group should govern itself in relation to such diversity” (Küçük & Özselçuk, 2016, p. 189). Democratic confederalism requires that the diversity of a population be acknowledged and accepted, which creates a “fabric of the social body as a multitude [and] establishes a legitimate symbolic field for the conduct of democratic

processes” (Küçük and Özselçuk, 2016, p. 190). Non-domination, as it is understood in Rojava, is the dissolution of all hierarchies. There is no individual that— due to a certain set of traits (such as being an older man)— is dominant over another individual within democratic confederalist society.

In order to create cohesion amid heterogeneity, the principle of freedom as non-domination must be vigorously upheld. Non-domination can also be understood as “non-dominated choice for all” (Cemgil, 2016, p. 421). This means that citizens of this autonomous society have the ultimate ability to exercise their freedom of choice, without being required to operate within an established set of parameters. This encompasses freedom of religion, speech, dress and so forth. In other words, self-determination. In order to actualize freedom as non-domination, Murray Bookchin argues that “hierarchal relationships, not capitalism, are our original sin...and only by doing away with all hierarchies— man over woman, old over young, white over black, rich over poor— can we solve the global ecological crisis” (Enzinna, 2015). Indeed, in his “Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan,” Öcalan conveys the view that none of the issues facing Middle Eastern societies— among them corruption and weak democracy— can be resolved unless women are granted truly equal rights (2005). Racism, inequality and sexism are the root of all societal and ecological problems, but unlike Marxist theory, which proposes violent revolution and the subversion of one class by another, democratic confederalism does not call for violence against any group. Applied to Kurdistan, Öcalan promoted the idea that the Kurds did not need to engage in violence against oppressive states, suggesting that they instead obtain their rights by “creating separate communities inside existing countries, resorting to violence only if attacked” (Enzinna, 2015). Thus, through radical self-defense, direct democracy and an eradication of all hierarchies, a new model for society could be envisioned.

Though statebuilding efforts in the past have attempted to provide security to target populations, democratic confederalism demands that such populations be able to defend themselves.

Furthermore, deviating from statebuilding theory, societybuilding (per Rojava and democratic confederalism) requires that the autonomy of the societybuilders be ensured. No foreign actor should hold more power over the societybuilding process than the citizens directly engaged in it. After these conditions are met, the process should move to engage with republican ideals of non-domination—that is, no single religion, ethnicity, etc should have complete control of the process. Rather, every individual should be able to influence the societybuilding effort in order to create a system that is accepting and accommodating to all.

Section 3. 5: Democratic Confederalism in Action

Section 3.5 shall identify the aspects of Rojava that align the most with democratic confederalism, as well as those that do not. Rojava, as can be expected with any future societybuilding movement, exists within a hostile environment where foe outnumbered friend. Yet this has not prevented Rojava's inhabitants from attempting to create a society that excels beyond those they are surrounded by. The following sections on Rojava's social and political makeup will act as examples of how democratic confederalism can inform a system that is a viable alternative to existing nation-state structures.

Structuring Society Around Self-Defense

Paramount to Rojava's survival is its ability to defend itself. There are four components to self-defense: weapons, ammunition, fighters and food/water. Food and water are needed to keep the fighters fighting and fighters need weapons and the ammunition that puts arms into play. In order to continue defending itself, Rojava has implemented a strict rations system. However, without an

existing self-sustaining infrastructure, Rojava must rely on territorial expansion, conquest and outside aid to keep the region operating.

Currently, there are 4 cantons included within Rojava's territory in northern Syria. However, the *Charter of the Social Contract* stipulates that, "All cities and regions in Syria that accede to this Social Contract have the right to join the cantons in the Democratic Autonomous Government" (*Charter of the Social Contract*, 2014). This clause adds a dynamic quality to Rojava's future. In contrast to the principles of statehood, Rojava's establishment lacks finality. In order to increase their chance of survival, Rojava's Kurds are eager to connect with other autonomous structures that voluntarily agree to the democratic principles of the constitution (Küçük & Özselçuk, 2016, p. 191). In order to encourage other populations to join it, Rojava has made a point to avoid the term 'Kurdish state' in relation to itself (Hosseini, 2016, p. 260).

