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Unbounding Homeland: Spatiality in the Kurdish Freedom Movement's Project of Kurdistan

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This article explores the critical issue of the spatiality of homeland, as emerging from foundational texts and personal accounts of members of the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM). The notion of homeland sits at the center of the interweaving of place and identity, but it often suffers from silent statism, which emphasizes a cartographic approach and a definition of homeland space in absolute terms. By connecting work in cultural and political geography on homeland with feminist geopolitical scholarship and poststatist epistemologies, this article frames the Kurdish homeland as a political project, of which spatiality must be understood in relational terms. It supports this argument by exploring four key elements of the KFM project: autonomy, women's liberation, ecology, and self-defense. *Key Words:* *homeland, Kurdish Freedom Movement, Kurdistan, relational space, spatiality.*

The concept of “homeland” or “motherland” or “fatherland” has ancient roots and refers to the place of settlement. However, it takes on a new meaning as a geographical territory, to which a nation-state refers. Here, the borders are not ethnic but political. ... In contemporary linguistic usage, every state is thus a homeland. ... The political boundaries that were drawn after the First World War led to a distortion of the concept of homeland, or rather caused the emergence of a “real homeland problem.” ... The real problem in the Middle East, concerning the various homelands, lies in the contradiction between the traditional federal structure and the unnecessary and unrealistic division into numerous nation-states. Until this contradiction is overcome, we can hardly arrive at a realistic concept of homeland and citizenship.

—Öcalan (2016, 240–41)

With these words, Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkêren Kurdistan*, PKK), posed the question of homeland, highlighting its mismatch with the political territorial configuration in the Middle East.¹ More conceptually, Öcalan interrogated the ontological and epistemological nature of modern homelands, understood in political terms and coinciding with the geographical territory of the nation-state. Not only did he point out the discrepancy between homelands and actual political

borders, but he went further, arguing that the very structure of nation-states is incompatible with the reality of Middle Eastern homelands. His stance therefore raises questions about what the spatiality of the homeland is, and whether it is the same as that of the state. Drawing on accounts of the Öcalan-inspired Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), in this article, I address this key question: What kind of space is homeland space?

The article answers this question by exploring the understanding of Kurdistan by the KFM, which seeks to establish a stateless confederal democratic society in the heart of the Middle East. Their oppositional stance against the state provides a valuable perspective for evaluating the spatial concept of homeland while transcending any form of statism. Thus, by putting geographic literature on homeland in contact with poststatist epistemologies and feminist geopolitics, I offer a relational understanding of homeland spatiality, emerging from the accounts made by members of the KFM and its foundational texts. Poststatist epistemologies disentangle the conceptual framing of homeland space from state space (Barrera de la Torre and Ince 2016; Ince and Barrera de la Torre 2016). Feminist geopolitics explores it from the spatially embedded practices of autonomy (Naylor 2017), which becomes the cornerstone of

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the KFM political project of a stateless democratic confederalism (Öcalan 2011; Jongerden and Knapp 2016). These two approaches clearly highlight the essence of the KFM's geopolitical project, aimed at building a free Kurdistan developed as antithetical to state centralization and founded on social autonomy, women's liberation, and an environmentalist conception of the relationship between people and the land (Öcalan et al. 2015; Ayboğa et al. 2020; Gerber and Brincat 2021; Hammy and Miley 2022). Autonomy is the founding principle ordering socio-spatial relations in the KFM project (Burç 2020b; Jongerden 2022a). The women's liberation struggle situates autonomy within society, rather than framing it just as a quality of society (Öcalan 2013; Dirik 2022). Ecology redraws the fundamental relationship between people and land as mutual-adaptive and in a nonexploitative way (Hammy 2021; Hunt 2021). Finally, even the key duty of homeland defense is framed as a bottom-up practice that embodies autonomy and relationality (Üstündağ 2016; Engizek and Network for an Alternative Quest 2017). Together, these four domains reverse the top-down statist approach to homeland, while preserving its political nature and its state of perpetual becoming.

In the following sections, I first situate Öcalan and Kurdistan and their relevance within debates on homeland. Second, I introduce the KFM within the geopolitical context, followed by a discussion of the article's methodology. Then, I delve into empirical sections, framing Kurdistan as a political project, and then illustrating how the relational space can be used to understand the aforementioned domains: autonomy, women's liberation, ecology, and self-defense.

Kurdistan in the Homeland Debate

Abdullah Öcalan is a key figure in Kurdish nationalism and recent history. In 1978, he cofounded the PKK, a Marxist-Leninist party, aimed at liberating Kurdistan, like other decolonial socialist national liberation movements. In 1984, the PKK initiated a war against the Turkish state and established its headquarters in the Beqaa Valley, between Syria and Lebanon, before moving to the Qandil Mountains in Iraq. Considered the primary enemy by Turkey, Öcalan was sentenced to death, which was later turned into a life sentence in solitary

confinement on Imralı Island. Since the late 1990s, he has guided the PKK and the KFM in shifting from a state-centric Marxism-Leninism to a stateless libertarian municipalism (Casier and Jongerden 2012; Dinc 2020; Gerber and Brincat 2021; Matin 2021; Hammy and Miley 2022; Jongerden 2022b). Between 2009 and mid-2011, he played a central role in then-failed secret peace talks with the Turkish state to solve the so-called Kurdish question, preparing an important document titled *The Road Map to Negotiations*. In this text, he tried to outline a real solution to the Kurdish issue, envisioning a "democratic nation" and a common homeland.

At the center of this project, we find Kurdistan, but what is Kurdistan? Literally, it means "the land of the Kurds;" however, there is no unanimous consensus on its defining characteristics. In the monthly *Kurdistan Chronicle*, Kurdistan has been defined as "a homeland for the Kurdish nation" (Dost 2023). Nevertheless, we do not find any Kurdistan on political maps (Figure 1). The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in northeastern Iraq, is just a small portion of the whole Kurdish-inhabited area—Greater Kurdistan (Figure 2; Kaya 2020; Mofidi 2022). In physical maps, Kurdistan might indicate the region between the Zagros and Taurus Mountains. Additionally, several historical maps employ different terminological references to "the land of the Kurds," since ancient times and even more frequently since the late nineteenth century (Figure 3). Therefore, we cannot determine what or where Kurdistan is until we consider the perspective of those who define it.

The framing, use, and interpretation of Kurdistan and its map throughout history have depended on understanding the relationship between nation and territory (Kaya 2020). Although a Kurdish region has existed since ancient times, it never experienced political unity, being fragmented into different principalities under regional empires (McDowall 2004). Attempts to outline Kurdish borders have been made more insistently since the end of World War I, also by global and regional powers, which inscribed their geopolitical discourse about the region in maps (Culcasi 2006, 2010).

