Un-stating order: The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Eda Gunaydin

21 December 2022

Abstract

This thesis asks how we can make sense of the popular characterisation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) as a state-making project despite explicit rejections that this is the case from the Administration, who claim instead to be crafting an alternative, non-statist vision of governance based on 'democratic autonomy'. Through discourse analysis of key political theoretical texts and political practices within the AANES, I show how adherents of democratic autonomy reject three key statist discourses: the centralisation of authority and the necessity of monopolised legitimate force for stability; liberalism (secularism, Western feminism); and capitalism. Using my translations of Abdullah Öcalan's works of political theory, and of articulations by female fighters and activists in the region, the thesis argues that AANES discourses on non-state armed groups and foreign fighters, on sectarian and gendered violence, and on political economy and the environment, all propose compelling challenges to the widely presumed requirements for order and democracy. Nevertheless, the thesis argues that the power of external discourses that recognise AANES as 'state-like' help to constitute it as such, both by making possible the activities that have rendered AANES more state-like over time, and by narrowing the space from which alternatives to statehood may be articulated. The thesis therefore provides an account of why 'non-state' revolutions, such as that in AANES, may be short-lived, by demonstrating the disciplinary role played by a statist international order, which re-enacts itself by re-shaping non-state polities in states' image.

Authorship attribution statement

This thesis contains materials published elsewhere.

Chapter 3's discussion of methods, specifically the discussion of the ethics of translation on page 86–87, has appeared in Gunaydin, Eda. 2022. "Saving the YPJ, Saved by the YPJ: Ambivalent Agency and the Legitimation of Intervention in Syria." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1–25.

The documentary quote on page 177, the translated book quote from Taşdemir on page 165, and the quote from YPJ fighter Dilan on page 180–181 are all used in Gunaydin, Eda. 2022. "Saving the YPJ, Saved by the YPJ: Ambivalent Agency and the Legitimation of Intervention in Syria." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 1–25.

Some aspects of the discussions of jineology (its critique of positivism and capitalism raised in Chapter 6) and women's armament (discussed in Chapter 4) are considered in Gunaydin, Eda. 2021. "Learn from Kurdish Women's Liberation Movements to Imagine the Dissolution of the Nation-State System." In *Feminist Solutions for Ending War*, edited by Nicole Wegner and Megan MacKenzie, 73–88. London: Pluto Press.

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As supervisor for the candidature upon which this thesis is based, I can confirm that the authorship attribution statements above are correct.

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List of abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
DFNS	Democratic Federation of Northern Syria
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTF	Foreign terrorist fighter
HPC	Self-Defence Forces (north-east Syria) also Hêza Parastina Cewherî
HPG	People's Defence Forces (northern Iraq) also Hêzên Parastina Gel
HSNB	Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces for Syriac Women
IFB	International Freedom Battalion
IS	Islamic State
KNC	Kurdish National Council
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union also Koma Komalên Kurdistan
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
NSAG	Non-state armed group
NES	North and East Syria
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey-based)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria-based)
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
UNSC	UN Security Council
WHO	World Health Organization
YJÊ	Êzîdxan Women's Units (formerly YPJ-Sinjar)
YPG	People's Protection Units
YPJ	Women's Protection Units

Towns and cities

English	Arabic	Kurdish
Afrin	Afrin	Efrîn
Cizre	Jazira/al-Jazira	Cizîrê
Deir ez-Zor or Dayr al-Zawr	Deir ez-Zor	Dêra Zorê
Kobani/Kobane	Ein al-Arab/Ayn al-Arab	Kobanê
Qamishlo/Qamishli	al-Qamishli	Qamişlo
Ras al Ayn/Serekaniye	Ras al Ayn/Ras al Ain	Serêkanî
Sinjar (Anglicised Arabic) or Shengal (Anglicised Kurdish)	Sindjar	Şengal/Şingal/Şingar
Tell Abyad/Tal Abyad	Tell Abyad/Tal Abyad	Girê Spî

Chapter 1: (Mis)interpretations of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

Introduction

In 2014, the region of northern Syria that was known as Rojava, and is currently called the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), declared self-rule under the principle of 'democratic autonomy', an outlook on how to organise and govern society that was written into the region's constitution (Rojava Social Contract 2014). The chairman of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Salih Muslim, whose political party spearheaded the declaration, had sought to pursue and implement democratic autonomy in northern Syria for the preceding half a decade, inspired by similar pushes occurring in Turkey and northern Iraq (see Gunter 2014, 109; Gurcan 2015; Moya 2015). In 2011, Muslim gave an interview where he stated that:

> we as the Kurdish Freedom movement reject the classical understanding of power. We reject classical models like federalism, con-federalism, self-government, and [even] autonomy. Our goal is the formation of a new Kurdish society, the formation of a free person, a person with free will and free thought. We find the solution in democratic autonomy. … The point is to renew society from the bottom up. It is about culture, institutions, structure, organisation, towns and cities (quoted in Ekurd Daily 2011).

In saying this, Muslim is echoing Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurdish intellectual and political prisoner who, in 2005, justified why he thinks democratic autonomy (also termed democratic confederalism) is necessary. He writes:

> The nation-states system … has become the most serious obstacle to the development of society, democracy and freedom since the end of the 20th century. … The principle of the right of self-determination, developed at the beginning of the 20th century, [has been] interpreted as the right to establish a nation-state. [But] the United Nations model [of self-determination] based on the nation-state is not working. … The only way out of this is to establish a democratic confederal system that will derive its strength in a grassroots fashion, from the people, and not from globalisation based on nation-states. Neither nation-states, nor the globalisation that will supersede it, are sustainable. Imperialism has, during this time, failed to develop a new alternative model. … For this reason, the only alternative is democratic confederalism. It is a pyramid-style model of

> organisation where it is communities who talk, debate and make decisions. From the bottom to the top of the pyramid everyone is elected, and the top forms a loose coordinating body. … The imposition of capitalist or imperialist power cannot develop democracy, it can only exploit it for its own ends … [D]emocratic confederalism is a movement that does not implement the right to self-determination by establishing a nation-state, but develops its own democracy regardless of borders and political boundaries (Öcalan 2005a, 1–2, my translation).

Both of these quotations place at their fore the need to move beyond the state model, and for the Kurdish freedom movement to seek an alternative pathway to liberation other than forming an independent nation-state of its own. While the political dynamics in AANES have changed and continued to develop since the 2014 declaration, the most influential parties in the region have retained this commitment to implementing democratic autonomy, and approaching both democracy and autonomy from an alternative perspective than the one the state form supplies. In 2016, AANES Executive Council co-president Hediya Yousef stated that she was opposed to intervention in the region that would establish a Kurdish state in the north, emphasising that her party would not allow the fragmentation of Syria, but rather only sought its democratisation (Sosyalist Gazete 2016). Five years later, in October 2021, Cemil Bayik, the chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the transnational political party that sits above the PYD, remarked: 'We are not seeking a solution to the Kurdish issue in the form of a state or establishing an independent state.' Similarly, in August 2022, a spokesperson for the Future Syria Party (FSP),[1] Muwaffaq al-Ahmad, reaffirmed that 'there are no separatist movements in north and east Syria, but rather there is a democratic project in which all components of the region participate' (Al-Assaf 2022).

Despite this relatively consistent messaging, international spectators persistently characterise the political project being mounted in the region through very distinct language. Simple content analysis demonstrates that between January 2012 and December 2021, only 319 English-

[1] This is another political party that operates in the NES region, and its base is more ethnically Arab than Kurdish. It is linked by some detractors to the PYD, but itself proclaims independence (Darwish 2018).

language news articles about Syria that refer to the terms 'democratic confederalism' or 'democratic autonomy' were published. This is despite the fact that these two terms are consistently used by local actors to self-represent the region's governance arrangements. By contrast, and despite the explicit rejection of state-based language, 2,358 articles identified the region or the administration as analogous to, or seeking of, a state.[2]

This is not a (mis)representation that is uncritically reproduced by Western media alone. It is also an assertion made by other actors present in the region, both unfriendly and (as I discuss further below) friendly towards the Autonomous Administration. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, for example, described northern Syria in 2019 as 'separatist', and as populated by Kurds 'who aspired to create a Kurdish state and rule over Arabs and other ethnic groups' (Al-Khalidi 2019). Syria's Russian allies concur, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov describing the region as planning to 'establish a territory that would be a kind of a prototype of a new state' (Iddon 2018). AANES' neighbour to the north, Turkey, has justified its continual attacks on the region on the basis that, in the words of former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım in 2016: 'we are there to protect our border, to provide for our citizens' safety of life and property, and to ensure Syria's integrity. We will never allow the formation of an artificial state in the north of Syria' (quoted in Dolan and Coskun 2016). This comment preceded a direct border incursion into AANES, which was explained in the Turkish-language newspaper *Dünya* in the following way*:*

> The civil war in neighboring Iraq and Syria threatens Turkey's internal and external security. Concerned that Turkey's territorial integrity could be threatened by the establishment of a Kurdish state, the AKP government is trying to cleanse the area west of the Euphrates with the Euphrates Shield operation (Gürleyen 2016, my translation).

[2] I used the Factiva newspaper-aggregating database, searching the English-language articles published between January 2012 and December 2021. First, I searched 'Syria' and 'democratic autonomy' or 'democratic confederalism.' Second, I searched 'Rojava', 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria', 'PYD', 'YPG', or 'AANES' and any of the terms statelet, mini-state, quasi-state, "de facto state", "independent state", "independent Kurdish state", "autonomous Kurdish state", state-like, "would-be state", para-state, or pseudo-state.

Turkey's characterisation of AANES as a separatist terrorist region has persisted well into 2022 (see for example Rudaw 2022). Even the Islamic State (IS) organisation, when it was publishing its now-defunct magazine *Dabiq*, characterised the Kurds of northern Syria as working to build a 'mini-state' with Marxist-Leninist or nationalist undertones (*Dabiq* Issue 8, 8; *Dabiq* Issue 4, 41).

Key questions

If spokespeople for the NES region have been relatively consistent in rejecting accusations that they are mounting a separatist, secessionist or statist project, why then does the claim endure? In other words, how can we make sense of this enduring characterisation of AANES as a statist project in the face of explicit rejection that this is the case? I argue that this mismatch is not accidental, and is not reducible to mere semantics, nor simple erasure. Rather, I contend that this claim is generative, in that it helps bring into being what it names. I also contend that the endurance of this claim is ideological and, when interrogated as such, opens a window that helps to understand the persistent power of the imaginary of the state system, and to theorise alternatives to it.

The modern state system is a recent convention, arguably no more rational, superior or stable than the empires and city-states which preceded it. And yet, it is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that to live within a state is better than to live without one. Indeed, even non-state entities that do not possess this status, such as de facto states, still seek it, or are uniformly represented as seeking it. But the state system has objectors, millions of them. There are people, communities, and organised political movements that consider themselves victims of such a system, and regularly seek to exit, subvert or productively live beyond it. It is easy to lose sight of them when we fail to problematise the conventional wisdom that there no longer exist real alternatives. As the scholar of anarchism James C. Scott (2009, 4) observes, 'only the modern

state, in both its colonial and its independent guises, has had the resources to realize a project of rule that was a mere glint in the eye of its precolonial ancestor: namely to bring nonstate spaces and people to heel.' He diagnoses this system as one that conclusively monetises all the lands' people and resources. This has come at a great expense: of death, war, conscription, genocide, the eradication of peoples and ways of life, and the large-scale re-writing of varied forms of social and cultural organisation. Not only does the imaginary of the state system contribute to the death of languages, cultures, and ways of life, but it also kills people. When we, as scholars of politics, study refugees or migrant workers and their plight, we are studying the by-products of the imaginary of the modern state system. Borders, which form the cornerstone of this system, act as sites of mass death, incarceration and violence (Cuttitta and Last 2019). The regime of citizenship that sits at the heart of this system marks individuals and entire ethnic and religious groups out for exploitation, death or confined lives spent languishing in camps or prisons. For example, the noncitizen status of migrant workers is what produces their vulnerability to forced labour and slavery (B. Anderson 2010; Davidson 2015). As Agamben (1998) has observed, the power of the sovereign includes the power to mark out who lives, who dies, and who is human. Likewise, Tony C. Brown (2022) argues that, within the discourse of the state, the stateless – migrants, Indigenous populations – are produced as the less-than-human. In his book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia,* Scott (2009) describes a population in south-east Asia that he terms 'Zomia' who engage in concerted efforts to evade the state. As my case study too attests, there are those who wish to live outside the modern state system, and who continue to actively contest it and point to its harms. In isolating how it suppresses these discourses and prolongs its life, therefore, this work re-politicises, and unsettles, what and how we think about the modern state system.

It should be stated from the outset that my goal is not to (only) adjudicate how closely AANES does or does not map onto the state form, and therefore not to validate or invalidate the claims that the region makes about itself. Indeed, there is cause to be skeptical about these claims, or at least good historical reason to see the AANES project as a statist one. These include that, before democratic autonomy was adopted, this same organisation was avowedly Marxist-Leninist and fought for secession and that, in fact, the majority of the history of the struggle for Kurdish rights has often featured separatist goals. It is possible to interpret the adoption of the democratic confederal model that I discuss throughout this thesis as insincere, or only a strategic compromise aimed at averting the same civil conflict, terror-listing and incarceration and criminal conviction of leaders that plagued these organisations in the past. And there are clear contemporary reasons to continue to be skeptical, or at least to interrogate the contradictions between what is 'said' and what is 'done', and highlight the aspects of governance in AANES that are state-like. Multiple worthy studies of Rojava/AANES do so. Leezenberg (2016) convincingly argues, for example, that there is a clear tension between the region's self-professed 'grassroots anarchism' and the continued hangover of 'Leninist centralism'. Dinc (2020), meanwhile, critiques enduring Kurdish nationalism in the region, and examines the struggle to fully cast off its, and Abdullah Öcalan's, historical legacy. Boyraz (2021) argues that democratic confederalism makes normative commitments that are not always matched by the authoritarian behaviours of the parties responsible for implementing the model. Dryaz (2020) goes further when he calls the region state-like, and identifies state-like practices it observes, including how it manages its judiciary, military and police. In the same edited volume, Lee (2020) makes a similar argument, arguing that regardless of whatever it was in its initial phases, the project has evolved to use some key tools of state-building. He focuses on conscription as a marker of statist war-making; the production of maps (as a means of imagining the 'dominion' of the state); and the emphasis on Kurdish-language instruction

that, while designed to 'counteract the Ba'ath regime's decades of Arabising education policies, during which Kurdish-language education was banned', constitutes a form of nation-building (Lee 2020, 87, 86). Likewise, Ünver (2018, 38) considers the administration's provision of security to meet the 'functions of a state.' Meanwhile, Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019, 138) write that although there has been concerted symbolic and linguistic effort made to distance the region from state-like structures, 'in practice many of the institutions resembled modern state and electoral systems, with central decision-making and coordination, but with partially decentralised governing bodies, military and police forces.'

On the other hand, there is another body of scholarly interventions that seek to elucidate exactly how, and how radically, democratic autonomy challenges statism. These accounts tend to be drawn either from more sustained engagements with the theoretical and intellectual underpinnings of AANES, or with interactions with everyday and grassroots adherents of the movement, rather than with the 'vanguard', which tends to be the subject of critique in the studies I have highlighted above. Cemgil (2021), for example, focuses his attention on how the region imagines its spatiality without recourse to the terms of modern statehood. Üstündağ's (2016) study, meanwhile, synthesises the results of her interviews with participants in the Rojava revolution, concluding that how the state becomes dismantled in the region is by a process of continually appropriating functions away from it, eventually making the state redundant by refusing to submit to it, and instead maintaining autonomy in the face of the state. This argument is also emphasised by Dilar Dirik (2014a), who highlights that democratic autonomy involves self-governing at the radically local level despite, and regardless of, the state. She expands on the way that anti-statist thinking forms the cornerstone of the everyday lives of people in the region, who undo the state by estranging from its power various functions previously held by it, such as the power of force (through self-defence) and education (through forming alternative education systems) (Dirik 2018a). These accounts do not interpret the mere

presence of military, educational or other identity-building initiatives as state-building, but as possessing a spirit aimed at unravelling the state. In particular, Dirik (2018a; 2016b; 2022a) documents the role of women in dismantling statism, as does Kivilcim (2021) in her discussion of how women participate in the construction of alternative legal frameworks. The women's liberation movement 'jineology', developed in the region as an alternative to 'feminism', often attracts accounts that link it to the dismantling of the state (Dirik 2016b; 2022a; Gunaydin 2022; 2021b). What is most valuable about this body of literature is not the analysis of the political structures present in AANES, and whether they, on the face of it, do or do not seem state-like, but rather the more sustained engagement with how AANES, especially from a grassroots rather than top-down perspective, seeks to challenge the *logics,* not just the appearances, of statehood. This latter approach speaks to the importance of self-understandings, that is, that one action may be made sense of in multiple ways, depending on the lens applied, and whether this lens adopts the state's central logics, or rejects them.

On one hand, therefore, I agree with this first body of literature, which observes that AANES demonstrates state-like tendencies. This is one possible explanation for why it is often made sense of as a state-like project: because, regardless of its intentions or the rhetorical strategies it employs, it is one. On the other hand, I concur with the latter scholars who observe the rich tradition of thinking and activism, especially women's activism, that poses serious challenges to the states model. My contribution to these literatures is therefore twofold. First, I treat the anti-statist project in AANES not as something to be verified or debunked by assessing just its practices, as I have mentioned above. I instead approach AANES as the site of a body of discourse, one that I contend can be read back into existing hegemonic accounts of the state in order to dismantle the logics of statism. This work is therefore primarily a work of political theory, intended to deepen existing accounts of how AANES critiques the state model, using my original translations of documents from Turkish to English (see Chapter 3 for discussion

of methods). As Küçük and Özselçuk highlight (2016, 186), AANES' broader enduring significance, and the legacy it leaves, may be the critique that it supplies of the nation-state, one that can be resonant in other contexts, not just across the Middle East, but also in the field of political theory.

My second contribution is to contextualise, and add further nuance to, my agreement with this first body of literature, the one that questions AANES' anti-state potential and futures, particularly in the long-term. I seek to re-appraise the apparent 'tension' observed by these scholars who question the gap between AANES' self-representations and the path it has cut towards stateness, and who see it as evidence of dishonesty or over-promising. Apart from enduring internal problems identified by the authors above, who highlight the role played by the sometimes-divided vanguard party and its sometimes-authoritarian acts, my goal is to show that AANES' anti-state project and principles have not simply faded away and dissolved, but rather specifically been *repressed* in the international. My key goal in this thesis, then, is to theorise *how* this repression has occurred. Per the discourse approach I adopt, I propose that this process has likewise been primarily a discursive one. In the next section I provide some further history and background in order to finish setting the historical scene, and charting how AANES has transformed, and been transformed, over the past decade. Then I expand further on this thesis' core argument, and describe in more detail how I propose non-state alternatives to the nation-states system, such as AANES, become vitiated by representational strategies that absorb these polities into the logics of statehood.

History, background, and important actors

This thesis concerns the developments that have occurred in the north-east region of Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2012. A brief timeline of events from then until now will help to supply context and background regarding the concerns about the region they bring to the

fore, and the actors that I take to be key. This timeline also demonstrates the importance of international actors in shaping how AANES has transformed in the past decade.

Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the multi-ethnic but Kurdish-majority region of northern Syria had for decades experienced similar challenges as faced by other Kurdish-majority areas of the Middle East, with large Kurdish populations spread across what are today known as south-east Turkey, western Iran, and northern Iraq. The Kurds are an ethno-linguistic group indigenous to Mesopotamia, whose tribes fell under different levels of administrative control by the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Their persecution throughout the twentieth century is well-known: in Iraq, this involved mass deportation and chemical and neurological weapons attacks, killing over 100,000, under the auspices of Saddam Hussein's al-Anfal Campaign (Yesiltas 2014, 51). In Turkey, Kurdish populations have been subjected to linguistic genocide, forced child removals (Özcan 2006, 68), massacres, and the razing of Kurdish villages. From 1987 to 2002, thirteen majority-Kurdish populated provinces of Turkey were managed under emergency law, which is a semi-permanent state of emergency that permits the Turkish government to implement extraordinary measures, including the imposition of curfews, and control over the right to assembly. It led to 'many human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances and evacuations of villages' (A. B. Çelik 2014, 54–55).

This trend of socio-economic and other rights deprivations was paralleled in Syria, with Kurds often suppressed by the Arab-majority population on the basis of the internal security risk they were deemed to pose (as terrorists or separatists) (Yildiz 2005, 31–32). In 1962, the Ba'ath administration, under the pretext of taking a census, stripped over 150,000 Syrian Kurds of citizenship by claiming they were in fact of Turkish origin (Human Rights Watch 1990, 88). By the mid-1960s, the re-formed Syrian state – which had seceded from the republic it had formed with Egypt between 1958 and 1961 – designed a twelve-point policy plan aimed at

managing the Kurdish population in the north. Under this Arabisation plan, Kurdish populations were removed from agriculturally productive parts of the land, and replaced with Arabs, in order to forge an 'Arab belt' that could disrupt the contiguity of the Kurdish population between Turkey and Syria (Vanly 1992, 122–23). Under the Ba'ath regime, Kurdish-populated regions were poor and 'exploited quasi-colonially' (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 192). As such, before the outbreak of the war in 2012, the region was relatively under-developed compared to the rest of the country, serviced by few roads, hospitals and schools, and its rich oil reserves and fertile soil were put to the task of powering and feeding much of the country through an imposed wheat and cotton monoculture (discussed further in Chapter 7). Before the war, the area accounted for a third of Syria's economic strength (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 192), though little of it was directed into the region itself.

This part of Syria saw occasional outbreaks of unrest from Kurds protesting these conditions. In 2004, for example, over 650 Kurds were arrested and at least 30 were killed by Syrian security forces (Human Rights Watch 2007, 12). In 2011, when protests broke out across Syria, Syrian Kurds partook actively. Struggling, the Assad regime made initial attempts to appease the Kurdish population in the north, committing in April of 2011 to restore the citizenship that had been stripped from its 150,000 inhabitants (Al Jazeera 2011). But the population of the region proved to be exceptionally organised and prepared to engage in militancy. This was the result of the presence of the PYD, a Kurdish-majority political party founded in 2003 (Savelsberg 2014, 98), who maintained a militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG). In 2012, the YPG spawned a second women's-only arm known as the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

The links of the PYD and the YPG to the Turkish militant organisation the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) extend back decades. This is the result of significant historical cross-pollination between the radical militant Kurdish movements of Turkey and Syria, which forms an

important contextual component of this thesis. The PKK was founded in Turkey in 1978, as part of a wave of militant Marxist-Leninist organisations inspired by decolonial movements that had sprung up across the globe. Inspired by this wave, it initially fought for an independent state of Kurds. In 2005, however, the PKK and PYD adopted the goal of democratic confederalism that I introduced above.

The PKK's founder and current ideological figurehead, Abdullah Öcalan – who fled Turkey in 1979 only one year after founding the organisation – originally departed for and organised out of Syria, and multiple attacks on Turkey were launched across the border from Syria in the 1980s (Rudaw 2016a; Mason 2014, 116). Although he was captured by the Turkish state in 1999, convicted for treason and separatism, and has been held in prison ever since, Öcalan continues to exert a strong intellectual influence in the region, which I discuss further in Chapter 3. Between the 1980s and 2000s, Syrian Kurdish militants flowed freely into Iraq's Qandil mountains, headquarters of the PKK, and participated actively in the group (Ünver 2016, 69). In 2011, Turkish academic Soli Özel estimated that a third of the PKK was made up of Syrian Kurds (Voice of America 2011). With the escalation of unrest in Syria in 2012, members of the PKK returned to Syria to help mobilise this region further, and train an increasingly large number of male and female recruit fighters (Jerusalem Post 2013; Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 134).

As the Syrian war escalated, large numbers of rebel factions were formed – with a Jane's Information Group analysis claiming that there were over 1,000 as of 2013 (cited in Bellal 2015, 271). However, two distinguished themselves. The first was the PYD/YPG, which capitalised on the security lacuna that was left behind after Assad's forces withdrew from Kurdish-majority regions, having been redirected towards the south in order to quash unrest closer to the centre of the country. Given its training and preparedness, the YPG quickly began to supply security for the region. In January of 2014 it declared autonomous self-governance

in a region dubbed Rojava, which means 'West' (to designate 'Western Kurdistan') in Kurdish. The region was to be governed as a 'confederation' composed of the cantons of Kobani, Afrin and Cizre, who would maintain their own administrations and constitutions, loosely linked by the Rojava Social Contract (2014), which clearly outlined that it would 'recognise Syria's territorial integrity.' This is the moment that the region adopted the model of democratic confederalism. At this stage of the war, the PYD/YPG were considered by international parties as a terrorist-linked and therefore extremist organisation (Lister 2012). This move towards autonomy was deemed 'provocative' and 'concerning' by the White House (Psaki 2013), who were led by Turkey's and other regional actors' concerns about the risks posed to Syrian, and other Kurdish-majority countries', territorial integrity and sovereignty if autonomy were granted to Kurds (Trend News Agency 2013; Cengiz 2013).

The period between 2014 and 2016 saw the PYD-led model of democratic confederalism become normalised,[3] following initial resistance from some segments of the non-Kurdish population in the region, and from rival political parties (Schmidinger 2018, 136–38). The PYD's key rival has been the Kurdish National Council (KNC or ENKS), established in Syria by the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani, in 2011. The rationale for establishing the KNC was to balance against the emergent power of the more radical PYD (International Crisis Group 2013). Democratic confederalism's support base, in this timeframe, did not cover the full breadth of the population of northern Syria (B. [*sic*] 2016). Nevertheless, large changes were made to how society was organised during this period. This included the establishment of 'communes', which represented the collectivisation of around 350 families or households,

[3] Schmidinger (2018, 138–9) attributes this to a combination of factors. These included that civilians in the region were largely satisfied that the efforts of the PYD and YPG had kept them safe from the fighting and turmoil experienced in other regions, and also that the educational work done by the PYD to promote uptake of its ideas was successful. I discuss this further in Chapter 3. Haenni and Quesnay (2020, 10) similarly note low levels of attempts to mobilise against the Administration, as well as low numbers of internally displaced people generated by the AANES, suggesting that civilians are not generally compelled to flee the areas it controls. When this has happened, it is usually on an ethnic basis, with an Amnesty International (2015) report finding that Arabs and Turkmen have fled PYD-controlled areas. I discuss the complexity surrounding this report further in Chapter 6.

or entire villages in more rural and sparsely populated regions (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 76). As part of their communes, inhabitants of the region were able to join weekly meetings, organised by issue area into committees (Women's, Youth, Peace, Economics, Self-Defence, and Social Committees). In the words of Kivilcim (2021, 35), 'communes confederate at higher levels as necessary.' Thus, communes were further collectivised into People's Houses, averaging around fifteen communes; issues, such as conflict and crime, that were unresolved at the commune level were escalated to this level. These Houses also took up the task of introducing more codified rulings and legislation. The women's equivalent House, the Women's House (or Mala Jin), resolved issues around women's rights, such as sexual assault cases or divorce proceedings. Sitting above this were cities, which maintained a Public Council or People's Assembly made up of two co-leaders, around 20 regional co-leaders, and nearly 200 further elected members. Sitting above the city was the canton: for example, twelve cities made up the canton of Cizre. Cantons had legislative power (to enact proposals from communes and committees); judicial power (which supervised the resolution of more serious crime through a court process, and served the functions of a 'supreme court' by interpreting the constitution and overseeing the constitutionality of laws); and executive power (that implemented laws through ministries on justice, finance, education, agriculture, martyrs' families, culture, religion, human rights, self-defence and labour). In November 2014, for example, the Legislative Council of the Cizre canton issued a special law on women, made up of 30 articles, which included provisions that made it easier for a woman to divorce and retain custody of her children, and to access her dowry or an equivalent value (Tammo 2018). It also forbade child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, and honour killings (Shahvisi 2021, 1009).[4] From the bottom up, each of these units featured elected co-chairs and co-presidents,

[4] Some of these rulings are difficult to implement in practice. As Kivilcim (2021, 38) notes, for example, the Syrian government is the entity responsible for issuing marriage certificates. There are many such examples throughout this thesis wherein the region's lack of statehood inhibits it from enacting its political positions.

one male and one female. And at all elected levels, there is a quota for a minimum 40 percent female representation (Lynch 2019; Lemmon 2018). Participation in these structures has, as I mentioned, expanded over time, but is still not embraced across the board. When local and regional elections were held in 2017, the majority of the political parties in the region participated, and 3,700 positions were elected (Kivilcim 2021, 35). However, the elections were boycotted by the KNC.

The second large shift in the Syrian landscape came with the coalescence of the threat of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which entered Syria in April 2013 as an affiliate of al-Nusra, which itself was an al-Qaeda affiliate delegated to Syria (Ezrow 2015; Kilcullen 2015, 48). Al-Nusra, for its part, had succeeded in co-opting the Free Syrian Army (FSA), who was important during the early stages of the war for attracting funding from the United States, who had chosen the group as the 'moderate rebels' it would back, in part due to the FSA's preference for a united Syria (Banco 2015; Ignatius 2012; Salih 2015). When the FSA collapsed, much of the military aid sent by the US found itself seized by Islamist groups. Having expanded into Syria and succeeded militarily by staging important attacks on Kobani, Raqqa, Idlib, Aleppo, and by capturing Mosul, ISI became ISIL and then Islamic State (IS). The group declared a caliphate, and overwhelmed multiple ground forces including the US-backed Iraqi Peshmerga. Between 2014 and 2015, several severe humanitarian crises erupted, in particular when IS attacked the Yezidis of Iraqi Kurdistan, trapping them in the mountains of Sinjar, sexually enslaving hundreds of Yezidi women and massacring others. When the YPG proved to be one of the few organisations equipped to fight back against IS, the US-fronted coalition in Syria struck an alliance with the group, albeit in the face of strong decrials by NATO ally Turkey. Turkey now and in the past has considered the PYD/YPG to be an offshoot of the PKK, which is terror-listed by NATO, the European Union and Australia. While working with the United States, in 2015 the YPG was integrated with the Syrian Arab Coalition, a US-backed rebel group, in

order to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The rationale for this merger was to unite militarily effective Kurdish forces with weaker Arab forces in order to generate a more ethnically balanced group which, in January 2017, had 23,000 Arab fighters out of about 50,000 fighters in total (Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019, 128). The SDF was conceptualised as being able to liberate towns from IS whose populations were not majority Kurdish and have the on-the-ground legitimacy to do so. It was also designed by the US to appease Turkish concerns about the PYD dominating the US alliance; meanwhile, the YPG consented to it in order to secure US support against Turkish hostility, and therefore ensure the survival of AANES (Tekoşîna Anarşîst 2020, 24) – a theme that recurs throughout this thesis. In 2016, a political party that corresponded with the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), was formed. The SDF has been credited with the defeat of IS in Syria in 2019, and the liberation of half a million people across Iraq and Syria. The SDF later became known as the SDC's military branch. During the period of this alliance, Rojava grew to encompass the Jazira region, whose capital is Qamishlo; the Euphrates region, whose capital is Kobani; the Afrin region, whose capital is Tell Rifaat; the Taqba region, whose capital is Taqba; the Raqqa region, whose capital is Raqqa; the Manbij region, whose capital is Manbij; and the Deir ez-Zor region, whose capital is Jazrat al-Buhamid. Taqba, Manbij and Deir ez-Zor are largely Arab regions.

Between the spring of 2016 and late 2018, Rojava became known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS). This aligned with plans it announced to link its cantons more closely, and pursue a federal model (Solomon and Srivastava 2016; Sherko 2016). Preparations for this shift began in 2017, and included the election of Kurdish and Christian co-heads to spearhead the executive body of the federal system (Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019, 129). Following the 2017 elections, DFNS intended to hold a final phase of parliamentary elections, on a federal level this time, to elect the SDC. Subsequent to the political destabilisation triggered by Turkish attacks on the region, this plan was abandoned, and the region thereafter

came to be known as AANES, an alternative to the planned federal body (Faidhi Dri 2021). These elections were further delayed by the drawdown of troops form the region announced by the Trump administration in 2019, effectively ending the alliance and throwing the region into intensified military turmoil. As of 2022, movement on elections has been promised but progress remains slow (al-Qadi 2022).

Core argument

In the previous section I highlighted how AANES and IS emerged onto the international scene at roughly the same time. What also makes them similar, or at least conceptually linked, for analysts like Boyraz (2021), is that they are both non-state actors, specifically non-state actors who have generated questions about the challenges posed to sovereignty in the twenty-first century, and to the future of the state system. As Grzybowski (2021) notes, IS was for a time heralded as being capable of bringing about the collapse of the Syrian state. Indeed, its existence was viewed with apocalyptic seriousness: the organisation was dubbed 'end-of-days' (Ackerman 2014). Much of the nature of this fear hinged on IS' threat to return the Middle East to a pre-Weberian understanding of borders, sovereignty, religion and nation. However, IS did not accomplish anything nearing this, and, as Grzybowski (2021) is correct to note, nor has the Syrian state disappeared; the international order continues to be 're-enacted.'

This re-enactment has taken shape in two ways. On one hand, the threat posed by IS had been largely eliminated at the time of writing, through a conventional military eradication strategy. Meanwhile, the PYD/YPG has persisted, in part because the group had to be armed, supported and protected in order for it to fight IS, given it was perceived as the only viable possible ally for the West after its failed partnerships with the fractured FSA and the weak Iraqi Peshmerga. I use this thesis to argue that the anti-state threat posed by AANES has nevertheless also been eliminated. However, this has occurred more often through techniques of management, which

include discursive strategies, which absorb the AANES project into statist logics. Today, the solution aimed to resolving the tension between northern Syria and the rest of the country that has the most support from both international and domestic actors is a federal model: Assad signalled his openness to a decentralised Syria in August of 2021, and the PYD, although resistant to the idea of a 'federal Syria', which would keep Syria squarely in the box of statehood – seeing it resemble Iraqi Kurdistan or Lebanon – has not entirely ruled out rapprochement on this front (Özuğurlu 2021). Although we cannot predict AANES' long-term future at time of writing, it is reasonable to suggest that the region's anti-state project is in decline. The goal of this thesis is to extricate AANES' anti-state thinking out from under statist discourses, and also to account for how these very representative strategies are what contribute to the re-enactment of the international order.