Rojava: A Snapshot

Societybuilding, as a process influenced by anarchism, can potentially offer a successful alternative solution to statebuilding. Anarchism is often referred to derisively as a system that is wholly idealistic. However, the following section details the complex and sophisticated society Rojava has become, which promotes the viability of societybuilding (and autonomous collaboration) as policy.

As of 2017, Rojava is the size of Connecticut and has an estimated 4.6 million inhabitants, consisting of 4 self-governing cantons (known as Jazira, Kobani, Afrin and Shabha) that are overseen by regional administrations (Enzinna, 2015).¹ These regional administrations form the "Federation of Northern Syria- Rojava." All bodies within Rojava must adhere to the Charter of the Social Contract.

¹ The material in this section is drawn from Enzinna (2015), except where otherwise noted.

Rojava's capitol city of Qamishli, located within Jazira canton, is home to 400,000 people. Within the towns, villages and cities of each canton are neighborhood communes known as "Houses of People" and it is within these municipal assemblies of citizens that the anarchism of democratic confederalist ideology is most enshrined.

The education of Rojava's inhabitants is carried out through local primary schools and the region's handful of universities. There are two Universities of Rojava: the University of Afrin and the Mesopotamian Social Science Academy (Enzinna, 2015). Rojava's society attempts to further the liberal principles of democratic confederalism by making the academies easily accessible to anyone who wants to participate in them (Üstündag, 2016, pg. 204).

Rojava has four chief protection forces. They are two military forces known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the YPG's all-women counterpart, the Female Protection Units (YPJ). Internally, the Asayis and Sutoro police forces maintain order and peace. Established in 2012, there are around 6,000 elected officers of the Asayis, which includes an all-female force that deals exclusively with crimes against women (Enzinna, 2015). It should be noted that the YPG does not fit into the paradigm of democratic autonomy and so, it is Rojava's intention to replace it with neighborhood self-defense units (local militias) comprised of people of both genders and a range of ages (Üstündag, 2016, p. 205). However, this may be an unrealistic ideal: the Middle East has always been an unstable region with its share of authoritarian governments and conflicting interests. Disbanding the YPG would require a general neutralization of threats to Rojava. Considering that among those threats are the Turkish government, the Syrian government and a variety of jihadists groups, it is unlikely that will occur anytime in the near future.

The Political Organization of Democratic Confederalism

Per the ideals of democratic confederalism, the *mala gel* (People's House) serves as a type of "communal council...[it is] at the center of decision-making processes, and as many people's houses as possible are being established in pre-existing administrative neighborhoods" (Saed, 2015, pg. 2). However, the people's houses were established almost 10 years ago and consist of "15-30 people who deliberate and, as much as possible, use consensus to resolve issues of energy, food distribution, social problems and the like...at least 40% of decision-making participants, at all administrative levels, have to be women...all people's houses have a parallel mala jinan (women's house), which has jurisdiction especially over cases of violence against women" (Saed, 2015, pg. 3).

Üstündag (2016) describes Rojava's political organization as follows: two co-presidents represent the Federation of Northern Syria- Rojava, there is a people's parliament that is headed by one president and two vice-presidents oversee each canton government (pg. 203). TEV-DEM maintains that "all different political affiliations, religious groups, and ethnicities [are] represented in canton governments and that gender equality in all power positions [has been] achieved...Preventing careerism and power concentration, people performing administrative functions tend to be remunerated in kind instead of salaries" (Saed, 2015, pg. 3). While this may sound more indicative of statehood than anarchy, Rojava's central goal is to have the elected assemblies, the *mala gels* and universities be the instruments through which localities maintain their autonomy against the canton governments, "[unmaking] the latter's claims to state-ness and eventually [appropriating] the [canton government's] functions, proving them redundant" (Üstündag, 2016, pg. 203).