In 2017, the KRG organized a nonbinding referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan independence. In that case, many within the KFM opposed the creation of a small Kurdish state to potentially save the integrity

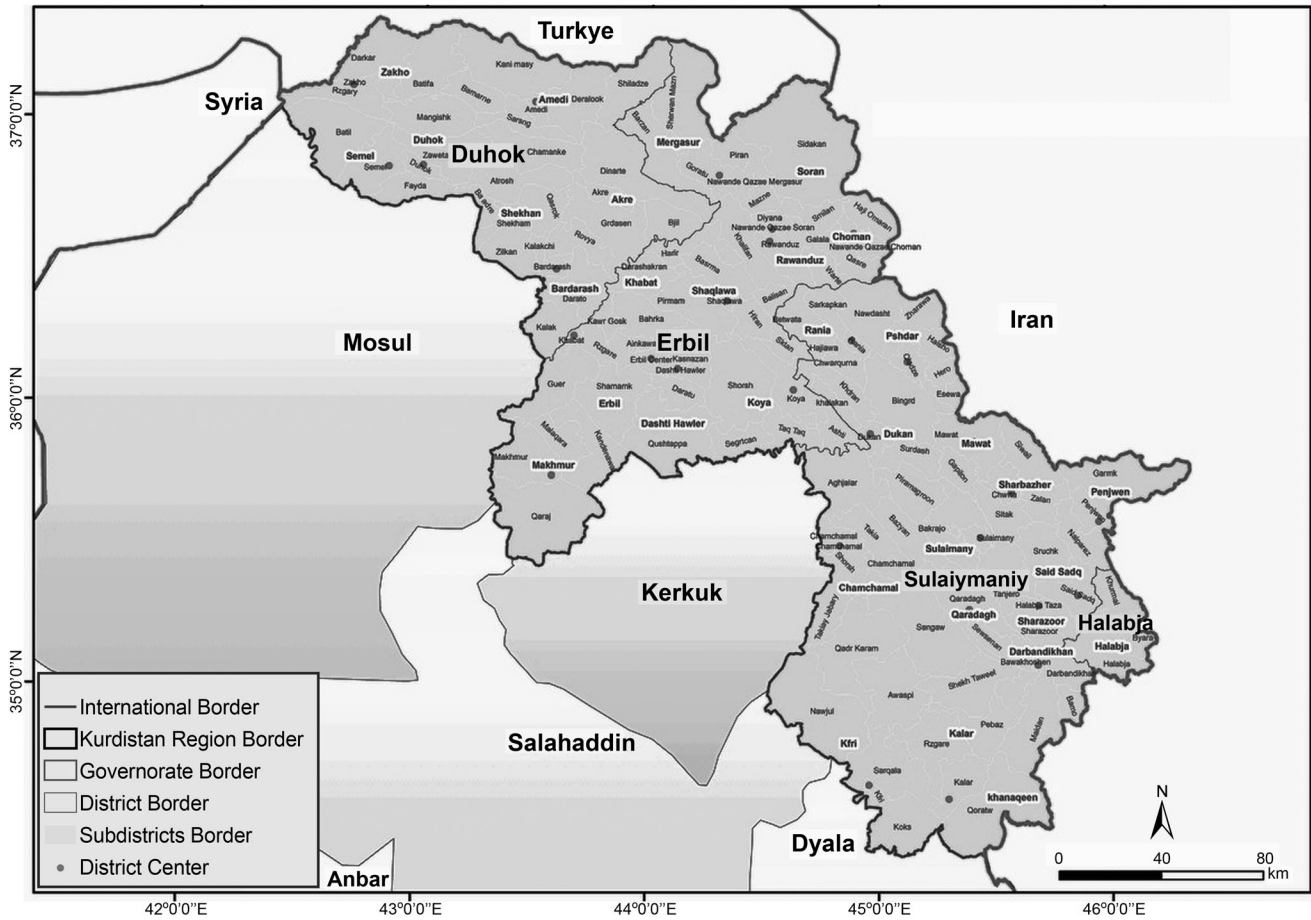


Figure 1. Kurdistan regional government. Source: Kurdistan Region Statistics Office.

of the Greater Kurdistan. Commenting on the referendum, however, PKK cofounder Duran Kalkan stated, “Kurds do not need a state” (Khalidi 2017), because the latter is only an apparatus of oppression. Such a declaration moves the focus from the cartographic outline of a Kurdish homeland to its political organization.

The Kurdish leader Öcalan has acknowledged that the concept of homeland is subjected to historical evolution. As convincingly demonstrated (Hobsbawm 1992; Kaiser 1994; Conzen 2001), before the advent of modern states, the term *homeland* referred to the restricted area where someone could circulate during a lifetime. In the last two centuries, though, with the global emergence of the nation-state, it served as the “geographic cradle of the nation and also the ‘natural’ place where the nation is to fulfill its destiny” (Kaiser 1994, 10). The historical emergence of the nation-state brought along the necessity to convert the land into an ancestral homeland through the twin process of nationalization of space and territorialization of

nation (Kaiser 2002). Thus, the concepts of nation, state, and homeland became interchangeable in political discourse and everyday language.

Kaplan (2003) emphasized how the term provides the state with “comforting images of a deeply rooted past to legitimate modern forms of imperial power” (90). Conflating the homeland with state territory, borders become crucial in outlining the related bounded space. Bordering is one of the techniques that the modern state employs for exercising its sovereign power because it is a means of ordering (Albert, Jacobson, and Lapid 2001) and othering (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002). Thus, Kaplan (2003) asked whether “the word homeland itself [does] some of the cultural work of securing national borders” (85).

According to Shelef (2020), a homeland is “a specific form of territoriality ... a product of the nationalist project” (11). Shelef focused on defining a homeland through claimed territorial borders, essentially conflating it with the state (Agnew et al. 2022). While recognizing homeland as a political

