

# The Kurdish Internationale

*by Massoud Sharifi Dryaz*

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**What are the PKK's historical lines of rupture and continuity from its inception to date? The sociologist Olivier Grojean provides a detailed study of the history, ideology and power plays within the Kurdish movement's main organization in Turkey and Syria.**

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Reviewed : Olivier Grojean, *La Révolution kurde. Le PKK et la fabrique d'une utopie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2017, 258 pp., 17 €.

In *La Révolution kurde* Olivier Grojean carries out an in-depth analysis of one of the most highly structured organisations in the Kurdish space. The aim of the book is in fact to provide an overview of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and to analyse the 'rationales for action and the modes of governance adopted by this party [and] its sister organisations in Syria, Iran and Irak. It also looks at the PKKs legal and illegal movements in Turkey and Europe' (p. 16). The book focuses specifically on the actions and mobilisations led by the PKK in Turkey, Syria and Europe.

Olivier Grojean, is a professor at Paris 1 University, and a renowned specialist of the Kurdish mobilisations in Europe. In this book he provides a coherent, synthetic and documented exploration of the PKK's activities and the manner in which the party has developed and functions. The first chapter describes the founding and progress of the PKK in the Turkish context. The second is dedicated to a description of the Party's origins and the ideological transformations it has experienced. The following chapter explains how the PKK enforces discipline within the organisation and exerts its power over the population. In the fourth chapter, the PKK's policies in the areas of ecology, economics and the status of women are analysed in detail. Finally, the last chapter looks anew at the internationalisation of the Kurdish cause.

With his wealth of experience researching the Kurdish diaspora, the author offers the reader a work based largely on interviews conducted with PKK sympathisers and former PKK

activists in Germany and France. He also draws from a field study conducted in 2014 at Maxmûr camp, located in Iraqi Kurdistan. He analyses the publications released by the PKK particularly those written by Öcalan, and cross-references observations made by researchers who have visited the Kurdish zones in Syria.

## **Transformations in the ideological discourse**

A reading of the work reveals Olivier Grojean's desire to show the ruptures and continuities in the PKK's discourse, as well as the paradoxes the organisation's leaders and activists have to face when implementing their principles. The author sees 'continual progress' (p. 57) in the ideas and doctrines recommended by the PKK, from the time of its inception until the present. Situating the Party in the continuity of the national liberation movements that believe in armed struggle, the author sees it as a 'nationalist organisation' inspired by Marxism-Leninism. Based on a reading of the organisation's publications, specifically the works by Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK's mythical leader, he retraces the manner in which this discourse was reshaped after the fall of the USSR, then Öcalan's capture in 1999. Through this he shows how the movement inspired by this organisation finally succumbs to a sort of makeshift ideology, known in its latest version as democratic confederalism, a system that relies on society's ability to organise itself.

According to the author, the PKK shows a certain constancy in its discourse, for example with regard to 'the official rejection of nationalism, seen as chauvinism' (p. 86). However, what Olivier Grojean emphasises more than the continuity of the ideological content, is the persisting ambivalence and contradictions in the PKK's discourse. The testimonies collected by the author highlight the internal incoherence and the ambiguities of the ideology transmitted by the PKK's leaders and cadres. They reveal the gap between 'what the leaders, activists and sympathisers *think* and what they *do* today' (p. 20). According to O. Grojean, this ambivalence that we should see as calculated, has a dual function: it is a means of gaining recognition from the external public, and serves as an instrument of control within the organisation to dominate the activists. The work frequently attempts to expose the contradictions between statements and practices, particularly in what concerns the theory of the 'free woman', and the project of 'democratic confederalism' in Syrian Kurdistan. With regard to the former, the author strives to prove that the idea of the struggle for women's liberation is to an extent used by the PKK to desexualise and subjugate both male and female activists. This is done largely by 'disciplining the body (via a prohibition of sexual relations for party members and combatants, and the imposition of specific behaviour for any interaction between the sexes)' (p. 161). For the latter, the author emphasises the fact that, contrary to its initial goal, the project of democratic confederalism 'is imposed from above and not from below' (p. 183).

## **Controlling, regulating, mobilising**

The influence of the PKK organisation extends from the furthest mountains of Kurdistan into the heart of the large Turkish cities, and crosses several European countries. This organisation is not limited to a specific country and pursues its activities in several territories. The work looks closely at the mechanisms developed by the Party to control and mobilise its own base, as well as the Kurdish populations in the Middle East and in Europe. To explain how the PKK imposes strict discipline in its ranks, Olivier Grojean underscores the importance of the ideological training and primarily the theory of the 'New Man'.