Rojava's Economy and Society

Rojava's economy is centered on worker-managed cooperatives that produce primarily wheat, petroleum and natural gas (Saed, 2015, pg. 2-3). These cooperatives serve as "core local institutions

that secure conditions of social equality by procuring necessities and defending the good's locally produced value by placing limitations on the private appropriation of monopoly capital...[However], because the democratic autonomous government does not want to replicate the structure of centralized state by enforcing taxes or placing penalizing constraints on private property, it currently relies mostly on voluntary acts of giving" (Küçük & Özselçuk, 2016, pg. 193). This is an example of the challenges Rojava faces as it strives to maintain the principles of democratic confederalism while also attempting to survive the geo-political conflict it exists within.

When a community member is caught breaking the law, justice is approached from a rehabilitative and transformative angle and the criminal is treated as someone who needs to be educated, rather than punished (Saed, 2015, pg. 3). Due to Rojava's heterogeneous population and its expansion within areas that have historically been highly conservative in respect to the Islamic religion, this approach may be a more effective way in gaining support within and without the region. Furthermore, in a land of dictatorial governments and religious organizations, Rojava's attempt to eradicate local crime through education rather than incarceration emphasizes the movement's "alternative-ness"—an important idea I shall return to later on. Many of the places within Rojava used to be under the control of ISIS and upon interviewing a handful of inhabitants; Üstündag (2016) discovered that "being in places and spaces where they had been humiliated and violated before was a constant reminder [to Rojava's people] of what they did not want to become" (pg. 204). He goes on to write that, "one of the ways in the which the asayis (Rojava's police force) tries to get rid of being perceived as part of the state is through spatial enactments: dogs, flowers, and plants are welcome; half of the [asayis] academy residents are women; students and teachers cook and serve at the same time. These make Rimelan more accessible to people and dissociate it from the state" (Üstündag, 2016, pg. 204-205).

Despite the harsh circumstances under which they exist, Rojava's inhabitants wage a daily battle to create a society that is unparalleled in its commitment to anarchism per democratic confederalism, one that does not mirror the typical regimes governing the Middle East. So far, Rojava has been successful in its societybuilding effort. The region has created universities, has maintained protective forces and has promoted a general sentiment among its people that each individual has a voice within his community. Against all odds, this grassroots effort has managed to survive the past six years under extreme conditions, demonstrating that democratic confederalism is indeed a viable philosophy that can inform an effective societybuilding effort.

Section 3. 6: Rojava's Geopolitical Reality

Although Rojava has all the makings of remarkable democratic movement and anarchic project, to portray it without fault would be academically negligent. And, while it is tempting to conflate Rojava with all Kurds and to state that its success is in the interest of all Kurdish organizations everywhere, this would simply ignore a geo-political reality— one in which exists a variety of Kurdish and non-Kurdish interest groups that are vying for power and one that may be the central determining factor in Rojava's survival. This section shall voice the difficulties that Rojava faces while arguing that Rojava's continued success lies solely within its commitment to its values.

Gunes and Lowe (2015) point out that there are five key actors in Kurdish politics: Rojava's Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdish National Council (KNC), the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)— Turkey's dominant Kurdish group, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The relationships between these entities are based on three things: location, economic interests and political ambitions. The PYD and the PKK are the most closely linked, with the PKK serving as the ideological inspiration for Rojava. The KNC is based in

Erbil, Iraq though it was originally founded to represent the interests of Syrian Kurds. In competition with the PYD, the KNC has lost a great amount of support due to its authoritative political actions (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). The KNC is allied with the KDP, an Iraqi-Kurdish political party that holds the most influence in the KRG, the administration that governs the “semi-autonomous” Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Crucial to the dynamics of Kurdish politics is the KDP’s long-standing rivalry with the PKK. Further exacerbating the situation are semi-frequent clashes between the KNC and the PYD, especially on account of the KNC’s and KRG’s economic ties to the Turkish government— a relationship they are careful to maintain and which does not allow them to fully support the Rojavan revolution. In fact, the KRG followed Turkey’s lead in placing trade embargoes on Rojava, as well as denied members of Rojava access to Iraq via its shared border with the region.