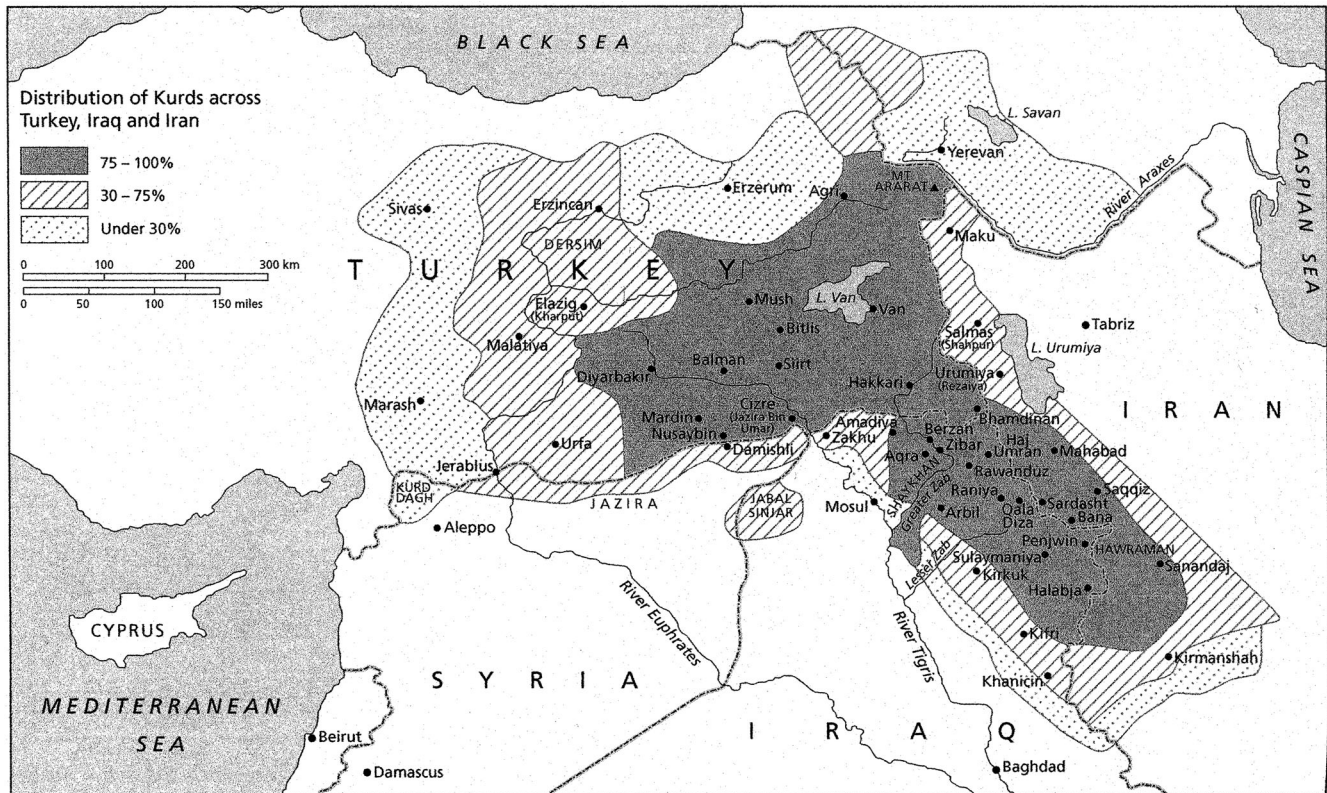


Figure 2. The Kurdish-inhabited area. Source: Kaya (2020, 179). Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

project, his approach raises the question of the analytical difference between homeland space and state space if viewed through borders.

The concept of homeland presents a dual nature. On the one hand, land refers to a spatial expanse, a material geographic entity, with natural resources, a topographic outline, climate conditions, and a connotative biodiversity. On the other hand, home involves human activities and histories, emotions, bonding, familiarity, and hospitality, essentially pivoting around the central functions of nurturing and defending (Dobel 2010). Thus, the homeland exists between the tangible and intangible perceptions, coherently codified through narratives that bind them: “Emotive narratives informed by cultural habit and experience are what connect people to their ancestors and homelands” (Kearney 2009, 218).

This dual nature is the major epistemological challenge and primary distinctive trait of homelands. It is no coincidence that all main geographers’ definitions of homeland emphasize bonding or attachment. According to Gregory (2009), it is “an area to which a people or a political community is closely attached” (343). Kaiser (2009) contended the term

symbolizes “the deep emotional connectedness that people are said to feel toward their places of origin” (21). Roark (1993) noted that “the term homeland, as used in several cultures, implies a bonding with the land, an emotional psychological tie” (6). Nostrand and Estaville (1993) described it as a place “that people identify with and have strong feelings about” (1). If attachment is its main characteristic, homeland should be best understood as a relationship. For example, Indigenous and decolonial geographies adopted a relational perspective to describe homeland as a form of becoming between humans and nonhumans (Country et al. 2016) or to explore its multiple sources of sovereign authority, outlining a multiscale legal system (Daigle 2019).

Cultural geographers Nostrand and Estaville (1993, 2001) proposed five analytical ingredients to define homeland: a people, a place, a sense of place, control of place, and time. In partial dissent, Conzen (2001), drawing on Connor’s (1994) categorization, introduced a political nuance with three analytical groups: identity, territoriality, and loyalty. Each was further defined by three additional criteria, including the

discipline emerged concurrently with the European state, serving to map resources and organize territories, while also promoting the concept of the nation-state (Castro 2005, 59) in the colonies. Cartography plays a crucial role in state-building (Harley 2005), enabling a Cartesian logic of space in absolute terms (Harvey 2006), as measurable, mappable, and controllable (Storey 2012). Modern state territory is conceived “as a political counterpart of calculative space” (Elden 2011). State space demands exclusivity and uniformity (Farinelli 2003, 2009), contrasting with the multiple, simultaneous, and overlapping nature of homelands and territorial belonging (Bialasiewicz 2003; Rees, Webb Williams, and Diener 2021). If homelands are political projects that can be best understood as a relationship, they always incorporate something exceeding the calculative space and mapped territorialities. Therefore, I propose to read the homeland spatiality in relational terms, relying on poststatist epistemologies, to eschew the “silent statism [which] remains embedded across the discipline” (Ince and Barrera de la Torre 2016, 10) of geography, but increasingly challenged in the last decade, especially by Indigenous and decolonial scholarship (e.g., Country et al. 2016; Daigle 2019; Fitzwater 2019).

Due to its refusal of the nation-state, the KFM case easily supports this argument. The aim of this article, however, is not only to juxtapose homeland and state, but to epistemologically and ontologically disentangle them and their spatialities, without neglecting the homeland's political nature.

The Kurdish Freedom Movement

For Kurdistan, ... democratic confederalism is a movement which does not interpret the right to self-determination to establish a nation-state, but develops its own democracy in spite of political boundaries. A Kurdish structure will develop through the creation of a federation of Kurds in Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq. And by uniting on a higher level they will form a confederal system. (Öcalan 2005)

The 2005 Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan posed a political and cultural challenge in the Middle East heartland: thinking of territorial organization and cultural belonging beyond statism. After his capture, and inspired by the U.S. theorist M. Bookchin (Hunt 2019; Dinc 2020; Gerber and Brincat 2021), Öcalan began writing a series of defense texts, theorizing the PKK paradigm shift to

stateless libertarian municipalism, beyond and against the state. The main objective became societal empowerment through the proliferation of a transnational network of assemblies or councils, at different scales, through which people organize themselves and administer their affairs. The KFM is an informal umbrella term that “encompasses an array of Kurdish organizations inspired by the ideas of ... Abdullah Öcalan” (Miley 2020, 2), including parties, their armed wings, civil society, and diaspora organizations. Among them, the PKK remains the strongest and best organized Kurdish political force (Marcus 2007), serving as the KFM's ideological backbone (Seevan 2017).

Each organization participates with its subjectivity but converges to the main political goal of building a democratic confederal Kurdistan, based on autonomy, women's liberation, and ecology. Democratic confederalism redesigns the institutional territorial architecture and consequently the nexus between territory and identity. In Öcalan's (2005) hopes, “[i]t replaces the centralist nation state based on borders. It is the basis for the unity of the peoples and democratic forces of the Middle East.”

