

The Mechanisms of the Turkish Invasion and Conquest of Kurdistan

Interview of Elise Boyle Espinosa by Manuel F rez Gil for Oriente Medio News: <https://orientemedio.news/los-mecanismos-de-invasion-y-conquista-turca-del-kurdistan/>

Oriente Medio News (OMN): Thank you very much Elise for chatting with us. Please tell us about your academic and professional work to introduce you to our audience.

Elise Boyle Espinosa (EBE): I have an interdisciplinary background in international studies and global development, previously studying and researching at the Universities of Sydney, Cape Town, and Copenhagen. I am now a [PhD candidate](#) at the University of Aberdeen’s Centre for Citizenship, Civil Society, and Rule of Law (CISRUL). CISRUL as a whole is focused on political concepts and how they function in different contexts, and among other things, how they are used by policymakers and scholars, fought over by social movements, and transmitted through education and the media. Within this, I’m interested in how different groups in the Syrian civil war have used education to share their visions for the future of Syria and the region more broadly. My current research, funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 programme, is on the education system established by Islamic State, and the impact that Islamic State control has had on education more broadly.

This builds on past research I conducted with Adam Ronan on the [education system established as part of the ‘Rojava Revolution’](#) in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which has a large Kurdish population. We were interested in the implications this new education system had for governance of the region: how education was used to propagate the values of the revolution, what role it played in increasing young people’s support for it, and how the change from life under the Syrian regime, as well as ongoing conflict, has been navigated.

Parallel to my research, I am involved in activism related to Kurdish issues and minority rights more broadly, and environmental and social justice. Prior to my PhD, I also gained experience with various Non-Governmental Organisations in South Africa and Denmark, and the impressions of such work — both positive and negative — that I developed throughout have no doubt influenced the way I approach my research today. The organisations include Right for Education and The Amy Foundation, which focus on youth empowerment through education, and the [Danish Demining Group/Danish Refugee Council](#). Here I worked on media and communications and as a writer, and supported mine risk education and armed violence reduction programmes in countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

OMN: It would be good if you could give us a little historical and political framework about Kurdistan, the Kurdish nation, and its current situation, because not much is known about this topic in Latin America.

EBE: It is difficult to do justice to this in a short space, but by way of an introduction, the Kurds are a people who live across multiple regions, predominantly inside the modern states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. It goes back further than this, but perhaps the most significant geopolitical factor in recent history is the denial of the opportunity for an independent Kurdistan that came with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire following World War I.

Instead, territory was divided amongst modern Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, with the Kurds now widely regarded as the largest ethnic group without their own nation-state.

Along with other minorities, they have faced oppression and at times, genocide, from these states. They have been subject to linguistic and cultural suppression, for example in Turkey it is forbidden to celebrate Kurdish holidays or speak Kurmancî, the local Kurdish dialect, and at times the Turkish state has gone as far as to deny the existence of Kurds. Similarly, across the border in Syria, since the early 1960s state policy has stripped more than 300,000 Kurds of their citizenship. It is the perceived threat that this group poses to the unity and power of these states — with a significant factor worth mentioning, being that Kurdish lands are also resource-rich — that has led to repressive assimilationist actions against them.

While keeping this shared history in mind, it is important to know that the Kurds themselves are diverse, with multiple dialects, religions, and political and social identities. As such, different Kurdish groups have responded to this historical and modern oppression in different ways, across and within their respective nation-states. Examples include, on the one hand, the Kurdish nationalism of the KDP party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a semi-autonomous region established in the north of Iraq. On the other hand, examples including the PKK in south-eastern Turkey and the PYD in northern Syria (which shares ideological roots with the PKK) have argued *against* nationalism, because they see the nation-state system as inherently oppressive. Inspired by the evolving ideas of the imprisoned founding member, Abdullah Öcalan, they have imagined a community that exists independent of the state, premised on a system of bottom-up democracy which challenges the very borders and boundaries that have oppressed the Kurds and other minorities in the first place.