The PYD has also been accused of acting as pro-Assad “thugs” due to the alleged suppression of anti-regime demonstrations in Kurdish areas in 2011 and 2012, as well as the strategic benefit to the Assad regime a PYD-PKK stronghold would have as a serious threat to Ankara (Federici, 2015, pg. 83-84). The PYD has also been accused of kidnapping certain KNC officials and of engaging in forced recruitment to the YPG (www.kurdwatch.com).

The reports that the PYD has been engaging in ‘thuggish’ behavior are concerning— primarily because, in order for Rojava to survive, it must not lose legitimacy in the eyes of its inhabitants (a factor I cited earlier as a cause of state failure). In Chapter 4, I will discuss the necessity for Rojava to maintain its ‘alternativeness’ to the authoritarianism perpetuated outside its borders. The moment it fails to offer an alternative to repression is the moment Rojava will fall.

Section 3. 7: Chapter 3 Conclusion

In Chapter 3, I delved into the history, birth and current state of Rojava. Rojava has its roots in the oppressed past of the Kurdish people. Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdish P.K.K. terrorist group, promoted Murray Bookchin's anarchic philosophy of democratic confederalism as an alternative to the state and the Kurds' desire for autonomy from the governments of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In 2010, the Syrian Civil War created a space that allowed Syrian Kurds to pursue Öcalan's Declaration of Democratic Confederalism and so, Rojava was born. Facing unimaginable obstacles, Rojava has struggled to create a society based on principles of autonomy, radical self-defense and non-domination. Furthermore, the process that Rojava has undergone runs parallel to the model of societybuilding I will explicate in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIETYBUILDING AND AUTONOMOUS COLLABORATION

Section 4. 1: Introduction to SAC

A far cry from the usual ambitions that have propelled the mechanism of power and politics in the Middle East, Rojava's pursuit of democratic confederalism is singular in its rejection of statehood, its radically liberal ideals and its institutional inclusivity. This chapter shall seek to apply Rojava's form of democratic confederalism to the practice of statebuilding. Finding the two to be mutually exclusive, I formally introduce the dual-model of Societybuilding and Autonomous Collaboration (SAC) as alternatives to current statebuilding policy.

Section 4. 2: The Difference Between Statebuilding and Societybuilding

As Rojava is a successful example of societybuilding, I must emphasize the bottom-up nature of the effort. Rojava was formed by the people, for the people. Though Rojava has accepted aid from the United States, there was no international entity that directed or affected its emergence. That is the

essential difference between statebuilding and societybuilding. Societybuilding is an effort driven by locals who want to determine their own future and the society within which they live.

Consider the American Revolution: France lent aid to the colonists, but did not send delegations to write the US's constitution and to appoint its people of choice to positions of power. The idea in itself is both offensive and hilarious! What makes the Middle East, or any country or territory for that matter, any different? The mistake of the West in its policy towards the Middle East is an inherent sense of superiority. The sense that "the children" didn't know what they were doing, messed everything up and now it's "the parent's" duty to come in and solve the problem. This is the ideology of imperialism and it has no place within this thesis. Thus, let it be clear that societybuilding is not a different form of statebuilding, but rather a completely new model for attaining the goal of creating a sustainable, functioning society. Societybuilding is not a practice undertaken by foreign actors. It is the process of creating unity within a given territory that is driven by that territory's inhabitants. While there is a role for international entities in the societybuilding process, it is much diminished compared to the one such entities have played under statebuilding. Foreign actors function from a place of *assistance* rather than one of usurpation. The function of international actors in societybuilding is referred to as "autonomous collaboration" (AC).

Now that we have rejected statebuilding in favor of societybuilding, Section 4. 3 will explore the conditions for AC, as well as its application to actual foreign policy and its role within the societybuilding effort.

Section 4. 3: Conditions for Autonomous Collaboration

The two most imperative conditions for autonomous collaboration are 1) an existing population with a shared ideology and 2) a shared ideology that will promote an alliance. This section

will investigate the complex role “shared ideology” plays within AC, as well as the necessity of a foreign AC policy that promotes alliances.