In 2005, these forces established a transregional bottom-up umbrella organization, now called Group of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK), with its female extension of the Community of Kurdistan's Women (*Komalên Jimên Kurdistanê*, KJK). In so doing, “the PKK decentralized its mobilization and facilitated the building of sub-movements such as the youth movement and women's movement” (Aydin and Burç 2023, 5). Although it serves as a site of diplomatic initiatives to promote democratic autonomy and as a platform for internal diplomacy, some scholars consider the KCK only an attempt to build a Kurdish statecraft (Kekevi 2015). Some might argue that they seek formal independence rather than autonomy, but the institutional internal organization does not reproduce statist structures but a complex multilayered political and institutional network, aimed at blurring the borders across Kurdistan without officially dismantling them.

Furthermore, amid the Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011, the KFM established the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North-Eastern Syria (DAANES), which is meant to be part of a future federative Syria, simultaneously participating in the KCK. This area, also known as Rojava by the Kurds, became a crucial center for the KFM, allowing them to implement their principles more freely and

consistently than anywhere else (Figure 4). Thus, DAANES and KRG emerged in recent decades as two competing models of Kurdish self-administration: the former based on societal self-organization, and the latter on the nation-state paradigm (Jongerden 2019).

Rojava's significance extended beyond Kurdistan, gaining importance also among non-Kurdish forces. Today, DAANES is home to various ethnic and religious groups, each with its own autonomy, incorporating non-Kurdish-majority territories (McGee 2022). All languages are officially recognized and considered equal in all areas of social, educational, and cultural life (Rojava Information Center 2023). It is a competing model for the rest of the Middle East (Sabio 2015; Hosseini 2016), even attracting internationalist supporters and fighters (Hammy and Miley 2022) for its promise to establish an egalitarian stateless society. Furthermore, the KFM has a strong presence in the diaspora, especially in Europe, where more than 1 million Kurds live, representing the largest stateless diaspora on the continent, politically active (Başer 2013), and well connected with international radical left forces (Ventura 2023).

In Europe, the PKK enacted a long-term strategy by helping form a network of civil society organizations, media, cultural centers, and political-diplomatic representations (Casier 2019). The latter is the case of

the Kurdistan National Congress (*Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê*, KNK), a governmental platform for different parties and forces, based in Brussels. Even if it is one of the most important Kurdish political actors in Europe, it “suffered from an inability to attract a full range of Kurdish participation and an image of being in part an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party” (Gunter 2011, 181).

Researching Kurdistan Through the KFM

This research draws on two main sources: pivotal KFM texts and interviews with key KFM figures in Europe, including Kurdish diaspora organizations, politicians, activists, and non-Kurdish supporters. Data collection for this research took place mostly between July 2020 and April 2021, during the harsh times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The whole world faced severe lockdowns and restrictions on movement. Additionally, the criminalization of the PKK makes the KFM's members unwilling to share information without previous familiarization or through remote interviews. These two limitations pushed me to pivot the research focus to written texts and public activities.

Previous contacts in the KNK and with prominent members of the diaspora in Ireland and Belgium and Italian activists of the Kurdish solidarity network

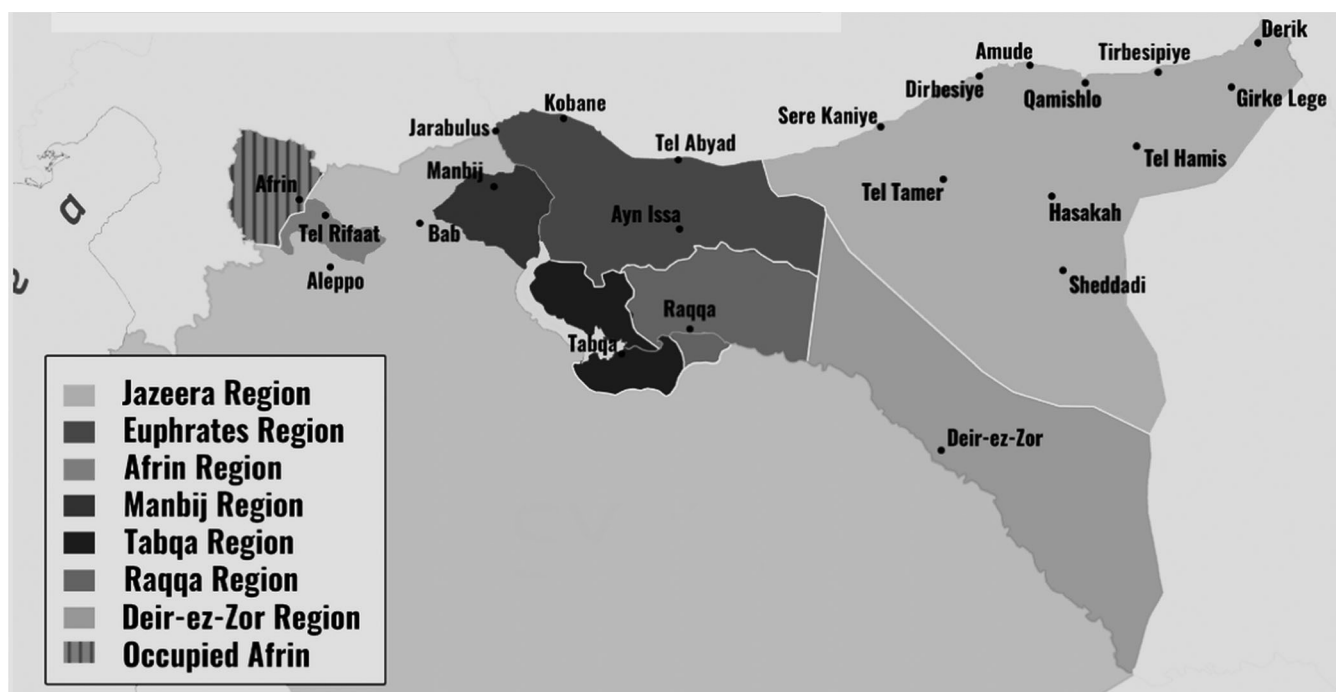


Figure 4. Autonomous administration of northeast Syria. Source: Rojava Information Center.

helped me overcome the lack of in-person familiarization with different Kurdish communities across Europe. The material is subdivided into written texts—monographs, conference proceedings, academic and online articles—and twenty interviews with key informants—all part of the KFM or the European solidarity network—conducted in Italian or English by phone, e-mail, video calls, and face to face. The sole purpose of the interviews is to strengthen and further investigate the findings from the text analysis. Each interview, based on open-ended questions, lasted around one hour, and touched on different aspects of the perception and personal understanding of the Kurdish homeland. Participants were asked to describe Kurdistan's geographical and political features; explain how democratic confederalism changes their perception of the Kurdish past and heritage, shapes the present spatial and political representations, and outlines future directions; and discuss borders and terminological differences between Kurdish and English.