So far, I have outlined two types of discourse about AANES: one that emerges from unfriendly actors and another from friendly actors. Detractors of AANES depict the region as a haven for terrorists, linking segments of the Autonomous Administration to the historically separatist PKK. This is an example of a discourse that interprets AANES as both statist and threatening, and it is this discourse that legitimises the acts of aggression, most often Turkish aggression, committed towards the region, intended to eradicate the Administration. On the other hand, allies of AANES, such as the US and the US-headed Western coalition[5] – made up of France, Belgium, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Australia – do not intend to entirely eradicate the Administration, nor construe it as terrorist. In fact, they have supported it, allied with it, and armed it: in the words of US State Department spokesman Mark Toner, they were Syrian conflict's 'good guys' (quoted in Kaymak 2016), bravely confronting the conflict's real terrorists, the Islamic State. In one view, these representations are diametrically

[5] With the exception of the brief involvement of the Gulf states, the actors involved in the international military intervention (Operation Inherent Resolve) against IS are all Western countries, and I characterise it as such throughout this thesis.

opposed. However, they do have something in common, which is that they both promulgate representations of AANES that make it the subject of state-based discourses.[6] The depiction of the region as a liberal democratic secular mini-state, crafted in the Western self-image – rather than as radically anti-state – still utilises the same logics of seeing states everywhere. These representations, which are limited by their own state-centricity, have the effect of shaping the represented actor as such, exerting a hegemonic pull over AANES which narrows the space from which it can articulate non-state alternatives. This is especially the case when both legitimacy and survival in the international system are imbricated with allowing such a disciplinary process to occur.

The broader contribution of this thesis is therefore to help understand why alternatives to the nation-states system are so few and/or short-lived. The modern state system is not inevitable, and nor is organising society in this way the most natural or normal solution to the problem of how to secure order and supply democracy. However, it is a solution that is normalised and naturalised. My goal, then, is to contribute an understanding of the role that the international plays in normalising and naturalising state-making and state-seeking, and vitiating alternatives. States are structured to interface with other states; indeed, at times, the possibility of the idea of international relations itself has hinged on this state-centricity. International intervention therefore plays a large role in this process, both coercive and more or less consensual, with international actors having a clear preference for interacting with centralised governments, sometimes implementing it by force where none may have previously existed. And yet, in the critical accounts of AANES I discussed above, the role of international pressure in the emergence of statist tendencies amongst the administration has been relatively neglected; that

[6] There is evidence that even IS was discursively managed in this way, given the proliferation of document releases and studies published in its wake that focused on the group's centralised organisational structure and administration, and high levels of bureaucratisation, which led analysts to conclude it 'saw itself as a state' (this wording is from the description of the George Washington State and *The New York Times'* 2018 The ISIS Files project) (see also Shapiro and Jung 2014).

is, failure tends to be diagnosed as the result of internal dynamics, without accounting for how internal dynamics are shaped by international dynamics.

The 'Rojava revolution' is often compared to the October Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Spanish Republic, and the Zapatista Revolution, moments of rupture that have threatened the statist imaginary, and which are now consigned to history. Indeed, the Rojava revolution itself is sometimes already discussed in the past tense. Appraising the achievements of the movement in 2017, Saed (2017) notes that many of the assertions that the region successfully 'transmogrified' its Marxist-Leninist practices – of a tightly regulated, centralised party structure which oversees changes on the ground – into anarchism are 'fanciful.' He echoes the concerns of the skeptical authors I discussed above, who point to the role of the authoritarian party structure. Saed does so in order to highlight that political institutions continue to be centralised, or only partially decentralised, in the region, despite (as I will discuss later) that a cornerstone of the AANES anti-state discourse is its critique of the centralisation of authority. Saed (2017, 8) then draws a negative comparison between the October Revolution and the Rojava revolution: 'the Rojava case displays similarities, in that ultimate authority was supposedly decentralised, as was to be the case with Soviets.' There has therefore been a sense for at least the past five years that the Rojava revolution is failing. However, Saed (2017, 17) concludes his article on an important note, one which I wish to take up and expand upon: 'these processes [of decentralisation, anti-capitalism] may be only gradually under way or embryonic at best in Rojava, but without massive, concerted external support from leftists the world over, there is little chance for the revolution to fulfil even a small fraction of its promise.' This author makes a significant normative observation, which is that revolutions need and deserve international support in order to sustain themselves. The contribution I hope to make, partially borne of this insight, is to develop a clearer account of how, when these moments of rupture in the statist imaginary – including but not limited to historical events that are dubbed revolutions

– fail, they undoubtedly do so through a combination of both domestic and under-acknowledged international factors. In other words, it is the international order, in seeking to reproduce itself, that forecloses these moments of rupture; they do not entirely foreclose themselves.

That the stability of international relations hinges on states resembling each other is well-known. As political economist David Harvey notes, powerful actors have ensured that this is so through the emergence and function of institutions like the Bank of International Settlements, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (Harvey 2007, 10). The point of departure of this thesis from such scholarship is that I do not theorise this process as a merely material one, wherein imperialist and neo-imperialist powers export the state form (whether that be its capitalist, liberal democratic, or neoliberal dimensions) through sheer military, economic and even ideological might. The theoretical commitments of this thesis are post-structuralist, and therefore I theorise this process by employing a discourse approach, which I discuss further in Chapter 3. I argue that it is discourse that has the power to re-fashion these polities, legitimising the more brute interventions; and exerting power over these polities until they adopt state-based identities in order to access legitimacy and survival in the international system, and indeed to access any kind of existence at all. These latter processes, ones of discursive foreclosure, radically circumscribe the place from which actors can speak and act, and achieve similar ends. Thus, I provide an enhanced understanding of how non-state alternatives, such as AANES, fail to survive in the nation-states system, and either disappear or begin to appear state-like. I discuss this argument further in Chapter 2, wherein I propose the idea of interpellation and recognition as disciplinary discursive processes, and I expand on my discourse approach further in Chapter 3.

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis address my two key goals in turn. First, they each provide a sustained, serious attempt to tease out how discourses articulated in AANES challenge the

key aspects of the state form, whose dominant discursive articulations I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2: these are centralised authority, specifically the monopoly over the legitimate use of force; liberalism, specifically secularism and feminism; and capitalism. In so doing, my goal is to advance our understanding of this indigenous and non-Western solution to the problem of political organisation. The second half of each of these chapters turns to considering how these anti-state alternatives have been vitiated in distinctive ways in each of the arenas I explore.

Chapter outline

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I draw on the relevant critical literature on the state system and statehood in order to lay out the conceptual framework that provides the structure of the chapters that follow. Employing this literature, I outline three key facets that I take to be central to what I call 'statist realism', a hegemonic discourse about the state system that sees it as permanent, transcendental, natural, and the best system for supplying order and democracy. These three facets are the monopoly over violence; liberalism; and capitalism. Inside of a statist realist imaginary, the maintenance of a monopoly over violence is considered to be the solution for disorder in the domestic and the international; liberalism is considered to be the solution for ethno-religious conflict, gendered violence, and the protection of minorities in general; and capitalism is considered to be the best means of ordering the economy and the environment. In this chapter, I also outline how my contribution furthers post-structuralist critiques of the state and state-centrism in international relations. I expound the concept of stateness as a performance demanded of, or induced from, polities who do not meet the requirements of statehood (or, in the case of this dissertation, polities who do not seek statehood), in order to access legitimacy and survival. I propose recognition not as a neutral or positive process, but as a disciplinary one, which 'sees' stateness, and in doing so helps to produce it.

Having established that I seek to understand the persistence of the state form as the product not only of blunt imperialism, but rather the end result of discursive and interpellative processes that license this imperialism, I use Chapter 3 to more firmly establish what employing a discourse approach entails. In short, I use post-structuralist discourse analysis, which is based on constitutive theory – a theory that highlights the role of representations in helping to generate the realities they describe – in order to accomplish two things. First, post-structuralist discourse analysis helps to explore the solutions that AANES proposes to the problems identified above, and to demonstrate how these solutions deconstruct the statist realist imaginary. Second, post-structuralist discourse analysis helps to explain the persistence of the state system, by showing how representations of AANES as a statist project suppress these alternatives and have the power to pull AANES into the logic of stateness. This chapter also outlines the corpus of the discourse analysis.

Chapter 4 explores the role of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in the region, particularly those that resist the imaginary of the state system in the way they characterise their relationship with the monopoly over violence. A decentralised approach to violence and security provision is seen as more effective at maintaining order because it is based on local self-defence, challenging the state's (capitalist, gendered, racialised) monopoly on violence, which is viewed as the real driver of disorder. The chapter concludes by exploring recent evidence of increasingly centralised forms of security provision in the region, arguing that the force propelling these NSAGs towards more state-like configurations is not a natural or inevitable one, but rather one tied up with the power of states, who re-craft such forces into more legible forms of militarism that more closely resemble their own. Chapter 5 also examines the monopoly over violence from the perspective of the international, specifically as it pertains to the interpretation of foreign fighters, or non-citizen volunteers, of the YPG in Syria. I argue that, outside the statist realist imaginary, foreign fighting is constructed as a means of declaring

international allegiances that does not require the sanction of the state or statist categories, such as nationality or citizenship. This chapter concludes by showing that efforts to curtail this foreign fighting forces statist categories such as citizenship, borders and the monopoly over violence to once more become salient in AANES, vitiating the non-state account.

Chapter 6 explores how, within the statist realist imaginary, liberalism represents the best conceivable solution to ethno-religious disorder and gendered violence, wherein liberal secularism and liberal feminism are its solutions. I show that the anti-state critique of liberalism sees it as a force that produces the individual as a subject of the state and grants them equality under its laws, primarily through centralising processes, which include the violent imposition of a single national identity, and the shift of ethics and politics into the state and away from the local. Outside of the statist realist imaginary, meanwhile, these problems can instead be treated by fomenting multiple, overlapping identities, and returning to collective and local ethics and politics. This chapter includes the most sustained discussion of the Kurdish women's liberation movement, jineology. It concludes by demonstrating how popular and official Western representations of AANES foreclose these alternatives, and enduringly recognise its treatment of minority rights as either secular or feminist, producing the region in liberal democratic states' image.

Finally, Chapter 7 explores the ties drawn by the AANES discourse between capitalism and statism. I show that, where capitalism makes necessary market primacy, capital accumulation, and the commodification and commercialisation of land and labour, the AANES discourse bases its understanding of how to order the economy and environment through the alternative epistemology of social ecology. This alternative is one grounded in decentralisation, local markets, non-extractivism, and the centering of social rather than market relations in economic decision-making. As with the other chapters, I conclude with a consideration of how social ecology as an ideological tenet is foreclosed in AANES by the encroaching logics of capital.

Chapter 2: What's in a state? Theoretical and conceptual framework

> The sovereign states system is the only global system of authority that has ever existed. It was once possible for many people, indeed millions, to live outside the jurisdiction of sovereign states. That is no longer possible. There is no inhabited territory anywhere on the planet that is outside. The entire population of the world, more than 6 billion people, find themselves living inside a sovereign state. They may have some choice in determining in which particular state they will live. They have no choice except to live in one state or another, having to make the best of it, enjoying its advantages and opportunities and suffering its hazards and liabilities. The weight of that now universal fact of human affairs is not always fully appreciated. – Robert Jackson (2007, x), *Sovereignty: The Evolution of an Idea*

Introduction

The political theorist Mark Fisher, in his influential book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009), wrote that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. The contestation over what system should govern human relations that characterised the preceding decades had concluded. A post-Cold War malaise had settled in across much of the world, one that Fisher thought had been rendered stagnant by an inability to imagine alternatives to the present, and therefore unable to generate any new cultural, social – or political and economic – forms. This idea was articulated from another perspective, over a decade earlier, by Francis Fukuyama, who proclaimed that history had ended with the conclusion of the Cold War and the decisive pivot to a unipolar world order helmed by the United States (Fukuyama 1992). Since then, even as the international balance of power has shifted back towards bi- or multi-polarity, the contenders that have arisen have done so by engaging with, rather than challenging, the dominion of capitalism (see for example Hung 2009 for a discussion of the rise of China). Fisher observed that capitalism had become a site of no-contest, a phenomenon that endlessly re-asserts itself, naturalised as both transcendent and eternal, rather than contingent or temporary. The challenge this has posed to political thinking has been profound: how to imagine a better, or new, society without attempting to perfect,

tweak, or reform capitalism. This thesis suggests that state-centrism – or, to adapt Fisher's term, 'statist realism' – functions similarly, as the space from which to imagine alternatives is radically narrow. I propose 'statist realism' as a concept that is tied closely to Fisher's because, as I argue in a later section of this chapter, the rise of the modern nation-state is co-extensive with the rise of capitalism. Because they are inextricably embedded with one another, capitalism's opposite face – the state – needs to be theorised in similar terms in international relations for the way that it limits options for alternatives, and is imbricated with power.

This chapter draws on relevant literature in order to fashion the conceptual framework of 'statist realism', which I take to be a hegemonic discourse about the imaginary of the state, and how it reproduces itself. This discourse proposes a dominant understanding of how to organise and manage government and the potential sources of disorder that influence it, including religious conflict; violence in the domestic sphere; violence in the international system; and gendered violence. I approach the concept of statist realism by drawing on Jens Bartelson's and James Martel's critiques, among others, of the enduring re-appearance of the state and its sovereignty throughout the history of political theory and international relations. Even as the state has been increasingly de-centered in scholarship, and we live in an era comprised of varied governance arrangements; power-sharing between state and non-state actors; the relative stability of unrecognised non-states; and the proliferation of post-colonial polities that work to decolonise sovereignty, I propose that what endures is not statehood, but state*ness*. This is a term I use in order to capture all the ways that productive state-like enactments are demanded, or assumed, of such actors. Drawing on the work of James C. Scott and Veena Das, I show that stateness, rather than statehood, is not a formal or legal category as such, but rather a performance required of, or induced from, polities, even those who do not meet (and those who do not seek) the requirements of statehood, in order to access legitimacy and indeed even survival. My argument is that stateness asserts itself even in its absence inside of international

relations, as states interpellate non-states into this subject-position as a means of disciplining difference, uncertainty, and the potential for disorder, out of the international system.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I justify my understanding of what I take the state to 'be', and examine how closely AANES currently maps onto this definition. Second, I explore the key components of statist realism, and what I consider to be the three key statist discourses that I will later argue AANES has positioned itself against. In the third part of the chapter, I engage post-structuralist critiques of the state, and discuss the scholarship that deconstructs state-centrism; historicises the state; and is attentive to how the naturalisation of the state form upholds, and is the product of, unequal power relations in the international system. Fourth, I discuss the literature on secession and de facto states, and propose that their focus on recognition and legitimation needs to be complemented with a focus on recognisability. I build this concept in order to propose that unrecognisable governance arrangements – ones that are illegible or ostensibly anarchic, such as that in AANES – are tamed either out of existence, or out of the episteme. Fifth, I therefore propose recognition as the disciplinary interpellative process that tames non-state entities by drawing them into the logics of stateness.

The ontology of the state

This thesis agrees with other post-structuralist scholars who have observed that 'the state' is a politically contingent concept, whose definition is hard to place and hinges upon temporal and geographical context (Epstein 2021, 4). It is important, then, to acknowledge that 'the state' can take many forms. A core component of this thesis, however, is to observe the way that 'the state' finds a way to assert itself even in its absence – that is, even when it is being explicitly eschewed in an overtly anti-state discourse. It is important, therefore, to delimit the bounds of what I consider statehood to be, specifically in order to avoid conceptual stretching, which over-fits different kinds of polities into statehood, especially those that seek to reject it. This

has been the tenor of a few of the attempts to theorise governance outside of the Global North. Bartelson, Hall and Teorell's edited volume *De-Centering State Making: Comparative and International Perspectives* (2018a), for example, proposes to move away from Western Europe in order to explore a wider range of examples of 'idiosyncratic and anomalous cases in order to identify alternative paths to statehood' (Bartelson, Hall, and Teorell 2018b, 2). Contributions in the collection identify the ways that states are made not simply through territorial bounding and war-making, but also through processes of opening up the international economy (in the case of the Steppe), or the performance of ethnonationalist imaginaries (in the case of Yugoslavia) (M. Hall 2018; Björkdahl 2018). Although this is only one example from a large body of scholarly output, I note it only to point out that worthy attempts to challenge Eurocentric conceptions of statehood, and thus 'de-centre state-making', sometimes inadvertently produce a second phenomenon that is equally worthy of critique. This is that 'the state' is sometimes observed, found, or constructed in governance situations where it is absent; that is, not that a polity is forming a peculiar or idiosyncratic 'type' or 'variation' of a state, but rather that it radically departs from statist realism. Below I discuss how the assumed presence of statehood even in its absence manifests teleological language that centres 'pathways towards' statehood, as if non-states were always caught in a process, whether successful or not, of becoming states. The purpose of this thesis is to argue that, when this is true – that is, when polities are pulled into the subject-position of statehood – this is the result of political pulls towards statehood rather than natural tendencies.

A delimited definition of statehood therefore needs to be offered in this thesis. The definition that guides these pages is broad, but it takes some principles to be key in order to avoid conceptual stretching. This is essential to a discourse approach, expanded upon in the next chapter. With the understanding that each signifier – in this case, 'the state' – references a signified (a set of meanings that the signifier brings to mind), it is important to establish what

is conventionally signified by the term, in particular in order to be able to apprehend what constructions and dominant understandings the AANES movement is positioning itself against when it casts itself as anti-state. Therefore, this thesis defines the state as a form of rule whose origins lie in the Westphalian order, and at whose core are the ideas of the state, sovereignty and territoriality. The Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933) outlines that statehood requires an identifiable territory, a permanent population, and a government that exercises authority over its territory and may be recognised by, or form relationships with, other states. Wendt also offers a useful definition of the 'essential state', which has five characteristics: a) an institutional-legal order, b) an organisation claiming a monopoly on the legitimate use of organised violence, c) an organisation with sovereignty, d) a society, and e) territory (Wendt 1999, 202).

AANES is not a legally recognised state, although, like other non-states, it meets some of these criteria. As of 2022, it has defined a territory for itself which includes the seven regions that have been under its administration since 2017. This territory has been disputed by domestic actors, such as the Syrian government and non-state groups such as IS. But it is also most powerfully challenged by external actors. The Turkish government has been involved in border disputes with AANES for the past six years, starting in August of 2016, when Turkey launched the cross-border Operation Euphrates Shield. Subsequent military operations across the border have included Operation Olive Branch (2018), Operation Peace Spring (2019), and Operation Spring Shield (2020). These operations have radically shrunk the Afrin region in particular. Throughout the course of the occupation of Afrin, multiple important changes have occurred, including that this border city is administered as part of the south-eastern Turkish province of Hatay; municipal buildings, hospitals and parks have been replaced with Turkish and Arabic signage only; the region has been repopulated with Arab and Turkic peoples, and Kurds displaced; schools have been established that teach a Turkish-language curriculum only; and

Turkish licence plates for cars and identification cards have been issued which describe Syrian Kurdish citizens as 'foreign nationals' – of Turkey (Syrian Civil War Map 2018; Rise Up For Afrin 2019; Rojava Cudi 2019; Turkey Untold 2018; Arab News 2021; Chulov and Shaheen 2018). Thus, despite Turkish protestations that it planned 'not to invade any part of Syria' and had no intention of remaining in Afrin (TRT World 2018; Şarku'l Avsat 2018, my translation), Turkish activities have brought regions of northern Syria into the sphere of Turkish sovereignty in a number of arenas: bureaucratically, demographically and linguistically, economically, and militarily (Al-Hilu 2019). Indeed, in March 2019, the Hatay/Afrin border was opened, while the remainder of the 764-kilometre Syria-Turkey concrete border wall remained intact (Tam Zamani 2019). In September 2019, that border wall began to be re-built to place Afrin on Turkey's side. As of 2021 in Afrin, electricity is supplied from the Turkish grid, and inhabitants use Turkish cell phones and currency (Gall 2021).

Connected to this contestation over territory is the fact that AANES' population is not settled in size or composition. At its height, AANES has represented one-fifth of the Syrian landmass and estimates of its population hover between the widely-cited figure of 2 million and self-reports of 5 million, although no exhaustive census has been conducted since 2016 (Rojava Information Centre 2019, 13; Ali 2022). Furthermore, the region's pre-war population and demographic composition were relatively unknown, given efforts from the Ba'athist government to (on paper) shrink the number of non-Arabs within its borders. This population estimate is also highly changeable due to the significant number of internally and externally displaced Syrians produced by the war. For example, estimates of the number of individuals living in the population centre of the city of Afrin range from 50,000 to 70,000 after the Turkish invasion, compared to a population of around 200,000 prior to it (Rudaw 2018). Similarly, the size of the population centre of Kobani has grown to nearly half a million, and shrunk accordingly, depending on its security status. The ethnic composition of the population of this

territory is also variable, as Turkey has repatriated Syrian Arab refugees back into traditionally majority-Kurdish territory (Chulov 2022). The population of the region is therefore heterogeneous and, when the area was first established and governed as a series of three cantons – that is, before the process to federate it commenced – its territory was non-contiguous. As Jackson (2007, 28) notes, heterogeneity of population and lack of contiguity of territory are two characteristics of non-states.

Additionally, AANES has a government: that it, it has recognisable political parties who hold elections (see Chapter 1). However, as I discuss later in this thesis, the model of governance implemented does not pursue full sovereignty (for example through the pursuit of secession, the establishment of a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, and the centralisation and bureaucratisation of rational-legal institutions and decision-making). On the question of the centralisation of rational-legal institutions, and on the question of securing contiguous territory, it is important to revisit the pivot away from confederalism and the push made towards the adoption of a federal model through the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS). As I noted above, the federalisation of Syria has increasingly widespread support, and I have argued that, to international actors, it represents a more palatable solution to the Syrian war than if the pursuit of full democratic confederalism were to persist unchecked in AANES. To be clear, the proposed federalisation would decentralise the Syrian state compared to its pre-war condition. However, if AANES were to agree to the adoption of a federal model and to the creation of a federal parliament, AANES itself would become more centralised, as well as continue to exist within the paradigm of conventional statehood.

The adoption of a federal model succeeded at making AANES' territory more contiguous. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the revised goal to move to a federal model was adopted in mid-2016, contemporaneous with the push to unite the three formerly non-contiguous cantons of Cizre, Kobani and Afrin. The rationale of this push was to secure a larger, connected border in the

north, which would theoretically help protect the region from Turkish hostility, which often routed through the parts of the northern border not held by the PYD (Rudaw 2016b). Although this made military sense, it was the SDF and SDC, both products of the intervention of the US-backed coalition in the region, who influenced these two pushes. Indeed, the re-name to DFNS in 2016 was designed to 'win the backing of the Americans' (Lemmon 2021a, 164); Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019, 123) detail this decision as being crafted by the PYD as a response to their 'exclusion from the Geneva talks that commenced in February 2016, as well as … the need to maintain US military support. … [Federalism] led to the further broadening of the YPG's military alliances and the formation of new umbrella organisations patronised by the United States.' The abandonment of confederalism, then, and the move towards a federal model, already clearly captures some of the themes of this thesis, namely that pressure placed on the region to begin to more closely resemble a state in order to secure its own survival has been successful.

Finally, this government has sought and achieved limited diplomatic and international recognition. For example, it opened diplomatic missions in Moscow, Paris, Prague, Stockholm, Berlin and Sulaimani in 2016 (Arafat 2016; Oliphant 2016). In 2021, the Administration finally backed a social media and diplomatic campaign calling for #Status4NorthAndEastSyria, which had proven to be internally divisive, but saw the SDF commander-in-chief request recognition of the region's 'civil administration' (The Syrian Observer 2021). This campaign came in response to three barriers long faced by AANES, all of them hinging on the fact AANES is not a state. The first is the region's exclusion from peace talks as well as the UN's Syrian Constitutional Committee. Second, the region's access to aid today depends on routing through Damascus. Although the UN delivered cross-border aid into both the north-east and north-west without Damascus' approval between 2014 and 2019, this was curtailed in 2019 due to Russian vetoes in the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC block has since also attracted the

support of China, both of whom argue that direct delivery of aid threatens Syrian sovereignty (Rojava Information Center [@RojavaIC] 2019; Gowan, Khalifa, and Pradhan 2022). Finally, AANES has faced significant difficulty in repatriating thousands of foreign former members of IS captured and held in prisons in the region. Both requests for repatriation, and to establish an international tribunal to try these fighters, are complicated by other states, who decline to engage with AANES on the basis it is not one: permission for a tribunal would have to flow from Damascus and, meanwhile, requests for repatriation have to be made at the nearest embassy in Iraq (Christou 2021). I highlight this in order to make two points about AANES' complicated relationship with recognition and recognisability, ones that I unpack throughout the rest of this thesis. The first is that AANES' belated campaign to achieve recognition is the result of the near-impossible obstacles faced by polities who attempt to govern without defaulting to statehood. Second, the muted international response to this request for status affirms my argument that recognition would risk endorsing a non-centralist approach to Syria. In the international arenas of aid and law, including the peace process and post-conflict reconstruction, AANES is presently unrecognisable, and this accounts for much of the difficulty it faces. Only Catalonia, a fellow autonomous region, responded to this request and, by order of its parliament, recognised AANES in 2021. What is notable about this is that the resolution specifically recognises the legitimacy of AANES' administration 'based on democratic confederalism' (Medya News 2021c), which I argue uniquely understands the region on its own terms. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, the kind of recognition AANES attracts is generally radically delimited: when it is both recognised and not recognised, its potentiality for statehood is what is at stake.

Unlike other non-states, such as Somaliland, what is distinct and important for the purposes of this thesis is that AANES does not seek recognition on the basis of its meeting or not meeting the criteria for statehood. Even if it does meet some of them, my goal is to show that it more

meaningfully eschews statehood, and its logics, rather than seeking it. Specifically, the AANES discourse deconstructs three cornerstones of statehood. I refer to these three cornerstones as dominant discourses, rather than mere characteristics. In the next chapter I discuss in more detail what I mean by the term dominant discourse, but in brief, I consider these to be concepts that move beyond the formal criteria of the Montevideo Convention and instead widely typify how we imagine statehood. I discuss these in turn, and they form the analytical basis of this thesis. They are centralised authority; liberalism, which I approach by discussing secularism and feminism; and capitalism. I do not argue that most modern nation-states succeed in possessing these characteristics – indeed, the discussion of Turkey's moveable borders offered above should confirm that territorial boundedness is not even a fixed reality for nation-states, either historically or in the contemporary period, for example in light of the recent expansionist movements made by other powerful actors such as Russia. Rather, I discuss these traits as hegemonic discourses about the state, which help hold this signifier together by investing it with, in the words of Stavrakakis (2007, 42), 'imaginary – fantasmatic – coherence and unity.' As Phillips (2020, 171) writes in the case of Somaliland, neo-Weberian statehood is best understood as a 'fiction', albeit a fiction with political impacts. Alternately, these can be considered norms, deemed to be characteristic of the 'good' actors in the international system.[7]

The epistemology of the state

The centralisation of authority

The first key factor that I consider to be taken for granted in the dominant imagining of statehood – whether achieved in practice or not, and eschewed in AANES – is absolute

[7] I make this clarification to point out that I do not use the word norm as if norms are neutral, or necessarily 'good', things (Epstein 2008; 2017). Rather, I use it to refer to the powerful discourses and the results of the normalisation processes that guide our understandings of what is considered 'good' versus dysfunctional behaviour in the international system, particularly as it pertains to the discussions of liberalism and the governance of the economy that follow below.

sovereignty, that is, the imbuing of authority to a unitary actor, whose authority rests upon a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Jackson (1991) identifies sovereignty as possessing two key dimensions, both negative and positive. Negative sovereignty he describes as freedom from external interference, intervention or aggression. Positive sovereignty, on the other hand, is more active, and requires a polity with the 'wherewithal to provide political goods for its citizens' (Jackson 1991, 29). This includes strengthening rational-legal institutions, or other self-directed efforts to promote peace and order, including initiating disarmament programmes (Piiparinen 2016). Meanwhile, Krasner understands the term as having been deployed in four different ways, referring to international-legal sovereignty (in other words, recognition); Westphalian sovereignty (referring to the authority to prohibit intervention over the domestic authority structures within a territory); domestic sovereignty, which refers to the structures within a state and the ability to exercise control and regulate behaviour inside borders; and finally, interdependence sovereignty, which refers to the ability to control the flow of 'information, ideas, goods, people, pollutants or capital' across borders (Krasner 1999, 4). As with the definition of statehood offered above, states rarely enjoy the fullest expression of these forms of sovereignty, both historically and in the modern day. To provide only a few examples, the globalisation of the past few decades has yielded an 'erosion' of sovereignty, having made it impossible to entirely regulate the flow of goods, people, finance, and especially diseases across territorial boundaries (Krasner 1999, 11; 2001; W. Brown 2010). Foreign interventions are routinely made into offending states under the mantle of enforcing global human rights (Graf 2021), in particular in the Responsibility to Protect era. "Fragile" and "failed" states are frequently exposed to state-building interventions (Phillips 2020; Woodward et al. 2013; Dodge 2013; Richmond 2014; Berdal 2019; Coyne 2006).

Although approached in myriad ways, at its heart, the dominant modern understanding of sovereignty captures the notion that a territory is governed against both internal and external

threats by an ultimate authority. The source of this authority is traditionally understood to reside in the maintenance of a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Max Weber's famous definition of a state as a 'human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence within a particular territory' was ventured in 1918 (M. Weber 2004, 33). In 'Politics as a Vocation', Weber contrasts this definition against the incomplete power of kings under feudalism, who devolved their power to vassals that enjoyed relative autonomy, as well as sharing it with the church. As Perry Anderson (1974) demonstrates in his book *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 'absolutist states' – those with a monopoly over the legitimate use of force – grew out of this Western European feudal state, replacing their 'parcelized sovereignty' with increasingly centralised and concentrated forms of power. As Epstein (2021, 3) notes, medieval rule is distinct from the state form in this way because the former features multiple forms of overlapping authority, including political, civil, religious, and corporate. Centralisation of authority has multiple dimensions, including cultural-linguistic, administrative, and sometimes economic (Scott 1998). But I argue that their underlying basis is the removal of the ability to coerce from all but one actor, that is, the state. As Anthony Giddens writes:

> a sovereign state is a political organisation *that has the capacity, within a delimited territory of territories, to make laws and effectively sanction their up-keep; exert a monopoly over the disposal of the means of violence*; control basic policies relating to the internal political or administrative form of government; and dispose of the fruits of a national economy that are the basis of its revenue (1985, 282, emphasis added).

This form of sovereignty is, again, a historically and geographically situated one. The possession of a monopoly over the legitimate use of force is a recent phenomenon, not even achieved in Europe until approximately the nineteenth century (Thomson 1996; Risse 2011, 6). It is also acknowledged as not having been achieved in many modern contexts (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013; Strazzari 2016, 61; Risse and Ropp 2013, 18). But it is an ideal, or prescription, embedded throughout the earliest history of theorising about the state. Thomas

Hobbes' germinal political treatise, *Leviathan*, proposed that the solution to the internecine violence of the seventeenth century was the formation of a Commonwealth, with individuals sacrificing their right to certain liberties in the state of nature – including the right to enact violence as private persons – in exchange for the order provided by law. The sovereign, as a consequence, is the only one that can enact violence legitimately, and indeed must do so, as coercion is at the heart of the state's ongoing legitimacy, and is its pre-requisite. As Hobbes writes, any covenant 'without the sword, are but words and of no strength' (Hobbes 1994, 106). Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* (2019) also highlights the fundamental association between executive violence and the possibility of political order.

As I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, this understanding of sovereignty – built on the maintenance of a monopoly over the legitimate use of force – is unravelled in AANES. As I discuss in Chapter 4, the resistance towards establishing an internal monopoly over the legitimate use of force is counter-intuitively seen as a means of maintaining peace. Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter 5, AANES' discourse on foreign fighters, which not only understands YPG volunteers as a welcome force in the region, but speaks of them through the vocabulary of comradeship and internationalism, challenges the nation-states system's preoccupation with regulating its borders, and ensuring that states be the only actors empowered to legitimately enact violence in the international system. As I demonstrate in this chapter, even those understandings of sovereignty that do not construe the monopoly over force to be at its heart – such as popular sovereignty – set up regimes of citizenship (Jackson 2007, 89). Citizenship sets disciplinary regulations around where an individual can vest their loyalty, and resultingly also places the ultimate decision about whom can legitimately enact violence into the hands of the state.

Liberalism

The second factor that I consider to be vital to the modern imagining of the state is liberalism. The states that have dominated in the international system this century have enshrined a world order based on the rule of law and other 'progressive' principles (Ikenberry 2012). It is outside the remit of this thesis to discuss all the tenets of this large body of thought. Instead, I limit my focus in this chapter only to discussion of the logics of liberalism, with a focus on secularism, and how they sit at the heart of statist discourse.

Although today embedded within liberalism, secularism's origins are again traceable to early thinkers on the state and sovereignty such as Hobbes. His particular prescription for a strong sovereign with maximum power also entailed that that power be earthly. This direction was borne of a context in which the state form, designed using scientific, positivist or rational principles – the result of intense interest in applying the insights of natural sciences to political philosophy which characterised the theoretical output of this period – was prescribed to replace the divine right of kings. In the words of Saba Mahmood (2015, 21), 'secularism temporalises divine power, makes its transcendental claims immanent and worldly.' Part of the state's solution to quelling the sectarian conflicts of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was to found liberal secularism, and with it the modern subject, who 'has to subordinate fealty to his religion, locale and clan to loyalty to the nation state' (Mahmood 2015, 12). I do not define secularism to simply mean the division of religious issues from the state, but more broadly the relegation of religion 'to its own differentiated sphere' (Mahmood 2005, 48), confined to the private. Talal Asad notes that it was not only Hobbes who postulated secularism as a means to form a strong state power that could pacify sectarianism. Rather, the prescription continued throughout the seventeenth century, with Locke's 'famous argument for religious toleration … similarly motivated by a concern for the integrity and power of the state' (1993, 206). In exchange for this subordination, the modern subject gains formal equality in the eyes of the law, and their rights are enforced by and through the state regardless not only of religion,

but also of race, class, or gender. The subject of these rights, and the subject of freedom, was the individual, a figure invented in this time-frame (Epstein 2021, 130); as such, individualism forms a cornerstone of the liberal discourse, and the individual is co-extensive with the state form. The state's ability to finish 'becoming', according to Bartelson, in his discussion of Hegel, hinges on the marking off of the state from civil society, with the former being separated from and elevated above the latter as a source of authority (Bartelson 2001, 41–42). With religion firmly embedded in the sphere of civil society, secular liberalism and the construction of the state entail one another.

Scholars furthermore point to how the history of not only Western, but specifically Christian, state development made secularism possible. In 1922, Carl Schmitt published his *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (2010), and observed that the function of secularisation is to strip the latent theological qualities out of the modern state. Martel (2012, 7), meanwhile, shows that 'the secular form of political sovereignty reflects and interacts with earlier Christian notions of temporality and order.' Historically, Mahmood (2015, 12) points out that Christian subjects of Islamic empires embraced the 'liberatory promise of political and civil equality' as a means of exiting the unequal treatment they were experiencing. Graf (2021, 18), meanwhile, highlights how 'transnational Christian solidarity animated European interventions into the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century.' As I discuss below, one dimension of these interventions was to promote secularism – as a replacement for Islamic law, which held Muslims and non-Muslims as unequal – through the nation-state model.

Although the origins of secular liberalism are deeply embedded in historical context, today it is readily considered a universal value and desirable quality for a modern polity to possess (Mahmood 2015, 13; Graf 2021). Critical secularism scholar Kemerli (2021, 978) speaks to its normative power, linked to the power of the state:

> …the institutional separation of religious and political spheres does not necessarily imply state neutrality and autonomous growth of religious subjectivities in the safe space generated by toleration. Rather than a simple separation, … secular rule in fact entails a persistent regulation of religion, involving recurrent renegotiations of how and where to draw the line that is supposed to separate religion from politics. The ultimate goal is to make religion compatible with state prerogatives while also rendering specific types of religious subjectivities as normative.