Shared Ideology Per Autonomous Collaboration

At first, the use of the term “shared ideology” may seem to conflict with the principles of democratic confederalism, upon which SAC is founded. But it is important not to confuse “shared ideology” with ethnic, religious, linguistic or racial homogeneity. First, I must include the definition of ideology per this argument. Ideology is a set of values and principles that guide a person and form a lens through which he views and assesses his world.

There are many ideologies: democratic confederalism, neoliberal democracy, communism, sharia and so forth. While religious beliefs often are conflated with ideological beliefs due to the influence of one on the other, for the purpose of this thesis, we must distinguish between religion and ideology, gospel and law. As a matter of fact, we must distinguish between religion, ethnicity, race and ideology. For example, a person may be Muslim, but he may not believe in following sharia to its fullest extent. There are progressive Muslims who desire Western democracy to inspire their government and there are others, such as Salafists, who believe in the forced, violent expansion of sharia and Islam. Humans are the most complex beings on this planet, with a range of ideas and desires, and any sustainable political system must recognize that and be flexible enough to adjust to that reality.

Yet, unknowingly, we have come to a crossroads. There may be a societybuilding population in need of AC that shares an ideology— however, what if this shared ideology is one that justifies violence on the basis of religious differences or discrimination against certain groups of people? What should actors desiring to engage in AC do? Is it morally sound to assist a population in the

creation of a violent, authoritarian state? The answer is simple: NO. Instead, the humanitarian effort should be focused on assisting the victims of such a population and protecting its neighbors from any potential threat it may pose to them. However, even this comes from a westernized viewpoint. What may be a violent, authoritarian state to one actor is a perfectly legitimate form of government to someone else. As I mentioned before, there must be a level of flexibility in AC policy. Thus, the crux of autonomous collaboration is this: international governments or organizations should only engage in assisting an existing population with a shared ideology that will, upon achieving stability, be an ally.

Promoting Alliances

The aforementioned criterion is based on the premise that *ideology* is the best indicator of which populations will be enemies and which will be allies, and so, which ones should be assisted and which ones should not. But most importantly, it implies that international entities cannot engage in AC on a state-level following war with any state. For example, if war was waged, it is due to some sort of security or ideological threat, making the warring state as a whole an “enemy population.” However, that does not exclude smaller populations of potential-allies within the existing state that *might* qualify for AC. Therein lies the influence of anarchy on this policy: autonomous collaboration occurs independent of existing nation-states. The idea is both logical and humanitarian: do not help those who would harm you, help those who would help you. Per the theory of the democratic peace, such a policy would encourage harmony on a global scale because the more people in this world who share a common ideology, the less likelihood there is for conflict. Because I am biased towards liberal democracy, the rest of this thesis shall be based on the premise that ‘ally populations’ are those that will promote the creation of liberal, democratic regions.

This section defends the idea that assistance, in the form of autonomous collaboration, should only be granted to *ideologically* homogenous (not to be confused with fully homogenous) societybuilding populations that, upon achieving stability, will serve as allies to the actors engaged in the AC process.

Section 4.4: Ally Populations

Section 4.4 will further engage with the concept of alliance within the SAC effort by demonstrating which qualities autonomous collaborators should seek in societybuilding populations they are attempting to assist.

There are two indicators of whether or not a population can be classified as an “ally”: practiced inclusivity and democratic ideals. Hosseini (2016) writes that ISIS “creates a literal *homo sacres* (a person who may be killed by anyone) on a daily basis, *excluding* people from society (often by taking their life) on the basis of religion, gender, political views and sexual preferences, while Rojava *includes* the rejected, ‘de-homo sacerizing’ those whose identities and rights have been denied through various forms of oppression” (pg. 261). Rojava’s strength, and appeal as an ally population, lies within its “alternativeness” and inclusivity. In the power-vacuum of the Middle East— where refugees attempt to escape the mass slaying of people who are deemed ideological threats, Rojava offers an ideological ‘safe space’ where gender, religion, ethnicity and so forth do not matter as long as one desires to uphold the liberal values of democratic confederalism, which preaches the radical acceptance of all such surface-level distinctions. This then creates a group of people who are united in protecting their right to exist, as they should so choose to exist, which destabilizes the mentality that has perpetuated war in the region. Inclusivity and democracy are two sides of the same coin— one empowers the other and vice versa. Inclusivity encourages a heterogeneous population and a

heterogeneous population cannot survive in the long run without democracy. Otherwise, the majority will always exert dominance over the minorities that share its space— creating instability, inequity and dissatisfaction, all of which can lead to state failure.