Among the key texts, Öcalan's manuscripts form the main theoretical basis on which the KFM's understanding of homeland is built. Öcalan's texts were smuggled out of jail by his lawyers and then handed over to the International Initiative, an organization of the Kurdish diaspora in Germany responsible for their translation and publication. The circulation of these texts is ensured by a hybrid social infrastructure consisting of European activists, publishing houses, nongovernmental organizations, and diaspora organizations (Ventura 2023). The Initiative also published the proceedings of three conferences held in Hamburg in 2012, 2015, and 2017. These conferences were arranged by the joint effort of various Kurdish organizations, and aimed at discussing the KFM's ideas. Their contributions play a significant role in this research, as they demonstrate an ongoing public engagement, by Kurdish members of the KFM, in narrating, describing, and imagining their homeland. Many of the quotations in this research come from these conferences, which were thought of to internationalize the democratic confederal Kurdistan. Other texts are provided by Kurdish activist scholars, such as Dirik's (2022) seminal *The Kurdish Women's Movement*, or by the memoirs of the PKK cofounder Cansız (2018), who was murdered in Paris in 2013. Finally, important insights come from reports and texts by internationalist militants who traveled to Rojava to support the KFM. Particularly significant is the collective of Internationalist Commune (2018) and their *Make Rojava Green Again*.

Kurdistan: A Political Project

As discussed earlier, a definition of Kurdistan depends on the territorial political project, highlighting the centrality of the political subjectivity enabling it. The KRG and the KCK—which DAANES is part of—are competing territorial models, not only in cartographical terms but also politically and militarily, as the KRG often collaborates with Turkey in repressing the PKK. For the scope of this research, though, it is important to focus on the spatial conceptualization of the democratic confederal option. The KCK is designed as an alternative to the nation-state, which Öcalan considered the enemy of the free society. Nonetheless, the concept of nationality does not lose relevance in his thinking (Ventura and Custodi 2024). The homeland remains important, but completely detached from the state or a potential state-building, without those traits of idealistic veneration present in nationalistic and statist accounts.

The homeland isn't an ideal, it is merely a tool for the life of the individual and the nation. (Öcalan 2017a, 25)

The concept of homeland in Öcalan must be interpreted within his larger theoretical framework, for which the conceptual pair of democratic nation and democratic modernity is the dialectical antithesis to the notions of nation-state and capitalist modernity (Biehl 2012). This framework is drawn on Bookchin's (1982) dialectical model, where history proceeds through confrontations between the legacy of freedom and the legacy of domination.

We are living in the age of the global hegemony of monopolies and the militarization of the entire society in the form of the nation-state. Democratic modernity can only counter this hegemony with its own system of confederal networks based on self-defense and democratic politics that encompass the entire society always and everywhere. (Öcalan 2020, 261)

The introduction of the notion of the democratic nation develops the people–land nexus in nonstatist terms.

For societies, the nation-state model is nothing but a pitfall and network of suppression and exploitation. The democratic nation concept reverses this definition. The definition of a democratic nation that is not bound by rigid political boundaries and a single language, culture, religion and interpretation of history,

signifies plurality and communities as well as free and equal citizens existing together and in solidarity. (Öcalan 2017a, 23)

The political project of democratic confederalism shapes the homeland relationship between identity and territory, outlining a politicized sense of place. The KFM aims to build a pluralistic Kurdistan, which can be considered the land of autonomous social forces, thus contributing to thinking of homeland spatiality as the rough space of the coexistence of multiple trajectories.

The democratic nation allows the people to become a nation themselves, without relying on power and state—becoming a nation through much-needed politicisation. It aims to prove that in the absence of becoming a state or acquiring power, and without politicisation, a nation can be created with autonomous institutions in the social, diplomatic and cultural spheres as well as in economy, law and self-defence, and thus build itself as a democratic nation. (Öcalan 2017a, 23)

Such a Kurdish homeland starts with people dwelling on the land, rather than its bordering. In so doing, it expresses a radical nonstatist approach to spatiality.

While the state's nation pursues homogenized society, the democratic nation mainly consists of different collectivities. It sees diversity as richness. Life itself is only possible through diversity. (Öcalan 2017a, 25)

Life cannot be bounded. Inspired by the early tribes, Öcalan understood homelands and human activities as not bordered.

The boundaries between what the tribes saw as their homelands were not yet borders. Commerce, culture or language were not restricted by the boundaries. Territorial borders remained flexible for a long time. (Öcalan 2011, 9)

The Öcalan-inspired Kurdish homeland exemplifies how it is never given but always related to a political project. Often, such a project has been thought of only in territorial terms, thinking where drawing the lines and defining the inside–outside divide. A homeland is more than that, though: It is a relationship between people and land, or territory and identity. The KFM democratic nation is “a model based on democracy instead of a model based on state structures and ethnic origins” (Öcalan 2017b, 42). Thus, it emphasizes a relational type of spatiality.

Homeland as Relational Space

We put people at the center, not borders. (Interview 1)

This is a captivating, short, but accurately shrewd extract from a broader answer given by one of the most prominent Kurdish politicians in Europe, the former cochair of the KNK. She was talking of how democratic confederalism changes the idea of a Kurdish homeland. In their brazen simplicity, these few words capture the interpretative reversing of the homeland spatiality: from an absolute understanding of space to a relational one. Whereas the former “is the space of private property and other bounded territorial designations (such as states, administrative units, city plans and urban grids)” (Harvey 2006, 271), in relational terms, “[t]he concept of space is embedded in or internal to process” (Harvey 2006, 273).

Framing homeland space as relational means understanding it as “a simultaneity of multiple trajectories” (Massey 2005, 61), unfolding as interaction, that is the social dimension. Consequently, space is neither smooth nor just a distance, but rough and the sphere of coexistence of multiple trajectories, always in movement. Homelands are thus in a perpetual state of becoming, following the actual sociospatial relations underpinning them.

Putting people at the center is the spatial essence of the KFM political project, aiming at overcoming the capitalist modernity of the nation-state, to use Öcalan's terminology. According to the Italian geographer Farinelli (2019), modernity originated from inventing absolute space, a move that decentralized people in favor of a geometric understanding of space, culminating in the bordering-centered cartographic reason (Pickles 2004). The modern state was its major outcome. The KFM seeks to overcome this.

Turning to a relational spatiality means evaluating multiplicity and becoming. The homeland finds definition in the concatenation of dialectical relations between people and land, material landscapes and economic flows, cultural heritage, and sociospatial practices. Space is traversed by uninterrupted histories, following people, and not bounded by borders. Thus, a European committed artist, involved in the KFM, answered my question “What is the Kurdish homeland to you?” with these words:

A history comes to mind, a culture, a language, a set of symbols, instruments, poetry, and narratives of intersecting struggles, but most of all, the possibility of

alternate egalitarian futurities with enormous political, cultural and artistic importance for the struggles of our present. (Interview 10)

In the KFM, the principles of political and social autonomy and grassroots democracy decentralize the production of homeland spatiality, which is represented more as a connection of places rather than a single homogeneous space. The place-making concerns the construction of physical locations hosting autonomous political activity. The portrayals of homeland provided by the KFM mainly depict assemblies, cooperatives, communes, women and youth's autonomy, environmental projects, and social protection units.