In this he shares Paul White's pioneering reflections that connected the theme of the New Man with a 'Stalinist' approach. The PKK seems to have radically 'adapted' this idea to suit its own needs' adding Guevaraist, Castrist and Maoist beliefs. This concept is now commonly found in works dedicated to the PKK.<sup>1</sup> Olivier Grojean states that the PKK uses the theme of the New Man to indoctrinate its activists, control them and demand 'they give themselves entirely, show unerring obedience, and live strictly disciplined lives' (p. 105) not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe

According to him, this desire for transformation reaches far beyond the activist circles and inspires the whole of Kurdish society. But unlike within the activist groups, in the Kurdish regions and among the diaspora, the Party's main aim is no longer to 'forcefully impose a certain lifestyle', but to garner support and 'organise and control the Kurdish population'. This is done through the media, associations and municipalities, and by organising social and political activities (pp. 108-118). Olivier Grojean specifically describes how power is exercised in the spaces governed by the PKK, for example in the Maxmûr, Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) and Sinjar (Iraq) camps. Through testimonies the author shows how these spaces are dominated and monopolised by PKK sister organisations and their allies.

## **The internationalisation of the space of action**

From the outset, Kurdish resistance in the Middle Eastern countries has been cross-border in nature. But its relationship to the existing State frameworks in the region, and the possibility of action at a regional scale, have been extremely varied. Hamit Bozarslan quite rightly underscored that the 'Kurdish issue goes beyond State boundaries to occupy its own

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<sup>1</sup> White Paul J., *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernisers? The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey*, London, Zed Books, 2000, pp. 139-141; Özcan Ali Kemal, *Turkey's Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan*, London, Routledge, 2006.

regional sphere'.<sup>2</sup> The PKK was born in a context marked by a progressive regionalisation of the Kurdish conflict. In the last chapter of his book, Olivier Grojean looks at the phenomenon of the regionalisation of the Kurdish issue, and more specifically at the international dimensions of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, from the 1980s onwards. According to the author, while the Iraqi Kurds 'benefited from the involvement of international organisations and the intervention of major powers', the Turkish Kurds remain forgotten by the international community. But thanks to the PKK they found themselves thrust into 'a strategy for mobilisation'. More recently, since the beginning of the Syrian civil wars, the Syrian Kurds have seen their cause attract international interest. The author focuses more on the internationalisation of the Kurdish question in Turkey, and gives a detailed explanation of the place it occupies on the agenda of European governmental bodies and Parliamentary institutions. Finally, to conclude his analysis, he also provides information on 'non-institutional support for the PKK' (p. 174).

## **Beyond the organisation, the movement**

This book is a major contribution to an understanding of what the author sometimes calls 'Öcalan's party' (p. 89). In this sense, the subject of the book is perfectly clear. But the question is whether we can fully understand the Kurdish movement by focusing solely on an analysis of its main organisation. Like the majority of works dedicated to the Kurdish movement, this book focuses primarily on the Kurdish organisations. As a result, the movement's progression tends to be reduced to the history of political parties or armed organisations. The movement's demands and characteristics are defined on the basis of the main organisations' discourses, strategies and modes of action.

This 'organisational bias'<sup>3</sup> in the analysis of the movement — to use O. Fillieule and M. Bennani-Chraïbi's concept —, could, on the one hand hamper an understanding of the Kurdish movement in its totality, and on the other hand, erase the distinction between the subjectivity of the actors involved and the ideological and symbolic discourse specific to an organisation. In other words, in O. Grojean's book, the space allotted to the organisational aspect of the Kurdish movement is so overwhelming that one often forgets that participation in the movement is not limited to joining the PKK. Consequently, there are almost no references to the less visible, unstructured and little centralised features of the Kurdish dissent movement.

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<sup>2</sup> Bozarslan Hamit, *La question kurde: États et minorités au Moyen-Orient*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo, 1997, p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> Bennani-Chraïbi Mounia and Fillieule Olivier (Ed.), *Résistances et protestations dans les sociétés musulmanes*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo, 2002, p. 119.

Moreover, this organisation-centric approach does not leave room for a study of the experience, identity and subjectivity of the individual actors involved in the movement. It reduces the work of the individual actor to a mere affirmation of, and adherence to, the representations constructed by the PKK's leaders and organizers. Nonetheless, we have only to remember that the internalisation of this ideology, as recommended by the PKK, only affects the organisation's cadres, and a 'small active minority' within the guerrilla movement.<sup>4</sup> Taking this idea further, it would be interesting to know how the individual actors live and participate in collective Kurdish actions, and how, through their experiences and ideas, they could participate in reinventing and redirecting the movement. These observations in no way detract from the exceptional merits of this works, which will henceforth serve as a key reference work for anyone seeking to understand the PKK and the role it plays in the transformations taking place in the Middle East today.

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<sup>4</sup> Collovald Annie, 'Pour une sociologie des carrières morales des dévouements militants', in Collovald Annie (Ed.), *L'humanitaire ou le management des dévouements: enquête sur un militantisme de 'solidarité internationale' en faveur du Tiers-Monde*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002, pp. 177-225.