Thus, ally societybuilding populations will demonstrate a strong desire to create a territory in which the democratic ideals of life and liberty are upheld. Returning back to the principles of democratic confederalism, such populations will exhibit many of Rojava’s objectives. By assessing the population’s commitment to creating a democratic space, autonomous collaborators can determine whom they should assist in the societybuilding effort.

Section 4. 5: *Autonomous Collaboration as a Practical Policy Prescription*

In this section, I will propose a specific set of actions that autonomous collaborators can undertake once a societybuilding population has demonstrated its likelihood of being an ally (thus qualifying it for AC). These are intended to be actual policies that can be applied by foreign actors when dealing with societybuilders in post-conflict areas. This is the aspect of SAC that ties into statebuilding and answers the question, “What can be done to help?”

Security is the most crucial component to any societybuilding process. Therefore, autonomous collaborators can assist a societybuilding population in achieving greater levels of security by helping fortify the population’s defense mechanisms. This can be done by: providing training, arms and ammunition, and, in certain specific cases, troops on the ground. Training, arms and ammunition should be the first and most common recourse of action in this regard. However, my goal to imbue this policy with a level of flexibility dictates that there must be a second recourse. Providing security via troops on the ground can be a part of AC, but the role of foreign troops in this context must be clearly delineated and not overstepped. Foreign troops under AC must strictly operate within a

paradigm of defense. No offensive maneuvers should be taken on behalf of the ally population. Similar to the role of UN Peacekeepers, if there is an enemy a mile away, he shall not be deemed a security threat in accordance with AC. However, unlike the UN Peacekeepers, should that enemy directly engage the ally population in armed conflict, autonomous collaborators have the option of allowing their troops to engage with the enemy *alongside* the societybuilding population. In this way, AC incorporates the democratic confederalist principle of radical self-defense. Still, I must emphasize that AC recommends the avoidance of foreign troops on the ground, unless under the most extreme of circumstances, under which a withdrawal should be issued as soon as possible.

The second and equally important element of AC is the provision of direct, non-monetary aid. This should come in the form of food, medicine, goods such as clothing and education materials, as well as construction materials, expertise and perhaps even physical assistance. I reject monetary aid for several reasons: there is no assurance of how it will be spent nor with whom it will end up and greed always accompanies capital, which can easily undermine a societybuilding effort. AC, under the influence of democratic confederalism, does not seek to encourage wasteful practices. It is easy to throw money at a problem, but entirely different to ensure the effectiveness of the contribution. As it currently stands, monetary humanitarian aid undergoes a process in which it passes through a variety of hands before making it to its destination, putting it at risk of being diverted from its original cause and funneled into certain pockets it does not belong in. Thus, AC will never incorporate monetary aid. Instead, legitimate societybuilders need practical supplies. International collaborators will use the money they would have put towards the humanitarian effort to buy culturally appropriate supplies in their home countries, where it is often much cheaper than in areas of scarcity, and then shall directly send it to the ally population. (By “culturally appropriate supplies,” I refer to supplies that are compatible with the societybuilding population. Such supplies must be beneficial without being either

1) culturally imperialistic, or 2) culturally ignorant. For this reason, I would reject the sending of textbooks due to their potential bias and promotion of a singular worldview).

I have emphasized the requirement for aid to be direct, because the use of so-called ‘middlemen’ always convolutes an already complicated process and there is no guarantee of trustworthiness. The aim of autonomous collaboration is to evolve beyond the traditional humanitarian paradigm by addressing the reality of the current process. The process as it stands today allows for the possibility of great waste. AC does not.

Autonomous Collaboration operates on the principle that foreign entities should play a minimal role in the societybuilding process, assisting rather than usurping. There are two fundamental needs that societybuilders have: security and supplies. Needs which autonomous collaboration as a foreign policy seeks to address. Furthermore, AC rejects the use of money as humanitarian aid in order to promote a foreign policy that is helpful without being wasteful.