This political architecture radically opens the spatiality of homeland, which turns into an unbounded wrinkled space, always ready to add components inside and to enlarge by including and connecting with communities not previously part of it. Homeland becomes unbounded, but not spatially infinite. It merges and overlaps with other spatialities and emotional topographies. As a result, the spatiality emerging from such political organization is radically different from the one produced by nation-states, because it is based on the practices of autonomy.

Autonomy

According to Connor (1994), “[a]utonomy is an amorphous concept, capable of covering a multitude of visions extending from very limited local options to complete control over everything other than foreign policy” (83). Etymologically, *autonomy* means self-rule and is usually framed as self-governance and power-sharing with the state: a bounded space demarcated by borders with clear legal limitations and competencies. Autonomy has been approached by scholars in two different ways. In the first case, it is a top-down devolution from the state to a minority group; in the second, it is a bottom-up political resistance against the state and the capitalist system (Naylor 2017). Poststatist epistemologies and feminist geopolitical scholarship claim for reversing such a perspective, decentralizing the approach, and making the state contingent, by beginning not from the state territory but from “the spatially-embedded practice of self-declared autonomy in place” (Naylor 2017, 27).

Turning upside-down the state model reassesses locality and human scale, referring to the “communities that are modest in size and comprehensible politically and logistically to their residents” (M. Bookchin 1992, 28). In the case of the KFM, autonomy becomes a principle of difference and variety, which might have a territorial dimension, too, but this is not the starting point, nor the foremost distinctive trait. Significantly, the KCK cochair and founding member of the PKK Cemil Bayik responded to written questions from the Kurdish Peace Institute (2023) explaining that in their view, “the women’s liberation struggle is much more valuable than any war for the homeland. ... It is not possible to be free without creating a consciousness of freedom in women and society in general.” What reverberates here is the epistemological reversing from territory and borders to people, producing a relational spatiality made of histories and sociospatial practices.

Similarly to Zapatistas in Chiapas (Fitzwater 2019), the KFM envisages a municipality-centered network of autonomous governance. Autonomy does not refer only to small territorial units, but “[e]ach community, ethnicity, culture, religious community, intellectual movement, economic unit, etc. can structure and express itself autonomously as a political unit” (Öcalan 2020, 259). The KFM blends territorial autonomy with the nonterritorial autonomy model, which recalls ancient empires’ modes of autonomy based on the “personality principle” (Ventura and Custodi 2024), but with a distinctive centrality played by women’s agency (Burç 2020a). Coherently, the KFM started establishing new villages in the most suitable social and geographic environments to strengthen and entrench the new political paradigm to spatial practices (Biehl 2011). Municipality becomes the most important geographical unit, which can simultaneously guarantee human-scaled political agency and resistance to statist modes of spatial organization.

According to Öcalan (2016), the organization of democratic society in the form of a network of organs of civil self-administration means a movement from democratic city councils to quarter and village communes; from cooperatives to big civil organizations with a wide social base; and from human, children’s, and animal rights organizations to vanguard organizations of women’s liberation, ecology, and youth. Political parties should survive to

nurture a democratic political culture; however, the most important democratic organs are the people's assemblies—one for each ethnic group—to avoid the cultural oppression and assimilation experienced by the Kurds themselves in the nation-states.

Their organization emphasizes human agency and autonomy within a communal life framework. Assemblies and cooperatives constitute the communal organization of politics and economy, placing the commons at the center of theoretical debate and practical implementation of everyday autonomy. Thus, Kurdistan is portrayed by emphasizing the specific encounter between land and the human factor.

[I]n all parts of Kurdistan, in nearly all of the cities and provinces, in some areas even in the villages, we now have city assemblies, and women's and youth assemblies as well as village communes. (Kışanak and Network for an Alternative Quest 2012, 2019)

The relationship between political and economic dimensions is the fundamental tie to build a space of autonomy, different from state and capital, as it outlines a futureward path. Identification of Kurdistan with face-to-face assembly democracy and communal economy directly affects the representation of homeland spatiality.

Communes were built in each village. Each commune was formed by the villagers according to their needs and opinion. Several communes came together to form an assembly. ... Communes were formed by the most grass-root units of villages. ... Here the emphasis and importance was on people's ability to express themselves, and the decisions of the communes were taken as a basis. (Ebdî and Network for an Alternative Quest 2015, 270–71)

The Kurdish homeland's spatiality cannot be reduced to its measurability: It is not a smooth space made of interchangeable segments, but a space with a meaning. People's ability to express themselves points to a symbolic dimension of the self, which decentralizes any territorial setting. As discussed earlier, a homeland emerges from the sense of place, the bonding, and the attachment. Therefore, places count and the social dimension of economic organization cannot be overlooked in homeland spatiality (Jongerden 2022a). "Autonomy is not just an ordering (or disordering—as the case may be) of space, but a pluriversal and productive experience" (Naylor 2017, 33). People's lives, practices, experiences, emotions, thoughts, and narratives directly shape the related idea of homeland.

Women's Liberation

The focus on autonomy, framed according to feminist geopolitics, reverses the analytical approach from top-down state processes to bottom-up, place-based embedded practices (Naylor 2017). Feminist approaches emphasize material aspects of individual and communities' everyday experiences (Hyndman 2010); grounding, locating, and embodying geopolitical practices and processes (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Pain 2009; Dixon 2016); and illuminating different scales, actors, and modalities involved in power deployment (Koopman 2011). They also highlight ongoing forward-looking paths of building geopolitical spaces from below.

Women's liberation within the KFM shows how the homeland space is made of multiple trajectories, at different scales, carving out spaces of autonomy and sewing them together. In the KFM ideological framework, women's autonomy is key, providing the basis for the entire societal self-organization model. By inverting the thesis of women as the "last colony" (Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Werlhof 1988), Öcalan defined them as the "first colony" of history, working as the primal matrix of subsequent hierarchies, such as statism and capitalism (Jongerden 2022b).

The male has become a state and turned this into the dominant culture. Class and sexual oppression develop together; masculinity has generated [the] ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state. When man is analyzed in this context, it is clear that masculinity must be killed. Indeed, to kill the dominant man is the fundamental principle of socialism. (Öcalan 2013, 51)

Born within the PKK nationalist struggle (Al-Ali and Tas 2018), autonomous female organizations developed their specific type of feminism, called *jineolojî*, which means "science of women and life." It presents itself as the epistemology of Kurdish women's history and experiences. According to the prominent Kurdish feminist theorist Dirik (2022), "Jineolojî is not antagonistic or "an alternative to feminism," rather, it builds on the legacy of all historical women's struggles and knowledges, including feminisms" (77). It is a science providing women with the necessary tools for liberation: "Key to jineology is the idea that gender is never just gender, but is rather embedded within a nexus of other oppressive social relations" (Shahvisi 2021, 7). Positioning *jineolojî* within the broader debate on

feminist geographies would be beyond the scope of this research. Rather, it is fundamental to underline the role of *jineolojî* in outlining the emerging space of women's autonomy as a key part of the homeland's relational space.