There is currently significant tension between some of these groups as well as ongoing external threats to the political communities they have fought for, complicated by a range of factors which go beyond their ideological differences. A significant factor, of course, is the involvement of the states who have historically sought to control the Kurds.

OMN: You published the article "[Breaking the international silence on the Turkish invasion and aggression in Iraqi Kurdistan](#)". What are the main factors of that aggression and why the silence of the international community on Turkish aggression?

EBE: As I mention in the article, Turkish aggression against the Kurds is by no means new, nor is international silence on it. It also isn't contained to the Kurdish regions of Turkey; it seeps across Turkey's borders to the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq as well.

In recent years, under the guise of fighting PKK members who operate partly from the mountains in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Turkey has ramped up its aggression there. Contradicting this stated aim, Turkey's actions do not seem to correlate with any increase in "terrorism" on the part of the PKK, and in any case, civilians are bearing the brunt of Turkish aggression. It is evident that Turkey means to do far more than contain the PKK, and that the lives and livelihoods of all Kurds are under threat. Since the 23rd of April this year, Turkey launched its most recent attacks, under operations 'Claw-Lightning' and 'Claw-Thunderbolt'. As I detail in the article, this is having devastating consequences for civilians and their livelihoods, with Turkey destroying thousands of acres of forests, and regularly launching airstrikes across its border, including into the UN-recognised Makhmour refugee camp, which hosts Kurdish refugees who fled Turkey in the 1990s. Concerningly, economic ties between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's leading KDP party have also strengthened over

time, and thus far, the KDP's actions suggest a willingness to prioritise economic gain over the protection of its own people.

There are multiple ways we can think about the silence of the international community on this, which seems only to be sporadically aware of, and superficially concerned about, the threats faced by the Kurds. Currently, Turkey's actions are going unreported by the mainstream media, and unacknowledged by European governments and NATO, which of course Turkey is part of. Going further than this, some European governments have actively sought to silence those speaking up about Turkey's actions. Indeed, in June a European delegation of around 150 politicians, academics, activists, and journalists were due to travel to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to document and raise international awareness about Turkey's actions, but around half were either deported upon arrival by the KDP or prevented from leaving their home countries by cooperating European governments. In the weeks that followed, the delegates that made it to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq continued to be repressed, and German police went on to arrest and interrogate several delegates upon their return at Frankfurt Airport.

All of this took place at the same time as the recent NATO summit, in which Turkey's violations of international law and human rights in the region went completely unacknowledged. Turkey's leverage here — with Turkish President Erdoğan previously threatening to 'open the gate' to Europe for the millions of Syrian refugees Turkey hosts, as well as the reality that Turkey is a major market for German and British arms — no doubt plays a role in NATO and the broader Western community's complicity. But remaining complicit in Turkey's aggression contradicts other NATO member's supposed goal of securing the region from Islamic State and other Islamist groups, with Turkey backing Islamist militias and fighting against the formerly US-backed Kurdish forces who helped to defeat Islamic State. It also reveals NATO's willingness to prioritise its own military alliance at the expense of democracy and human rights.

OMN: The Kurdish struggle is not limited to Turkey or Iraq. Also, in Rojava, northern Syria, the Kurds suffer from Turkish aggression and Islamist groups. Tell us a little bit about the Kurdish revolutionary project in Rojava and the attacks it has suffered in recent years.

EBE: Throughout the Syrian civil war, the Kurdish struggle has manifested in the establishment of de facto autonomous control in the North and East of Syria (Rojava), partly by an alliance of political parties in an 'Autonomous Administration', comprised of Kurds as well as other peoples, including Arabs and Assyrians. The main party in this alliance is the PYD, which as mentioned, has ideological links to the PKK. As such, it is anti-nationalist in its orientation, advocating for a system of bottom-up democracy in which all ethnic and religious groups are represented. For this reason, Turkey also sees the PYD as a threat.

In my research with Adam Ronan in Rojava, we heard frequently from our research participants about the threats they face from all around: from the Turkish state and Turkish-backed militias, the Syrian regime, which has long been hostile to the Kurds and other minorities, and Islamic State. Many participants explained that such states and groups saw the democratic and inclusive way of life they advocate as a threat to their nationalist or Islamist agendas.