Section 4. 6: Chapter 4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I proposed a new dual-model of Societybuilding & Autonomous Collaboration (SAC) as an alternative to current statebuilding practice. Arguing that societybuilding is fully driven by local populations, I formally introduce the concept of Autonomous Collaboration as a practical foreign policy that can be applied by international entities seeking to assist societybuilders. Additionally, I identified the characteristics of an ally population, which I argue is necessary for determining the societybuilding efforts worthy of assistance. Finally, I make a case for the provision of security necessities and non-monetary humanitarian aid as the final component of Autonomous Collaboration.

CHAPTER 5

FINAL THOUGHTS

Section 5.1: In Totality

This thesis identifies the disadvantage of current statebuilding practice and theory that is based on a misunderstood notion of ‘the state.’ This has led to limited success in past statebuilding efforts. Rather than approaching statebuilding from a neoliberal institutional point of view– which suggests that ‘the state’ is a governing body that exerts authority over a given population and territory– I propose two theories that work in tandem to replace statebuilding as foreign policy. These theories, known as Societybuilding & Autonomous Collaboration (SAC), are influenced by an anarchic philosophy known as democratic confederalism. Proposed by American anarchist Murray Bookchin, democratic confederalism is based on the three major principles of autonomy, radical self-defense and non-domination. Autonomy is conceptualized as a territory or population’s ability to exist independently without the influence of a higher authority. Radical self-defense is the idea that an autonomous region can exist without achieving the status of a state by endowing every inhabitant with the training and ability to repel any external attack on that territory, and thus, that region’s autonomy. Finally, democratic confederalism upholds the concept of non-domination as the complete eradication of all hierarchies within society. Every individual– regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, orientation and so forth– is equal to his fellow citizens.

Due to the highly theoretical and outdated nature of much of the existing literature on statebuilding, I attempted to move past theory by using the democratic confederalist project of Rojava in northern Syria as a concrete example of societybuilding. Then, per the principles embodied by anarchy, Rojava and societybuilding, I proposed Autonomous Collaboration as a concrete foreign policy that could be used to assist, rather than usurp, societybuilding efforts around the world.

Societybuilding is different from statebuilding in that local populations are in complete control of the effort. It is not managed or overseen by foreign entities. It is a uniquely grassroots movement that recognizes and respects the agency of the individuals around. AC, as a complement to societybuilding, requires that international actors first ensure that the population they desire to assist meets two requirements. Those requirements are that the population 1) shares a common ideology and that this ideology will promote an alliance with the autonomous collaborator(s). Once these conditions are met, autonomous collaborators can offer their assistance to the societybuilding effort by providing the necessities of security and/or non-monetary humanitarian aid in the form of medicine, food, clothing and so forth.

With every day the Middle East continues to experience widespread instability and violence, this dual-model of Societybuilding & Autonomous Collaboration becomes increasingly applicable and necessary. In the past six years, the Middle East has experienced a multitude of state failures and societal breakdowns. Many refugees are still fleeing the region, which continues to impact the global community. The question remains: what can more stable, Western democracies do? In response, I offer SAC. Statebuilding, as it is widely understood, does not have the capacity to create strong, sustainable societies. Neither does AC– but part of this argument lies within the notion that the international community should not extend itself into foreign territories, hoping to engage in the creation of top-down democracy. True democracy can only come from an organic movement driven by the people. The attempt by foreign entities to artificially create democracy will never yield a truly legitimate result.

Section 5. 2: Acknowledgment

It is necessary to acknowledge the dependence of Societybuilding & Autonomous Collaboration theory on Rojava as a model. Due to its extremely current nature— Rojava is still evolving and fighting for its survival every day. The conflict in the Middle East is not over, nor is there a realistic end in sight. SAC are separate from Rojava, but if Rojava does not withstand the ‘test of time,’ this thesis may become irrelevant. In truth, one can only wait and see.