AANES offers explicit critiques of secular liberalism and its ties to statist discourse. As I discuss in Chapter 6, AANES' discourse characterises secular liberalism as a latently religious technology of the state, but one disguised in the seeming rationality of the rule of law and the demand that subjects adopt and defend a secular national identity. AANES' alternate approach to supplying rights to religious – and other – minorities comes about through plural, not singular, identity, and the defence and upholding of minorities' freedoms on the local level, rather than through reliance on the state and its laws. I argue that female and feminist AANES writers in particular make sharp critiques of liberalism along the same lines of the discussion of secular liberalism above, with a particular emphasis on liberalism's individualist and positivist epistemologies. Chapter 6 therefore also explores how jineology rejects the role of liberal statist discourse when addressing how to promote the rights of women.

Capitalism

The third key aspect of statist realism that I contend is eschewed in AANES is capitalism, and its modern instantiation, neoliberalism. The twin forces of the state and capital are impossible to dis-embed. Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (1944) provides a rigorous account of their mutual rise, and their interdependency. Polanyi describes how the eighteenth century enclosure movement, enacted through the Enclosure Acts, ended the relationship with the land that had characterised the medieval era. Across England, land that had previously been cultivated in common was closed off, and those who typically would have relied on it to survive were forced to turn to buying these necessities

on the market. Land, labour and money became commodities, that is, things to be bought and sold per market dictates. The invention of the market necessitated a state, which could command commerce, employment and finance, through methods like supplying credit and stabilising a currency. States furthermore played a key role in nationalising markets, replacing local markets. Polanyi (1944, 68) writes that:

> By maintaining the principle of a non-competitive local trade and an equally noncompetitive long-distance trade carried on from town to town, the burgesses hampered by all means at their disposal the inclusion of the countryside into the compass of trade and the opening up of indiscriminate trade between the towns of the country. It was this development which forced the territorial state to the fore as the instrument of the "nationalization" of the market and the creator of internal commerce.

Subsequent to this, mercantilist statecraft marshalled 'the resources of the whole national territory for the purposes of power in foreign affairs,' with capital playing the role of unifying into countries those territories that had been formerly 'atomised by feudal and municipal particularism' (Polanyi 1944, 69). In the words of Polanyi (1944, 69), 'the centralised state was a new creation called forth by the Commercial Revolution.' Arrighi (2010, 12) also identifies how important and unique this 'fusion of state and capital' was in Europe, where one virtually entailed to the other (see also Perelman 2000, 252; Wood 2002; Tilly 1992). Anderson (1974, 23–24) writes, regarding this 'double determination' of the state with capital in Western Europe: 'the threat of peasant unrest, unspokenly constitutive of the Absolutist State, was thus always conjoined with the pressure of mercantile or manufacturing capital within the Western economies as a whole.'

The relationship between the state and capital shifted post-World War II, with the commencement of the era of embedded liberalism and the rise of the liberal democratic state form (Ruggie 1982). Nevertheless, the state retained its role in embedding the market in social relations, sometimes restraining it. In this period, the state's role was to 'focus on full employment, economic growth, and the welfare of … citizens' (Harvey 2007, 11). This

dynamic shifted in the following decades, with the commencement of the neoliberal era, which sought to disembed itself from state constraints. Neoliberalism emphasises the free market (via trade and financial liberalisation) and privatisation (of enterprise and enforcement of private property). Even within this epoch the state maintains a role for bolstering capitalism. In the words of Milton Friedman (1982, 34), even the most delimited definition includes a state that:

> maintained law and order, defined property rights, served as a means whereby we could modify property rights and other rules of the economic game, adjudicated disputes about the interpretation of the rules, enforced contracts, promoted competition, provided a monetary framework, engaged in activities to counter technical monopolies and to overcome neighborhood effects widely regarded as sufficiently important to justify government intervention, and … supplemented private charity and the private family in protecting the irresponsible, whether madman or child.

By contrast, other authors have noted that the state and capital remained closely wedded during this time (L. Weiss 1998; Wade 2003). However, this thesis is not focused on unpicking in any great detail the different epochs of capitalism. Rather, my goal is to identify its key logics, which recur regardless of the evolution of the state form. Namely, statist realism takes markets to be central, and prioritises the market over other kinds of relations. Where markets do not exist, states make them, privatising and commodifying new fields in the name of capital accumulation. Connected to this is the primacy of the freedom of market exchange, including in trade and finance. Second, statist realism centres the endurance of a regime of private property, with this property owned by individuals rather than collectives (see Epstein 2021, 36). Chapter 7 explores how AANES eschews these statist-capitalist modes of relating to the economy and the environment. As I demonstrate, this includes an eschewal of the logics of capital accumulation and market primacy; and resistance to the commodification of land and labour, specifically through a return to local markets, and refusal of extractivist and individualistic relationships with how land is used, exploited and managed.

I dismantle the logics of these three key components of statist realism in subsequent chapters, using the discourses of the AANES as a source of resistance. I turn in the following sections

of this chapter to discussion of critical theories of the state, and situate the contribution of this thesis inside of them.

Critiques of the state

International Relations has long been noted as a state-centric discipline. Its founding claim is that there is a clear division and distinction between the domestic and the international, with the 'inside' forming an orderly realm held together by sovereignty (Walker 1993; Agnew 1994). Meanwhile, the 'outside', or the international, is a realm in which this sovereignty is absent, and therefore disorder and danger – in other words, anarchy – are rife. Ashley (1988) terms this the anarchy problematique, and demonstrates that it sets up a false binary between the presence of sovereignty and its absence, anarchy. Despite decades of scholarship that seeks to challenge this paradigm, Jens Bartelson's *The Critique of the State* (2001) unpacks how state-centrism endures inside the discipline. As Bartelson (2001) argues, the state recurs in political discourse despite the fact that 'the state' is ambiguous, unstable and highly contested; furthermore, its very ambiguity, instability and contentiousness are what cause us to see it everywhere. He coins the term 'statist discourse', which I adopt throughout this work, which refers to a tendency to presume the presence of the state, or to use it to organise other concepts. Inside of International Relations, Bartelson (2001) argues that the state concept has become constitutive of the field, in its quest for a disciplinary identity; because the state functions as a source of coherence that defines the domain of political science, he argues that it is difficult to politicise new concepts without recourse to it. This is an important critique that I bring to bear throughout this thesis, which, as I delineate further in the next chapter, occasionally uses political science scholarship itself as examples, or containers, of statist discourse. This thesis is one more contribution to the body of scholarship that seeks to move beyond 'statist intellectual predispositions' (Bartelson 2001, 2) and works to 'destabilise the state as a unit of analysis' (Vucetic 2017, 12; see also T. C. Brown 2022 on denaturalising the state). Two bodies

of work are important for further highlighting the contingency of the state, to which this thesis contributes. The first is acknowledging the historical situatedness of the state form, and the second is understanding how it has been exported across the globe, especially via the construction of racial hierarchies. I discuss these next.

Origins of the state form

Critical scholarship on the state is also important for the way it questions the links we perceive between the necessity of the state and the possibility of order (Bartelson 2001, 138). Both Bartelson's *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (1995) and Hendrik Spruyt's *The Sovereign State and its Competitors* (1994) achieve this by historicising the emergence of the state system. They demonstrate that the unique state form, which weds unitary, centralised sovereignty closely to a state – relatively uncontested today – has its origins in Western Europe in the seventeenth century. Scholars who locate the origins of this particular state form in the influential texts of this period, such as Hobbes' *Leviathan*, identify that this solution was designed especially to avert conflict, as noted above (Epstein 2021, 41). In this context, the raison d'être of this particular state was to supply security; in its absence, then, what could only exist was the persistent threat of violence. These origins have inflected subsequent imagining about the state, setting up the sovereignty-anarchy false binary that I discussed above. In his discussion of the work of Walter Benjamin, Martel (2012, 135) also highlights the way that sovereignty offers a (false) choice between these two things. I note throughout this thesis my agreement with Martel's argument: namely, that what animates much of the cleavage towards statism in the international system currently – beyond its imbrication with capital – is the fear that persists of its alternative, anarchy. As Martel (2012, 133) writes, this particular view understands anarchy in its most rudimentary form, narrowly conceived, as a caricature: 'wild, dog-eat dog "Lord of the Flies" style of anti-politics … [that is] a pure projection of liberal capitalism.' Martel instead proposes a turn to a form of anarchism drawn from Walter Benjamin: this is an understanding

that does not interpret anarchy as an absence, but rather a presence, of a politics that is local and multiple, and 'goes on even under the shadow of sovereign authority' (Martel 2012, 131). I highlight the many ways that AANES captures this form of anarchy throughout this thesis.

Exportation of the state form

That the state system as it exists currently coalesced as the result of political contention and the outcome of a power struggle also necessitates a discussion of the role played by imperialism in exporting this model across the globe. As argued by Amy Niang (2018, 4), narratives around the superiority of the nation-state system 'reduce history to an ingratiating account that casts a presumed superior identity (the Western state) over inferior domestic ones (for instance, Spruyt's Hanzas) or those of supposed barbarians and "uncouth singletons" in Africa, the New World and elsewhere.' Indeed, much of the history of the proliferation of the state model outside of Western Europe relied on stigmatising non-Western actors, often by drawing upon ideas of racial backwardness. Ayşe Zarakol's *After Defeat* (2010b), for example, provides an account of how the collapsing Ottoman Empire – which was, with its unfinalised and ever-expanding borders and lack of centralised governance, far more heterogeneous than a state (Spruyt 2020) – was forced to meet certain standards of civilisation in order to cast off its inferiority and putative backwardness in the international system. What is notable about this example, alongside the others she utilises – Japan after World War II and Russia after the Cold War – is that this stigmatisation process, and the pathway away from 'othering', involved entry into the state system and the adoption of statist modes. In the case of Turkey, this included the importation of Western (Swiss, French and Italian) law (Kirişci 2000); forming a secular republic; fixing its borders (Cizre 2001, 233); centralising administration and language; and mounting other attempts to secure a single national and sometimes ethnic identity out of what had previously been a 'polyethnic and multireligious' territory (Canefe 2002, 149). Today, the extent of Turkish investment in, and internalisation of, the hegemony of the nation-state model

is reflected in the vigour with which it has opposed AANES, discussed in Chapter 1, a vigour that it has not always reserved for other Kurdish governments, such as the far more moderate autonomous Kurdish government in northern Iraq.

Access to legitimacy in the international system is still tied up with the adoption of governing and cultural practices exported from Western Europe, that is, statist practices. In the twenty-first century this often entails the exportation of the modern neoliberal state form that I canvassed briefly above. David Harvey (2007, 6–7) discusses, for example, the forced establishment of a state apparatus capable of transforming Iraq into a neoliberal state when, in 2003, the Bush administration ordered that all areas of the Iraqi economy (barring oil) be fully privatised, the country opened to foreign control of banks and firms, and all barriers to trade removed (see also Klein 2008, Chapters 16–18). He also explores the military pressure placed on Saudi Arabia by the United States while the oil crisis of 1973 raged, which induced them to 'recycle their petrodollars through … New York investment banks' (Harvey 2007, 27). What this process looks like in the contemporary period may be also termed 'good governance.' As highlighted by Risse (2011, 8), the Western nation-state form is considered the model of good governance, which is a governance paradigm – a set of institutional and economic prescriptions – coercively exported to regions of the globe deemed failed, pathological, corrupt, or backwards (Gruffydd Jones 2013). This takes on more or less consensual forms. Phillips (2020), for example, highlights how Somaliland has willingly adopted "good governance" practices in order to make international appeals for sovereignty. Acknowledging the role played by imperialism and neo-imperialism in helping extend the reach of the hegemonic state form across the globe further helps to point towards its contingency, that is, that there may in fact be alternatives.

The endurance of de facto states

World politics and the study of it have not failed to account for non-state actors, or to acknowledge areas where statehood is incomplete, and governance is hybrid or shared. A prime example comes by way of the literature on de facto states. This widens the remit of International Relations to consider a variety of non-state actors as equally important, specifically polities that control territory and supply governance, but lack juridical recognition (Pegg 1998; Klich 2021). These kinds of polities are also termed unrecognised states (Caspersen 2012; 2015), contested states, quasi-states, informal states or pseudo-states. Generally secessionist in origin (Pegg 1998), de facto states were originally theorised as passing phenomena in the state system, on their way towards statehood. However, scholars such as Klich (2021) and de Waal (2018) have observed that they have proven to be surprisingly durable. This is a phenomenon that both challenges the view of sovereignty as indivisible and absolute, and challenges the teleology of this assumed passage from statelessness to statehood. That is, it is possibly puzzling that these de facto states have not resolved (back) into formal states. Instead, a norm against secession appears to have coalesced in the modern international system, as states work to prevent de facto states or self-declared states from achieving recognition (Ker-Lindsay 2012). Following a wave of new state formation throughout the late twentieth century (Fazal and Griffiths 2008), only four states have achieved recognition in the twenty-first century so far.

De facto states may be durable, then, simply because those who seek international recognition are routinely denied it, even if they meet all other criteria. The incentives for discouraging secession may lay in the belief that it possesses a unique ability to foment violence – as Ryan Griffiths establishes, 'secession has been the motivating force behind roughly half of the civil wars since 1945. I estimated that there has been an average of fifteen secessionist conflicts per year since the end of World War II, and Barbara Walter has argued that secessionism is the "chief source of violence in the world today"' (Griffiths 2021, 2; see also Walter 2009). Secessionist and separatist movements are also frequently characterised as having the potential

to lead to further and further fragmentation, as states break off of larger ones, potentially ad infinitum (Walter 2006). Ayres and Saideman (2000, 91) describe separatism as 'as contagious as the common cold.' That secession enjoys such little popularity in the modern state system, I argue, is connected with the very same fears of anarchy, uncertainty and illegibility that propel the attempts to vitiate non- and anti-state alternatives which are discussed throughout this thesis.

In light of this hindered pathway towards statehood, de facto states literature largely turns its focus to understanding how governance can occur under conditions of 'limited statehood' (Risse 2011). Alternately, the focus is on how they vie for recognition. This work can often leave unexamined the assumption that international recognition of the state and its institutions are always sought. In other words, de facto states are generally defined as having a demonstrated desire for independence, whether this be seeking international recognition as a state, or consciously building state institutions (Richards and Smith 2015; Caspersen 2012, 6; Bobick 2017). Indeed, this 'non-recognition' dynamic holds for the case studies that are popular in this literature, such as Nagorno Karabakh, Somaliland and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) (Klich 2021; Caspersen 2012; Voller 2014; 2015). It is possibly tempting to consider AANES as yet one more example of a de facto state, following the lead of its neighbouring Iraqi Kurdistan, which is also majority Kurdish and has more than once decisively voted in favour of secession (Middle East Eye 2017). In other words, KRI is a statist de facto state, with statist logics. But the difference between these two regions is stark: although Iraqi Kurdistan is not a state, it is a de facto state because it seeks recognition using established strategies of legitimation; it possesses centralised governance structures; and it maintains economic policies

that cause it to resemble a traditional petro-state (K. Palani 2022; Mallinder 2020; Güneser 2015).[8]

As I discuss throughout this thesis, in AANES, the treatment of governance and the economy are instead carefully enacted through non-state principles and thinking. The AANES study represents a case where seeking recognition of the region as a state, or the building of state institutions, has been rejected. I challenge this dominant paradigm in the de facto states literature and further argue that, where the tendency to vie for recognition appears, it is not because the state form is a neutral or normal way of promoting order, but rather the only means left available to act. Therefore, these are processes driven by power relations. In other words, work that focuses on secessionist actors does not always account for the forces that drive them to seek secession, which may be the sole means available for exercising sovereignty or exerting independence in the international system. As I demonstrate in this thesis, where AANES has demonstrated federalising or state-like tendencies, it has done so in response to international pressures. Furthermore, discarding the notion that recognition-seeking is a neutral or natural desire that non-state polities must possess opens space to demonstrate what the act of recognition as a state does to the subject being recognised as such.

Recognition and misinterpellation

The definition of statehood offered above sometimes veers towards the essentialist. That is, I draw my account of the basic ontology of the state from theorists who propose that the state possesses some pre-social, rather than socially constructed, intrinsic qualities. Wendt, who offered the definition of the 'essential state' above, identifies some, but not all, elements of the state as pre-social. He distinguishes between a state's corporate identity (the bodies and territory that comprise it) and its social identity (Wendt 1999, 225). As suggested above, my

[8] Havin Güneser (2021, 114) also characterises it as a 'province shared by Turkey and Iran', that is, that although it is not itself a state, it is a tool of other states, and thus tied up with stateness in this way.

goal in offering such a definition, and therefore ostensibly stabilising an ontology of the state, is to identify what meanings are prevailingly or dominantly associated with the term, rather than to confirm that states have essences as such. In other words, I am not conceiving of the state as transcendental, but rather engaging with how it is made to appear this way. This is consistent with a discursive approach, which seeks to demonstrate how a single understanding can come to dominate a particular issue area. In identifying what is meant by the term 'state' in the majority of the instances of its usage, my goal is to further highlight that there are in fact non- and anti-state actors in the international system: that is, those who represent themselves, and act, in explicit departure of this discourse and the practices it implies. Nevertheless, the longevity of these actors is limited, because they are persuaded to act more state-like because of international pressures, or they get 'recognised' as state actors. This recognition, I argue, has political effects, namely the ability to re-shape that which is being described. Rather than recognising what is inherently there, I theorise the moment of recognition as potentially violent, when it is contrary to the self-identity of the subject being seen and therefore forcefully interpellated into the subject-position of statehood.

These two processes rely on a post-structuralist approach to statehood. That is, I agree with proponents of a constitutive theory of statehood, which espouses that a state is constituted by other states recognising it as such (Lindemann and Ringmar 2015) – this is an inter-subjective, or relational, definition, rather than an essentialist one. In other words, the process of recognition does not only see what is already 'there', but rather causes it to become so. This thesis proposes this process as one that can be disciplinary and foreclose alternatives to statehood. As Ringmar (2014) has established, recognition relies on degrees of othering – acts of recognition from one state to another help affirm sameness, while acts of non-recognition help establish difference and enshrine hierarchy (for example, of non-Europeans). The process of recognition itself, however, can be considered – as I do – a form of interpellation. Drawing

on Althusser, post-structuralists have defined interpellation as a process of subject formation, whereby language constructs a social position for the subject (Jorgensen and Phillips 2000, 15). In the absence of being called, drawn, or 'hailed' into this position, the subject does not exist (Milliken 1999, 239; see also Althusser 2001). This process could also be considered in Judith Butler's terms as subjectivation: the means by which identity is formed, and which produces the subject by supplying the conditions of possibility both for their agency and their subordination (Butler 1993): that is, both the ways the subject can act, but also the ways it cannot. Recognition, in other words, makes subjects, including making that which was not a state before into a state. This process bears some similarity to what Wendt defined in 1992 as 'altercasting', which involves one trying to induce another to take on a new identity by treating them as if they already had that identity (1992, 421). This is a less contentious phenomenon in situations wherein that recognition is desired, or, in other words, when that recognition coheres with the identity being articulated by the subject that is hailed as a state. As Weldes (1999, 104–5) notes in her account of interpellation, representations are most successful at hailing the subject, or drawing it into a particular subject-position, when they accord with the self-understanding of the subject in question. In other words, recognition as interpellation may be more consensual when it helps make sense of what is already there. In many cases – such as in the examples of de facto states discussed above – recognition may be welcomed. Indeed, much of the literature around recognition construes it as a right, rather than a form of discipline, with discussions often surrounding which non-state subject deserves it, or has earned it (Erman 2013; Ker-Lindsay 2012; Griffiths 2021). On the other hand, understanding recognition from a disciplinary perspective, as a form of subjectivation, highlights the processes of power at play in this and other cases: as long as the state is the subject-position that is maximally empowered, and maximally recognisable, in the international system, being drawn into stateness involves being drawn into a disciplinary paradigm.

This thesis argues that when this process is applied to a polity that does not seek to be interpellated as a state, that this recognition acts as another means of eliminating difference – namely, radical alternatives to the state system – from the international system. As Ringmar identifies, the question of recognition 'presupposes recognisability' (Ringmar 2016, 104), which is suggestive of its ability to erase unrecognisable forms of difference. The interpellation of AANES into statehood, despite its calls *not* to be recognised as such, does, as I argue, draw it into this subject-position, but not with wholly empowering effects. This could represent a form of 'misinterpellation', a concept theorised by James Martel, who argues that colonised peoples can answer calls – for example, for rights – not meant for them, and step into a space of agency and exert resistance (Martel 2017). I argue that the reverse can also be true: that a polity can be misinterpellated into the category of a state and, although they may be able to access agency as a result, this misinterpellation can also function to erase resistance.

What is also vital to my account of how nation-states have interpellated AANES into the subject-position of statehood is the way that states make states in their own image. As discussed, my account of statehood is constitutive and it is assumed that statehood is brought about through interactions between self and other, that is, relational processes of drawing similarities and differences. Recognition often implies the self recognising something similar to itself. In *Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Tzvetan Todorov (1984, 185) states that self/other relationships have three dimensions: axiological (value judgements about the Other); epistemic; and praxeological, involving strategies of rapprochement or distancing (such as 'I embrace the Other's values, I identify myself with him, I identify the Other with myself, I impose my own image upon him'). This thesis discusses the way that other nation-states relate to AANES by seeing themselves in its practices, helping to craft it as a state in states' own image. As I have outlined already in Chapter 1, states see other states everywhere. The subsequent chapters of this thesis address this contention with more granularity. I show

that the way that AANES manages religious difference and the violence it can sow, for example, is often assumed to reflect the nation-states' model of secularism. Its vision of women's liberation, meanwhile, is voided of any anti-statist content, and represented as a reskinned version of liberal feminism.

Stateness vs statehood

Throughout this chapter I have identified that we live in a system of self-preserving nation-states and that these nation-states exert power in the international system in order to minimise difference: non-state entities are discouraged from forming or surviving, and the nation-states model has been exported across the globe, sometimes at the point of a gun. Although secession is relatively unpopular, there is a relatively stable cohort of de facto states, who nevertheless seek statehood, and have their identity structured by their quest to be recognised as such. Meanwhile, I have highlighted the many fictions of statehood, pointing to its unstable ontology and apocryphal qualities. In this section I propose the idea of stateness in order to begin to draw these threads together.

First, I prefer the term stateness over statehood in order to make clear this thesis' specifically post-structuralist contribution to the phenomenon I am discussing, which could be, at some junctures, simply termed imperialism. For example, the above discussion of the coercive exporting of neoliberal forms of capitalism to the Global South, or the coercive efforts to export the nation-states model into the Orient, offers robust but partial insight into the way that the state system prolongs its life. These are certainly examples of historical and modern imperialism, and can and should be understood as such. But my focus extends beyond only examining the material practices that are so vital for exporting the nation-states model (which is fundamentally imbricated with capitalism). My goal is to point to factors that extend beyond the material, and apply post-structuralist insight to this case study and to our understanding of

this phenomenon. In other words, I highlight the role that constitutivity plays, a term I unpack further in Chapter 3. What a focus on constitutivity helps demonstrate is that the representations applied to these actors are what have made these practices possible. For example, it is the representation of Iraq as dysfunctional and fractured that was concomitant with the overhaul of its economy. Alternately, the representation of the Ottoman Empire as uncivilised and dysfunctional, again, points to the role of discursive power in inducing its movement towards building state-like structures. My goal, then, is not simply to address all the 'real' ways that statehood is being built in AANES – as I will point to throughout this thesis, AANES' relationship with the monopoly on violence has altered in real-time, as have its governance institutions, and economy. Instead, it is the representations applied to and demanded of AANES that do this work of transformation, fundamentally re-casting its identity, or the subject-position from which it can act, which is what gives meaning to these practices.

In arguing that the state is not built out of material interventions alone, nor persists by material practices alone, I prefer the term stateness over statehood because it captures the performative dimension of what it means to 'be' a state. This is an argument well-expressed by Cynthia Weber, who writes that 'sovereign nation-states are not pre-given subjects but subjects in process and that all subjects in process … are the ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted' (C. Weber 1998, 78). Like Cynthia Weber, I use the term performative to refer to Judith Butler's envisioning of it as discursive practices that enact or produce the subject (Butler 1993, 13). Zarakol points to the way that states perform such actions in order to stabilise identities, and 'underwrite their notions of "who they are"' (Zarakol 2010a, 3). Meanwhile, both James C. Scott and Veena Das have highlighted the way that the legitimacy of the state as such is secured by these performances, which rise to the level of spectacle. To Scott, the public mass exercises – the coordinated movement of thousands of bodies in public – of the Russian Empire were a spectacle designed to affirm that only a single centralised

planning authority could execute such a display (Scott 1998, 156). Das agrees with Scott when she affirms that 'what remains critical to the construction of *stateness* for him are spectacles, political rhetoric, as well as the pertinence of the law, of public legal processes and so on' (Das 2006, 180, emphasis added). Hansen (2001, 130) also opts for the term stateness over statehood: he writes that 'public and performative dimensions of governance and sovereignty remain critical to the construction of "stateness" – spectacles, political rhetoric, symbols.' Where statehood locates power with a sovereign, stateness reflects the post-structuralist understanding of biopower, that sees the power of the state enacted through the disciplining of people, bodies, and their everyday encounters with things like buildings, signs, or checkpoints.[9]

Furthermore, Butler identifies performativity as a normative force, which has the power to establish what qualifies as 'being', 'not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. … Those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic' (Butler 1993, 188). Butler in this quotation is discussing bodies, but this insight can equally be applied to the international system: what is not performed, or not permitted to be performed, becomes foreclosed. This thesis is equally concerned with the performances of stateness that AANES is drawn into as well as the exclusions that make acting as anything other than a state – at least in a way that can be easily 'seen' or recognised by the international system, inside the discursive context of statist realism – impossible.

I also use the term stateness over statehood to emphasise that the state is not a thing that is 'there'. What lays at the heart of the need for these performances is both lack and anxiety, driven by the fact that all of these attempts to assert the presence of the state betray its

[9] See for example Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of symbolic violence, which he contends is another form of violence monopolised by the state in addition to physical violence. This kind of violence, he says, incarnates itself through the social (Bourdieu 1994, 3–4).

fundamental absence. In other words, that this process is ultimately not achievable is exactly what drives the performances. Nancy (2007), for example, speaks of sovereignty in these terms, a performance of authority that is always in process, to be completed but never in fact completed. This insight is applied by Doty (1996, 12) in her discussion of how dominant discourses respond to crisis. In being fuelled by this lack and anxiety, she identifies that they tend to accelerate when they are called into question. As I will discuss further in the next chapter, I treat statism as a hegemonic discourse, one which anxiously re-asserts itself in order to mask its fundamental absence. This helps to account for the sheer quantity of (mis)representations of AANES that I identified in the first chapter: the region has been subjected to a deluge of representations that seek to construct it as state-like, the pace of which possibly confirms the extent of AANES' departure from statist discourse. Stateness as a performance fuelled by lack and anxiety is also an important insight for this thesis because it encapsulates the way that the state can be present even in its absence, and explains how both formally recognised states and unrecognised, or yet-to-be-recognised, non-states alike, are pulled into the dynamic of acting-as-if. It ceases to matter that these enactments are never conclusively successful; rather, what matters is the discipline exerted over the subject that is induced to perform stateness. This thesis is thus interested in this very dynamic of how non-states are pulled into the performance of stateness, which does not require state*hood*.

Conclusions

This chapter explored how I will situate the case study of AANES inside the literature on states, statehood and stateness. I first examined how closely AANES currently cleaves to a basic definition of statehood, before highlighting that what is essential is the extent to which the discourses of this region depart from the framework of what I have called 'statist realism'. I have proposed that the key components of statist realism are the centralisation of authority, built on top of the basis of a unitary sovereign who retains a monopoly over the legitimate use

of violence; liberalism; and capitalism. I have highlighted the facets of these three, admittedly large, bodies of thought, that I see as being deconstructed by AANES' discourses. I outline in more detail what I mean by 'AANES discourses' in the next chapter.

This chapter also discussed critical theorisation about the state, which makes important interventions that identify how this state form has become hegemonic. I have argued that these statist realist logics have a common origin, which lay in seventeenth century Western Europe, where dominant thinking of the day saw that peace and order could only be secured by the emergence of a particular kind of sovereign state, in whose absence emerged the threat of anarchy. I also examined how this hegemonic state form has persisted and extended its power across the globe through imperialism and neo-imperialism, in order to show that alternatives have been vitiated through specific processes of power.

Finally, the second half of the chapter introduced the explicitly post-structuralist contribution that this thesis makes to understanding the persistence of the state form, not only through blunt imperialism, but through the discursive and interpellative processes that license it. In discussing the literature on de facto states, I introduced the importance of the idea of recognition, and identified that sometimes state-centric logics can re-assert themselves when this topic is discussed. Although acknowledging that situations of incomplete sovereignty may be lasting, I have argued that what is nevertheless often taken as central in this work is the assumption that international recognition of the state and its institutions are sought. I have theorised the idea of recognition instead as a dynamic, coercive process, rather than one that is generally consensual, and proposed it as a means of understanding how unrecognisable governance arrangements have stateness demanded or induced from them in order to maintain order in the international system. I expand further on what this post-structuralist approach implies for my methods in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Discourse analysis and discursive artifacts: methods and ethics

Introduction

This thesis makes two key connected arguments. The first is that, despite discursive efforts by state actors that seek to understand AANES as a state-making project, there is a clear pattern of practice and theory produced by participants and ideological adherents of the movement that contest statist discourse. The second is that, at the same time, these discursive efforts are successful: that is, AANES is constituted as a state-making project by the discourses that describe it as a state-making project, both because they make possible activities that render AANES more state-like, and because they reproduce an international system that rewards stateness and state-seeking, while foreclosing alternatives. Both of these arguments hinge on the use of constitutive theory and a post-structuralist approach to discourse. This chapter therefore outlines how I implement post-structuralist discourse analysis, using it to both read the non-state discourse of the AANES, as well as to highlight how these alternatives are foreclosed, co-opted or suppressed when AANES is interpellated into stateness.

As I acknowledge throughout this thesis, generating a non-state account is not without its difficulties given this tense interplay. Uncovering the non-state discourses promulgated by a key segment of actors in AANES therefore requires treating a wide variety of texts and practices as sources of discourse; engagement with majority non-English sources; and analysis that consciously attempts to eschew ethnocentrism, in particular by not centering the state as a master signifier. Instead, I argue that the key AANES texts and practices that I engage with re-articulate key concepts generally articulated alongside or within a discursive formulation that privileges statehood – namely, as I outlined in Chapter 2, the legitimate use of force, the international, secularism, feminism, and the economy – into their own alternative web of signification. Each of these key concepts is unpacked in turn in the following chapters. This

chapter therefore proceeds as follows. First, I discuss my approach, which explains the power of discourse analysis in helping to wrest AANES' self-understandings out from beneath popular understandings – as articulated in official discourse, wider political debate, and cultural representations – and to re-appraise it as a non-state-making project, as well as to understand how this and other similar radical projects are rarely survivable in the international state system. Second, I lay out a method for reading the texts I analyse. Finally, I outline my corpus, which includes a large numbers of texts that I have translated from Turkish into English for the first time.

Constitutive approach to discourse analysis

Following a definition offered by Roxane Doty – one which she identifies in turn as having been influenced by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – I use the term discourse to mean a totality of representations that 'delineates the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular "reality" can be known and acted upon' (Doty 1996, 6). This is a productive or constitutive definition: discourses produce the realities and subjects they define because non- or extra-discursive meaning cannot be accessed. In the words of Stavrakakis (2007, 44) 'events like earthquakes or the falling of a brick certainly exist independently of our will. However, whether their specificity as objects will be constructed in terms of "natural phenomena" or "expressions of the wrath of God" depends upon their discursive articulation.' Discourses are furthermore productive or constitutive because they make intelligible certain ways of understanding, knowing, or being and behaving, while precluding others. In Vucetic's (2011, 1310) terms, discourses produce reality by 'rewarding/punishing actions that are congruent/deviant,' or, in other words, forcing alignment with the dominant meanings ascribed to social phenomena and framing alternatives out of the realm of possibility. To illustrate by way of example, Lene Hansen's (2006) *Security as Practice* argues that the depiction of the Bosnian war as an intractable ethno-nationalist

conflict, an inward-facing dispute waged over Balkan identity, constructed the war as irrelevant to Western security. This then legitimised US non-intervention. This dynamic was also at play in the early stages of the Syrian conflict. US Senator Ted Cruz (2013) argued against intervention in Syria in an opinion piece published in the *Washington Post,* advocating a 'no' vote on a planned intervention that was designed by the Obama administration to respond to chemical attacks alleged to have been committed by Assad. Cruz wrote that the conflict did not threaten 'US national security.' Instead, he called it a 'sectarian civil war', identifying the absence of clear allies and a side to support. The way that the space from which to act in certain ways shrinks and expands in accordance with discourse is central to this thesis, as I attempt to account for how non-state governance models are short-lived in the international system, and how even the most stridently anti-state polities can find themselves with no space from which to act other than through stateness.

Discourses also constitute knowledge, in that they produce our sense of what is correct, common-sense, natural or true. Rather than conceiving of truth, then, post-structuralists conceive of knowledge claims that have acquired the effect of truth, or a truth-effect. In the words of Foucault (1977, 194), 'power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.' The categories (such as knowledge and identities) that discourses produce are therefore not in fact either natural or true, but rather have taken on an *effect* of truth after this process of contestation over meaning is resolved. This process requires the suppression of alternative representations. The construction of truth, although not based on correctness, is therefore not arbitrary either, but rather the result of an (invisible) play of power. Processes of force and violence are at play in 'privileg[ing] specific meanings over others' (van Brussel, Carpentier, and de Cleen 2019, 7). Those discourses that stake a claim to the status of truth can therefore be termed powerful, dominant or hegemonic discourses, which have

undergone a process of stabilisation or naturalisation (Laclau 1990, 28; Milliken 1999, 230), discussed further below.

This thesis further espouses that discourses circulate for the purpose of maintaining and authorising the status of the powerful (Foucault 1977; 1991). For example, postcolonial scholars have shown that discourses that represent brown and black people as inherently 'aberrant, undeveloped and inferior' and Westerners as 'rational, developed, humane, superior' have historically enabled material practices of colonisation that enrich the coloniser, under the guise of civilising or democratising the colonised (Said 1979, 300; see also Lyons 2012; Razack 2007; Sadiki 2004; Kempadoo 1999; Doty 1996). Mohanty (1991) calls this 'discursive colonisation' in the context of colonised populations, but I adopt the more general term 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu 2001). In viewing dominant discourses as ones that have acquired an effect of truth, this thesis holds that dominant discourses generally help to maintain and legitimate such unequal power relationships. The power relations and forms of hegemony that are salient for this thesis are those between the Global North and the Global South; the Kurds and neo-colonial actors in the Middle East, including Turkey; and, in the eyes of adherents of the Rojava revolution, the domination of the nation-states system.