Whilst we were in Rojava in 2018, Turkey began making advances into Afrin, one of the three original regions in Rojava, and replicating the same strategies of ethnic cleansing it has used on the Kurdish population inside Turkey. In 2019, when former US President Donald Trump made the decision to withdraw the US troops, he effectively gave a 'green light' to Turkey to

extend its incursion in the region. This has contributed to the same refugee crisis Turkey purports to be helping, with hundreds of thousands of people fleeing Afrin and other areas inside Rojava. Indeed, since then there have been many reports of escalating violence by Turkey and Turkish-backed militias: abuse of civilians, interrupting the supply of water, burning crops, and carrying out attacks against the population.

OMN: Let's talk a little bit about the role of academia in the Kurdish issue. What has the academic approach been to Turkish aggression against the Kurds? Talk to us a little about initiatives generated in the academy to make this aggression visible at the international level.

EBE: There are some great Kurdish academics and activists who through their work have highlighted the Kurdish experience and Turkish aggression against the Kurds. Just one who comes to mind is [Dilar Dirik](#), who I believe is now a researcher at the University of Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre. She researches, among other things, issues of statelessness and self-determination in Kurdistan, and in doing so, highlights the threats posed by Turkey. Alongside this she has been involved with campaigns including [Water for Rojava](#) (a campaign about Turkey's control of the water supply in Rojava).

The work of new universities in Rojava, including Zanîngeha Rojava (the University of Rojava), which was established in Qamislo in 2016, should also not be underestimated. Over the last few years, it has not only grown its reach within Rojava, but internationally, establishing links with scholars — including Noam Chomsky, who recently gave a [guest lecture](#) at the University of Rojava — and universities globally. This seems to have increased international awareness of the revolution and the ongoing threats it faces. Academic delegations to Rojava have been similarly important for generating awareness, and through this the Kurds have gained many allies, including the late David Graeber, who after travelling to Rojava wrote and campaigned for Kurdish rights.

To me, these examples highlight the importance of building networks across borders, and of bridging the gaps between academia and activism. I feel this is essential if we are to increase the visibility of an issue that the world has, by and large, turned a blind eye to, in a way that sometimes cannot be achieved through traditional academia alone. With this in mind, academics also formed part of the international delegation to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq last month. Since then, many academics have joined politicians, activists, and journalists across the world in signing the delegation's declaration to end the Turkish occupation and international complicity. You can view and sign the declaration [here](#).

OMN: Explain to us the "Rojava Revolution" in northern Syria and the role of the Kurdish population in that project.

EBE: As I have mentioned, the Rojava Revolution is framed by the ideology of founding PKK member Abdullah Öcalan and taken on and developed by those 'on the ground'. Essentially, in contrast to a typical nation-state, the revolution is based around three pillars, which together create a 'Democratic Nation': 1) radical democracy, 2) women's liberation, and 3) ecology. There is a complex historical narrative that underlies this, but at the core of it is a belief that Kurdish oppression and the oppression of other ethnic or religious minorities, of women, and of nature, is linked to capitalism and the nation-state system. Because of this, while the roots of Democratic Nation are in the Kurdish struggle, supporters of the revolution see it as something that could unite a far broader group of people, with the idea being that people could

organise themselves at the grassroots level in a way that transcends national boundaries and respects cultural, ethnic, political and religious diversity.

Since 2007, Kurds in south-eastern Turkey have been working to implement Öcalan's ideas. Since the Syrian civil war, just across the border, Syrian Kurds had the opportunity to take this a lot further. The war had left several power vacuums across the country, with non-state groups like Islamic State emerging to fill the gap. In the north-east, the Autonomous Administration, which I've mentioned, was able to establish themselves, and by 2014, the principles of Democratic Nation were made official in Rojava 'social contract', and the system of governance was implemented. It's difficult to accurately describe this because of the unusual dual power structure at work, comprising on the one hand, the Autonomous Administration, which functions more like a typical government, and on the other hand, the popular assemblies and council democracy system. The basis of this system is the 'commune', where people are meant to come together at the street or village level to discuss issues, and then elect a representative for the neighbourhood level. Each neighbourhood elect representatives to the third level, the 'district', which encompasses a city and surrounding villages, and the further level is the overall people's council, represented in the regions of Kobani and Cizîrê. Across these levels are various committees, including on women, defence, economics, politics, civil society, justice, and ideology.