Coming to the end of this project, I have identified two factors that will determine whether Rojava will become a sustainable autonomous society or whether it will be annihilated. The first is the safeguarding of Rojava’s democratic confederalist ideals. If Rojava sacrifices the principles put forth by the Charter of the Social Contract, then the region will no longer stand as an alternative to the repression that surrounds it. It won’t have the same power to unite its constituents under a common cause and, weakened by internal dissonance, Rojava will easily be destroyed by its many enemies. Or, Rojava runs the risk of following in the footsteps of the French and Bolshevik Revolutions in which the original values of the revolutionary movement become perverted and subverted, creating a reality that runs perpendicular to the rhetoric espoused by the regime. In both circumstances, Rojava’s survival depends on its legitimacy and its legitimacy is contingent on the preservation of its democratic ideals.

The second determining factor in Rojava’s survival will be its relationship with its neighbors and broader regional and international actors. The Turkish government already perceives it as a major threat, and united behind Ankara are the KRG, the KDP and the KNC. Rojava and the PYD must engage in diplomacy in order to neutralize such threats as soon and as much as possible. Other threats to Rojava’s survival are the Syrian government, the Syrian opposition forces, ISIS and potentially any radical Islamist group that rejects its liberal, egalitarian society. The menace of the latter may always be a present reality, which should inspire Rojava to use diplomacy in order to minimize its threats

as well as to gain alliances. Potential allies of Rojava are the United States, the countries of the EU, Canada and Israel. However, an open, supportive relationship between Rojava and Israel may imperil the region's relationships with other Arab countries. Regardless, diplomacy will be Rojava's next battle and it must be prepared for the cutthroat world of Middle Eastern politics.

As a scholar who has invested a significant amount of time into this work, I can only hope that Rojava will succeed in permanently establishing itself as an autonomous region and that the liberal principles of democratic confederalism will find themselves embedded within the sociopolitical map of the Middle East. The continued survival of Rojava will validate the claim that grassroots societybuilding (and autonomous collaboration as foreign policy) will be more successful in the creation and promotion of strong, sustainable democratic societies.

Section 5.3: Potential Implications

Finally, I must reiterate that it is imperative that the international community does not engage in autonomous collaboration unless there is a population that demonstrates the desire to incorporate liberal values into its society, is willing to drive the societybuilding process itself and is willing to collaborate with foreign entities.

Autonomous collaboration incorporates a set of premises that exist outside the realm of current foreign policy. Hameiri and Jayasuriya (2011) argue that statebuilding is "marked by a preoccupation with managing security risks potentially emanating from zones of perceived poor governance...The current attention accorded by states to transnational risk reflects the broader crisis of the national scale of government. This is because depictions of potentially catastrophic transnational risk are typically attached to claims about the inherent incapacity of individual governments to deal with these issues effectively within national territorial borders, which rationalize

deeper forms of intervention and regulation on a regional or global scale.” AC cannot be approached from a state-to-state angle. In fact, it recommends and justifies non-action when faced with threatening events occurring outside of national borders. Instability in the Middle East is not a justification for intervention or foreign aid. However, supporting an ‘ally population’ in its quest to create a peaceful, democratic society is a much more compelling reason for intervening outside of national borders. The goal of AC is to perpetuate a positive foreign policy that is both sensible and humanitarian.

AC may also imply a betrayal of certain unethical alliances made by international entities in the past. Hypocritical alliances cannot withstand a policy of autonomous collaboration. To exemplify a hypocritical alliance, I refer to Operation Condor— a covert set of actions undertaken by the United States government in Latin America in the 1970s-80s that helped overturn legitimate, left-leaning democracies in favor of brutal, right wing authoritarian dictatorships. AC demands actions based on true ideological alliances.

Finally, Hameiri (2014) wrote that, “The future of statebuilding is therefore the future of statehood.” If this is true, than democratic autonomy as a societal model and foreign policy may demonstrate the future of all global political systems. Moreover, if democratic confederalism is successful in Rojava and powerful international actors adopt autonomous collaboration, then this will promote the idea that like-minded people must form their own societies based on communal values, regardless of the current layout of nation-states, which also potentially implies a radical reconfiguration of our entire geo-political map.

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