In describing a discourse as a totality, it must be acknowledged, however, that they are rarely totalising. Rather, they are contingent, and their claim to dominance is temporary and partial. Discourses achieve an effect of dominance by organising meaning around a central concept, signifier or 'node'. However, this process of seeking organising centres (or a self, or a presence) is what generates peripheries, absences, and others (Derrida 1998). Therefore, these totalities rarely last, for two reasons. First, because powerful discourses tend to contain contradictions and traces of ambivalence, and therefore contain within them the means of their own unravelling. For example, Bhabha (cited in Kapoor 2002, 651) writes that the colonial subject is constructed as 'savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the

bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar.' These discourses contain so many contradictions that they become difficult to contain, and occasionally rupture – and, in the words of Kapoor (2008, 119), 'the ruptures in discursive power become windows of opportunity.' Second, this stabilisation is temporary because power and resistance entail each other in the Foucauldian view (Foucault 1978, 95 [1978]; Butler 1990, 195). Therefore, discourses can be destabilised by the researcher through paying attention to the alternate articulations, or counter-discourses, which are always being produced by subaltern populations, and suppressed by hegemony. I discuss my method for isolating less hegemonic accounts that emerge from and about AANES below, and emphasise a need to move past mainstream, and in particular Anglophone, sources.

In the words of David Howarth (2000, 130), 'constitutive theory is thus intimately connected to the social reality it describes and interprets, and cannot be falsified by the accounts of reality it facilitates.' Because we cannot access an extra-discursive reality, 'it is discourse itself that has become the object of analysis' (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2000, 21). In endeavouring to study representations of AANES, my goal is not to uncover 'truer' truths (Jorgensen and Phillips 2000, 17) or 'essential truths that have been obscured' (Doty 1996, 5), but rather to explore two things. The first is to isolate discourses on AANES that have taken on the status of 'truth', and demonstrate their imbrication with statist discourse. Second, I do this in order to demonstrate that 'statism' as a dominant discourse makes possible and impossible certain political horizons. This process occurs through naturalisation, interpellation, and foreclosure, which I discuss in turn. As Doty (1996, 10) explains, naturalisation:

> occurs through presupposition, which creates background knowledge that is taken to be true. This background knowledge entails an implicit theorization of how the world works and also an elaboration of the nature of its inhabitants. The North's encounters with the South have been accompanied by such implicit theorisations, however crude they have been.

In the context of this thesis, pieces of knowledge that function as pre-supposed, universal and natural are that, as discussed in Chapter 2, states are the ideal form of polity, are necessary for order and democracy, and/or that non-state entities generally at least seek statehood or desire formal secession. Naturalisation furthermore occurs both via frequent articulation and re-articulation of a discourse, and, according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), via the presence of a privileged, or master, signifier. This is simply any signifier that becomes the structuring centre of a discourse, allowing the regular free flow of association between signifiers to halt, form of a temporarily coherent whole, and allow subsequent meanings to flow from it. In this analysis, I treat the hegemonic idea of 'the state' as one such master signifier, which functions as a privileged and implicit reference point that 'sets limits to our theoretical imagination' (Bartelson 2001, 4), and regularly structures, for example, what it means to be democratic, tolerant of other religions and ethnicities, or to participate in the international.

Inside an international system where statist discourse has staked a claim to truth, non- or anti-state constructions of social and political reality are therefore framed into non-existence by twin processes of interpellation and foreclosure: they are suppressed by representations and activities that seek to deny, in this case, that AANES is anything but a state-making project (as I discuss throughout this thesis, this takes the form of widespread discussion of AANES as a traditionally secessionist project, or the making of international support of the region's survival contingent on, for example, regularising the area's militias to make them more closely resemble standing armies). The opposite side of this coin is the punishment of non-state modes. For example, during the COVID-19 crisis, AANES has been barred access to direct support from the World Health Organization, which prefers to route its assistance through Damascus (Zaman 2020a; Rebrii 2020). Anna Rebrii, reporting on this issue in 2020, wrote that: 'the WHO has been providing all COVID-19 aid to the Syrian government. It refused to supply test kits to the AANES, maintaining that the latter is not a state and therefore cannot be dealt with directly'

(Rebrii 2020). The prioritisation of state entities by international organisations is echoed in the exclusion of the PYD from the Geneva peace talk process – where the group was generally only invited to participate as part of the Syrian state delegation (Candar 2016) – and subsequently from participation in the Syrian Constitutional Process. In the eyes of adherents of the Rojava revolution, the unequal distribution of rewards towards state-like entities and punishment of non-state entities forces alternative political projects to pursue state-like pathways, or perish. In this thesis, I describe the totality of the means by which AANES is produced by discourse as a state-like or state-seeking project through interpellation.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, interpellation is the process by which a discourse makes available a range of subject-positions or identities to actors, who either step into or are drawn into these subjectivities (Weldes 1996, 287). This is another aspect of the productivity of discourse (see Butler 1997, 2), one which produces identities, in this case initiating AANES into stateness. On the other hand, the process of suppression of AANES' alternative identity, one articulated strongly by many adherents to the project, particularly in its early years, I am terming foreclosure. Gayatri Spivak renders a definition of foreclosure borrowed from Lacan, which she defines as an 'expulsion from the subject' (Spivak 1999, 6). For the purposes of this thesis, I define foreclosure to function against interpellation, to refer to subject-positions that are made impossible, in this case the ways of operating politically that arise out of the non-state discourses I engage with in this thesis.

Reading AANES without the state

A second, connected rationale for exploring discourses on AANES is to make a serious attempt to excavate these foreclosed anti- and non-state discourses, which adherents of the movement insist are important and overlooked in mainstream, academic and Western accounts of the Rojava revolution (Dirik 2016c; B. [*sic*] 2016). A few lines of narration from the 2014 *BBC*

Our World documentary 'Rojava: Syria's Secret Revolution' are demonstrative on this point. In it, a leader of TEV-DEM – a coalition of governing parties in AANES now subsumed by the Democratic Nation List – states:

> **Aldar Xelil:** Rojava has an all-encompassing solution. It can be an example to other regions. This is a consensus based, democratic way of life. It could become the way forward for Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon. It is a really advanced form of democracy. But we are part of Syria. We don't want to partition Syria.

The closing lines of narration echo, but also possibly distort, this statement:

> **Narrator:** Some people here believe this revolutionary *mini-state* could be the blueprint for a more tolerant and stable region. But how long can Rojava hold out in the face of such ruthless and determined enemies? (Bozorgnia 2014, emphasis added).

What is lost in the documentary's concluding representation of Xelil's statement is that his prescription is not for Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to become democracies. Indeed, two of these countries are typically characterised as democracies. As I argue throughout this thesis, Xelil is referring to a new type of democratic polity altogether, not to a classical democratic republic. This documentary is but one example of the tendency I highlight throughout this thesis: it later attributes women's freedom of dress in AANES to 'the separation of church and state' and describes AANES as 'the Middle East's newest country.' This re-assertion of the state – with the narrator describing Rojava as a 'mini-state' – persists even despite Xelil's explicit statement that AANES does not seek to secede: as he remarks, 'we don't want to partition Syria.' I argue, therefore, that there is a contingent of actors in AANES whose anti-statist articulations are suppressed in the face of dominant accounts that take the state as transcendent. Having identified that, in the words of Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 122), 'any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre,' and having identified that the 'state' functions as one such centre in accounts of non-state actors' political aspirations, this thesis endeavours to construct an account of AANES that makes a genuine attempt to de-centre the state, in order to excavate what alternative theoretical possibilities this then gives rise to.

In an analytical climate that sees Rojava's vision as one of state-building, and part of a long history of attempts to establish a Kurdish state, and any activities that suggest otherwise as strategic or rhetorical flourishes, I use the rest of this chapter to propose a way of engaging with these discourses in order to maximally de-centre the state and its trace. I propose this account with the knowledge that a common mode of conducting political analysis of 'rebel governments' focuses on the instrumental goals that their rhetoric can help them to achieve, and which views their articulations through a strategic lens. Without disputing that AANES discourses are articulated by a wide range of actors with complex, often instrumental, motivations, I am nevertheless interested in asking what happens if we read the articulations of participants of the so-called Rojava revolution as if they might be genuinely held beliefs that at least a small contingent of adherents are attempting to enact, and if we resist characterising such an approach as overly credulous, apolitical or naïve.[10] This is not to suggest that discourse functions to express the inner thoughts, moods or feelings of speakers – indeed, this is not the goal of a discourse approach (Howarth 2005, 320) – but rather to acknowledge that this mass of articulations exists; is an important ideological current in the region; and that this current makes non-state-centric theorisation possible. In this section I outline the analytical practices that I employ to unpack how discourses in AANES resist statist discourse, and discuss the postcolonial theoretical and ethical commitments that underpin such an approach.

Re-articulation

In this thesis I treat a wide range of practices, statements, publications and images as sources of discourse that all contribute to a clear pattern of non-state articulations that I argue are widespread and common in AANES. Below I discuss in more detail what texts in particular I

[10] I draw these adjectives (credulous, apolitical or naïve) intentionally from queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (2003), who proposed the idea of 'reparative' reading in contrast to 'paranoid' readings of literary texts. Paranoid reading, writes Sedgwick, says that the only way to produce knowledge about and to interpret 'a world full of loss, pain, and oppression' – and in this case, disappointment and compromise – is to respond with paranoia, depression, doubt and cynicism as if they were more sophisticated modes of engagement.

focus on, while in this section I discuss the primacy of language in this discourse analysis. Rather than dividing between the 'linguistic' and the 'non-linguistic', this thesis, in taking a constitutive approach to discourse, espouses that practices and objects – things that exist "out there" – take on a meaning through language, and cannot be made sense of without recourse to language.

Discursive artifacts can be found in many different places. As Doty (1996, 6) writes: 'the definition of discourse includes texts, practices, images, and identities: when we speak of a discourse, we may be referring to a specific group of texts, but also importantly to the social practices to which those texts are inextricably linked.' Anything, including physical objects and images, take on a meaning through language, and can therefore be treated as an object of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; L. Hansen 2011). Words, actions, and images alike are signifiers, or units which generate meaning. These signifiers, or discursive components, are held in particular relationships with each other in order to produce a signification. These discursive components already exist within a society, and it is the way they are arranged which is of interest. The way that these signifiers hang together to form a coherent whole is an articulation. As discussed, some articulations, or ways of arranging signifiers to make a claim on meaning, are more successful than others. Those articulations which succeed at uniting a set of signifiers, halting the chain of signification and creating a relatively stable set of meanings and regular associations, are, as I have identified, called dominant discourses (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 113).

As I argue throughout this thesis, inside a statist dominant discourse, certain answers to how society should organise itself politically take on their meaning via, and take their conditions of possibility from, the nation-state: as discussed in Chapter 4, peace and order are viewed as achievable through the monopolistic and sacred violence of the state; the 'international', as I discuss in Chapter 5, is entered into via state-centric categories like the citizen; the problem of

religious and ethnic co-existence is solved via secularism, whose state-centric character I unpack in Chapter 6; women's liberation, also discussed in Chapter 6, is associated with liberal feminism; and economics, as discussed in Chapter 7, is approached via colonial and capitalist state and extractivist modes of relating to the environment. Undergirding each of these case studies is the fundamental association held between the nation-state and democracy. My goal in these chapters, then, is to ask how, in the absence of the presupposition of the nation-state, these signifiers (secularism; the economy; the international; women's liberation; violence and order) are re-articulated into alternative webs of signification, which give rise to novel theorising about how it is possible for society to be politically ordered and democratically organised. I define re-articulation as an alternative to articulation, and argue that it involves this process of interlinking signifiers differently (see Jorgensen and Phillips 2000, 48; van Brussel, Carpentier, and de Cleen 2019, 5). De-linked from the state, the signifier democracy is instead associated and re-attached to new signifiers: polytheism or polyculturalism in the place of secularism; internationalism in the place of citizenship; jineology in the place of feminism; and social ecology in the place of extractivism and the monopoly on violence.

One of the goals of this thesis is to unpack these concepts in their context and explore their logics. As discussed above, discourses can act as a 'boundary that cuts off something from our vision' (Litfin 1995, 35). Because they both 'enable one to "know"' and also 'to act upon what one "knows"' (Doty 1996, 6), a core concern of the discourse approach is to trace the conditions of possibility and impossibility for particular political horizons. I therefore undertake this discourse analysis in order to explore how these anti-state discourses make non-state-centric alternatives possible. In addition, a second goal of undertaking this discourse analysis is to examine how these anti-state discourses denaturalise our existing theoretical dispositions, which I discuss in the next section.

Theory and agency

This thesis is also engaged with how these discourses make available sustained critiques of existing modes of political organisation, as well as of the existing Western political theoretical canon. Although I treat the discursive artifacts employed in this thesis as objects of empirical analysis, it is worth acknowledging that many of them exist alternately as pieces of political theory in and of themselves. Throughout this thesis I identify both instances where the texts themselves engage in critique (of theories that have animated Western political theory – namely the nation-state, individualism, the law, capitalism, liberalism, secularism, and feminism) and theorisation, as well as employing them to conduct theorisation myself. My goal in so doing is to avoid simply theorising 'about' the adherents of the Rojava movement, but theorising alongside and in solidarity with them. This is more broadly aligned with the postcolonial approach I adopt in this thesis, which is geared at acknowledging that activists and everyday participants in subaltern political movements are not only objects of discourse but subjects in their own right. Postcolonial scholars have identified that there are alternate, usually indigenous, ways of knowing and being which were subordinated during the Enlightenment era and throughout the colonial period (for example Middleton 2015; S. Hunt 2014; Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina 2010; Berkes 2009). Avril Bell (2014) argues that acknowledging this is a necessary means of accounting for the agency of indigenous peoples. In her words, discourse analysis which focuses only on domination makes colonial discourse appear general and 'monolithic, bearing down on pacific indigenes, [who are] reduced to the status of objects of discourse' (Bell 2014, 15).

In showing the novel components of what I call Apoist discourse,[11] a particular subset of AANES discourse, my goal is not simply to highlight how different it is from Western approaches to knowledge, economic and social organisation, governance, the environment,

[11] This term is drawn from the nickname given to Abdullah Öcalan, Apo. An Apoist discourse is one broadly aligned with or that draws upon his political views, as they have been carried forward and innovated upon by other actors involved in the Kurdish liberation movement.

rights, the law, and religion. As postcolonial theorist Bhabha notes (1994, 114), the 'entry of "denied" knowledges' is not sufficient to 'estrange the basis of [colonial] authority.' Bell (2014, 98) takes this to mean that 'cultural difference … is not a major challenge to colonisation… Difference … can be judged and either appropriated or denigrated. So the challenge to colonial authority lies elsewhere … [in] the disruption and unsettling of binary logics and systems of discursive colonisation.' This thesis instead attempts to trouble and invert typical hierarchies of knowledge and power by placing non-Western knowledges in direct conversation with the Western canon, and in particular using the former to critique the latter. The anti-state theorising that I excavate and contribute to is used to place pressure directly on Western logics, that see the state as the 'best' form of polity, which includes, for example, seeing secularism as the superior way of containing the violent potential of religious difference, or extractivism, the free market and private property as the most natural ways to manage the economy.

In applying a discourse analysis to Apoist ideology which locates these points of 'unsettling' – which necessarily requires that the texts I utilise are able to speak back to the canon – I hope, too, to extricate Apoist contributions from the risk of being flattened by ethnocentrism. Many of the extant representations of the group, which attempt to acknowledge its novel ideology, nonetheless refract their activities, and thinking, through this lens. For example, the group's theories are often viewed even by sympathetic analysts as derivatives of Western thought,[12] or are dubbed traditional Marxist-Leninism (Bradley and Parkinson 2015). This latter characterisation, which I discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, owes itself to the fact that the Kurdish liberation movement has origins in the original 1970s wave of decolonial

[12] See for example an article by Murray Bookchin's daughter, Debbie Bookchin (2018), which claims credit for the 'Rojava revolution' despite Kurdish activists' requests that the movement be seen as an autochthonous result of Kurdish political thinking. Indeed, as Saed (2017, 10) observes, some of the changes attributed to Bookchin's influence were made inside the PKK well before his ideas were taken up. This includes the decentralisation of the party (see White 2015, 127).

Marxist-Leninist organising. But, as I argue, the means by which this perception has managed to linger and persist in the face of decrials, and a fully-developed alternate ideology that eschews it, is tied up with the endurance of state-centrism, which chooses to see statist projects where there may no longer be any. These imputations can be considered forms of epistemic violence, and enable domination just as much as material practices do. What I have outlined is an attempt to read Öcalan and others' texts dialectically, as Stuart Hall did with Gramsci's writings, treating them as both pieces of empirical evidence as well as pieces of political theory. This in turn enables the work to take on extended applications that can illuminate other aspects of modern politics (and studies of politics), and greater, systemic questions about power and hegemony.

In sum, with this approach, I hope to denaturalise the logics at play in the dominant discourses circulating about the Apoist Kurds, and show how they expose a core ideological dependence on the nation-state. In Turkey's case, its accelerated activities focused on suppressing the region through its occupation of Afrin suggests a distaste for the possibility of state fracture, both of Turkey and of Syria, drawn from the repeated imputation that the Kurds seek secession. In the case of Western actors, their discourse paints the group in the Western self-image, deeming the group to be seeking liberal-democratic and secular statehood. Neither discourse has contended – or, I argue, is epistemologically able to contend – with the notion that the adherents that I discuss do not see themselves as state actors, do not profess to seek statehood, and are radically anti-state. These two examples of the broader dominant discourse therefore suppress, in their own ways, the possibility of a reality in which the nation-state is not *the* organising principle of social and political reality.

As I identified in Chapter 2, post-structuralists have argued for some time that 'statist discourse' generates these blind-spots in the field of IR (see Campbell 1992, 41). Scholars are increasingly diagnosing the 'fear of anarchy' which propels its continuance (Dunn 2004;

Karatzogianni and Robinson 2017; Martel 2012), and challenging whether the traditional nation-state is universally applicable or necessary (Phillips 2017; 2019). This suppression therefore accomplishes two things, both of which have important political impacts. The first is the vitiation of radical alternatives to the nation-state model. The second is the erasure of indigenous and non-Western solutions to and thinking about problems of political organisation. These contribute to the broader problem of orientalism, whereby the Middle East is continually coded as lacking its own democracy (Sadiki 2004), and capable of hosting only radical currents in the form of radical *right-wing* politics subsequent to the Cold War era. What I argue is that the Rojava revolution has radical tenets, ones that do not (only) place it in counter-point with the orientalist vision of the Middle East as un-democratic, unstable, and intolerant (in short, illiberal), but rather with the entire nation-state system taken as a whole. In the next section I outline my corpus and define the bounds of what I call the Apoist, or anti-state, discourse.

Apoist discourse: data and corpus

Key thinkers: Abdullah Öcalan, Murray Bookchin

Failure, cooptation and compromise plague radical leftist movements. Indeed, important modern leftist or revolutionary movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been regularly diagnosed as failures: from communism to the 1968 movement to Occupy (Debord 1998; J. Dean 2016; 2012). While at first attracting significant enthusiasm from the left as 'the most radical experiment in democracy and gender equality in the whole world' (Gupta 2016b), and drawing comparisons to the Paris Commune and to the Spanish Revolution of 1936, among others (see Hoffmann and Matin 2021, 1), the initial vision of the Rojava revolutionaries has likewise been difficult to sustain. Apart from issues with the centralised party structure that I identified in Chapter 1, other significant failures include the invitation of

Assad's forces back into the region after the withdrawal of US forces in 2019 (Ibrahim 2019), despite the statement in 2014 that the Rojava government would never again be 'enslaved by Damascus' (R. Hall 2014). In addition, PYD and SDF members have been accused over the past eight years of organised crime, child recruitment, ethnic cleansing (namely the targeting of Arabs and Turkic inhabitants of the region), and the mistreatment of prisoners. Although a large portion of these findings are made by aggressor state Turkey, some of these allegations – such as of child recruitment – are substantiated and affirmed by other bodies and the PYD itself (UN General Assembly Security Council 2016; Jangiz 2021). Another significant critique made of the Rojava movement's (in)ability to live up to its goals and values are the criticisms that Kurdish revolutionaries continue to adhere to nationalist values rather than the 'eco-anarchist' ones that they profess (U. Muhammad 2018). Indeed, Allsop and van Wilgenburg (2019, 35) point out that nationalism has readily inter-mingled with communist and other leftist principles inside of Kurdish radical thinking for several decades. Leaving aside the question of whether the Rojava revolution is a chimera, or whether it has been in the modern day compromised to the point of failure, I argue that, nevertheless, throughout its duration, there has been a contingent of grassroots activists, organisations, and militants who operate either in Rojava or work on the cause from abroad, who consistently espouse a discourse with clear tenets (around pluralism, jineology, anti-statism and social ecology) that help to theorise non-state-centric political horizons. I refer to this broadly coherent discourse as 'the Apoist discourse' or 'the AANES discourse' throughout this thesis, with the awareness that neither term fully encompasses all actors that either term might include at all times. Instead, I use these two terms as a short and simple way of expressing this body of articulations, which have observable patterns and consistent tendencies.

'Apoism' is a body of thought and practice whose origins lay in the work of the founder of the Turkey-based PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan is nicknamed Apo by his supporters. As noted,

Öcalan has been incarcerated by the Turkish government for over two decades; however, he continues to publish prolifically from prison. A 2006 stock take of Öcalan's works found that he had published over 16,000 pages of written material across a two-decade period (Özcan 2006, 225–26). As Özcan (2006, 180) identifies, these texts are repetitive and copious by design, and their impact has been to secure Öcalan as an ideological figurehead of the Kurdish freedom movement, especially the PKK and other linked organisations. One of these is the PYD. From its inception in 2003, the party has openly subscribed to the political philosophy of Öcalan (BBC 2003; Savelsberg 2014). There are other 'Apoist' parties, and they formed an umbrella political organisation called the Koma Komalên Kurdistan (KKK or, in English, KCK), accepting an agreement written by Öcalan (2005b) to organise under the principles of 'democratic confederalism'. Democratic confederalism was adopted specifically to replace the Marxist-Leninist platform of these organisations (Öcalan 2015, 1), and it is the system of government implemented and sought in AANES. I demonstrate this idea further throughout the thesis, but this point is exemplified by the opening lines of the constitution of the AANES, approved in 2016 (Darwish 2016b), which read:

> We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens, freely and solemnly declare and establish this Charter. In pursuit of freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability, the Charter proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society. It protects fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples' right to self-determination.

Many of the discursive hallmarks of democratic confederalism are captured in this preamble, most explicitly the explicit use of the terms 'democratic' and 'confederation'. Therefore, given the significant contribution of Öcalan's thinking to the PYD's political outlook and the system of government implemented more broadly in AANES, this thesis draws heavily on his written texts. It is worth noting that Öcalan is Turkish-speaking, and the majority of his work is not

translated into English. In this thesis I primarily rely on his written works published once democratic confederalism began to be developed. Although this is not an exhaustive list, the key texts I focus on are *Bir Halkı Savunmak* (Defending a Nation) (Öcalan 2004); *Demokratik Konfederalizm* (Democratic Confederalism) (Öcalan 2006), and *Kürt Sorunu ve Demokratik Ulus Çözümü* (The Kurdish Question and the Democratic Nation Solution) (Öcalan 2013a). These books are more extensive than the translated pamphlets that have been published in English that draw on this work (*Democratic Nation* (Öcalan 2016a); *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Öcalan 2013b); and *Democratic Confederalism* (Öcalan 2015)). The mainstream academic publisher Pluto Press has published three English-language books compiling Öcalan's key writing (Öcalan 2011; 2007; 2017); the independent radical publisher PM Press, based in Oakland, has in the past two years published two volumes of a translation of Öcalan's five-part *Manifesto of the Democratic Civilisation*. Beyond this, the mainstream English language availability of his work is somewhat limited, and academic output that engages with Öcalan's work tends to draw upon the narrow range of English-language sources that are readily available (see for example Hammy and Miley 2022). This issue is exacerbated by the fact that the issuing publisher of the pamphlets I have named, Mesopotamia Press in Neuss, Germany, was raided in March 2018, the day after a visit to Germany from the Turkish Foreign Minister (ANF News 2018a). In February 2019, it was permanently closed by the German government, who deemed it a PKK front organisation (Der Tagesspiegel 2019).

The translation from Turkish to English of these works, in addition to the jineology texts I discuss below, therefore represents a substantial contribution to ameliorating this knowledge deficit in the English-language scholarship. There are, however, challenges to the task of translation, which I am conscious of, namely that effective translations require the researcher to internalise a foreign system of referents that challenge naturalised representations (Milliken, 1999, 244). As a second-generation Alevi-Turkish-Australian, I am conscious of the power

relations, but also the potential for solidarity, between Turkish and Kurdish people, and the West and Middle East. This is another reason to render the internal workings of the Rojava movement's values, rather than imposing external accounts. Furthermore, a second challenge to note is that these texts have been translated out of the Turkish language, which is itself a language colonially imposed on Kurdish people both in Turkey and increasingly in areas of northern Syria. On the other hand, there are clear benefits to focusing on material that appears in its original language rather than only the material that has filtered into the English language, or to use sources – such as interviews – given to English-language sources. These latter articulations risk being distorted, both by the linguistic limitations of their speakers, and by the possible need to appeal to Western audiences, elicit support, or manage how these groups are perceived abroad. In focusing on articulations as they are made to an in-group – in the forms that I analyse them, these texts were distributed among fellow participants – I argue that the full extent of their counter-hegemonic articulations is clearer.

Murray Bookchin

Democratic confederalism is an idea originated by Öcalan, but linked with the late philosopher Murray Bookchin's work on libertarian municipalism and social ecology (see Gerber and Brincat 2018). In his book *From Urbanization to Cities: The Politics of Democratic Municipalism,* Bookchin (2022, 103) defines confederalism as 'the interlinking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens' assemblies and whose sole functions are coordinative and administrative.' As I discuss throughout this thesis, this definition closely resembles aspects of the model of governance implemented in Rojava, and it is not by coincidence that this is the case. For example, Öcalan quotes Bookchin extensively when he proposes the idea of municipalities and people's assemblies for the first time (Öcalan 2006). Öcalan first encountered Bookchin's works while incarcerated, attempting to set up a meeting with the thinker before he passed away in 2006. Although this never

occurred, the PKK 'honoured him as "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century" when he died in July 2006' (Leverink 2015). This being acknowledged, Öcalan is careful to note elsewhere that the democratic confederal model is tailored for and responds to the local contexts in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, rather than simply imported wholesale from Bookchin's body of work, which focuses on the West (Öcalan 2015, 34–41). In sum, Bookchin is an important thinker for Öcalan and for the movement, and so this analysis also draws upon his key works, namely *Towards an Ecological Society* (1980), *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (1996), and *Social Ecology and Communalism* (2006).

Mechanisms for proliferation

In identifying these two theorists as key progenitors of the discourse I study, it is important to clarify that I do not wish to argue that every inhabitant of the region has read these works in a dedicated fashion. As Schmidinger (2018, 137) correctly notes, from his jail cell on a prison island, where his access to the outside world is highly limited, and it is difficult for him to even speak readily to his family or lawyer, Öcalan plays no direct personal role in the region. Nevertheless, I do argue that the principles extracted out of these works are widespread in the region, as well as highly visible in the region. In this section I discuss how these ideas are proliferated, and in the following section I discuss amongst whom they are popular.

I identify three key modes by which ideas such as social ecology, jineology (discussed further below), and democratic confederalism are spread. First, they are propelled by educational institutions, as the AANES movement has placed a large focus upon education. These include academies attended by individuals training to join the region's internal security forces (asayiş), as well as the YPG and YPJ militias. The Yekîtiya Star Academy in Rimelan, founded in 2012, trains female cadre. As described by Janet Biehl, who visited the region in 2015 and 2019, at

the academy women are educated at length on jineology. Biehl (2015b) quotes instructor Dorîn Akîf, who discusses what is taught at the academy:

> We are trying to overcome women's non-existence in history. We try to understand how concepts are produced and reproduced within existing social relations, then we come up with our own understanding. We want to establish a true interpretation of history by looking at the role of women and making women visible in history. … We talk about pre-Sumerian social organisation. We also look how the state emerged historically and how the concept has been constructed. Power is everywhere, but the state is not everywhere. Power can operate in different ways. … We look at the political mechanisms – women's parliaments, women's communes; and the general [mixed] parliaments, general communes, neighbourhood parliaments.

Upon graduating from these academies, individuals swear oaths on the principles of ecology, self-defence, and democratic autonomy (Dirik 2015a; RT 2015). Second, universities in the region teach classes on this subject matter (Enzinna 2015). In 2015, AANES established Afrin University; in 2016, Rojava University was established; and in 2017, Kobani University was established (Rojava Information Centre 2022). Examples of the proliferation of Apoist ideas in the region include that, in 2016, the University of Afrin – now defunct, forced to close in 2018 following the Turkish incursion and occupation of the region – taught a course called 'The Nation's Democracy', which covered Öcalan's thinking (Darwish 2016a). In addition, the University of Rojava, in Qamishlo, has a Department of Jineology (Women's Science) (Syrian Democratic Times 2021). As of 2021, there were 47 students enrolled in the Department (Medya News 2021b), and it offers a two-year course in Jineology (Rojava Information Centre 2022, 11). Furthermore, as of 2022, jineology is being taught at the secondary and tertiary levels in at least eight cities (Flock 2022). A report outlining the structure of the region's university system, prepared by the Rojava Information Centre, outlines the region's universities' philosophy, and names Öcalan explicitly:

> … The university furthermore distinguishes itself through its philosophy connected to the ideas of the 'Democratic Nation', as expounded by Kurdish philosopher and imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan. According to his writing, within the Democratic Nation, every ethnicity, creed, as well as every city, local, regional and national entity has the right to participate as its own identity in the

> nation's democratic social structures. "Rojava University considers itself part of these social structures. Thus, knowledge and knowledge-production have to be an organic part of society and should work in service of it, as opposed to an instrument of power and elites," says Dr. Mustafa (Rojava Information Centre 2022, 6).

Finally, in addition to these direct modes of exposure, I argue that there is also an everyday saturation of Apoism throughout the region. Speaking about Syria more broadly, Wedeen (2015, 24) identifies phenomena such as orchestrated events, monuments, and poster art as examples of iconography, a term which I also adopt to capture the range of visuals and speech that are palpable in public spaces and which function as metonyms for the broader body of principles they reflect: Öcalan's likeness is worn on YPG uniforms and pins bearing his likeness can be purchased in stores; and his and Bookchin's image appear on street art and at rallies and protests. Graffiti also takes the form of slogans used throughout the region: 'jin, jiyan, azadi' (women, life, freedom) is a common motto.[13] Taken together, I argue that a broad cross-section of AANES inhabitants are at least familiar with key concepts such as jineology, democratic confederalism (and its attendant critiques of the state), and social ecology: indeed, I argue that these concepts have been re-deployed as shorthand in the form of slogans, mottos, chants, and songs which suggests their mainstreaming, and therefore that they occupy common-sense status in the region.

Democratic confederalism across borders

I also argue that democratic confederal ideas are not confined to the territorial bounds of the Syrian state. Although this is where they have had the most success in being implemented, their origins lay, as I have identified, with Öcalan, who was born in Turkey, although he fled the country in 1979 and operated out of Syria until 1998 (Rudaw 2016a). In majority-Kurdish parts of the southeast of Turkey, Kurds have made attempts to implement democratic confederal

[13] This is one of the most recognisable mottos of the Kurdish freedom movement. As of 2022, it has also been very prominently used among protestors in Iran, in protests that started after the death of a Kurdish woman at the hands of the regime.

ways of self-governance, although these have been quickly quashed due to the strength of the Turkish state (Gurcan 2015; Scalbert-Yücel 2021). This phenomenon was echoed in Iraqi Kurdistan in the same time period (Moya 2015). Democratic confederal ideas therefore hold sway in four countries where 'Apoist' parties exist: in addition to the PYD in Syria, and the PKK in Turkey, there is also the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iran, and the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK) in Iraq. These parties belong to the umbrella organisation KCK, which signed onto the democratic confederal platform in 2005. As I further unpack in Chapter 4, there are a number of other militias that have formed in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan during the period of the conflict in the region. Indeed, many of these militias are not ethnically majority Kurdish, suggesting that this discourse has extended out of the national confines from which it emerged, something that poses a challenge to analyses that interpret it as merely nationalist. In Chapter 4 I show that these groups also draw direct links and inspiration in their ideological model from these Apoist groups, or else they have generally been directly trained by their cadre or at their military academies. I therefore include in my analysis all public statements made from members of any of these organisations, in particular the commanders and spokespeople of these groups.

Jineology, women activists and organisations

Despite criticisms of the way that Öcalan acts as a 'one-man leader' (Özcan 2006, 180), or a 'sole theoritician' (D. Bookchin 2018), and that he has courted a 'cult of personality' around himself (Leezenberg 2016), this rendering paints only a partial picture of the way that the discourse I have identified is promulgated and developed by adherents, in particular female militants and activists. A common criticism of jineology, as an alternative women's liberation movement to feminism, is that there is an irony to it having first been coined and its development encouraged by a man, in particular one who headed an organisation, the PKK, which struggled for many years with patriarchal behaviours among male cadres (Üstündağ

2016). It must be acknowledged, therefore, that there are power differentials among different contingents of activists in Rojava – party and non-party, elite and non-elite – and that women's goals and voices can become sidelined in the movement (Gunaydin 2022). An important part of addressing this issue, then, is to acknowledge the agency of Middle Eastern women, namely their agency to make jineology 'their own' – to expand upon it, and even to resist it – rather than taking the ideology to be an example of something imposed from the top down, and blindly believed. This in itself is a gendered reading, which sees a limited role for women to make their own theoretical or ideological contributions to the revolutions in which they participate. Although it is true that jineology is a coinage of Öcalan, as Al-Ali and Käser (2020, 8) identify:

> the history of Jineolojî started long before that, growing out of continuous discussions among women cadres in the political and armed structures of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, taking place in PKK training academies in Syria and Lebanon, in prisons in Turkey, as well as in guerrilla camps in the mountains.

Furthermore, this field has been innovated upon almost exclusively by women activists in the region since 2012.