OMN: Let's compare the Kurdish revolutionary project with that of the Islamic State in terms of education and ideology. What is the education system of Islamic State like and how does this system impact the influence of the jihadist ideology in Iraq and Syria?

EBE: As part of the Rojava Revolution a new education system has been established. The people we interviewed in our research there frequently described the revolution as predominantly a 'mental revolution', because of the dramatic shift from life under the Ba'athist Syrian regime to a 'Democratic Nation'. As such, the Democratic Nation ideology, which I described in the previous question, is embedded in the new curriculum, teaching methods, and structure of the education system. It is worth noting that education takes place in all spheres of society in Rojava, but our research focused on the 'formal' education within schools, universities, and related institutions.

Where previously students could only learn, as one student told us, 'One language, one party, one politics' — in other words, Arab nationalism — the new education system allows students to learn in their mother tongues, and about their own unique cultures and histories, as well as that of other groups, with the aim of fostering a sense of inclusivity and respect. In addition, students are taught about ecology with regards to protecting the environment, as well as autonomy over land and resources. The new education system is, although imperfect, considerably less centralised than the Syrian regime's education system, with opportunities created to provide feedback for the curriculum, and to equalise the relationship between students, teachers, and administrators through more participatory and democratic teaching methods and discipline.

Within our interviews, the new education system was most frequently compared to the Syrian regime's education and ideology, but of course another significant actor in the region and the civil war has been Islamic State. My research on Islamic State's education system is still in progress, but from what is known so far it too saw education as vital for its goals and for increasing support amongst young people, and as such, education was also closely aligned with its ideology. Subjects including nationalism and social science were banned, and new subjects

were introduced that reflected its ideology, for example, Jihad Training and Islamic Governance. This was unsurprisingly taught in such a way that it cannot be questioned.

Islamic State had comparatively less time and opportunity to implement its education system than was possible in the Rojava Revolution, before it lost territorial control, so the extent of its impact is questionable — this is something I hope to understand better through my research. But in terms of the content and the way it was implemented when it had the chance, perhaps the only relevant similarity to Rojava's education is that they are both against nationalism, and they both see their vision as being in competition with, and superior to, the Ba'athist Syrian regime.

But in all other ways that matter, the differences are stark. Where Rojava teaches diversity, Islamic State taught homogeneity; where Rojava makes attempts to decentralise the education system, Islamic State tightened its control; and where Rojava advocates women's liberation, Islamic State entrenched the division between genders.

OMN: The Kurdish issue has certain similarities with the historical experience of ethnic and indigenous groups in Latin America. What is your opinion on the intersectionality of the Kurdish experience with that of Latin America? I have seen Zapatista murals in Kurdistan and Kurdish murals in Latin American countries, for example.

EBE: The Kurdish struggle does indeed seem to share certain similarities with Latin American examples. The struggle to resist imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy and ecological domination and to gain autonomy is certainly one that the Zapatistas, as you mention, have in common with Rojava in particular.

From an educational perspective, I think similarities can be drawn between the aims of education for the Zapatistas, and in Rojava, in the way that they both aim to strengthen local identity and give young people the knowledge and tools they require to harness their democratic power. I think this is a good point to also mention my colleague and friend, Hanifi Baris, who is currently researching commonalities (and differences) between Kurdish movements in Turkey and Syria, and the Zapatistas and the town of Cheran in Mexico. You can read more about his work, [here](#).

On the ground, I think there has been a recognition of such commonalities by those within the Rojava Revolution, especially amongst those working on creating links with and showing solidarity for different struggles around the world. These efforts point to the importance of coming together based on shared experiences of oppression — and common solutions, even though true to the nature of such solutions, these primarily come from within.