The women's liberation struggle within the PKK has been affirmed gradually and internally to the KFM itself, as men were culturally reluctant to encourage female emancipation. In her memoirs, Cansız (2018) noted that women's organizations within the KFM existed before the party's establishment. At the founding congress, she brought an article titled "The Place and the Significance of Women in the National Liberation Struggle," which ended with the claim "*Down with male imperialism!*" but did not read it aloud due to lack of confidence. Later, Cansız became one of the most important PKK leaders. This marginal episode suggests how power dynamics unfold in private and public arenas and visible and hidden processes (Dowler and Sharp 2001).

Besides securing female quotas in KFM administrative positions, Kurdish women have developed autonomous spaces for political conversation and organization in all the domains of politics and society. These spaces include communes, cooperatives, parties, and armed wings such as the Women's Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ), coordinated with the gender-mixed People's Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG). Even women-only villages are integrated with broader societal life. Rather than segregation, these safe spaces facilitate women's perspectives on society. Women's liberation intersects with other struggles, such as antistatism, anticolonialism, and anticapitalism. For instance, in women's cooperatives, the political principle of women's liberation aligns with a democratic egalitarian economic model.

It is a project that is completely based on women's labour. We established village communes and we took this work up through Bağlar women's cooperative. The Bağlar women commune is a project that bases itself entirely on the new economic model and paradigm in Kurdistan and therefore is very precious. (Varlı 2015, 141)

Bağlar exemplifies dual goals: women's liberation and socioeconomic autonomy. Emphatically, the former cochair of the KNK envisioned the Kurdish homeland as the land of "autonomy, democracy and no patriarchy" (Interview 1). An Irish artist close to

the Kurdish cause added that women's emancipation is the KFM's most important element (Interview 2). This understanding permeates the concept of homeland itself. An Italian activist of the Kurdish solidarity network explained that the term *welat*—homeland in Kurdish—"has feminine traits, rather than masculine" (Interview 3). The KNK spokesperson, however, clarified that *welat* is neutral, and thus it has no reference to male power as the term "fatherland" has (Interview 1).

Women's autonomy in the KFM is epitomized by the cochair system (*hevserokatî*), where a man and a woman are elected to colead any structure equally, with the woman elected only by female votes. Dirik (2022) described copresidency as "a social relation marked by a permanent struggle between two partners in arms" (188). Relationality permeates homeland spatiality in all its manifestations.

Ecology

So far, I have illustrated how the KFM political project brought to the fore the importance of social space in framing and shaping the Kurdish homeland, thus enabling a relational understanding of its spatiality. Antistatist and anticapitalist autonomy is a crucial element with important outcomes for homeland building. Subsequently, communes and cooperatives are the tools adopted by the Kurdish administrators in Rojava to pursue a political aim that generates a specific type of sociospatial relations:

[They] want to protect the rights of the simple people against the well-off. A down-to-earth economy should rest on redistribution and use, instead of orienting itself toward accumulation and the theft of surplus value and surplus product. Local economic institutions should damage neither the society nor nature. (A Kurdish administrator quoted in Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 199)

The focus is on the relationship between people and land, and consequently on the types of undertaken activities that link each other. From a relational perspective, homeland spatiality is necessarily produced by ongoing sociomaterial practices: "It is always in a process of becoming; it is always being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey 1999, 2). It does not preexist them but exists *in* them. The human acting upon the land, and vice versa, makes the homeland. Therefore, now I turn to another key

element of the KFM philosophy, which emphasizes the relationship between people and land, caught in reciprocal adaptation. Inspired by M. Bookchin (1982; D. Bookchin 2018), ecology covers a paramount dimension in the KFM's building of Kurdistan. The principle of ecology is intertwined with the process of place-making that underpins the relationship between people and land in a supposed nonexploitative way. Öcalan (2016) even considered planting trees the greatest form of patriotism (which is a term that in Romance languages conserves its direct link with the word *patria*, which means homeland). This type of activity crucially affects the geographic outline of the homeland. It sits at the very intersection between people and land, defining their type of reciprocal connection.

Ecology, economy, and homeland are deeply conceptually connected, as the prefix *eco-* originates from the Greek *oikos*, which means home. Therefore, economy and ecology are two faces of the same act of dwelling and shaping the land. Öcalan (cited in Hammy 2021, 26) noted that capitalism “has perforated sky and land, thereby turning the ecological balance upside-down and pushing society to the brink of extinction,” and that “[c]apitalism pollutes the environment and biosphere, and renders an incurable cancer upon society.” Consequently, and in line with Bookchin, he framed ecological disruptions as the product of ill social organization. Like women, nature, too, is colonized by hierarchical societies.

The KFM rethinks the encounter between people and land as a democratic-ecological society. Its meaning resides in conceiving of existence as being mutually shaped by the social and the natural, eradicating the domination of the latter by the former.

A democratic-ecological society is based on the moment of reconciliation between humanity and nature, which lies only in the overcoming of domination over both. (Internationalist Commune 2018, 46)

The question of environment became essential within the KFM and specific movements flourished within it. In 2010, the First Conference on Ecology and Local Administrations considered social relations and development as critical. Then, in January 2011, the first Ecology Forum was held in Amed (the Kurdish name of the city of Diyarbakır, Turkey); the year after, the Mesopotamia Ecology

Movement was established, finding soon a great opportunity to put their ideas into practice in Rojava.

There, a group of internationalists formed a specific environmentalist organization. This group of people started thinking about methods to convert Öcalan's social-ecological theories into practice to transform the land and the way of dwelling. Their primary interest was about turning theory into practice:

[W]hat would an ecological society in Rojava look like, and how could it be built? (Internationalist Commune 2018, 16)

In such an interest, these internationalists show the importance of relating with nature, which is still not really known. A future orientation emerges from this work of people meeting the natural world: an ongoing process of reciprocal adaptation. Thinking of nature not as a possession or domination liberates the potential of becoming together. Therefore, the mode of working the land matters. Abbott and Boyle (2020) termed the future-oriented design of the land “ecological homelands.”

It is also possible for [the cooperatives] to take into account long-term consequences for the natural world and design production with this in mind; indeed, care for the community is one of the seven cooperatives principles. (Internationalist Commune 2018, 91)

The spatiality of homeland is thus opened from the inside, following temporal trajectories of people–land relationality and true ecological patriotism, as Öcalan suggested.