To that end, this thesis incorporates a wide variety of sources from women into the remit of its analysis. This includes two Turkish-language book-length publications from Öcalan's publisher mentioned above, Mesopotamia Press, *Introduction to Jineology* (Jineoloji Akademisi 2015) and *Debates on Jineology* (Özgür Kadın Akademisi 2016), written by a broad cross-section of militants and other female activists operating in the 'Jineology Academy' and 'Free Women's Academy' organisations in the region, some of whom are currently or formerly incarcerated. It also draws on the contents of the *Jineolojî Dergisi* (Jineology Journal), published in the Turkish language every three months. One of its editors, Nagihan Akarsel, also a member of the Jineology Academy, which authored *Introduction to Jineology*, was shot dead in Suleimani in October of 2022 in a targeted killing (ANF News 2022c). As of writing, there are 21 issues of the journal. I have chosen these sources (these two books and the journal)

intentionally, based on what participants in the jineology movement have explicitly requested. They did so in a 2021 response written to an article published in the highly reputable social sciences journal *Politics & Gender* (Al-Ali and Käser 2020). The article was penned by two respected Middle East researchers, one a Professor, but the article's methodology was criticised by members of the Jineology Committee:

> The [article's first] footnote states that no sources in Kurdish and Turkish were consulted for this article. This is striking, as these are the two main languages that broadcast/publish information on Jineolojî. For example, the two Jineolojî programs that are broadcasted by Jin TV, where the authors conducted interviews, are one in Turkish and one in Kurdish. Nor it appears have the authors consulted any of the publications that elaborate on the theoretical and conceptual terms within Jineolojî, such as the *Jineolojî Journal*, published regularly, every three months, in the Turkish language. The journal just published its 20th issue. Moreover, the major publications entitled *Jineolojî Tartışmaları [Jineolojî discussions]*, 2015 and *Jineolojî'ye Giriş [Introduction to Jineolojî]*, 2016 do not seem to have been read (Jineoloji Committee 2021).

I quote this at some length in order to re-affirm what I have highlighted in this chapter is a commitment to theorising alongside grassroots members of the Rojava revolution, and fulfilling their explicit request that Turkish-language sources, such as this journal and these books, are relied upon heavily. I also focus on statements made by participants in women's organisations such as the YPJ, Kongreya Star, the Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ), formerly known as the YPJ-Sinjar; the Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces for Syriac (Chaldean, Assyrian and Aramean) women (HSNB), formerly part of Sutoro and branching off in August 2015 (HSNB 2020; Dirik 2018a, 238); the women's units of the Assyrian Khabour Guard Council (Kongra Star 2020); and the female militia of the Hêza Parastina Cewherî (Self-Defence Forces) (HPC), the HPC-Jin (B. [*sic*] 2016; Quinn 2015; Kongra Star 2020).

Other data

Finally, I include a wide range of newspaper articles from Kurdish news sources, as well as social media posts (both text and photographs) in this analysis. These are also considered to be

valid sources of the 'marginal political discourse' that this thesis takes as its focus (L. Hansen 2006, 57). Hansen (2006) outlines three other general types of discourse, which I also consider briefly throughout the following chapters: official discourse, wider political debate, and cultural representations. I view these three sites as places where statist articulations are made, which I use throughout this thesis to juxtapose with AANES' representations. This includes discussion of English-language and Turkish-language newspaper articles, news broadcasts and documentaries[14] from mainstream sources, statements from heads of state and military spokespeople, and, frequently, scholarship. It should be noted, therefore, that academic scholarship is used in this thesis both as a body of knowledge, but also as a discursive artifact in and of itself. For example, Chapter 5 discusses academic literature on foreign fighting at some length in order to deconstruct the way that it shapes hegemonic understandings of foreign fighting, rather than exclusively using it as a source of truth or facts about the phenomenon. This is similar to the treatment of the political theory I am analysing that I have discussed above, and is therefore consistent with the broader methodological and ethical approach adopted by this work.

The following chapters of this thesis discuss how the AANES discourse re-articulates the concepts of security, the international, ethno-religious tolerance, women's liberation and the economy without recourse and tethering to the privileged and implicit reference point of the state, and thus re-articulates democracy and order. Each chapter first discusses the alternate discourse at play in AANES and the texts I have outlined, before discussing how the space for

[14] In addition to the BBC documentary discussed above, I engage in extended discussion of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation documentary *No Free Steps to Heaven* (Anghel 2015) and the 60 Minutes Australia documentary *Female State* (T. Brown 2014) in Chapter 6. These three documentaries were chosen because they aired in at least one coalition country and were available online thereafter, and thus watched by millions of viewers. Brown and the BBC's documentaries are no longer available online; however, transcripts are retained by the author.

these alternatives has been narrowed or foreclosed as statist discourses re-assert themselves, or struggle for dominance in each of these conceptual arenas.

Chapter 4: Un-stating militarism

> A weapon cannot teach you how to love. It is easier to teach a revolutionary how to shoot than it is for a man who loves guns, war, and fighting to learn how to make a revolution, regardless of whether he is a great shot … Maybe in an imperialist military, weapons and military training are enough, but we are not an imperialist military and we don't have the resources they have – we have hevaltî [collectivity, shared purpose] … Armed aspects of self-defence must never be separated from other aspects of revolutionary struggle. Political education and practice, a love of freedom and life, and a deep respect for women's freedom is essential for absolutely every armed militant. Otherwise, what are we doing here? – Interview with a fighter known as Ceren, member of the anarchist SDF military unit Tekoşîna Anarşîst (quoted in Tekoşîna Anarşîst 2020, 48–50)

Introduction

In the popular understandings of AANES, and indeed other non-state armed groups, there exist two broad tendencies. The first is to associate instances of the widespread provision of security with stateness. As I argue in this chapter, such accounts can be flattening because they take the state as ever-present, or alternately inevitable. This creates the risk of making sense of context-specific, situated forms of militarism – ones that understand themselves to specifically be challenging the hegemonic or statist forces they are compared to – through the lens of dominant ways we possess for speaking about state militaries and standing armies. A second tendency is to associate non-state armed groups (NSAGs) with the breakdown of peace and order, whereby these groups are understood in terms of being profit-seeking, criminal and, as such, more impure and disorderly than state armies. This construction, like the first, again takes the state as transcendent and essential, in this case via its necessity for supplying order. On the other hand, self-understandings of the NSAGs that are common in Syria, and have a small presence in Iraqi Kurdistan also, differ significantly. By considering how NSAGs in AANES are spoken about by members of these militias themselves, and the political theory upon which these groups are based, I argue in this chapter that such organisations render an account of the

association between centralisation of authority (specifically the monopoly over violence) and order that is radically untethered from statist discourses.

It is common to characterise provisions of security undertaken by non-state violent actors – from organised crime groups to rebels – as 'state-like'. In his work discussing ISIS and YPG's 'rule' in northern Syria, Ünver (2018) argues that, after expelling Assad's forces from northern Syria in the early stages of the conflict, the autonomous administration took on 'the functions of the state', including providing security and law enforcement. In other words, the YPG, as a violent non-state actor, began to 'behave like the central authority it dislodged' (Ünver 2018, 38). Likewise, during a recent discussion about AANES at the 2021 International Studies Association Conference – a panel where I presented a paper on Western volunteer fighters who travel to Rojava – it was put to me through a series of chains of equivalence that, if we understand AANES to be governing, then we can understand it as fulfilling the basic functions of a state; and if we understand it as basically a state, then we can understand the YPG and associated militias as just armies or militaries; and if we understand them as just like regular armies, then their practices – for example, of glorifying the war dead and of commemorating sacrifice – are not so different from any other military in the world. It is certainly possible to follow this line of thinking, and to understand the YPG and associated militias – discussed in this chapter – as engaging in provision of security that renders them state-like.[15] However, as I argue throughout this thesis, this understanding relies on a tendency to see states everywhere, and reproduces the association between the capacity to maintain order and statehood. As Phillips (2021, 38) argues, this approach is limited because it affirms a state-centric ontology:

[15] Just like many other international militaries, AANES publicly honours the dead, remembers them on special occasions, and compensates victims' families. For example, both the Turkish state and AANES commemorate their war dead through the language of martyrdom (şehit in Turkish, and şehîd in Kurdish). To conclude that such cultural resemblances make the two military forces more similar than different, however, overlooks the less superficial distinctions between them, particularly as they orient themselves distinctively towards the state and the monopoly over violence, and how violence functions in relation to power.

> it suggests that it is only states or the entities that directly mimic them that produce order. This leaves no room for ordering processes that do not simulate those provided by the state. It also constructs institutions as ontologically prior (rather than constitutive of) the ideas that give them legitimacy.

This is not to say that this understanding is 'incorrect' – indeed, as I discuss below, popular understandings become the only ones available after a time, and do stake a claim to truth by suppressing alternatives. What I am arguing in this chapter, therefore, is that to render this the *only* way of understanding these militias has distinct political effects and limitations. The first is that this account – which construes all acts of militarism as instances of 'a military', understood through a narrow, state-centric lens – obfuscates alternative, specifically non-state discourses that are articulated on the ground in the AANES and surrounding regions. The second is that such an interpretation draws equivalences between all expressions of violence, associating them with hegemony. As I show in the below discussion of how the violence these militias enact is understood as non-hierarchical, this understanding limits our ability to theorise the contingency of violence, and the contexts in which it is constructed as a counter-hegemonic force. As the quotation from Phillips above highlights, viewing these NSAGs as mimics of standing armies risks eliding the understandings and ideas held about what they are and how they function against statist discourse, not with it.

This chapter shows that there is a clear pattern of linked paramilitaries that have proliferated throughout territories controlled by the AANES as well as Iraqi Kurdistan, in particular the YPG, HPC, HPG, HSNB and asayiş,[16] that I argue reproduce aspects of the discourse of 'self-defence' and 'people's protection'. First, I establish the common ways of understanding non-state armed groups such as these, before exploring the alternative that these groups consider themselves to be constructing through their implementation of an 'ecological' – that is, non-hierarchical, radically local – approach to violence. This approach is viewed as maintaining

[16] This thesis discusses only the asayiş of NES, and does not include discussion of the KRI asayish.

order because it is based on communal ethics, local power, and challenges the state's (capitalist, gendered, racialised) monopoly on violence, which is viewed in fact as a key driver of violence. Despite the incidence of overlapping defence organisations in the region – which might be interpreted through a statist lens as disorderly, and a predictor of conflict – instead there is an articulated sense in the statements made by members of these groups, and inhabitants of the regions they defend, that the relatively higher levels of peace maintained in these areas is felt and owned palpably on the level of the local. This recalls Walter Benjamin's definition of anarchy which I offered in Chapter 1, and views anarchy not as an absence of order – as the traditional International Relations definition of anarchy tells us it is – but rather a presence. I argue therefore that the AANES discourse challenges the view that non-state violence is fundamentally impure – disorderly, profit-seeking, criminal – and that centralisation of authority is the key to order. I conclude by demonstrating how the space for this non-state and decentralised approach to order is being foreclosed in AANES, as international actors and internal pressures force these militias to professionalise and institutionalise themselves – and in short, begin to resemble formal standing armies. I demonstrate this by discussing the trajectory of the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, and its pathway towards becoming professionalised and centralised through the interventions of external actors. This demonstrates the over-arching argument of this thesis, which is that non-state alternatives rarely survive in the international system because they are disciplined out of existence, and re-fashioned in states' image.

The statist discourse on the privatisation of violence

There is a strong modern norm that associates centralisation of authority with order. Common scholarly understandings of order view the absence of a monopoly on the legitimate use of force as being associated with the proliferation of violence, for example as in insurgencies, as the state and its sovereignty is spoken about in terms of fragmenting or breaking down (see Koc-Menard 2007). In other words, when the monopoly is lost, 'oligopolies' of violence are

often theorised as rising to take their place. These involve militias, mafias, local gangs or 'warlords' who often compete with one another or engage in racketeering. When security is provided in a decentralised manner, for example by private actors, from 'warlords' to security contractors, they are theorised as doing so due to their pursuit of profit or power – that is, the focus is on actors who are spoken about in a way that assumes a market or commercial logic, leading to the conclusion that they may have a material interest in seeing conflict prolonged (Chojnacki and Branovic 2011; Wulf 2011; Krahmann 2013; Staniland 2012; Kaldor 1999; A. de Waal 2015; Keen 2012).[17] As Percy (2007) points out, the absence of a state monopoly on violence is associated with mercenaries, and mercenarism and privatisation of violence tends now to be constructed as impure and disorderly. Usually, it is only *state-backed* private military and security companies (PMSCs) that can access legitimacy and escape this negative association (Phelps 2014).[18] The effect of such a norm that associates centralisation of authority with order is that it vitiates examples of successful non-state provision of security. In other words, this construction suggests that a coercive apparatus endowed to one actor (namely the executive arm of the state) is ideal for maintaining order, and that states are normatively the best providers of security. However, as I demonstrate in this chapter, intentionally seeking to prevent a monopoly on force from forming can counterintuitively produce order when the undemocratic establishment of that monopoly is viewed as a key driver of conflict. That is, the contents of the AANES discourse on order does not take the state as its necessary provider, framing it instead as a likely source of disorder.

Locating self-defence in the theory of social ecology

[17] An interesting exception to this focus on self-interested private actors is raised in Wendy Brown's *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010). Brown discusses the case of the Minutemen, a vigilante group dedicated to fortifying and monitoring the US-Mexico border in an attempt to stop illegal crossings. As Brown notes, the Minutemen are attempting to 'shore up, rather than to deplete state power' (2010, 88), although, as she notes, the very attempt to do so undoes 'precisely the state sovereignty they would resurrect' (2010, 90).
[18] Recent empirical work by Petersohn (2021) has shown that PMSCs in general increase conflict onset.

This chapter focuses on the ways that 'self-defence' is a recurrent discourse underpinning key security behaviours in AANES. 'Self-defence' is a prevalent discourse in NES, which I hold apart from the realities on the ground, which are discussed in the concluding section of this chapter – in particular the evidence that AANES exhibits increasingly centralising behaviours. Many of the region's security practices are represented as instances of 'self-defence'. The speakers of this discourse adhere to a belief that their means of maintaining order is non-coercive, non-hierarchical and non-rent-seeking. In being this way, these NSAGs reflect an understanding of order and democracy that does not interpret violence as a sacred right of the state. The security practices observable in AANES today are rooted theoretically in the theory produced by Abdullah Öcalan and the political theorists he is informed by, chief among them Murray Bookchin. As noted in Chapter 3, individuals who undergo military training are required to take classes on Bookchin's principles, including ecology and self-defence (Enzinna 2015; Dirik 2015a). In this section I explore the tenets of self-defence and AANES' linkages to Bookchin's body of work in more detail, and examine the implications they have for militarism in the region.

In Öcalan's writing, self-defence is identified as a right to violence that contrasts against the violence waged by states. Öcalan accords with the Marxist critique of war when he writes that states wage wars to redistribute capital (Öcalan 2015, 13; see also Üstündağ 2016, 199), and are focused on establishing hierarchies, pursuing domination or colonisation (Öcalan 2016b, 50–51). Although scholars such as Leezenberg (2016) argue that a justification for violence cannot be drawn out of Bookchin's body of work, I argue that Öcalan draws his position on self-defence directly from Bookchin's theory of social ecology. Bookchin argues that human society, as it developed, formed a dualist epistemology holding humans apart from nature; with this being the originary hierarchy or relationship of domination, humans have gone on to establish other forms of hierarchy (for example, patriarchy or capitalism). He argues that in

order for all forms of domination to be abolished, humans must first seek to generate a new relationship with the environment, one not based on domination (see Chapter 7 for more detail). In accordance with the epistemology Bookchin proposes, Öcalan locates the true right to violence (in the form of self-defence) in nature: in *Democratic Nation,* he writes that all living creatures, even the simplest ones, are equipped with the ability to defend themselves in some manner, specifically for the purpose of self-preservation (Öcalan 2016b, 49). What is interesting about this claim is that it locates the right to self-defence as ontologically prior to the state's right to use violence to coerce. This latter right is located in the social, that is, in the social contract individuals enter into to live inside a state. This attempt to orient human activity in nature, rather than to exit the state of nature by contracting out of it – as traditional theories of sovereignty do (see Chapter 2) – accords with Bookchin. That is, Öcalan often draws his ideas about ethics and modelling human behaviour not from an anthropological but from a 'biological-ethical point of view' (Venturini 2021, 9). Öcalan innovates and adds to Bookchin when he argues that self-defence is a component of ecology – that is, a natural impulse for communities that is 'coextensive with natural evolution' (M. Bookchin 1996, 135). As Türk (2020) has noted, this characterisation of violence resonates with what Hardt and Negri call 'the democratic use of violence,' and it estranges the claim made by Westphalian sovereignty to being the only legitimate source of violence. In Öcalan's work, society defends itself against the state system – which is unnatural – rather than the state representing the very possibility of sociality. This again accords with Bookchin's views on society, which he argues is not something 'against' nature, but rather is an extension of nature (M. Bookchin 2009). This insight – that there is an agonistic relationship between the state and society, not a mutually constitutive one – forms the heart of Öcalan's thinking, and thus recurs throughout this thesis.

Kurdish scholar Dilar Dirik (2017) draws on fieldwork, interviews and participation in the Rojava revolution to further extrapolate on the way that the ethos of self-defence (or

xweparastina rewa) is linked to ecology. Unlike violence, she argues, self-defence eschews domination – in the way that social ecology requires – because it does not seek to 'exploit or unnecessarily destroy another creature but to preserve itself and meet its vital needs … legitimate self-defence must be based on social justice and communal ethics.'[19] This is an argument emphasised by self-defence organisations in the region. A statement from the YPJ released in 2019 reads that, '[t]he YPJ's principle of legitimate self-defence applies the following rule: if we would have [sic] the strength to attack the whole world, we would not do it, but if all the forces of the world unite to attack us, we will defend ourselves' (quoted in Kongra Star 2020). This critique is important for uncovering the contingency of violence, as discussed above. As decolonial scholars such as Frantz Fanon have observed, violence is a tool that can function both for liberation – 'counter-violence' – as well as for colonial oppression (Fanon 1963, 88). This should not be interpreted as an endorsement or glorification of violence – nor does Fanon glorify it – but rather an acknowledgement that the association made between violence and profit, or violence and domination (for example, the capacity to enact oppression), is not a universal one, but one borne of how specifically colonial and state powers have historically used it. The quote from fighter Ceren that I used to open this chapter potently crystallises this argument. Thus, examination of the AANES discourse on violence helps to reveal an alternate set of associations made between violence and domination and hierarchy, and avoids collapsing all expressions of militarism into pre-figured ways of understanding the violence enacted by more traditionally hegemonic forces such as states. In other words, reading the expression of violence without the state uncovers new ways of understanding how order,

[19] It is worth acknowledging that appeals to the principle of 'legitimate self-defence' appear in many other contexts of contested uses of violence, including by the Turkish state when justifying its recent incursions into northern Syria and northern Iraq (Hathaway 2019), and by the state of Israel when explaining actions taken against Palestinian populations. With the acknowledgement that this term is a term of art in international law, as well as the fact that it is commonly utilised by other, non-state violent actors to legitimise their activities (see for example Hastings and Phillips 2015, 565), I argue that the militias discussed in this chapter use it distinctly, as part of a discourse informed by the theory and practices I describe here.

and democracy, could be instilled without requiring the centralisation of authority, and the maintenance of a monopoly over the legitimate use of force.

Given that the governance model of democratic confederalism is drawn partially from Bookchin's works, it is also important to examine the critiques that he offers of the monopoly on violence in his writing. As discussed, Bookchin advocates for a 'libertarian municipal' governance model that involves autonomously self-managed communities, which are loosely linked in the form of confederations. Rather than seeking to override nation-states, these municipalities (or cantons) exist in 'open tension' with the nation-state, seeking to appropriate functions away from it (M. Bookchin 2006, 50; Dirik 2014a; Üstündağ 2016). Bookchin (1980, 116) offers libertarian municipalism as a response to centralised states, which he argues re-orient society towards a scale that is so large and abstracted that it is not comprehensible to or controllable by all. He proposes a return to the level of the village, town or commune as an alternative, arguing that decisions must be made on this level to combat the 'professionalisation of power' brought about by statecraft, which replaced the functions of these smaller local structures with bureaucracies, police and the military (M. Bookchin 2006, 63). In addition to the implementation of communes and the decentralisation of decision-making to the village level in AANES, the proliferation of non-police and non-military (that is, non-professional) security accords with Bookchin's social ecology model, given the critiques that Bookchin makes of the police and military as examples of professionalised and centralised power rather than local power.

Eschewing the monopoly on violence in practice

Although drawn from theory, the self-defence model implemented in AANES and parts of Iraqi Kurdistan is also the result of the experiences and lessons learned from Öcalan and other militants' time in the PKK. As discussed in Chapter 1, the PYD has been governing in northern

Syria alongside a coalition of other parties since 2012. Having been founded in 2003, the Kurdish majority party has always maintained a militia, the YPG. This practice was inspired by the practices of Turkey's PKK. The party is influenced by the PKK in a number of ways: like the PKK, which has maintained an autonomous women's paramilitary known as the Free Women of Kurdistan Troops (YJAK) since 1995 (Al-Ali and Tas 2018), the PYD formed a female militia known as the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in 2012, although it had maintained smaller numbers of women in its ranks prior to this. Its members were trained by former commanders of the PKK (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 134). Both the PYD and PKK subscribe to the political philosophy of Öcalan (Savelsberg 2014, 98), forming part of the same umbrella organisation, the KCK (Öcalan 2005b), which provides the common platform of democratic confederalism to both parties.

Prior to 2005, the PKK waged a guerrilla war against the Turkish state, seeking to secede. As I noted above, many attacks into Turkey during this war were launched from northern Syria (Mason 2014, 116). This form of violence was 'the by-product of state-centered strategies aimed at forming new nation-states' (Türk 2020, 8): with the goal being state capture, attacks often targeted police barracks and other similar locales aimed at breaking the Turkish state's monopoly on violence. The ensuing conflict resembled a guerrilla war. As Üstündağ (2016) and Türk (2020) note, in the twenty-first century the PKK pivoted away from the goal of state capture to the stated goal of self-defence (see also Gerber and Brincat 2018). The relationship that the latter approach has with the monopoly on violence, I argue, differs significantly, as does its preponderance for producing disorder. This is based on two key lessons learned from the guerrilla war against the state. First, Öcalan laments that the PKK relied on villagers to keep them supplied during the war, leaving 'them defenceless when the state struck', that is, when the state began targeting villagers with the goal of cutting off the PKK's logistical support (Üstündağ 2016, 201). Conversely, PKK members grew to rely on the resources and cover

supplied by civilian villagers. As Üstündağ (2016, 202) notes, these dynamics turned 'PKK members into warlord-like figures with partial sovereignties.' In short, this dynamic replicated the racketeering model described above, with guerrillas supplying or withholding security to and from civilians, using insecurity as a tool to extract rents or concessions from the Turkish government. As I discuss further below, one of the implemented solutions to this dilemma is to attempt to break down the distinction – and the hierarchy – between civilian and soldier, allowing the former access to training and arms as a means of preventing their own victimisation.

Second, and connectedly, throughout the 1980s, the PKK's leftist goals risked co-option by male guerrilla leaders who monopolised arms and information, and the party nearly devolved into paramilitaries. As a result, in 1993, Öcalan encouraged the formation of an independent women's army and other autonomous institutions, which 'not only guaranteed women's protection against men … but also disrupted channels of secrecy, transformed relations with locals, and effectively developed an opposition to the abuse of power' (Üstündağ, 2016, 200). Both of these lessons involve the key insight that monopolies of violence form inside of paramilitaries and that this is what propagates violence. By contrast, the democratic confederal solution, as I discuss below, is to distribute the means of violence as widely as possible, 'democratising' and decentralising it in order to prevent these internal monopolies from developing. As Üstündağ (2016, 2018) writes, '[t]he experience of Rojava, informed by thirty years of guerrilla warfare waged in the name of a colonized people, suggests the way forward involves the profanation of violence and the law by their radical democratization rather than an unrealistic and liberal adherence to nonviolence.'

Alongside the YPG and YPJ, there exist several other paramilitary organisations in AANES and surrounding regions that are loosely linked. As opposed to rebel groups that vie to capture power and transfer it away from AANES, these groups usually train at Rojava's YPG/YPJ and

asayiş academies, are trained by the party, or subscribe to the ethos of 'self-defence' (see, for example, Paraszczuk 2015). This includes the asayiş, who act as the area's 'police' force – although eschewing this name – and maintain internal security, such as the Hêzên Xweparastinê (Self-Defence Forces) (HXP), a locally conscripted army trained by the YPG. Other militias include the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ) and its women's wing, the Êzîdxan Women's Units (YJÊ), formerly known as the YPJ-Sinjar; the Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces for Syriac (Chaldean, Assyrian and Aramean) women (HSNB), established in August 2015 (HSNB 2020); and the women's units of the Assyrian Khabour Guard Council (Kongra Star 2020). In addition to these Yezidi and Assyrian groups, further examples include Sutoro or Sootoro (Aramaic for 'defence'), a self-defence militia for Syriac Christians, as well as the Hêza Parastina Cewherî (Self-Defence Forces) (HPC) and the women's HPC-Jin (B. [*sic*] 2016; Quinn 2015; Kongra Star 2020). These forces have fought in combination, and sometimes the name Gozarto Protection Forces (GPF) is used to refer to the Khabour Guard Council together with Sootoro and the Nineveh Protection Unit. The Syriac groups have generally operated in north-east Syria, in particular Hesekê province (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016; Lemmon 2021a, 127), while the HPC have operated in or around Qamishlo in northern Syria. The SDF is also composed of groups including the Syrian Kurdish Anti-Terror Forces, a special forces unit, and the Al-Bab Military Council, which has a female militia. The People's Defence Forces or Hêzên Parastina Gel (HPG), a militia of the PKK, are active in areas of northern Iraq such as Gare, from which they operate (Al Jazeera 2021).

Although there are many other paramilitary groups active in NES and surrounds, this chapter focuses on those formed under the discourse of 'self-defence' and which have been inspired by the ethos of violence I have outlined above. These groups are considered to be linked in this way not only because Bookchin and Öcalan's views on defence are taught by these organisations at training academies, but also that this particular framing and language are

reproduced in public statements made by these militants. For example, in 2016 conscription was introduced for 18- to 30-year-olds in the Kobani region, instituted as a law known as the 'Self Defence Duty' (see Özçelik (2020) for a more critical account of this measure). Speaking to the measure, Ibrahim Kurdo, the head of foreign relations in Kobani, stated that: 'We have been under threat for five years, and people realize that this self defence service was created for them to be able to defend themselves … It is a natural right to defend yourselves' (quoted in van Wilgenburg 2016a). Here, Kurdo is clearly reproducing the argument that self-defence is inherent and can be located in nature. Similarly, a commonly repeated metaphor inside these organisations understands the groups' military activities via the 'theory of the rose' – just as roses possess a natural defence mechanism in the form of thorns, so too Rojava acts as a flower protecting itself from attack (quoted in Finley 2015; Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 139; Dirik 2017; Çiçek 2015).

These organisations therefore share a common conception of violence, one that espouses an understanding of the relationship between order and the monopoly on violence that rivals statist realism. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, given the strong norm that associates an overlapping, multifarious and widely distributed means of violence with disorder, the 'people's protection' and 'self-defence' militias discussed in this chapter are viewed as promoting order, because they break down the systems that are viewed as drivers of violence. I discuss how this functions in AANES in two ways. First, these paramilitaries are viewed as producers of order because they place the means of violence into the hands of those who typically have violence inflicted upon them. This violence comes from both the state and from dominant groups in society, including men and the ethnic or religious majority. Second, the provision of security from the bottom up, rather than the top down, is viewed as a driver of disorder when locals become estranged from the responsibility to protect their own communities. In other words, the very professionnalisation and centralisation of security provision characteristic of states is

viewed as something that perpetuates conflict; the anti-state alternative pursued by these NSAGs helps correct for this problem.

Breaking down the gendered and racialised monopoly on violence

In this section I discuss the increased accessibility of the means of violence by women and ethnoreligious minorities as a method of promoting order, by breaking down men's and an Arab/Ba'athist monopoly on violence.

Participants of the Rojava movement link states to a matrix of oppressions, defining states as fundamentally tied up with capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (Dirik 2017; Jineoloji Akademisi 2015, 103). This is seen as being reflected in who amongst society holds the monopoly over violence: majority ethnic or religious groups, as well as men. Violence against social minorities is generally understood to be state-sanctioned, if not explicitly enacted by states. For example, prior to 2013, the great majority of the Syrian military and police were composed of Arabs, and Kurds and other ethnic minorities were routinely detained, assaulted or killed by military and the police (Human Rights Watch 2007; 2009). Likewise, Kurdish Syrian female activists working inside the group Yekîtiya Star were often arrested by security forces (Isik 2018). Similarly, subsequent to the Turkish occupation of Afrin, Rojava proponents argue that the incidence of violence against women in general and female Syrian Kurdish politicians and activists in the region has escalated, which is often depicted as reflecting the Turkish state's patriarchal orientation (Bodette 2020). Today, the HSNB identifies its primary assailant to be Turkey, stating that 'we are now as a force defending ourselves against the Turkish state. As Syriac women in particular we faced a lot of massacres, this is why we built up our own force against these attacks' (Kongra Star 2020). Yezidi and Syriac female militias were formed to better protect these marginalised groups from violence, particularly in the context of the failure of states to protect them adequately during the attacks from ISIS in 2014

and 2015 (HSNB 2020; Aslan 2021). As Madeleine Khamis, commander of the Assyrian Khabour Guards Council states, '[a]s Assyrian peoples, especially women, we have been subjected to many massacres and cruelties at all times, so we must take on the responsibility of protecting ourselves' (Kongra Star 2020). The Iraqi government and KRG attempted to expel these autonomous self-defence groups from the region in late 2021 – as Dirik (2022, 273) writes, they continue to operate 'in the shadow of power struggles.' Dirik's words evoke Benjamin's and Martel's definition of anarchy, which I first introduced in Chapter 1: a presence of politics that is local and multiple, and continues to go on even if it is under the shadow of sovereign authority, and thus helps to dismantle this authority.

The formation of autonomous militias along gender and ethnic or ethno-religious lines reflect the belief that it is the monopolisation of violence that produces violence, creating hierarchies inside of society where certain groups can wield violence against those who are defenceless. As Helen Kinsella notes (2011, 8), the term 'civilian' is typically associated with innocence and defencelessness, which has a gendered dimension.[20] Indeed, not only in Syria and Iraq, but across the world the majority of the armed forces are male, while women and children comprise the majority of civilians. Inside the state system, Kinsella points out that the prevailing norm is that states are supposed to protect and defend these civilians who cannot do so for themselves. Inside the AANES discourse, on the other hand, if it is the state that one needs protection and defense from, then civilians – the bulk of whom are women – should seek to exit this category. Thus, crucial to breaking up these monopolies is the creation of dedicated and autonomous militias along the lines of ethnicity, religion and gender, as well as at the

[20] Kinsella (2011) also aptly points out that the civilian-combatant distinction that lies at the heart of international humanitarian law is not real, but rather ambiguous, contingent, and performative: this distinction neither exists cleanly in reality, nor do states protect and defend civilians in war-time. Although this distinction appears to us as a 'universal norm', the civilian-combatant distinction is another example of a statist discourse that is challenged by AANES discourses. In the region, meanwhile, it is a discourse upheld most vociferously by the Turkish state, who routinely call female combatants who join these militias brainwashed, and compare their recruitment to the recruitment of children (M. Çelik 2015). Such depictions attempt to re-naturalise the positioning of women into the category of civilian.

intersections of these identities: for example, the women's units of the Assyrian Khabour Guards Council work across ethnicity, gender and religious lines, playing a role in the protection and liberation of Christian-populated areas of Syria. Groups autonomously arming themselves, therefore, is seen as one of the crucial means of reducing the incidence of violence against these specific groups. The YPG has a higher proportion of women in it than most conventional armies in the world, sitting at around 25 to 40 percent (Terrorism Research and Analysis Consortium 2016); alongside the 40 percent quota for female representation in public institutions, women hold public office and participate in education and public life; and are reported to experience lower levels of gender-based violence compared to other regions of Iraq and Syria, and compared to before the appearance of these NSAGs (Krajeski 2015). While these NSAGs have proliferated, Rojava has come to be increasingly popularly made sense of as uniquely peaceful compared to the rest of Syria, described as a 'zone of peace' and 'safe haven' amidst widespread conflict (Gupta 2016a; Kobani University 2021; also see Nordhag 2021 on Rojava as a "zone of peace"). In a 2021 online talk delivered as part of a lecture series organised by Kobani University, Slavoj Žižek described the region as an 'actually existing utopia' from which Western countries could learn lessons about democracy (Kobani University 2021). That higher levels of security, and democracy, could be experienced in regions with higher numbers of non-state combatants could be considered a counter-intuitive proposition, and it therefore stands in distinct contrast to state-centric theories that view full sovereignty, including a monopoly over the legitimate use of force, as the necessary antidote to its only other alternative, disorder.

Local security and felt, owned order

Earlier in Chapter 1 I discussed James C. Scott's critique of the state. Part of this critique is his analysis of the 'gaze' of the state, which, he argues, 'sees' through a zoomed out and synoptic lens. What constitutes order is decided from this overhead point of view, and it tends to prefer

simplifications, including centralisation. However, Scott argues that external, top-down attempts to impose order often in fact produce 'felt disorder' (1998, 133) on the ground. By contrast, he argues that re-orienting one's gaze towards the local allows one to see that complex systems – ones that may look to an outside observer like chaos – function quite well and organically at the grassroots level. This he calls 'experienced order', and it is tied not to policemen, nightwatchmen or public officials, but rather to informal, local agents who promote order from below, sometimes in unexpected ways (Scott 1998, 135–6). In this section I discuss how this insight can be applied to understanding the way that these overlapping self-defence organisations I have identified are seen as producing the experience of order specifically by localising security.

As Ibrahim Kurdo identifies in the quotation above, the requirement that individuals defend their own towns is tied to an ethos of encouraging inhabitants of Rojava to take ownership over their own security needs at the local level, rather than relying on organisations such as the YPG to enter a region and maintain security on its behalf. This latter approach would constitute a top-down provision of security, such as that enacted by states, where authority flows from the state down to society. 'Self-defence' organisations in the region consciously seek to avert such a dynamic. The asayiş of NES in particular is concerned with untethering itself from the state, via 'localis[ing] itself' (Üstündağ 2016, 205), and also de-professionalising itself. This occurs in several ways. First, rejecting the label of police (Dirik 2015c), which is considered to be tied up with hegemony, the asayiş instead calls itself an 'internal security', and volunteer, force, one concerned with defending society rather than the state (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 171). This choice of language again echoes the social ecology epistemology. Here, the 'state' as a signifier is held outside of the knowledge assumed about, and associations drawn between, society, order and the legitimate use of force, rather than being the central node upon which these signifiers generally converge.

Second, the asayiş is not a professionalised force – they do not wear uniforms and they work not to carry guns, so as not to visually distinguish themselves from the communities they are a part of (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 173; Üstündağ 2016, 205). As I discussed in Chapter 1, the performance of stateness hinges just as much on such symbolic, iconographic, and bodily enactments of the state, its sovereignty, and the monopoly over force, just as much as it does on brute military power itself. In this vein, Üstündağ (2016, 204) discusses the role of 'spatial enactments' in creating the experience of statehood, such as buildings, gates and checkpoints. Instead of these, asayiş facilities instead feature things like 'dogs, flowers and plants.' Dirik (2016a, 149) also highlights that the asayiş academy in Rimelan is in the same building where the Syrian secret service used to be located: she writes about students who later attended the building to take classes on jineology and attend to the garden and kitchen had previously been tortured there; and about the Ishtar Women's Academy in Rimelan, which was formerly a Ba'ath Party guest house, and turned into a gated complex that 'women repurposed and turned purple' (Dirik 2022, 224). Each of these examples point to how the asayiş seeks to reject the enactment of stateness.

Third, although members are recompensed a small amount for their work, it is not possible to make a career in the asayiş. With no chain of command to 'climb', and with only modest pay, members tend to work second jobs (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 173). This re-frames participation in the group as a community service, rather than a rent-seeking exercise. Furthermore, these organisations purport that their ultimate goal is in fact to recede in the long-term, and to have all of their functions absorbed into community assemblies and people's courts, which are conceived of as being able to mediate, resolve disputes, prevent crime and rehabilitate offenders at an even more radically local level. As such, many of these defence organisations seek ultimately to eschew violence. For example, although members of the HPC-*Jin* undergo basic military training, they define themselves as 'not a military force.' Instead,

they say, they ‘are more active in society,’ working to perform reconciliation, dispute resolution, especially around gendered violence, alongside neighbourhood watch activities (Kongra Star 2020). Dirik (2022a, 124) also observes the attempt to replace police and courts with other solutions: ‘men engaged in domestic violence or any form of misogynistic behaviour or harassment get suspended from their roles and community spaces. They are held accountable by the women’s assemblies and are, unless they change, ostracised.’ The raison d’ être of many of these organisations, then, is not to inflict violence, monopolise violence, or accrue legitimacy for the violence they commit. Rather, self-defence is conceived of as taking many forms, and female participants see their activities as extending far beyond violence and militarism, as the quotation from the fighter Ceren that opened this chapter demonstrates. Indeed, self-defence even extends into the ideational realm. As I discuss further in Chapter 6, the transnational Kurdish women’s liberation movement jineology is conceived of as a method of self-defence that requires not just militancy (if necessary), but also the counter-production of knowledge about women, specifically to defend women against epistemological and symbolic attacks made against them in the course of history in the sphere of ideas, such as philosophy and the arts. As members of the Özgür Kadın Akademisi (2016, 98, my translation) write, ‘[b]uilding women’s consciousness and women’s knowledge is an act of self-defence’ (see also Aslan 2021).

As discussed above, members of the Rojava movement tie their critique of statism to a critique of capital – states, not NSAGs, are viewed as being motivated by profiteering when they engage in wars. Indeed, Dirik (2015b) traces this motivation to the historical emergence of standing armies. This argument contrasts directly with the norm discussed above that associates paramilitaries or private militias with impure, often profit-driven, motives. A society that can provide its own order is, as Dirik (2016c) argues, capable of generating and upholding its own laws, rather than relying on a static bureaucracy or professional military to impose and secure

them from ‘outside’ or from ‘above’. Rather than being viewed as private armies, then, ‘defence’ and ‘people’s protection’ organisations might be better interpreted as instances of public armies defined not from the point of view of the state, but from the point of view, or gaze, and the smaller scale, of the local. However, this means of maintaining order is not represented as a private or privatised one. Rather, the responsibility to maintain order is one shared by all of society, from the bottom up rather than the top down. In the next section I discuss how these non-state enactments of militarism and order, the products of understanding violence without the sanction and monopoly of the state, are increasingly suppressed in AANES.

Whither self-defence?

In his essay ‘War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,’ Charles Tilly discusses how modern nation-states grew out of at first informal arrangements struck by organisations that provided security. He demonstrates that these organisations supplied protection for rents. These organisations progressively grew larger and more stable, becoming permanent and formal systems, and effectively levying taxes. To this he attributes the rise of the modern standing army. Tilly writes:

> the personnel of states purveyed violence on a larger scale, more effectively, more efficiently, with wider assent from their subject populations, and with readier collaboration from neighboring authorities than did the personnel of other organizations. But it took a long time for that series of distinctions to become established. Early in the state-making process, many parties shared the right to use violence, the practice of using it routinely to accomplish their ends, or both at once. The continuum ran from bandits and pirates to kings via tax collectors, regional power holders, and professional soldiers. … The distinctions between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” users of violence came clear only very slowly, in the process during which the state’s armed forces became relatively unified and permanent (Tilly 1985, 173; see also P. Anderson 1974).

In this section I discuss the possibility of such a trajectory for militias like the YPG, which, as I have argued, proclaim not to derive protection rents but are instead motivated by a ‘self-

defence' discourse. As I have argued throughout this thesis, AANES, despite articulating an anti-state discourse, is not exempt from the interpellative pull of stateness. However, I do not take such a possible trajectory as an organic or inevitable development, with a state the logical end-point of the unfolding of history. With the understanding that Tilly's account is historically and geographically situated rather than predictive – which Tilly himself notes – in this section I propose that if such a trajectory is set to occur and to 'normalise' AANES militias, that there are specific, immanent co-opting forces at play. It is these forces that make the move towards statehood appear inevitable because they actively suppress alternatives. One of the key forces that I have already noted in this chapter is the work of other states, such as Turkey and Iraq, who seek to eliminate these NSAGs within and outside of their borders. But the means by which AANES' anti-state potentials have been vitiated is not only through the strategy of sheer aggression. Rather, as I argue throughout this thesis, this foreclosure also results from friendly actors, who use their interactions with AANES to draw these NSAGs into stateness. To make this argument it is important to look to the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, which is a useful comparator not only because it is a Kurdish de facto self-defence force, but because it has undergone a recent transition from being a highly decentralised, amateur, non-state organisation to one that is professionalised; has been made permanent and institutionalised, with fourteen brigades integrated as of 2018 (Charountaki 2018, 1600); and increasingly exercises a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in the areas in which it operates (Charountaki 2018; Aziz and Cottey 2021; Hama and Ali 2020). This transition has been aided, shaped and moulded by other states, in particular the United States, who I argue seek to impose legibility onto these regions by making the provision of security more state-like.

It must be noted that the Peshmerga and the YPG and associated militias have multiple palpable dissimilarities and do not share a common ideology, which impacts the beliefs and values of the participants, as well as the composition of the organisation. For example, fewer than 1,000

Peshmerga fighters are women (Szekely 2020), while the militias discussed in this chapter actively recruit women and, even more distinctly, promote autonomous women's military organising. Similarly, during the fight against ISIS, female Peshmerga fighters generally worked in support roles and did not enjoy the same status as frontline fighters that YPJ women did (Marouf 2018). There are also clear political cleavages between militias like the YPG and the Peshmerga. Although they are both Kurdish forces, they relate to one another and are related to by regional actors distinctly. For example, Turkey has often sustained positive relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (Ottaway and Ottaway 2014), at the same time as it lists the YPG as a terrorist organisation. The KRG has banned the YPG affiliate PÇDK in Iraq (van Wilgenburg 2013), and also closed its borders under Turkish direction to limit aid flows into northern Syrian territory in 2013 (*Economist* 2013). For their part, the militias I discuss make strong criticisms of the Peshmerga for its more conservative orientation, such as these links to Turkey, and, despite fighting together against ISIS, spokespersons have criticised military decisions made by the Peshmerga, such as the withdrawal of its forces during ISIS' attacks on Yezidis (Paraszczuk 2015). The purpose of this comparison, therefore, is not to conflate these two groups. Rather, my goal is to explore the precedent set by international interventions designed to 'normalise' non-state fighting forces in the region, specifically by professionalising and centralising them, and demonstrate that there is a clear pattern of practices that achieves this effect. I use the Peshmerga example in order to bring it back to bear on the 'self-defence' NSAGs I have discussed, and to supply insight into some of the changes that have occurred in AANES, particularly in the YPG, in the past seven years.

The Peshmerga became the key force supplying security to the Iraqi Kurdish region (the KRI) in 1992, following the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kurdish areas at the conclusion of the Gulf War. Although the decision was made 'to de-politicize … Peshmerga units and to integrate them under the authority of a new Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs' (Hama and Ali

2020, 112), the forces remained largely divided along partisan lines between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Charountaki 2018; International Crisis Group 2015; Hama and Ali 2020). Still, both forces emerged from the conflict 'professionalised by US aid and the experience of fighting beside US troops' (International Crisis Group 2015, 9). Following the conclusion of the 1994–1998 Kurdish civil war and the establishment of the KRG, specifically as a result of the terms of the US-mediated Washington Agreement (1998), the forces re-committed to unification. The Peshmerga played a valuable role as allies of the US military throughout the invasion of Iraq, further professionalising, and pivoting from a purely defensive to an equally offensive force, by participating in, for example, the assault on Fallujah (Charountaki 2018, 1587). This movement from a defensive to an offensive orientation, and towards supporting the wars waged by other states, helps show how the Peshmerga has become drawn into stateness over time.

This continued into the twenty-first century. Following the removal of the Iraqi government in 2003, the Peshmerga was embedded in the Iraqi constitution in 2005 and the group became domestically legally recognised by the central government by subsequent laws established in 2007. Today, the US, France and Germany maintain the clear policy objective of ensuring that the Peshmerga becomes a professional, 'apolitical' fighting force (composed of non-partisan battalions), as well as a centralised one that, rather than maintaining a system of unintegrated leadership, training, headquarters and intelligence, is coordinated via and answerable to the Ministry for Peshmerga Affairs (Sputnik 2016; Hama and Ali 2020; Fumerton and van Wilgenburg 2015). During the fight against ISIS, France, the UK, Russia and Germany all supported the Peshmerga militarily, equipping them with weapons and enabling them to 'skill up' as a defence force (Charountaki 2018, 1587) via frequent experience with fighting. Today, the United States pays Peshmerga salaries (Dri 2021). In other words, the Peshmerga is now

propped up by other states and looks and acts more and more like a conventional standing army as a result.

This context is important when considering the potential futures of the YPG and its associated militias, and the survivability of its ethos regarding decentralised, non-rent-seeking provision of security. Like the Peshmerga, the YPG has been professionalised by the experience of fighting ISIS and the training and resources that have accompanied it since 2014 (I. Lee, Robertson, and Dozier 2015; Starr 2015; Pugliese 2016; BBC 2016a; *BBC Monitoring Newsfile* 2015). Following international intervention in Syria, in particular the establishment of the US-backed SDF in 2016, the YPG in particular has undergone significant transformation. Like typical standing armies, the force, as discussed above, now engages in conscription, some of it forcible (Human Rights Council 2017). It furthermore now possesses a clear chain of command, suggesting its increasing centralisation. In addition to a special forces unit, both SDF and YPG forces are salaried, with salaries specifically used to attract recruits, two factors that contribute to the professionalisation of the organisation. Starting in 2014, what used to be a 'financial assistance payment', in the form of a monthly stipend to YPG fighters with families (totalling around $180 USD), has been gradually replaced with more competitive pay that has helped to incentivise individuals to join the SDF (Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019, 122); therefore, what used to be a job predicated on volunteering has been increasingly replaced with market logics. As of 2020, the SDF has received salaries from the US military, with van Wilgenburg noting that 'the Pentagon budget for 2021 includes $400 monthly payments per individual for a total of 10,000 vetted Syrian fighters, mainly SDF fighters' (van Wilgenburg 2020b, 107). In 2017, the YPG launched a large recruitment campaign, with spokesman Redur Xelil commenting that the YPG was seeking to 'turn itself into a more organized force resembling an army', using training provided by foreign militaries (Perry 2017). Each of these factors contribute to the specialisation of the YPG, and the formation of hierarchical structures.

For example, the SDF leadership and vanguard units were primarily composed of YPG fighters. Such specialisation has also contributed to YPG forces participating in offensive activities rather than exclusively defensive ones, liberating towns and cities from which its members are not drawn. These factors replicate the model of security provision – one that involves professional members of a military entering a region from elsewhere and helping to liberate it, rather than relying on local actors defending themselves – that these self-defence militias have tended to critique. In other words, security provision is increasingly starting to come from 'outside' and 'above', rather than from 'within' and 'below'.

Although these militias' futures are as yet unknown, what is clear is that foreign actors have expressed their desire to see de facto self-defence forces 'normalised' and transformed into regular armies. These forces, in the name of survival, often *must* formalise themselves and embed themselves in existing institutions: often, the possibility of forming ongoing positive relations with other states hinge on the extent to which they can resemble them. AANES participates in these more consensual interpellative encounters with stateness in order to entrench US interests in the region, and accrue legitimacy, as defined by these actors. Such decisions help counter-balance Turkish, Iraqi or Syrian military aggression, which threaten to eliminate these groups entirely, but they come at the cost of transforming these self-defence NSAGs and making them, in short, look and act the same way that other military organisations do. These factors threaten to re-make the YPG just as the Peshmerga has been re-made, and stifle the more radical, anti-state articulations that originally informed the establishment of these groups.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate that the assertion of a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, replacing instances of overlapping and fragmented provisions of security (and sovereignty), is not a fundamentally inevitable one. As much as it has so far

characterised the history of state formation and the formation of standing armies in some contexts, the continued imputation of this teleological narrative onto analysis of regions like northern Syria has political consequences. In this chapter I have demonstrated that, although understanding instances of security provision as mere mimicry or imitation of statehood may not be 'incorrect', they are narratives that function to suppress alternative articulations which, when examined, reveal innovative re-conceptualisations of the relationship between order and centralisation of authority. I have also argued that, if we move beyond the clear set of associations drawn between non-state military groups and breakdown of order, criminality, and profit-seeking, we can observe that the discourse articulated by these militias and their proponents make clear critiques targeting these associations as state-centric.

An examination of the 'self-defence' and 'people's protection' discourse articulated by the militias that have proliferated in the region following the Rojava revolution yields innovative re-configurations of the relationship between order and violence, and local and private. While state-centric discourses link centralisation of authority to improved order, the discourses I have examined connect a monopoly over violence with the proliferation of disorder. Likewise, while statist discourses link instances of local or 'from below' provisions of security with disorder, criminality or profit-seeking, I have demonstrated that the 'self-defence' discourse instead links 'from above' provisions of security with profit-seeking, and locates a purer form of peace in the scale of the local. In the 'self-defence' discourse, therefore, violence is linked to peace, albeit in a non-linear manner. Crucially, because violence is re-interpreted in this discourse as being able to be a non-hierarchical act, the possibility of an 'ecological' use of violence reveals itself. This approach to violence maintains order because it challenges the state's capitalist, gendered, racialised monopoly over violence, all of which are viewed as drivers of violence.

Nevertheless, in AANES there is a recent pattern of security provision, and the slow accrual of legitimacy onto this security provision, increasingly to the exclusion of other forms. Although

the ‘self-defence’ discourse consistently argues that communities should be empowered to provide themselves with their own security, I have also explored evidence of increasingly centralising behaviours, in particular inside the YPG via its association with the SDF. I have concluded by arguing that the force that is propelling some of these militias ‘towards’ more state-like configurations is not a natural one, but rather one tied up with the power of states. By examining the trajectory of the Peshmerga vis-à-vis the YPG, I have argued that it is often other states who actively re-craft non-state self-defence forces into more legible forms of militarism that more closely resemble their own.

Chapter 5: Un-stating the international

Introduction

In 2015, during the peak of the fight against ISIS in Syria, the Facebook group *Lions of Rojava*, managed by the PYD, had accumulated over 30,000 followers. The page was being regularly flooded with pledges and requests to travel to northern Syria by willing international volunteers, as the broader public learned about the genocidal crimes of ISIS, which included massacres and the sexual enslavement of Yezidi women. By mid-2015, so many potential recruits were requesting to join the region's Kurdish forces that many were rejected for lack of relevant experience (McKirdy 2015), or placed in non-fighting and public communications roles. Inspired by the Paris Commune and the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War, a group of volunteer fighters who had successfully completed the journey came together in 2015 'to defend the Rojava revolution' (Isyandan 2015), forming the International Freedom Battalion (IFB).

IFB fighters played several key roles, ranging from combat (including direct fighting, ordnance disposal, sniping, and medical support) to public communications (documenting events on the ground, appearing in videos and images produced for the movement's YouTube channels and social media, and giving interviews to mainstream outlets). Returned volunteers include those with public profiles, such as British actor Michael Enright (Ajiri 2015). The IFB has also played a military role defending the towns of Tel Tamir, Haseke and Serekaniye against IS. Since the Turkish invasion of northern Syria, which started in the city of Afrin in 2018, and expanded in 2019, remaining IFB volunteers have defended the area against various NSAGs as well as Turkish state forces (Morning Star Online 2019). This chapter considers the distinctive ways that participants in the Rojava revolution have of speaking about the acts of these international volunteers, in particular those who travelled to northern Syria and joined the IFB, fighting alongside the YPG/SDF. I focus on this group because, as I argue in this chapter, their activities

allow us to access an understanding of 'foreign fighting' that most readily challenges statist discourses around the monopoly over the legitimate use of force.[21] This understanding allows us to envisage non-state-centric means of being part of the international, which I take to be a 'spatial and conceptual domain [that] constitutes the modern state as the sole form of legitimate political authority at the national level' (Shepherd 2012, 170). Specifically, I focus on the question of violence in the international, asking who can legitimately take part, and declare allegiances, in foreign conflicts. I do this in order to show that, just as in the domestic, violence in the international is sanctioned by and for states, and non-state expressions of allegiance that can lead to violence which lack this sanction are curbed out of existence.

I begin by outlining several important statements made about foreign fighters of the YPG, which I take to be representative of the wider YPG discourse about foreign fighters. I read the statements closely in order to identify patterns or common constructions of foreign fighters and the meaning of their actions, and demonstrate how these understandings depart from dominant understandings of foreign fighters. Specifically, I show that foreign fighters are most commonly represented by adherents of the Rojava revolution as 'comrades', 'anti-imperialists', and 'internationalists'. These constructions are non-state-centric because they draw their account of how to 'be' in the international – and answer the question of what might motivate someone to travel to a far-flung land to fight in a foreign conflict – without recourse to state-centric categories or modes of participation. Namely, they convey an understanding of foreign fighting that assumes that permanent loyalties – rather than temporary alliances – can be formed with those outside of one's borders, and that these loyalties may result not from shared citizenship, birth, or identity, but rather from shared political ideology. I argue that this understanding of foreign fighting represents a form of transnational action that is hard to make

[21] It is worth acknowledging that there are alternate theories that observe that the foreign fighter phenomenon is often tied up with states, who may covertly facilitate flows of fighters as part of state-sponsored pushes 'toward a proxy war' (Strazzari 2016, 56).

sense of inside a state-centric international order whose legibility comes from the assumption that one's highest loyalty should be to one's state – via citizenship – or one's nation, which I take to also be a statist category.[22] I demonstrate these arguments by drawing on existing materialist, postcolonial and internationalist political theoretical accounts, which draw explicit links between these terms and their non-state-centric potentialities. In the second half of the chapter, I discuss how this non-state-centric alternative account of foreign fighters and foreign fighting is in turn foreclosed, or disciplined out of existence, by the actions of states and the responses they make to, and representations they make of, foreign fighting. As discussed in Chapter 3, discourses have disciplinary effects, 'punishing actions that are … deviant' (Vucetic 2011, 1310). Building on David Malet's (2013) and others' observations about the history of foreign fighting, I show that the dominant discourse on foreign fighters, one normalised in official and popular (including academic) discourse since the coalescence of the modern state system (and which (re)produces that system), understands it as an impure, extremist or deviant political entanglement. This discourse legitimises punishing the act of foreign fighting, both in general and specifically in the case of fighters who travel to AANES. I show how these understandings are applied quite directly by states, who have, both regionally and internationally, sought to curtail the movement of all foreign fighters in and out of Syria. Although the fighters who have travelled to join the YPG exist in a legal grey area, given that they have not travelled to join a formally proscribed terrorist organisation,[23] their activities have been criminalised or punished to varying degrees, with the effect of depopularising and shrinking the IFB. I conclude by arguing that this process, too, helps contribute to vitiating the anti-state potentiality of AANES. I demonstrate that, as a result, the only space left for

[22] The term 'postnationalism' is used in the sociological literature to describe this phenomenon (see, for example, Maronitis 2020), but I am referring to these post-nationalist accounts as part of the post-statist umbrella because they form part of a larger matrix of eschewals of stateness that I discuss in this thesis.

[23] No countries other than Turkey and Qatar have terror-listed the YPG, citing its affiliation with the Turkey-based PKK. Although the majority of Western countries have the PKK terror-listed, the YPG is yet to be terror-listed, although there is some ambiguity around this point, discussed below.

participating in the supply of security or order in Rojava is through state-centered engagement – that is, by contributing through aid supplied by and routed through nation-states, or via formal standing armies. I do not consider aid or the variety of civil society organisations operating in the NES region in any detail, as they fall outside the remit of this chapter; my focus here is specifically on foreign fighting and its foreclosure as a mode of participation in the international within the context of the state system.

Comrades across borders

In this section I discuss how the YPG has represented the actions of foreign fighters who travelled to join and fight with the group. It should first be clarified, however, that I do not focus on the motivations or representations that the fighters themselves make. Those who have travelled to fight in northern Syria possess a variety of motivations and it is neither possible nor necessary to account for all of them. This is the case because of the discourse approach of this thesis, which is not interested in the biological individuals involved in foreign fighting, but rather how their actions are made sense of inside of a hegemonic statist formation, versus the anti-state discourse that this thesis excavates and develops.

Motivations for foreign fighting may include, for example, stated affinity with AANES' political aims, with some fighters identifying as Marxist-Leninists, anarchists, communists and anarcho-communists (for example Harp 2018; Gilbert 2019). Indeed, members of the IFB readily fly anarchist and communist flags, or serve as part of existing communist militias. Meanwhile, other visible foreign fighters include British man, Macer Gifford. He published a popular account of fighting with the YPG through the publisher Hachette, entitled *Fighting Evil* (2020), and its cover matter describes Gifford as the 'most well-known international volunteer'. Gifford identifies as a conservative (Freeman 2020). Still others were veterans of other Middle Eastern wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, and profess a sense of ongoing responsibility,

having ‘unfinished business’ in the Middle East, or avowed loathing towards ISIS fighters’ anti-democratic ideals and misogyny (Hawramy and Jalabi 2015; Nissenbaum 2015; J. Hall 2015).[24] This loathing towards ISIS took on more specific forms: the Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army (TQILA), which existed for a little over a year between 2017 and 2018, was formed by LGBTQ members of the now-defunct International Revolutionary People’s Guerrilla Forces,[25] and responded specifically to ISIS’ treatment of LGBTQ people (Miller 2017). This variety of foreign fighters motivated Ergül (2020) to propose a tripartite typology for classifying YPG volunteers, as either adventurous Westerners; radical leftist revolutionaries; or Kurdish nationalists. Like Ergül, Pedersen (2017) has also found that fantasy and adventure-seeking are often a motivator for Western participation in combat in the Middle East. Alternately, some earlier analyses observed that many YPG volunteers were Christians, travelling to Syria to oppose the Muslim ISIS (Malet 2017, 126; Carter Center 2017, 1). However, a more recent interview-based study, also by Malet, has found that many IFB members themselves do not interpret their actions through an identity-based lens, but rather a political one (generally leftist politics), and that identity rarely underlies the choice to travel (Malet 2021). Weiss (2020), contrastingly, found in a recent study that ideology may play a more limited role in motivating one to become a foreign fighter than previously imagined. The Carter Center suggests that these flows actually occurred in staggered waves, with religious and veteran groups motivated to travel in the earlier stages of the war, and that these flows fell ‘after it became clear … that the YPG was dominated by cadres of Marxists, Marxists-Leninists, and Maoists’ (2017, 1).

This thesis leaves these questions aside, acknowledging that although the fighters themselves may not understand their actions through this lens – or that these fighters and their varying

[24] This includes the ‘Daesh Hunting Club’, one of whose members was Barry Hall, a convicted rapist in his home country (BBC 2016b).
[25] This group merged with the IFB.

motivations are not a monolith – what is more significant is how they have been made sense of, and represented, by AANES, to form part of the larger anti-state discourse. Indeed, I discuss further below how academic focus on understanding foreign fighter motivations, rationales and "radicalisation pathways" contributes to a scholarly paradigm that seeks to minimise foreign fighting, and discipline it back into formal modes of state-centered engagement in the international that does not challenge the state's monopoly over violence. The goal of this thesis is distinct, and is to understand how foreign fighting can be understood outside of state-centric categories. In this section, I focus on a statement made about the fighter Anna Campbell, and in the following section I focus on a statement made about Alina Sanchez, in order to draw out the non-state-centric salience of common ways of discussing these fighters as comrades, anti-imperialists, and internationalists.

Hêlîn Qereçox: comrade

Anna Campbell was a British citizen born in East Sussex, England. Working various blue-collar jobs in her home country, she was also active in anarchist and other leftist organisations. In 2017, when she was twenty-five, she travelled to northern Syria to join the YPJ, fighting with the SDF in order to retake land from ISIS as part of the Deir ez-Zor Campaign. In 2018, she was killed by a Turkish air strike in Afrin. Posthumously remembered and identified via the Kurdish name Hêlîn Qereçox, she is widely commemorated as a martyr, both inside the region and out. The Internationalist Commune of Rojava named their Academy, the Akademiya Enternasyonalist a Sehid Helin Qerecox (the Martyr Anna Campbell Internationalist Academy) in her honour (Dani Ellis [@lapinesque] 2020). Memorials and art remembering Campbell can be found in cities including Bristol, London, Ghent, Manchester, Sheffield, Bilbao, Brighton, and Birmingham (Industrial Workers of the World 2018; Paul Myszor [@paulmyszor] 2018; Jepps Books [@JeppsBooks] 2018; Hardi Hewa [@HewaGoran2] 2018). She can therefore be considered as a very prominent face of

internationalist volunteering for Rojava. The YPG released the following statement after her death:

> The revolution of Rojava, which became the hope of humanity, drew revolutionary people from around the world to join this uprising and to courageously face these enemies. Against groups such as Daesh and al Nusra, as well as the fascist, occupier Turkish state, thousands of heroic fighters came to Rojava, overcoming all borders, to struggle for the freedom of peoples and women. Without recognizing borders in their heroism and their longing for freedom, they embraced the revolution.
>
> Fascism is an international enemy and accordingly, an international war against fascism was led on the lands of Rojava. This war also led Hêlîn Qereçox from Britain to overcome all frontiers and travel to Rojava. Comrade Hêlîn could not accept the fascist and occupier Turkish state's attack on Mount Qereçox on April 25, 2017 and therefore took up the name Hêlîn Qereçox. … When she was holding position in the Euphrates Wrath Operation alongside Kurdish and Arab women, her revolutionary spirit did not recognize borders and differences of nation, language or race (ANF News 2018b).

The above is an excerpt that is quoted at length in order to capture the tenor of the discourse surrounding YPG volunteers. The full statement refers to Campbell as a comrade eight times. This is a common tendency of YPG members, who refer to foreign fighters (and each other) frequently as 'comrade' (or 'heval' in Kurdish) (see Gifford 2020, 30; J. Palani 2019, 331). This term is a significant one, and I argue that its significance as part of an anti-state discourse can be best understood by drawing on the work of political theorist Jodi Dean, who provides one of few existing accounts of the 'comrade' in modern international political sociology. Indeed, Dean argues that although this figure has featured extensively throughout political history, it is a unique but under-studied political subject or relation:

> For centuries, political theorists have sought to explain power and its exercise via expositions of the duties and obligations, virtues and attributes of specific political figures. Machiavelli made the Prince famous... There are countless treaties on kings, monarchs, and tyrants. Political theorists have investigated the citizen and foreigner, neighbor and stranger, lord and vassal, friend and enemy. Their inquiries extend into the household: master and slave, husband and wife, parent and child, sister and brother. They include the workplace: schoolmaster and pupil, bourgeois and proletarian. Yet for all these figurations of power, its generation, exercise, and limits, there is no account of the comrade (J. Dean 2019, 61).

Dean's study makes several important postulates that can be used to build a non-state-centric account of foreign fighting, one that I argue the YPG discourse on foreign fighters encapsulates. Dean defines a comrade as a generic figure, a name given by one person to another on the same side. One of the defining features of a comrade is that anyone – but not everyone – can be one. Their individual identity ceases to matter, and they enjoy a fundamental interchangeability with other comrades (Dean 2019, 79). This resonates with the way that foreign fighters of the YPG are treated: like Campbell, they are usually re-named, and given generic *noms de guerre* that pertain to towns they have fought to defend, or appellations that draw them into a collective and de-prioritise their individual identities. This is a vital way in which the 'comrade rejects the state's logic of identification (papers, policing)' (Dean 2019, 72). It is also reflective of the AANES discourse's rejection of liberal individualism, which I discuss further in Chapter 6.

Second, the same-sidedness of the comrade is important: it requires comrades to '[take] on each other's fights as if they were your own, including those for national liberation and the fight against imperialism' (Dean 2019, 52). As opposed to the ally – a term that takes on a second meaning in International Relations – a comrade is not a 'little sovereign state' (Dean 2019, 20) that comes together temporarily, as a separate entity, united by briefly shared common interests. Comrades are more profoundly politically entangled. This is again observable amongst YPG volunteers, some of whom have assumed the cause to the point of dying for it. Indeed, Western analysts have identified that the greatest threat that results from Westerners joining the group is that they will become 'imbued with the Kurdish cause' (Corneau-Tremblay 2017). I discuss the ways in which YPG volunteers both leverage but also disavow their privileged subject-positions further below. Unlike allies, comrades are not assumed to only be able to engage with, or feel affinity towards, those who share their identity.

Rather, by assuming the same struggle, they step into the utopian, identity-free 'container' that the figure of the comrade supplies, temporarily freed of present-day power relations.

Dean's account is crucial because it helps to disentangle foreign fighting from state-centrism. One is not required to share an ethnicity, religion, or nationality (in short, an imagined sense of nation) to be a comrade. This assertion is in line with Etienne Balibar's (1991) insight that nations are constructs invented in order to supply coherence to states; I unpack the extent to which national identity is the by-product of the modern state system in more detail in Chapter 6. This insight is important for appraising the actions of non-diaspora YPG volunteers and understanding the non-identity-based motivations for their involvement. As I discuss below, this is a popular representation of foreign fighters that prevails in academic discourse, taking state-centric categories such as nationalism and nationality to be the only available means of understanding fighting for a foreign cause.

A third defining feature of the comrade helps further unpack its helpfulness for theorising foreign fighters' activities beyond the state. This is its relationality – or, in Dean's terms, ambiguity – which allows for the possibility that anyone can be a comrade. As Dean notes, a comrade differs from a neighbour, and makes it possible to have relations with those who need not share geographical proximity (or a border) (Dean 2019, 71). A comrade also differs from a friend,[26] with the friend-enemy formulation belonging most famously to Carl Schmitt, and relying on a level of state-centrism due to its embeddedness in his account of sovereignty – with friends being those who 'belong' to their nation (Dean 2019, 69). Comrades, on the other hand, are not locked into static categories supplied by the state; the artificial limitations imposed by borders can theoretically be exited permanently. Indeed, the statement above

[26] The Kurdish *heval* is used to mean comrade, although it also carries the meaning 'friend'. However, it is widely used amongst the left, and carries the same meaning that comrade does in Romance languages, referring to a fellow traveller, or a companion on a long journey.

emphasises more than once that the act of volunteering for AANES overcame borders, and bordering practices – in other words, distinctions and separations that are typically enacted by states.

Finally, Dean distinguishes a comrade from a citizen, identifying the latter as a 'relation mediated by the state' (Dean 2019, 72). This critique relies on a conventional liberal understanding of citizenship, which understands it as a relation between the individual and the state, and an identity granted to the individual by the state. In other words, if the citizen designates everyone born or residing in a specific territory, who gain rights and responsibilities only through their boundedness to a specific political community, the concept necessarily takes the state as its reference point. Comradeship, on the other hand, exceeds the state: as Dean writes, '[o]ne finds comrades all over the world' (Dean 2019, 72), and as such, comrades have loyalties outside of the state. This again helps to push our understanding of foreign fighting further into the international, with comrades venturing into the international in ways not mediated, or organised, by the state. Foreign fighters do not fight on behalf of a state, or as part of a state's army, and that is what this use of the term 'comrade', I argue, designates in the AANES discourse.

Another important aspect of the statement about Campbell is the emphasis on the fact that she fought not only to eliminate ISIS, but to protect the Rojava revolution from state and fascist forces. This representation paints a different picture of the international dimension of this fight, which targets the universal evil of fascism and imperialism rather than the specifically Middle Eastern problem of ISIS. The struggle for freedom as depicted by the statement is shared, rather than a problem faced by the Kurds and solved by Campbell. The 'cause' that Campbell is viewed as subscribing to is not a Kurdish cause, but rather a cause that implicates all people. The statement emphasises that British comrades should care about injustices occurring in the mountains of Iraq, without regard for the borders that traditionally divide these spaces, and

without requiring an ethnic, national or religious affinity to underpin such engagement. Indeed, the other key emphasis in this text, alongside the mentions of Campbell as comrade, is the repetition of her actions as helping to collapse borders. The statement therefore carefully de-emphasises differences of nation, language and race, which map onto the statist imaginary. This adheres, again, with Dean's discussion of the comrade: Campbell's assumption of the same struggle is portrayed as having allowed her to, through her acts, step into a utopian space of possibility, temporarily freed of present-day power relations, such as those of existing borders.

Power relations beyond the state

Another important tenet of statements made about foreign fighters, which helps move beyond state-centric accounts of international volunteering, pertains to this question of power relations. International Relations scholarship is clear about the asymmetries between North and South, and highlights the dangers of foreign actors asserting themselves in foreign conflicts across these divides. Indeed, many of these groups in AANES drew critiques from decolonial scholars, who observed participants' embeddedness in orientalism (Ghazzawi 2017). It is true that these foreign fighters' actions are worthy of critique, and I have discussed elsewhere the orientalist tropes proliferated by prominent returnees who have gone on to publish memoirs about their time in Syria (Gunaydin 2021a). Nevertheless, the YPG discourse on foreign fighting is careful to eschew these considerations, and is consistently encouraging and positive about the involvement of foreign fighters in the cause. There are, of course, clear instrumental reasons for why AANES actors may choose to diminish the divides between North and South, and choose instead to emphasise the 'universality' of the Rojava cause. Namely, framing the Kurdish liberation movement's concerns as being of universal or international importance helps draw more actors into the cause (Glastonbury 2018), and communications with 'foreign publics' that make them feel that they have a stake in the conflict can assist with augmenting

sympathy or contributing to recruitment (Bos and Melissen 2019, 1332). A large component of these communications can be fruitfully analysed through this kind of lens, given that many fighters' interviews and video diaries make explicit requests targeting Western governments' foreign policy. For example, volunteers appeal to their home governments for more military support (Smith-Spark 2015), or criticise the drawdown of US troops that occurred in October 2019 and enabled a second Turkish invasion (D. Kelly 2019; Michael 2019).

However, as stated, this chapter is not concerned with reproducing common academic lines of inquiry that tend to focus on understanding (and even limiting) recruitment pathways, nor understanding the strategic significance of communications made about and by foreign fighters. Rather, my goal is to explore how these ways of representing foreign fighting reject state-centrism on the level of discourse. In the following section I discuss the depiction of international volunteers as 'internationalists', whose actions are understood as helping to undo these power differentials and the borders that uphold them through 'solidarity' and sacrifice.

Solidarity, internationalism and class suicide

Alongside 'comrade', there are three other recurrent terms that are commonly used to describe the actions of foreign fighters. In this section I discuss how 'solidarity', 'internationalism' and 'class suicide' (and other terms used to encapsulate the notion of sacrifice) appear prominently in statements made by Kurdish fighters to appraise the actions of international volunteers.