Self-Defense

Autonomy, women's liberation, and ecology combine to construct an original way of framing patriotism and self-defense, which are essential parts of the control of place and willingness to defend homeland, as geographers have highlighted (Jordan 1993; Conzen 2001; Nostrand and Estaville 2001; Herb 2018). The KFM encompasses a wide range of self-defense domains, aligned with their focus on societal self-organization. Overcoming domination of humanity and nature means that the homeland must be defended from hierarchies and exploitative practices,

and not only from foreign enemies. Defense, too, is organized according to the principle of autonomy. Thus, for instance, women defend themselves:

The women's movement is autonomously organized in all walks of life, from defence to economy to education to health. ... In all spheres, including the internal security forces (*asayish*) and the YPJ/YPG, gender equality is a central part of education and training. (Dirik and Network for an Alternative Quest 2015, 218)

[S]elf-defense is the most basic legitimate right. ... all Middle Eastern women have begun to focus on self-defense movements and there is a great improvement in this sense. (Serhat and Network for an Alternative Quest 2017, 155)

Self-defense conceptually and practically challenges the monopoly of violence, unmaking the state (Üstündağ 2016), and liberating the representation of homeland from state spatiality; "if a society cannot defend itself, its moral and political features become meaningless" (Öcalan 2020, 190). Self-defense is not portrayed only in military terms, though. "It also presupposes the preservation of [a people's] identity, its own political awareness, and a process of democratization" (Öcalan 2011, 28). Self-defense is developed against the militarization of society, but conversely for the socialization of military.

The aim is not to destroy an enemy but to force it to give up its intention to attack. Guerrilla fighters discuss this as a defensive strategy in a military sense, but it works in other areas as well. It's a method of self-empowerment. The YPG and YPJ attribute great meaning to defense. National armies serve the state, but they leave the people without defense. (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 139)

A central part of the political shift of paradigm was the criticism of the previous PKK's trust in armed struggle, whereas the new approach prescribes that "the use of armed force can only be justified for the purpose of necessary self-defence" (Öcalan 2017b, 31). Thus, the KFM does not refuse violence as such, but it is not their first and foremost means of national liberation, expanding the meaning of self-defense to other aspects of societal life.

This is the *welatparêzî*—the Kurdish term for "protection of the homeland." This concept cannot be limited to the military defense from an external attack. It involves a social dimension of care toward people and land, against exploitative and

hierarchical practices, entailing a deep and variegated relationship between social life and the natural world. It is the struggle against the overexploitation of natural resources. It is the social war against the commodification of labor values. It is the military defense against the state repression and aggression. This notion of Kurdish patriotism blends the inside–outside conflict line—framed as the defense of human activities, rather than a territory—with a social struggle fought in daily life, which is similar to those carried on by various social movements.

Self-defense is not only developed against open physical attacks developed by colonialism. The society whose self-defense is prevented is open to all kinds of abuse, slavery and alienation to itself. (Engizek and Network for an Alternative Quest 2017, 98)

The hierarchical statist sovereignty that advanced upon the expropriation of the labour value of the natural society is an expression of an attack on all values that compose the social. (Yıldırım and Network for an Alternative Quest 2015, 192)

Self-defense is framed as the agency that makes democratic confederalism and unmakes the state. Through the participation of people in their own security, different emotional ties are produced. The state is spatially enacted through symbolic devices (Ferguson and Gupta 2008) and people have experiences of it in specific sites and specific ways: "The conceptual and material existence of the state as a separate entity is always already dependent on a spatial enactment" (Üstündağ 2016, 204).

For a democratic society, the meaning of self-defense can only be possible if politics is taken out of the hands of power and interest groups. (Engizek and Network for an Alternative Quest 2017, 99)

The emphasis is on practice modalities. How security forces behave is how autonomy is enacted, and consequently what the democratic project is in its material and symbolic representation. The KFM self-defense practices contribute to outlining the relational spatiality of the Kurdish homeland, grounding themselves in the relationship between society and the natural world, and the gender, social, and ethnic inclusiveness. In more geopolitical terms, it outlines the space of society's autonomy across state-nations borders, without claiming for their official abolishment. The KFM goal is to disempower Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian states, without replacing them with another statist organization of societal life and security.

Conclusion

Interrogating the spatiality of the Kurdish homeland, as emerging from pivotal texts and individual accounts associated with the KFM, has in this article opened new lines of discussion about the spatial dimension of homelands. Although significant contributions in cultural and political geography have outlined distinctive traits of the homeland concept, they often fail to investigate its proper spatiality, reproducing a methodological and epistemological “silent statism” (Ince and Barrera de la Torre 2016). This approach, even when not explicitly considering a homeland as a nation-state, often frames it as a bounded, territorial space.

Scholarly efforts to characterize homeland (Conzen 2001; Nostrand and Estaville 2001), catalog its varieties (Connor 1994), illustrate its genesis (Kaiser 1994, 2002), grasp its nationalist politicality (Shelef 2020), and define its dialectical nature between people and land—or territory and identity (Herb 2018)—must be acknowledged. These endeavors, however, overlook the key question: What kind of space is homeland space? This article argues that homeland space is best understood in relational terms.

First, I introduced Kurdistan and the KFM, illustrating its transnational organization and main political aims, presenting Kurdistan as a political project encompassing Kurdish-inhabited areas in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Despite lacking official recognition, dismissing Kurdistan’s existence assumes a statist perspective, which would conflate the homeland with state space. Therefore, exploring the political project behind its configuration is fundamental. Framing the homeland as a political project emphasizes the political subjectivity enabling it. A homeland exists as the effect of a collective, ongoing relationship between people and land, in a perpetual state of becoming.

Second, I delved into the KFM project’s key features to state that the homeland is a relational space with significant methodological and epistemological consequences. Viewing homeland space in relational terms means it is unbounded, follows multiple trajectories, and is social, emotional, and narrative at once. It emerges from different temporalities, stories, and histories.

I focused on four key elements of the KFM project—autonomy, women’s liberation, ecology, and self-defense—that outline important homeland relational spatialities. Autonomy is the core principle, developed in territorial and nonterritorial terms, dialoguing with

feminist geopolitics, which highlights the everyday experience, as seen in communes and cooperatives. Women’s liberation is the backbone of the KFM political project, shaping sociospatial relations throughout Kurdish society by building women’s villages, cooperatives, assemblies, and protection units, thus empowering half the population. Ecology transforms the land materially and ideationally, leading people’s organization and practices. Finally, self-defense integrates these elements under a relational patriotism, *welatparêzî*, protecting the homeland beyond territorial terms, serving social autonomy, women’s liberation, and a democratic-ecological society.

In conclusion, this article argued that the spatial dimension of homeland is best understood in relational terms, liberating it from statist epistemologies without losing political significance. Thus, the homeland is conceived as an ever-changing spatiality resulting from people’s attachment and its political codification. Although the KFM is an antistate political project, this article does not seek to oppose homeland and state but rather to disentangle their spatialities epistemologically and ontologically while maintaining the homeland’s political significance.

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Note

1. Although the term *Middle East* reflects a Western and Orientalist understanding of the region of southwest Asia and north Africa (SWANA), I chose to retain it because it aligns with the phrasing used by the official translators of Ocalan’s manuscripts.

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