The term 'solidarity' is commonly used to describe the actions of foreign fighters. A prominent example of this appears in the foreword to Gifford's memoir *Fighting Evil*. The foreword is written by Kino Gabriel, Official Spokesperson of the SDF. The statement extends thanks for the 'solidarity from international fighters' (Gifford 2020, vi). Another prominent example of this discourse comes by way of fallen fighter Alina Sanchez, an Argentinian medic who travelled to Syria to contribute her medical knowledge. Like Campbell, she was re-named

Legêrîn Çiya, and died in 2018. She is honoured with similar language as Campbell and Gifford, and praised as a comrade, particularly for bringing her medical training to NES. An in-memoriam statement notes that: 'She truly embodied the legacy of Latin American revolutionary traditions. Like Che Guevara, she, as a doctor, committed *class suicide* to serve the oppressed.'[27] She is often discussed as embodying Guevara's 'internationalist' spirit, and the PKK commemorated her in the following way:

> Rojava revolutionaries and our people will never forget her. The struggle and martyrdom of Legêrîn will be Rojava's democratic revolutionary line, and the guarantee for that line. We remember Legêrîn Çiya with gratitude and respect, and promise to hold her flag of struggle up high. We say her international spirit and socialist path will live on in the line of the PKK (quoted in Cartier 2018).

I argue that the tools for making sense of these statements lies in the history of proletarian internationalism and political theory produced about it. Chandra Mohanty, for example, explicates the concept of solidarity in her 2003 book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. In it, she defines solidarity:

> in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. Jodi Dean (1996) develops a notion of "reflective solidarity" that I find particularly useful. She argues that reflective solidarity is crafted by an interaction involving three persons: "I ask you to stand by me over and against a third" (3). This involves thematizing the third voice "to reconstruct solidarity as an inclusive ideal," rather than as an "us vs. them" notion. Dean's notion of a communicative, in-process understanding of the "we" is useful, given that solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences. It is the praxis-oriented, active political struggle embodied in this notion of solidarity that is important to my thinking … Thus, decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and the politics of solidarity … emerge as a necessary component of an antiracist and internationalist feminism—without borders (Mohanty 2003, 7).

[27] The original statement by Dirik (2018b) in English has been removed from the internet, but the Spanish translation is available. A copy of the original is retained by the author. Emphasis has been added by the author.

Here, Mohanty builds on Dean when she emphasises that solidarity – particularly internationalist solidarity – emerges out of action. Rather than taking identity as permanently intractable (and loyalty as pre-figured by one's class position, or place of birth), it is instead choices that allow one to reconstruct her identity, and demonstrate that she is on the same side as another. This ability to change – or shed – one's identity resonates with Bissau-Guinean and Cape Verdean politician and theorist Amilcar Cabral's theory of 'class suicide', a term used to describe Sanchez's actions as a foreign fighter. Cabral argued that in order for revolution to occur, the petit bourgeoisie – the revolutionary leadership – must 'sacrifice its class position, privileges and power through identification with the working masses' (Meisenhelder 1993). In his view, it was not inevitable for individuals to be determined entirely by their place in the class structure, but rather that they could choose to release their power and adopt the same goal as oppressed peoples, becoming 'completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which he belongs' (Cabral 1979, 136).

As the quotation from Mohanty above suggests, these concepts help to achieve a politics freed from the nation-state, with citizenship not assumed to be capable of making permanent determinations about where one places their loyalty. Indeed, these concepts enjoy a long history within the internationalist, Marxist and anarchist left. Proletarian internationalism of the nineteenth century, starting with the First International, assumed a unity between all the oppressed classes across the world, across the lines of nation-states. Its tenets inspired the Spanish anarchists (M. Bookchin 1977, 42), who, as discussed above, inspired the IFB in NES. Because of these connections between the history of socialist struggle and the IFB, the term 'internationalism' appears regularly inside of this discourse, and is the term employed in this chapter, to capture this non-state articulation of solidarity.

What is interesting about Dirik's statement memorialising Sanchez, therefore, is that it does not understand the difference of class that existed between Sanchez and those fighting in

northern Syria as an intractable power differential. Rather, AANES adherents instead depict those who bring their privileges – wealth, education – across North-South divides as acts of comradeship. These accounts are not identity-based in that they do not place their focus on where the foreign fighters 'have come from', but rather on what kind of political horizons are shared between them and other fighters. The focus of these statements, therefore, is on shared goals rather than shared identity. Understanding what makes these statements non-state-centric in their orientation, therefore, requires further unpacking of how foreign fighting is commonly understood in other discourses.

Foreign fighters as deviant in the state system

In this section I focus on the academic discourse surrounding foreign fighting, and demonstrate that it possesses a number of assumptions that are drawn out of a state-centric epistemology.[28] These accounts typically assume that foreign fighting is deviant; that it should be curtailed where possible; and that it is inherently extremist. I argue that all of these assumptions are based on an underlying dominant discourse which has normalised the notion that one's highest loyalty is to their nation-state, and that the only actors who may validly, or reliably, become involved in foreign conflicts must be states and not individuals – that is, that the international should be engaged in via the unit of the state. Second, I argue that the other common assumption reproduced in this literature is that foreign fighters fight in the name of a common identity – that is, their motivations are identity-based – rather than a common political goal.

Mercenaries, criminals, and extremists

Foreign fighters, defined as 'transnational non-state military groups' (Malet 2013) (and individuals), have been ubiquitous throughout the history of conflict. As Malet demonstrates, they pre-date the modern state system, having been employed as far back as the Crusades

[28] Mendelsohn (2011, 192) also discusses this issue.

(Malet 2013, 5). Foreign fighters were active in, for example, the French, Spanish and American independence struggles, fought over ideology. In addition to ideology, other common definitions of foreign fighting highlight 'religion and/or kinship' as its key drivers (de Guttry, Capone, and Paulussen 2016, 2). It was only after the establishment of the modern state system that fighting for a foreign military was normatively and legally curtailed. The US Neutrality Act of 1794 was the first piece of legislation to make it formally illegal to work for a foreign military, with other states following behind. Malet explains that 'foreign entanglements' began to be frowned upon after the modern rise of the duty of citizenship crystallised (Malet 2013, 37). Now, the norm that prevails in modern International Relations scholarship is that citizen armies are more loyal (Percy 2007; Hanson and Lin-Greenberg 2019), and their motivations more reliable and pure.[29] Foreign fighters, like other non-state armed actors such as those discussed in Chapter 4, are readily associated with mercenaries – those who fight for non-ideological, material reasons (in other words, private gain or greed) (Chesterman 2016; Paulussen 2021, 606). Alternately, the term is associated with those who travel to fight with terrorist organisations, that is, for ideological reasons associated with violent extremism, especially Islamist extremism (see Malet 2020 for similar critiques; Strazzari 2016). Indeed, the term that now predominates is 'foreign terrorist fighter' (FTF) (Jayakumar 2019; Schmid 2015). This shift in vocabulary responds to the UN Security Council's Resolution 2178, which defines FTFs as a core threat, one that is most salient upon their return to their home states, defining FTFs as 'individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict.'

[29] See Mustapha (2013) on the (im)possibility of viewing foreign fighters as virtuous in the modern state system.

Although the scholarly focus on foreign fighters in Syria concentrates on jihadism – understandably, given the thousands of individuals who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS – foreign fighters of the YPG are often characterised in these pre-established ways, suggesting that we currently lack an adequate theoretical vocabulary to understand their activities, and/or that it is the act of foreign fighting itself, rather than the 'cause' for this fighting, that is problematic. For example, Jayakumar (2019) considers YPG volunteers as FTFs despite the fact the group is almost universally not considered a terrorist organisation. No countries other than Turkey and Qatar have terror-listed the YPG, citing its affiliation with the PKK. Both Koch (2019) and Orton (2018) – who acknowledge that these fighters are 'non-Jihadi' and 'secular' – focus on the status of YPG foreign fighters as security threats to their home states, characterising them as a left-wing instantiation of comparable right-wing extremism. This rendering codes any act of foreign fighting as implicitly extreme, regardless of whether it is for a proscribed terrorist organisation or not – because, as I argue, foreign fighting entails unpredictable entanglements that challenge the statist imaginary. Inside of statism, allegiances are organised through recourse to singular, usually national, identities. Where these are absent, there can only be the potential for disorder.

In 2017 the *Small Wars Journal* published an analysis appraising the threat posed by Western volunteers in Kurdish groups. It concludes that these 'Western governments must prevent their citizens from engaging in this foreign cause' broadly for two reasons: the first being that they pose a threat if, upon return, they have developed 'a Kurdish identity' and return with 'extreme left' views or 'hostile intentions towards Western states'. The second source of threat comes from the possibility that these individuals may turn against NATO members, including that they might be willing to join a war against the Turkish state. The key concern highlighted by this analysis is that these individuals may cease to hold the views of their countries of citizenship regarding how they relate to Western countries or to their allies or, in other words,

that they may develop alternate loyalties (Corneau-Tremblay 2017). I argue that these alternate loyalties are coded as security risks because they introduce uncertainty around identity and allegiance, which is no longer able to be reliably predicted and contained within the statist imaginary.

Due to what I have argued is a statist orientation, much of the foreign fighter literature, including that on foreign fighters of the YPG, is preoccupied with explaining and predicting recruitment (Arielli 2018; Fritz and Young 2020; Koch 2019; Kunst et al. 2018; Hatahet, Cengiz, and Rashid 2019). This approach, too, re-inscribes the norm of foreign fighting as deviant, in prioritising a focus on explaining, predicting, and therefore preventing, the act. Alternately, the focus is on de-radicalising and re-normalising the individual upon return, such that they cannot pose a threat to their home states due to any persisting stray allegiances.

Transnational accounts

Of course, scholars have developed a more nuanced account of foreign fighters' motivations, which hone in on the role of political identification that crosses borders. Malet observes that conflicts that draw foreign fighters often do so by representing the war as one that threatens a shared transnational identity group (Malet 2010). He also posits that foreign fighting has proliferated in the wake of globalisation, as activists become more effective at using framing to 'make political conflicts relevant to distant audiences by making them feel as though they have a direct stake in the outcome' (Malet 2013, 14). Arielli (2018) terms this phenomenon 'vicarious plight.' Again, the focus in this transnational activism literature tends to be on Muslim case studies, which theorise populist pan-Islamism (Moore 2015; Hegghammer 2010). Hegghammer (2010), for example, explains the rise of transnational war volunteering among Muslim foreign fighters as the result of the rise of the pan-Islamic identity movement, which asked fighters to protect the Muslim nation. These transnational activists may draw on other

kinds of identity-based commonalities in addition to religious ones, including ethnic ones. For example, foreign fighter recruitment is often attributed to members of an ethnic group's diaspora (Jayakumar 2019; Meservey 2019; Clarke 2017). Mustapha (2013), meanwhile, engages with the idea of 'cosmopolitan citizenship' in order to theorise the activities of the Mujahideen in Bosnia. Cosmopolitan, or world, citizenship represents a non-statist approach to citizenship which 'defend[s] a strong sense of personal and collective responsibility for the world as a whole' (Linklater 2007, 109) and asserts that citizenship can have meaning as a category even when detached from the sovereign nation-state (Linklater 1998).

These kinds of transnational accounts explore the incidence of foreign fighting as an example of political entanglement that is not confined to the determinations of the nation-states system. They form part of a more critical, rather than conventional, strain of academic discourse on this subject, and make important critiques. Nevertheless, this chapter considers this strain of scholarship to contribute, albeit not with the same intensity, to the broader dominant discourse on foreign fighting for three reasons. First, individual social identities are often used to explain involvement in foreign fighting, including for the YPG, which de-prioritises the role of collective political identifications that are so prominently emphasised in the AANES discourse. For example, as noted above, Malet suggested that many YPG volunteers were Christians, travelling to Syria to oppose the Muslim ISIS (Malet 2017, 126). Alternately, the focus on members of an ethnic diaspora as a source of foreign fighters risks coding the migrant as a threat-in-waiting, like to be drawn to "home" causes. Second, the scholarly focus on foreign fighting for an ideology other than Islam has been sometimes subsumed, and modern awareness of the long history of foreign fighters as relatively normal components of politics de-emphasised (see Malet 2020). The putative 'extremism' of the foreign fighting act, therefore, is a recent one, and speaks to the limitations of the political imaginary within the confines of statist discourse. Third, these accounts that focus on less conventional understandings of

citizenship and nationalism as drivers of foreign fighting nevertheless continue to reproduce the nation-state, given that neither of these concepts are salient, or meaningful, outside of state-centric accounts. Indeed, it is notable that the IFB fighters whose memorial messages I discussed above were not dubbed 'world citizens', or other similar terms, but rather described as internationalists. In other words, the citizenship is not a salient concept inside of the AANES discourse on foreign fighting, whereas internationalism is.

Attempts to curtail foreign fighting

The legality of foreign fighting in the West is mixed. It is de jure illegal for any United States citizen to:

> enlist or enter himself … hire or retain another to enlist or enter himself, or to go beyond the jurisdiction of the United States with intent to be enlisted or entered in the service of any foreign prince, state, colony, district or people as a soldier or as a marine or seaman on board any vessel of war, letter of marque, or privateer (US Criminal Code Title 18, Section 959a).

This provision does not apply to anyone who volunteers in a war with a country with which the United States is at war. Canada's *Foreign Enlistments Act,* passed in 1937 in response to the Spanish Civil War, prohibits any Canadian citizen from enlisting in a foreign state's military which is at war with a 'friendly state'.[30] Similarly, the United Kingdom's *Foreign Enlistment Act* of 1870 made it illegal for Britons to enlist in foreign armies at war with a state at peace with their home country. Although these pieces of legislation are relatively uniform, they are rarely uniformly upheld and instead subject to discretionary application. The most notable example of this is that the UK's *Foreign Enlistment Act* was not enforced during the Spanish civil war, after thousands of Britons, including George Orwell, travelled there to fight. Meanwhile, in countries including Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland and Austria, it is a crime to participate in fighting for ideological reasons in another country. A notable example of this

[30] As of 2022, Canadian citizens are no longer legally able to fight with the YPG, but are able to fight on behalf of Ukraine in the Ukraine-Russian conflict.

comes by way of Denmark when Joanna Palani, an Iranian-Kurdish Danish citizen, was detained and received a nine-month prison sentence for travelling to fight with the YPJ (J. Turner 2018).

In sum, although it is generally de jure illegal to join foreign conflicts in these countries, a de facto policy that developed around the Syrian civil war is that those who travelled to Syria to join proscribed terrorist organisations such as the PKK or IS were consistently criminalised (Bulman 2016; Davies 2015; Sabin 2014; Nissenbaum 2015; Saner 2015). IS foreign fighters in particular were construed as such a significant threat to some Western states, such as the UK, Denmark and Australia, that citizenship-stripping powers were either introduced or enacted in these countries (Laine 2017; Paulussen 2021; Sykes 2016). Indeed, the UK has successfully revoked the citizenship status of some fighters in order to prevent their return. Citizenship-stripping is a highly contentious policy response that has the potential to render individuals who lack dual citizenship stateless, which constitutes a breach of international law. It is a tool that is utilised to punish disloyalty to the state, and therefore has the power to discipline, shape and order allegiance towards it (Almutawa and Walker 2022; Irving 2019), both historically and in the present day. For example, in 2022 the Israeli Supreme Court found that two Palestinian citizens of Israel could have their citizenship revoked for carrying out an attack that killed two Israelis, which constituted a 'breach of loyalty' (Chacar 2022).

YPG returnees have not been criminalised to this extent. Instead, the applied policies and laws have been more mixed. However, as the war has progressed, the tendency towards attempting to curtail this flow has increased. As Strazzari (2016, 57) notes:

> foreign fighters flocking to Syria have long been neglected in the West, or at best have been seen as radicals de facto allied in the effort of tearing down a monstrous dictatorship reportedly ready to make use of chemical weapons against its own population: it was only well into 2014 that Western States' discourse veered towards their criminalisation as domestic foes.

The volunteer fighter Şahin confirmed this insight in an interview, stating that following the invasion of Afrin and the pivot to fighting the Turkish state, 'there is an elevated risk of internationals [now] … Several states that did not go after "their citizens" for coming here to fight ISIS have changed their policies or stopped looking the other way and are now pursuing people who return much harder' (Tekoşîna Anarşîst 2020, 8). In this section I discuss the way that legal and political processes have increasingly rendered foreign fighting on behalf of AANES transgressive, narrowing the space to express this form of international participation. Increased intolerance towards foreign fighting has occurred alongside declining Western interests in the region and therefore these fighters now act, I argue, not with the sanction but in the shadow of the state. I argue that the attempts to curtail foreign fighting discussed in the next section re-enshrine the authority of the state as the sole locus from which violence might be legitimately enacted in the international order.

Stigmatisation, criminalisation

YPG foreign fighters passing through Turkey have, from the start of the conflict, been held and treated as terrorists (IT's a 2014; Suraj and MacDonald 2016). This approach results from the fact that Turkey makes no distinction between the YPG and the PKK, which is terror-listed. The YPG has been considered the PKK's 'Syrian franchise' since its founding (see, for example, Erdoğan 2016). This has created persistent tensions between Turkey and other countries, particularly NATO allies with whom Turkey has often been out of step. For example, British citizen Joe Robinson was arrested in November of 2017 by British police upon his return from Syria to the United Kingdom in 2015. He was part of a contingent of UK citizens, among citizens of other countries, who volunteered with the YPG that were investigated during this period. At the conclusion of these investigations, no one was prosecuted on the basis that there was insufficient evidence to prove that they had engaged in terrorism (Halliday 2016). Indeed, barring Joanna Palani, there are no examples of high-profile prosecutions of YPG

returnees to the West: only brief detainments, a suspended sentence, and a constellation of home searches, enhanced screening and occasional passport seizures where, ultimately, any charges laid were eventually dropped (McKernan 2019; F. Kelly 2018; Rosen 2020; van Wilgenburg 2020a). Robinson's prosecution came only when he was detained in Turkey in 2018 while on holiday, and sentenced to nearly eight years imprisonment by the Turkish government (Gayle 2018).

The Turkish government has mounted international pressure on its allies to treat foreign fighters volunteering with the YPG as terrorists, such as when the Turkish International Centre for Terrorism and Security Studies released a report entitled 'PKK's Regional Franchise of Terror' (Gurcan 2017). It explicitly criticises Western governments for continuing to distinguish between the YPG and PKK:

> Both western and Turkish foreign fighters fighting with PKK's Syrian franchises as well as non-Western militants of the YPG and YPJ admit openly that they are of the PKK, from the PKK and for the PKK. For instance, "One reason the preponderance of these fighters have joined the YPG is because if they joined the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, they would then be in violation of U.S. law." Other western foreign fighters reportedly noted that "There often seemed little to distinguish the 'terrorist' PKK and America's YPG friends" and "PKK militants would become YPG fighters by changing fatigues." (Soner, Aslan, and Kiyici 2017, 19).

The PKK and the YPG are indeed affiliate organisations, albeit not interchangeable. And this was previously acknowledged in Western foreign policy circles. The reason that the YPG has not been terror-listed, however, hinges on the fact that the Western coalition worked directly with the group in its fight against ISIS during Operation Inherent Resolve. This complexity made it difficult to punish citizens of countries who formed the coalition against ISIS in Syria for travelling to fight with a group that their home governments were actively supplying and arming. In the United Kingdom, returned fighter James Matthews made headlines after he nearly faced trial for fighting with the YPG, almost becoming the first person to be prosecuted for terrorism for assisting a group helped by the UK government, a contradiction noted by

mainstream media at the time (Defense Post 2018). The distinction maintained between the YPG and the PKK, and Western resistance to Turkish pressure on this point, became difficult to maintain subsequent to the case of Aidan James, a British fighter who trained with the PKK but served with the YPG, and was prosecuted for both acts in 2019. For his PKK links he received a 1-year jail term; the YPG-related charges were dropped (De Simone 2019).

Rosen's (2020) profile of American YPG returnees identifies that this increasing criminalisation at the border, alongside the Western drawdown in Syria, helped to decrease the numbers of foreign fighters. Indeed, these two processes have fed one another: with the ramp-down of Western support supplied to the YPG, after Trump announced the abrupt withdrawal of forces from the region in 2019, the state mandate that had briefly protected these fighters dissipated, and it ceased to be in Western security interests to limit these fighters' criminalisation. Those targeted by this enhanced criminalisation, such as Dan Newey, point to the way that it diminishes opportunities for individuals to participate in the international. After his father was investigated for terrorism offences – the first time a family member of a YPG fighter had been investigated – Newey commented: 'On the one hand Britain supports the YPG militarily as part of the international coalition and on the other hand it is actively persecuting people that have anything to do with it' (quoted in McKernan 2019). What is interesting about this statement is that it points to the contradiction at the heart of this legal approach, which has been to attempt to criminalise individuals for partaking in the same violence enacted by their home states. It echoes a statement made by the mother of Konstandinos Erik Scurfield, the first Briton to be killed fighting for the YPG. In a statement penned in 2015, she writes, in defence of her son, that he was 'not a mercenary', rejecting his characterisation as such after he left formal military service to fight with the YPG. This recalls the distinction I identified above between the soldier who fights under the mandate of the state, versus one who fights in their capacity as an individual. Scurfield goes on to remark that her son deserves to be remembered

as a hero, even if he was not acting in 'British political interests' (Botin Kurdistani [@kurdistannews24] 2015). This letter captures a fundamental insight about statism, which is that it seeks even to control when, whether and how people die. As Talal Asad (2003, 199) writes:

> because the modern nation-state seeks to regulate all aspects of individual life – even the most intimate, such as birth and death – no one … can avoid encountering its ambitious powers. It's not only that the state intervenes directly in the social body of reform; it's that all social activity requires the consent of the law, and therefore of the nation-state.

This echoes the comment made by the volunteer fighter Garzan about nation-states seeking to assert agency back over 'their citizens', which evokes the language of ownership, one secured by the state over the individual via the identity category of citizenship, which not only helps to order their allegiances, but also creates avenues for punishment if they are transgressed.

I suggest that this curtailing process forecloses the space for a non-state-centric understanding of foreign fighting in two ways. First, borders, which give definition and order to states, become re-asserted when free movement across them is restricted and contained in this manner. As I discussed above, foreign fighters have typically been curtailed in the state system, at the same historical moment that dominant European powers made a push to establish a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence: as Strazzari (2016, 61) writes, 'by blocking the activities of transnational actors that could span across borders and jurisdictions. Pirates and brotherhoods are cases in point.' The limiting of the foreign fighter phenomenon, then, has close resemblances to the discussion about sub-state militias in Chapter 4. That is, the limiting and re-shaping of both of these phenomena are designed to help craft a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence inside of AANES. Second, and connectedly, this legal treatment of these individuals helps to enshrine an order wherein the legitimacy of violence is decided on the level of the state and not the individual. Turkish security analyst Metin Gurcan (2017)

synthesised this idea when he wrote, regarding the YPG returnee problem, and the West's insufficient response to it, that, 'we are facing the grim reality that governments no longer hold a monopoly on war-making: now, anyone in one country can declare war via social media against an armed group in another country as a matter of personal choice.' As I have demonstrated in this section, the response from both regional and international actors – that is, Western home states – to the phenomenon of these fighters has been to criminalise or negatively portray their actions, or to re-centre the state when identifying which means of engaging in violence are valid. Indeed, it is notable that many of these individuals are, as I mentioned above, veterans of other Middle Eastern wars, whose actions became radically circumscribed, rather than decorated, only after they participated in fighting in their capacity as individuals.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed how the AANES discourse represents foreign fighting, which I have argued is distinct from how foreign fighting is understood in state-centric accounts. By drawing on the political theorisation of Jodi Dean and others, I have shown that common signifiers invoked to describe foreign fighters have them represented in a way that has embedded inside of it a critique of the state. These representations view foreign fighting as a phenomenon that confounds our sense of borders, identifications and nations. Indeed, I have argued that understanding foreign fighting as an act of comradeship moves beyond state-centric accounts like that of citizenship, as well as those that assume the necessity of an identity-based (ethnic, religious, national) commonality, each of which is tied up to differing degrees with statist discourse. As discussed in Chapter 2, citizenship is a social category that emerged alongside the formation of the nation-state as a way of making individuals' allegiances legible, predictable and orderly within the statist imaginary. Attempts to strip citizenship from foreign fighters in the contemporary period is a potent demonstration of this fact (Laine 2017). In

Australia, the amendment to the *Citizenship Act* that provided the power to strip citizenship from FTFs was named the *The Australian Citizenship Amendment (Allegiance to Australia) Bill* 2015. The AANES discourse helps to move beyond accounts that find foreign fighting to be deviant because it is extremist or impure. Instead, I have wagered that the 'extremism' of the foreign fighting act lays with the challenge it poses to statist discourse.

In the second half of the chapter, therefore, I have shown how statist discourse has sought to respond to and contain the threat of foreign fighters, either by attempting to directly curtail, or discursively denaturalise the phenomenon. Alternately, I have also argued that statist discourse lies behind accounts of foreign fighting that enduringly seek to make sense of it through recourse to state-centric categories. This I have demonstrated by showing how acts of foreign fighting become re-framed through state-centered vocabularies, emphasising the role of nation and identity. I have concluded by arguing that attempts to curtail foreign fighting in AANES are tied up with other pressures to restore the monopoly over the legitimate use of force in the region, and help craft a state in its borders. In the next section I continue some of the concerns introduced in this chapter around identity via an exploration of the AANES discourse on liberalism, specifically liberal secularism and liberal feminism. Chapter 6 explores how these statist solutions to ethnoreligious and gendered violence are disrupted by AANES discourses, as well as how statist logics nevertheless succeed in representing, and re-fashioning, the region in states' image.

Chapter 6: Un-stating secularism and feminism

Introduction

In Chapter 2 I canvassed the role that liberalism plays in the enduring imaginary of the modern state system, and I highlighted that a key instantiation of liberal logic which is especially relevant to the AANES case is secularism, a statist solution for managing ethno-religious or sectarian disorder. In this chapter I discuss the Apoist critique of secularism, in particular the way that it identifies nationalism as an injunction requiring groups to subordinate any identities or affinities that they possess to the state, and to adopt national identity as a primary mode of identification above others. I demonstrate this in order to show that, inside the AANES discourse, the secular solution to disorder is viewed as a driver of other kinds of disorder. Untethered from the master signifier of the state, the solution to sectarian disorder that is articulated in AANES shifts focus away from cultivating a single state-affiliated identity, or implicitly empowering an ethno-religious majority at the expense of minorities by handing them the bulk of state power. The AANES discourse on ethno-religious conflict therefore turns away from liberal secularism, instead viewing the fostering of multiple, rather than unitary, identities as key drivers of order and democracy, which is a solution that goes hand in hand with eschewing the state. I conclude the first half of the chapter by discussing how, despite AANES' problematisation of this discourse, Western mainstream and official discourses nevertheless represent the solution to sectarianism promoted in the region as a familiar, state-based form of secularism. Alternately, I argue that there is another popular pattern of articulations that construct the region and its inhabitants as sectarian in orientation and in pursuit of something resembling an ethno-state for Kurds. These representations are two sides of the same coin, as they both make AANES the subject of a state-based discourse.

The second half of the chapter proceeds similarly, but turns to considering the AANES discourse's critique of liberal state logics as they are applied not to ethno-religious but gendered violence. This is not to suggest that feminism is a core imaginary of the modern state system, but rather that the discourses that circulate around secularism and feminism as solutions for sectarian and gendered violence are very similar, because they are both viewed as being organised by liberalism. Like the discussion of secularism that precedes it, (liberal) feminism relies upon rationality and law, and equality and individualism, all animating concepts of the liberal state designed to promote order and supply democracy to women, just as they are to ethnic and religious minorities. I therefore discuss how AANES discourses tie liberal understandings of women's freedom to the state form, and how the question of gendered violence and freedom are understood in the absence of the state. I conclude by discussing how Western dominant discourses narrow the space from which to understand these non-liberal constructions of women's liberation, and the increasingly hegemonic understanding of the women's liberation project in the region as being a liberal feminist one. Bringing the discussions of secularism and feminism together, I conclude that the effect of such patterns of representation is to make available only a liberal, and therefore statist, subject-position through which AANES can speak and act, which vitiates these attempts to theorise order and democracy in the absence of the imaginary of the state system.

The AANES critique of liberal secularism

Abdullah Öcalan identifies secularism as a solution to religious conflict tied up with the genesis of the modern state system, which he argues substitutes religion as the historical locus of authority with the state as the modern locus of authority. He writes:

> The state itself has been built in such a way that it has absorbed and replaced all the divine concepts of both the medieval era and antiquity. […] If we scratch the surface of the 'secular' or modern nation-state, what we find is divine law (Öcalan 2016b, 13, my translation).

This account, which says that God's absolute power became delegated to the state once the discourse on sovereignty crystallised, bears distinct similarities to the Schmittian account. Like Schmitt, Öcalan also highlights that, with moral edicts no longer drawn from the divine, such directives instead emerged as the result of apparently objective and rational science and law, with the state bearing dominion over both of these things: what knowledge claims count as knowledge, and which laws to produce and uphold. It is for this reason that Öcalan dubs science a form of positivist religion. He writes that after the Middle Ages, the church lost ideological dominance and that this was replaced by the dominance of liberal secular institutions such as universities (Öcalan 2013a, 441, my translation), who maintained significant control over knowledge and leveraged it for state and capitalist power, only with its religious content purged from it. I expand further on this critique of positivism as a cornerstone of liberalism in the section on women's liberation below.

Inside of this discourse, nationalism is viewed as the only possible corollary of the production of secularism. Öcalan, even by 2004, immediately prior to the adoption of the democratic confederalism model, had already begun to critique nationalism as a force, writing that it too serves as the state-based replacement for what used to be forms of identification drawn from religion: 'nationalist ideology developed rapidly out of the phenomenon of the nation. In essence, nationalism serves as a substitute for common ethnic and religious feeling, and should be thought of as a more developed form of these "tribal" affinities' (2004, 80, my translation). Nationalism, writes Öcalan, is a secular 'earthly' religion, and 'the most basic tool of state legitimacy. It is difficult to run the state without relying on [it]' (Öcalan 2004, 220, my translation). He particularly critiques the way that nationalism is designed to create previously non-existent unity between different groups by replacing their multiple, overlapping identities – ethnic and religious, but also tribal – with just one, or at least requiring them to subordinate these lesser identities to the umbrella identity of nationhood, which has to be held above the

others in order to secure state power.[31] This reflects the critique of secularism made by Saba Mahmood that I discussed in Chapter 2. Talal Asad (2003, 179) echoes this when he writes that: 'unlike the modern, secular world of nation-states, medieval Christendom and Islam recognised a multiplicity of overlapping bonds and identities. People were not always expected to subject themselves to one sovereign authority, nor were they themselves sovereign moral subjects.'

Critical scholars of secularism have aptly noted that the kind of freedom that the sovereign subject of the state is able to access is circumscribed. The capacity to be protected from religious persecution relies on the state, and its opposite face, the individual citizen, who is the subject of rights. As Asad (2003, 135) writes:

> only a strong, secular state can enforce natural right and its successor as the law … [I]t is a matter of critical importance whether or not a state concedes that it has violated rights and restores them, or restores rights that have been violated within its own domain … Human rights depend, as Hannah Arendt long ago pointed out, on national rights—that is, rights that constitute, protect, and punish one as the citizen of a nation-state.

In other words, while the individual right to religious belief is protected by a sovereign state, 'the state has more than sovereign jurisdiction over all its subjects; it also seeks to create an exclusive national identity in each of its citizens' (Asad 2003, 137). Öcalan adds to this critique when he notes that nationalism as a homogenising force, which seeks to produce a single identity out of multiple identities, and to replace multiple sources of authority and of freedom

[31] It is apparent such writings are particularly responding to the Turkish context that Öcalan writes as part of, with the idea of Turkish nationalism, and secularism, coalescing only when the Turkish state did (Öcalan 2013a, 124). The Turkish Republic formed as a secular nation-state in 1923, and attempted to smooth over religious discord (between Muslims and Christians) and ethnic discord (between Turks and Kurds) by promoting civic nationalism and the choice to embrace national identifications over all other available (religious and other) identifications. Article 88 of the 1924 Turkish constitution reads: 'as regards nationality, all the inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of religion or race, are Turks. Any person born in Turkey or abroad to a Turkish father, who, born in Turkey, of a foreign father, remains there and, on his age of majority, officially chooses Turkish nationality, is Turkish' ("1924 Anayasası (1924 Constitution)" 1924, my translation). Of course, the Republic was latently religious, a point that Öcalan often identifies (Öcalan 2004, 408). For example, although the nascent Turkish identity of the twentieth century professed to be race- and religion-free, the majority of non-Muslim inhabitants of Turkey were either expelled or forced to migrate and resettle elsewhere by 1934. Islamism has also been a frequent feature of Turkish nationalism (see Yeğen 2007; Çetinsaya 1999).

with a unitary source, 'plays a major role in concealing internal class contradictions and promoting outward aggression' (Öcalan 2004, 137, my translation).

This alternative, critical understanding challenges the presumed capacity of secularism to drive order in two ways. First, it highlights that secularism does not in fact secure formal equality, nor democracy, but rather only masks the endurance of hierarchy and anti-democratic behaviour within states. Öcalan is particularly critical of 'laicisim' as a new form of religiosity in Turkey. Indeed, it has often driven persecution of Kurds in the country, with the state using the pretext of secularism as a legitimation tool to suppress Kurdish rebellions since the beginning of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Although such rebellions began as 'proto-religio-ethnic' in the nineteenth century (Yavuz 2001, 5), they later came to be understood, or produced, as nationalistic rebellions after the formation of the Turkish state. For example, by 1924, Kurdish dissent from the newly-formed Republic was suppressed both on the grounds that Kurds were nationalists and separatists (McDowall 2007, 130), but also by representations of Kurds as anti-modern, anti-secular religious zealots angered over the abolition of the Ottoman Empire's Caliphate (see Ergin 2014, 325). The Apoist critique makes it possible to appraise secularism as a powerful discourse: that is, through this lens, we can understand it not as an apolitical policy evenly applied to the populace for the purposes of fostering peace and order, but rather as a tool deployed by whichever group has captured the state to circumscribe the autonomy of the less powerful by placing them in the deviant category of the overly-religious. Such an argument is also applicable to Western secular democracies with Christian roots. These democracies can turn secular discourse onto racialised religious groups such as Muslims; as Talal Asad identifies in his discussion of the "Islamic veil affair" in France, liberal secularism acts as a value that all segments of French society are required to adhere to and unite around, and the Muslim population's failure to be adequately secular is deployed against them to justify Islamophobic oppression. He writes that these calls for unity and integration

around symbols of the nation 'may be seen as part of the problem of centralised state control' (Asad 2006, 496). The key critique at play in all of these accounts is that the liberal statist solution to ethno-religious discord is to manage it through requiring obedience to the state, which decides which forms of religious, and even nationalistic, expression are allowable. However, the state can generally only ever engage in majoritarianism, and can never be 'neutral in regard to its national identity, which is rooted in the culture, religion and language of the majority population' (Mahmood 2015, 67). Jineologists add a further, explicitly gendered critique of the nation-state's inability to produce equality between men and women, because the nationalist fervor required – to replace religious fervor – by states still demands the worship of men and the subordination of women. In *Jineology*, Baydar (2016, 124, my translation) writes:

> monotheistic religions reflect male power. God is male; God is the Father. So are the prophets and preachers. Symbols of absolute power, the representatives of God on earth, are male: tribal chiefs to kings, sultans, mirs, sheikhs. Like religious leaders, leaders of secular revolutionary movements and governments are seen as such by the masses to some extent. They are not challenged or questioned, and are given allegiance. Those who misbehave face sanctions, ranging from societal exclusion to being accused of treason.

This kind of comment can again be most deftly illustrated by way of a Turkish example, given the veneration and cult of personality that the newly-formed Turkish Republic created around the masculine figure of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, promoted through Kemalism. Per these formulations, then, the space for ethno-religious minorities to practice freedom and autonomy within the confines of the state is in fact quite small – confined generally to the private – and held at the mercy of the state, which may unevenly apply its own laws, or produce oppressive laws.

Second, according to Öcalan, not only does secularism seek to mask power relations internal to the state, but it also drives conflict in the international, with modern wars being fought in

the name of states and spurred on by nationalist sentiments, rather than in the name of religion and spurred by religious feeling. Indeed, the link between patriotism and militarism is well-attested (Mccleary, Nalls, and Williams 2009; Mosse 1990; Malešević 2010; Moss 2001). In these understandings, then, while secularism may emerge as a solution to sectarian violence, it does not form a lasting solution to it, nor to other kinds of violence. Rather, secularism is understood as a driver of violence, both domestically and in the international system.

As noted, Öcalan has not always opposed nationalism; instead, his critique of it has coalesced in recent work alongside his critique of the nation-state. Throughout this thesis I have highlighted the legacy – and current presence – of nationalism that has driven different segments of the Kurdish liberation movements to seek to form a country or countries called Kurdistan. I have also identified those critiques of AANES that see it as unable to escape this nationalism. Nevertheless, there are several ways that the AANES discourse disrupts liberal secularism that are important to highlight. For example, the Rojava Social Contract of 2014 opens as follows:

> We, the people of the Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrîn, Cizîre, and Kobanê, a confederation of Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens…

Later in the same document, the canton of Cizre is described as 'shared among Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Chechens, and adherents of Islam, Christianity and Azidet [Yezidism]'. The framing of these documents – with their focus on recognising the multiplicity of ethnic and religious identities observable in the region – summon the critique of secularism above, because they intentionally do not seek to produce a single national identity to unite the area's inhabitants. Rejecting 'authoritarianism, militarism and centralism', the 'people of the Autonomous Regions unite in the spirit of reconciliation, pluralism and democratic participation' instead. It becomes clear from this text that both identity and authority are treated the same in the non-state view: neither needs to be centralised, and aggregated or homogenised,

in order to secure order, but rather can remain multiple. This emphasis on plurality is echoed in a September 2013 YPG statement made to the UN, which describes the forces as a 'multi-ethnic and multi-nationality military institution of sons and daughters of the components of the region, the Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Assyrians, Turkoman and Armenians, who adopt the right of legitimate self-defence' (YPG General Command 2013). These two statements are typical of official releases from the region's administration, which are intentional about enumerating the multiplicity of ethnic and religious groups that comprise the area, as a clear challenge to other, statist discourses that might elide these minorities, or seek to erase rather than highlight difference. As with the discussion I raised in Chapter 5, the unity that is achieved in AANES is not represented as being identity-based, but rather one based on a commonality of political vision.

There are interesting contradictions at play in this discourse. For example, the Rojava Social Contract (2014) that is quoted above also contains an article (Article 92) that 'enshrines the principle of separation of religion and State.' Such a remark is perplexing given the conscious rejection of centralism contained in the text, and that the key tenet of democratic autonomy is to eschew a state: without a state, there can be no church to separate it from. Nevertheless, secularism is not the animating, state-based logic for these strategies for managing ethno-religious tensions: in lieu of deploying that signifier, the focus instead tends to be on alternative constructions such as democracy, autonomy and plurality. These principles are reflected in the devolution of power to ethno-religious minorities and the attempt to foster collective autonomy that is sought by the formation of autonomous militias, and the provision of training to them, which I discussed in Chapter 4. Rather than relying on the protection of the state, these militias secure themselves. And the principle is further reflected in attempts made to form military and civilian councils in new regions that the SDF liberated and that were absorbed into AANES, with their composition designed to reflect the local ethno-religious and tribal demographics of

the regions in question. This occurred in Manbij, Jarablus, al-Bab, Shadadi, al-Hawl, Tal Brak, Tal Hamees, Tal Abyad, and Raqqah. As Allsopp and van Wilgenburg (2019, 127) write, 'local Arab tribes were encouraged to form councils that followed the democratic autonomy model … in Tal Abyad a council of 134 members was created, which included prominent Arab tribal figures.' In doing so, the administration was clear that it was not seeking to build ethnic exclusivity: in the words of Hediya Yousef, the former co-president of the Executive Council of the AANES: '… it doesn't matter if a region historically belongs to Kurds or Arabs. … If Raqqah is liberated it could also join … We don't want a country to oppress the people. They can have their own self-administration' (quoted in Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019, 133). Yousef is Kurdish, and shared her co-presidency with an ethnic Arab, a principle that is reflected in other representative structures such as the SDC, which was also headed by a Kurd and an Arab, and worked to build membership among Turkmen and Christian groups.

Representations of secularism

In spite of such self-representations, there is a clear pattern of representations that readily construct AANES' identity as a liberal secular one. For example, the 2014 BBC documentary *Syria's Secret Revolution* begins with the following lines of narration, before cutting to a shot of the interior of a church:

> **Narrator**: For three years now, these frontlines have defended a little known revolution. It's not only ISIS trying to create a new society in the Middle East. In northern Syria, left wing radicals are trying to build a mini-state in an unprecedented political experiment. But this is no caliphate.
> **Man**: It's not about religion here – we protect all sects.

This documentary is one example of a larger pattern of representations – which coalesced when IS was at its zenith and media attention was concentrated on the region – that see Rojava as a 'secular utopia in ISIS' backyard' (Enzinna 2015), or a 'secular society' that provides a 'refreshing countercurrent' to the rest of the country, otherwise torn apart by 'sectarian struggle' (Gupta 2018). Such representations commonly contrapose Rojava with IS, which is

a religiously extremist non-state project par excellence. Alternately, they contrapose Rojava with the rest of the Middle East, whose conflicts are often made sense of as sectarian. Inside of the liberal imaginary, the state re-asserts itself even in its absence through such representations: a force that opposes IS or approaches religious freedoms differently from IS can only be understood using the signifier *secular*, because statist realism makes no other description of the management of religious difference available or possible. As such, *Syria's Secret Revolution* continues:

> **N**: Camps like this one, north of Qamishli, house refugees from ISIS attacks. The authorities here say the political system is based on collective agreement, based on popular local assemblies and grassroots decision making. And you can see the results at meal times in the refugee camps. All the food on offer was facilitated by the authorities, but we were told it was forty local families who'd agreed to organise and take it in turns to cook meals for the refugees. According to their constitution, in each municipality, the top three offices have to come from different ethnicities, and at least one must be a woman. This is unprecedented in the Middle East. Qamishli is the biggest city in Rojava. The separation of church and state here means women can dress as they want and there are no religious restrictions on public behaviour. Although many of the Kurds here are from Muslim backgrounds, Rojava has now become something of a sanctuary for minorities from across Syria and beyond.

In this quote, the region is constructed as engaging in 'separation of church and state', a framing that I have highlighted is only possible in the assumed presence of a state. Inside of this discourse, both religious and even gendered oppression are attributed to a lack of secularism, and equality measures between men and women and ethno-religious groups are attributed to its presence. As I highlighted in this chapter and in Chapter 4, and will discuss further below, the AANES discourse on gendered violence understands it as being inflicted by religiosity, patriarchy *and* the state, including the secular state; meanwhile, such an understanding is not available within the statist discourse. Inside of such a formulation, which takes secularism to be a central tenet of the AANES project, these same strategies that I discussed above (namely, the employment of ethno-religious quotas and autonomous councils which take into account religion, ethnicity and tribal affiliation in non-Kurdish regions) can be understood, and therefore represented, as simple examples of state-based secularism, as the documentary quote

above does. As Mahmood (2015) highlights, the secular state can employ forced solutions such as language rights, representation rights and rights of self-government. However, these are based upon the logics of liberal secularism. Mahmood makes this point when she states that:

> for a minority to draw attention to its plight, it must necessarily highlight its difference from the identity of the nation, exacerbating the fissure that produces the group's exclusion in the first place. Furthermore, a minority's demand for redress requires that the group's subordination be thematised in the laws of the nation state (whether through affirmative action, proportionate representation, quotas or special protections) (Mahmood 2015, 67).

This quotation captures my argument that the same actions can be read differently within and outside of the statist imaginary. In this instance, what adherents of the AANES discourse might consider to be examples of pluralism can readily be interpellated as evidence of liberal secularism within a statist dominant discourse; with the latter far more powerful, and therefore capable of generating a greater truth-effect, AANES' anti-state potentiality becomes foreclosed.

Representations of sectarianism

Above I identified a dominant discourse that popularly and regularly understands the cause of conflict in the Middle East as sectarian. Critics of the over-diagnosis of sectarianism have pointed to the way that it elides other drivers of conflict, essentialises identity and places a disproportionate and orientalist focus on the idea of 'ancient hatreds' (Jacoby and Neggaz 2018; Haddad 2017; Dixon 2018). In this section I highlight that the second way that AANES is absorbed into state-based logics, one that vitiates the non-state alternative to religious disorder that they espouse, is by applying this characterisation to AANES. In other words, rather than constructing the region as secular, it is instead constructed as sectarian; however, this, equally, interpellates AANES into a statist discourse.

As I noted in Chapter 1, characterisations of AANES as nationalistic are prevalent. Whether a total purging of nationalistic associations has been achieved – or more importantly, is

achievable – by the democratic autonomy initiatives I have canvassed is contested. Observers point to the fact that some of the region's ostensible changes – such as in how official documents employ language – are symbolic rather than substantive (Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019, 138). Meanwhile, evidence of enduring nationalism is available to those who seek it. As Lee (2020) notes, increased dominance of the Kurdish language in the region could be interpreted as nation- and nationalism-building. So too could the naming of the region, originally Western Kurdistan, which risked imposing a national umbrella identity onto the region. Although the term 'Western Kurdistan' was discontinued and replaced with 'Rojava' for this reason, this term is itself a Kurdish-language word – opening the region up to criticism that it is at the very least ethno-linguistically exclusive if not nationalist. The use of 'Rojava' itself has therefore since been discontinued on official channels, and the more neutral term AANES adopted.[32] What is important for this thesis, and its discourse approach, is that because AANES can readily be constructed as nationalistic, this creates opportunities to recognise a range of its behaviours as sectarian. This is because, as I have highlighted often, discourses not only describe reality, but help to produce it. For example, the 2015 Amnesty International report that I discussed in Chapter 1, which found that the YPG had destroyed houses and villages and prevented Arabs and Turkmen from returning to their homes in a timely fashion, has empowered Turkish sources to accuse the PYD of ethnic cleansing (for example Pamuk and Bektas 2015; Hürriyet 2016). Although the PYD has responded that the destruction and delays with returns were not intentional (that is, not ethnically or religiously targeted, but rather the result of fighting), such a representation endures and is exploitable, because it creates competing representations, one of which emerges as more dominant than the other. The Amnesty International report, which places an emphasis on ethnic cleansing, is today viewed

[32] It endures as a shorthand for the region, and a way of referring to the associated historical event, "The Rojava Revolution".

as the authoritative account of these home demolitions, in particular after it was followed up in 2017 by a report published in *The Nation* by Pulitzer Prize winning human rights journalist Roy Gutman, who confirmed that the YPG/PYD's actions amounted to war crimes (Gutman 2017). This report has since been removed from the web, and is contradicted by a 2017 finding made by the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic that there was no substantive evidence of systematic displacement and attempted repopulation on ethnic grounds on the part of the PYD or the YPG (Human Rights Council 2017). Putting aside the question of whether these demolitions and delayed returns were in fact intentionally targeted to Arabs and Turkmen, what is important to note is that this claim has been repeated and re-circulated widely, and has taken on the status of common-sense. In post-structuralist terms, a truth-effect has stabilised, where, after contestation, one truth claim has achieved the status of knowledge over other competing claims (Foucault 1977). This is a powerful discourse that has important effects, including diminishing international support for the PYD, and allowing Turkey to secure a guarantee from the US that the PYD would not be allowed to retain a presence west of the Euphrates as a consequence.

Meanwhile, and connectedly, when the Turkish government has sought to foment tensions in the region through proxies, it has constructed, and helped produced, these tensions specifically as ethnic tensions. The Turkish government has accomplished this primarily by backing rival tribal military alliances. This includes Ahrar ash-Sham, the Liwa al-Tawhid, and the Harakat Nur ad-Din az-Zanki (Schmidinger 2019, 75). It also includes the 'Army of Al Jazirah and Euphrates Tribes', a group formed in Turkey by 50 tribal leaders drawn from Raqqa, Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor, who accused the PYD of cleansing the region of Arabs (Daily Sabah 2017). Such representations are not always easily reconciled with other sources and pieces of information. For example, some Christians in the region opposed the PYD not because of

religion but because they remained Assad loyalists.[33] Meanwhile, ideologically aligned Arabs, Turkmen and other ethnic minorities did in fact form coalitions with Kurds, rather than homogeneously oppose them (see Allsopp and Wilgenburg 2019, 128). Additionally, many Kurds, those drawn from the rival KNC, have stringently fought against the PYD, and at times been the most vocal opposition to it. Finally, thousands of Christians who have fled the region in the past five years have done so in order to escape not the PYD, but Turkish-backed Islamist militias (Schmidinger 2020). The Turkish government has also constructed the PYD/YPG as sectarian by successfully shaping views about the pre-war demographic make-up of cities like Afrin. As Schmidinger (2019, 78) notes, President Erdoğan has made the statement that the city was ten percent Turkmen and 55 percent Arab, which is contested by Kurdish sources, who argue the city was 90 percent Kurdish. What this factual contestation again allows for is for Turkey to successfully represent any future fighting between Kurds and Turkmen in Afrin as attempted ethnic cleansing on the part of the YPD/PYD. As Schmidinger (2019, 104) writes: 'Erdoğan's brazen lies about an Arab majority and a substantial Turkmen minority in the region are setting the stage for a later narrative about the Kurds attacking innocent civilians when they resist the new settlers.'

Such alternate understandings – that the tensions in AANES are partisan or ideological – emerge as less popular and naturalised than those representations that portray AANES as sectarian, or at least nationalist. These representations form part of the same body of representations that assert that AANES pursues an independent state for Kurds, with Turkey often a primary source of both of these truth claims. This demonstrates what I highlighted in Chapter 1, which is that the pattern of representations of AANES often cleaves to this model:

[33] Schmidinger (2020, 48) makes the important observation that these Christians were protected by the Ba'ath Party only as long as they identified ethnically as Arab, supporting my argument that ostensibly secular governments often require nationalism, and that the state often manages difference through majoritarianism and prioritising the identity of the majority (in this case, the majority ethnic group of the country).

friendly states see the polity's statism in a positive light (as secularism), while unfriendly states see it in a negative light (as nationalism, sectarianism or separatism). Ultimately, they represent the same tendency, which is of states to see themselves everywhere.

Women's liberation through jineology

As discussed in Chapter 2, jineology is a political and intellectual movement whose origins lay in the theorising of Abdullah Öcalan, but which has been expanded upon extensively by female activists in the region. The prefix 'jin' means woman in Kurdish, meanwhile that '-ology' refers to the idea of developing a science of women. In Chapter 3 I discussed how jineologist thinking has informed critiques made of the monopoly over the legitimate use of force. In this section of the chapter, I focus on the critiques that jineology makes of liberalism. I demonstrate that jineologists see liberalism as a central logic of the state, with a focus on the tenets of individualism and positivism, and the flawed solutions they are viewed as providing for securing order and democracy for women. In the second part of this section, I discuss how these articulations, which are embedded in anti-state thinking, are obviated by representations that 'recognise' the women's movement as a liberal project.

The inter-connectedness of oppressions

First, jineology distinguishes itself from liberal approaches to women's rights because it rejects multiple, intersecting forms of hegemony, not only patriarchy. As I have highlighted in this thesis, this discourse sees the oppression of women as fundamentally inter-connected with the oppression wrought by states. Evin Soysal and Özlem Yanat (2020, 6, my translation) write: 'it will not be possible to dream of "another world", let alone live it, unless we fight the positivism, liberalism, neoliberalism, industrialism, nation-statism, scientism, sexism, and religious fundamentalism of capitalist modernity.' This is a whole-of-system critique that highlights the impossibility of securing democracy without dispelling with the state, among

other power structures. For example, the nation-state and patriarchy are also viewed as co-extensive with, and unable to be disembedded from, the power of capitalism, positivism, and individualism. Jineologists often hold liberalism at fault for causing struggles for women's liberation in other parts of the world to be co-opted by the state. Specifically, they argue that liberalism individualises both the conception of liberty and of oppression. Taşdemir (2016, 161, my translation) captures how liberalism individualises liberty in *Introduction to Jineology*, stating: 'Post-enlightenment… the ideal of the free, equal society based on the individual removes the individual from whatever group they belonged to, and defines them only as a singular individual. The liberal ideology that this gives rise to imposes this individualism on society.' She goes on to critique Hobbes who, in his book on the citizen, *De Cive*, suggests that humans in the state of nature have no natural sociability or sense of obligation towards one another; from this results war. As I have noted before, the Hobbesian solution to this dilemma is to produce the sovereign and the state (and the individual citizen), with humans agreeing to live in a society not out of a natural ability to avert violence and foment social solidarity, but out of fear alone. Such a statement also evokes the critique of liberal secularism identified above, that it imposes singular, individual identities as a pathway towards the kind of freedom and equality that the state supplies. Jineologists go on to suggest the liberalism also individualises the conception of oppression, by disconnecting connected struggles from one another. Beydağı (2020, 70, my translation) expresses this view as follows: 'One of the most fundamental liberal discourses of the post-modern era is that anti-system movements should aim for narrower targets and steer clear of grand narratives. In other words, the suggestion is that we can achieve nothing except for small changes in the life of the individual.'

The solution that jineologists propose for stitching back together these seemingly disconnected struggles, and analyses of power, is through re-embracing grand narratives. This idea recurs in *Jineology*, drawing on anti-colonial feminist theorist Himani Bannerji's remarks that it fell out

of fashion to 'talk about grand narratives such as class or patriarchy, or to pursue socialist utopias' following the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of liberalism, whose motto is that individuals can be whomever they want to be (quoted in Narin 2020, 180, my translation). As I discussed in Chapter 1, that autonomy can only be individual, specifically grounded in individual choices and actions, rather than collective, is a key discourse of the liberal state form. As Saba Mahmood (2005, 148) notes, this hinges upon 'an imaginary of freedom, one deeply indebted to liberal political theory, in which an individual is considered free on the condition that she act autonomously: that her actions be the result of her own choice and free will.' Beydağı (2020, 71, my translation) highlights that following the loss of a pursuit of freedom from structures that affect classes, rather than inequalities that affect individuals, anti-system movements have remained in a 'position of constant opposition' wherein they lack the 'strength to defend themselves or oppose [fascism] due to the influence of liberalism.'

What jineologists propose needs to be recovered, then, is a movement based on a grand narrative, one that can offer a systemic alternative, rather than keeping individuals locked in a reactive, within-system position of mere opposition. The alternative system that jineologists attempt to construct is 'democratic modernity'. This phrase is drawn directly from Öcalan's work, which often contraposes the dominant account of the history of human civilisation, which he terms 'capitalist modernity', with its opposite face, 'democratic modernity.' Democratic modernity highlights the parallel cultures and practices that have historically resisted this system of domination, and which AANES suggests it is continuing to build: Emine Erciyes (2016, 64, my translation) writes that, 'when history is written in the language of the oppressed, it will reveal completely different truths.' In its absence, they argue, capitalist modernity, 'suffocates all utopias, including socialist utopias, in its liberalism' (Jineoloji Akademisi 2015, 19).

According to Öcalan, the key tenets of capitalist modernity are (perhaps predictably) capitalism and the state form. These, he argues, draw their continued legitimacy from liberalism. He writes that:

> In the era of capitalist modernity, the greatest threat to democracies and self-government comes from nation-state governments. [Although] most nation-states provide the strictest centralisation [and] completely abolish the right of self-government on the level of society, they make democracy a cover for themselves. The hegemony of liberalism tries to pass off the anti-democratic nature of the nation-state as characterising the "age of democracy", and calls the nation-state's denial of democracy a victory of the democratic regime (Öcalan 2013a, 35, my translation).

In other words, Öcalan argues that capitalist modernity cruelly utilises the coercive power of the state, but disguises this fact through representative government structures, which work to convince the oppressed that they are in fact accessing democracy. Jineologists extend this critique in their discussion of how women's liberation movements were similarly neutralised by liberalism. Elif Mercan writes that:

> where women's movements used to be based on militant struggles and gains, capitalist modernity, which is the final embodiment of the patriarchal system of rule … carried out the work of drawing the achievements of women's movements into liberalism, into the state, and into its own system. This policy was developed by nation-states and international civil organisations. CEDAW, created by the UN, is the result of such a policy. In other words, they took the results of women's own efforts and resistance into their own control when they placed them under the roof of the UN (Mercan 2020, 114, my translation).

The success of the co-opting power of the liberal state is, again, attributed to individualism. Not only does this individualism reduce the unit of political action – and the subject who is entitled to freedom and to 'rights' – down to the individual, as I discuss further in the following section, it also reduces the goals sought down to individual ones. Ardem (2020, 58, my translation) writes that, 'just as liberalism prevents understanding the state of affairs and how to solve it by individualising all problems, it also neutralises the problem of freedom by differentiating, altering, distorting and individualising it.' This embeddedness of jineology in the thinking of crafting a grand narrative around democratic modernity explains why they

maintain this focus on whole-of-system critique. As Bozacı (2016, 39, my translation) writes, 'the science of democratic modernity will be an alternative to all religious, nationalist, sexist and positivist discourses, concepts, theories and institutions [resulting from] the ideology of capitalist modernity.'

Liberal rights and de-politicisation of the local

Connected to the above critique is the critique that liberalism reduces women's liberation down to the unit of the individual, a conception of freedom that necessarily locks women's movements in a compact with the state and the framework of equality and rights. As I discussed in Chapter 1, political theorists have highlighted how the figure of the individual was co-constituted with the modern state form: liberalism guaranteed autonomy to the individual, which functioned to balance against the power of the sovereign, but also made their access to rights dependent on the presence of the state and its law, without whom the subject, and therefore rights, do not exist. Jineologists evoke this formulation when they observe the dominance of such language in other women's movements. Ariel Salleh (2020, 88, my translation), for example, highlights that following the wave of new social movements in the 1970s, 'feminism was diverted by liberal individualism and turned into a one-sided struggle for equal rights.' This observation is echoed by Ardem (2021, 62, my translation), who writes: 'liberalism distorts gender consciousness and reduces feminism into a legally defined framework of rights.' Ardem is highlighting a common observation made by jineology texts, which is that the law supplied by the state came to replace the ability of societies to act ethically and morally; this insight summons the key way that the AANES discourse re-arranges the signifiers of state and society, seeing them not as being mutually constituted, as the statist discourse suggests they are, but rather at loggerheads. I re-visit this concept in the next chapter. As a result, AANES discourses do not view the state as a supplier of freedoms, but rather the entity from which freedom should be sought. Indeed, jineologists point out that the law of the

state is historically sexist, and can only to a limited extent be relied upon to secure freedom for women (Mercan 2020, 111). Writing in *Jineology,* Şafak Ardem (2020, 55, 59, my translation) observes:

> In addition to the need to fight male rule, which is reflected in individual men, it is also necessary to fight against liberalism, the state and the experience of modernity, which are the ideological identity of the broader system. Although there has been movement in the world women's struggle on this issue … the complete rejection of the system and the state has not entirely developed yet. Many women's movements instead try to separate the issue out from the struggle against states. The state is the institutionalisation of power, it produces power, and it keeps itself alive through deepening sexism. The state is the place where all sexist policies are protected and legally secured. … We cannot secure freedom or a democratic revolution without a structural revolution, that is, the overcoming of the state and the development of local, administratively autonomous organisations that work in joint partnership with a confederal unity.

Another critique contained in statements like Ardem's refers to the way that liberalism, in forcing individuals to interface with the state – which is abstracted from, and sits above, the people – in order to secure their freedom, neutralises and de-politicises society. Jineologists argue that it is society that should be the true site of struggle, politics, discussions about right and wrong (that is, morality and ethics), and democracy. This insight is particularly applied to NGOs, of which many of these writers are extremely critical. Aydın (2020, 44, my translation) writes that UN-backed NGOs and other development programs use their funds in such a way that reduces women's freedom to 'equal opportunity' measures, which has the co-opting effect of 'integrating [women's struggle] into the system' by replacing the pursuit of 'subvert[ing] social hierarchy' with the pursuit of individualised goals such as 'empowering talented women to the top.' Heine (2020) extends this critique in the same volume of *Jineology*, drawing extensively on Arundhati Roy's essay, 'The NGO-isation of Resistance,' which points to the way that NGOs capture and divert individuals and organisations away from participation in local resistance movements.

Ardem's comment about 'gender consciousness' highlights that the perceived result of this process is a society that lacks political consciousness about gendered oppression. Attempts to return politics to the level of society, and to the local, that is, to reclaim it from the state and from institutions, are observed in AANES by the attempts made to engage women politically at every level of society, rather than to only pursue electoral and representative means of integrating women into politics. In the wake of the revolution, a much-cited figure was that over 75 percent of Kurdish women had become 'politically active' (Bengio 2014), which meant being involved in debates and decision-making at meetings of committees at the local commune level, just as much as pursuing elected office at the council level. This approach was designed to challenge the de-politicisation of the local that occurred as a result of statist liberal discourses that constitute freedom as individual freedom, and constitute democracy as representative rather than direct.

This understanding helps supply a direct response to the critiques of AANES that I have highlighted, which observe that the administration engages in centralised forms of decision-making, pursues electoralism and federalism, and engages in representative politics. However, this example points to the fact that what is at stake is not the presence or absence of centralised decision-making, but the way that the relationship between the local and the higher levels is configured non-hierarchically. Rather than the lower structures sitting below the higher governance structures, they function almost dialectically: while the local seeks to continually appropriate the functions of the higher structures and someday make them redundant, they work together as a 'joint partnership', as the quote from Ardem above encapsulates. What this discussion also demonstrates is that, whether centralised decision-making is present or not, the locus of authority of these decisions must reside in the local: indeed, it is the higher levels of governance that are supposed to submit to the lower levels, given that communes may recall councils at any time (Rojava Information Centre 2019, 15). This conforms with Bookchin's

definition of confederalism, which I supplied in Chapter 3. And this recurrent emphasis on finding and living politics in the local again summons Benjamin's and Martel's discussion of anarchy as a presence. Inside of this approach, autonomy is granted not through, but rather against, the state, and to collectives rather than individuals. As Çiçek (2020, 163, my translation) writes, '[for women] it is our level of organisation that determines our level of liberation. … Propaganda that individual freedom is possible is a manipulation of liberalism to keep women from collective struggle.' In the next section I discuss how the other solution to enhancing political consciousness and challenging liberal individualism relies on restoring collectivity to knowledge production and educational initiatives, and the epistemological critique such initiatives are grounded in.

Positivism and the social sciences

Above I noted that jineology posits itself as an alternative 'science' of women. Capitalist modernity, they note, comes with its own epistemology. Therefore, part of the project of fomenting its alternative, democratic modernity, is the building of an alternate philosophy of science, with an alternative epistemology. It may seem odd that a women's liberation movement would target positivism with the same intensity as other sources of oppression: positivism is consistently listed when jineologists discuss the nexus of power (see for example Soysal and Yanat's quote above, which is very typical of the articles in these volumes). However, jineologists convincingly trace the deleterious impact of positivism on the history of knowledge production, into which they seek to make critical interventions.

In the jineologist discourse, the history of the development of positivism begins with the development of modern science, commencing in the sixteenth century. This process was both dominated by men, and embodies masculinist principles, but notably is also connected with the origins of the development of the state form. Öcalan (2015, 15) highlights the primacy of

positivism to the development of early modern science, where knowledge, with its focus on measurement and observation, became 'confined to the appearances of things, which it equates with reality itself.' Within this understanding of positivism, whatever is not the self is designated as 'other', and whatever the self cannot observe of the other is deemed outside the realm of knowability. As Epstein (2021, 28–9) puts simply: 'the [analytic] method breaks complex wholes into their constituent parts, in order to determine what belongs to each part and what does not. It differentiates between what is identical to itself and what it not. … [T]he non-identical is appraised on its own terms, as different.' Öcalan attributes this subject-object distinction to Descartes and Cartesian dualism (Öcalan 2013a, 216, my translation), a principle that was highly influential on the seventeenth century thinking on the state that I discussed in Chapter 2, and to which I have attributed the origins of the modern state form. Jineologists consider this phenomenon from the perspective of gender, concluding that this is the method by which women were exiled from the episteme, rendered as unknowable and as other by male-driven sciences. I discussed this from the perspective of secularism in the preceding section, exploring how Öcalan positions science as a positivist form of religion that replaces the divine rule of monarchs with the rational rule of the state. Building on this, jineologists argue that positivism has spawned a secular form of sexism that replaces the sexism of religion with the sexism of the state (Emek 2020, 21, my translation).

Jineologists also critique the role that the advent of the social sciences has played in proliferating sexist and other statist knowledge into society by creating a monopoly over education. This they trace to influential figures like Auguste Comte, the progenitor of French positivism, who is discussed at some length by multiple authors in Issue 1 of *Jineology*.[34]

[34] Again, it is worth noting that these critiques are structured so as to heavily focus on positivism and the influence it has had on the development of secularism and liberalism because of the influence of French positivism on the development of the Turkish state, which imported secular law, and indeed the French conception of laïcité (laiklik in Turkish) from the West (discussed further in Chapter 2).

Emine Erciyes (2021, 62, my translation) argues that the modern social sciences provided the 'foundations of capitalism', with Comte's sociology born as an ideology, 'the ideology of liberalism', which rulers could use in the place of religion to manipulate people and embed ideology, including sexism. Jineologists argue that this state of affairs neglects that:

> people can speak for themselves, to establish the vocabulary of their own knowledge. … In the same way that liberalism creates the illusion of representative democracy, and says, "You shut up, I speak for you", so too does the intellectual/academic field, which says, "You live, and I will produce the theory and the analysis on your behalf". This attitude … establishes a hierarchical relationship between science and society, and distances science from its purpose of making sense of the truth of life. … Even the warmest and liveliest thought in the world loses its soul when it is held in the net of power (Berk and Yıldız 2021, 6, my translation).

The argument that the social sciences have functioned as a tool of the liberal state is a notable theoretical intervention that speaks back into academia and the circuits of knowledge production that often seek to frame Middle Eastern women, and stateless women, as objects rather than subjects of theory. As I have tried to highlight throughout this thesis, Kurdish women's liberationists, and the project of jineology, are often positioned as subjects of study rather than figures alongside whom scholars should consider theorising. The pages of the volumes of *Jineology* show that jineologists, for their part, already engage with English-language scholars, both in agreement and disagreement, to participate in the production of such theory. A large part of the programme of jineology is to 'critique philosophies that do not exceed a liberal epistemology … We endeavour to scrutinise academic works that work in favour of [liberal] feminism and capitalist modernity' (Jineoloji Akademisi 2015, 50, my translation). They also write that 'a criticism of social science, which has become a stronghold of positivism and liberalism … will be the most basic work of jineology' (Jineoloji Akademisi 2015, 61, my translation). Taking up the task of critiquing the social sciences, Elif Kaya (2021, 25, my translation), for example, writes:

> academic knowledge continues to remain in a dubious state despite its claims of being scientific. This is because the academy does not only produce knowledge, but also tries to direct society in line with the knowledge it produces according to the interests of capital and states. … Although there are feminist analyses on the subject, the academic world still largely continues with the values of the male mind. … Women's [and gender] studies still have not been able to take up a larger position in academia, and indeed there are attempts to limit its position further following intense attacks by neoliberal and conservative movements.

Jineology therefore seeks to construct a 'new epistemology' (Jineoloji Akademisi 2015, 52) in two key ways, first by presentation of sustained critiques and second by working to develop a robust intellectual counter-movement. The production of the volumes of *Jineology* is exemplary of this work, which is extensive and which I am able to sample only partially in this thesis. This is a clear implementation of the concept of 'self-defence', whose material, physical component I discussed in Chapter 4. Here, the form of self-defence that women activists engage in is epistemological. In addition to producing criticism, jineology works to correct for the absence of women throughout the history of knowledge production, that is, to reveal women's knowledge that has been historically deemed unknowable, and therefore 'de-other' her, and render her an object rather than only a subject of knowledge. This is also a function served by the jineology texts I canvas, particularly in the emphasis they place on allowing non-traditional contributors to contribute to these publications. Other examples include the opening, in September 2014, of northern Syria's first ever university, the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy in Qamishli (Rojava Report 2014) (now Rojava University). Based on her fieldwork, Dilar Dirik observed that at this academy older women delivered classes on types of knowledge traditionally deemed non-academic, such as folklore (Dirik 2015b). Dirik (2022b, 38) finds that the Mesopotamia Academy was created specifically 'as a critical alternative to positivist social sciences and their perpetuation of systems of power and hierarchy.' This represents a further attempt to de-centralise and therefore democratise knowledge production, also observable in the programme of workshops and seminars jineologists participate in across the

Global South (ANF News 2022a; 2022b). This focus on educational initiatives as a key pillar is connected to the critique of individualism that jineologists make of liberal feminism, which I discussed above. Çiçek (2020, 161, my translation), for example, highlights that 'one of the main weaknesses of women's movements today is that collective education is not given enough importance.' Meanwhile, in AANES, all new recruits to military academies are required to undergo mandatory training, which includes classes on jineology for both women and men (Flock 2022). These initiatives can be characterised as 'consciousness-raising' (Dirik 2022b, 109; saed [*sic*] 2017, 4) practices designed to combat individualism and positivism, and re-politicise society from the bottom up.

Representations of AANES' feminist project

Above I discussed the explicit critiques made by jineologists who reject the label of feminist (understood specifically as its liberal Western instantiation) for themselves. These women clearly connect their negative appraisals of liberal democracy to what is, in their view, the genuinely democratic alternative that they promote: rather than working cohesively against hegemony writ broadly, (neo)liberal individualism sees the state and capital co-opt women, enmeshing them in matrices of power, and depoliticising struggles for collective freedoms whose battleground should be the local. In this section I discuss how the pillars of this anti-statist discourse are foreclosed by Western official and popular representations that characterise these women as liberal feminists. Specifically, I point to the individualising nature of these representations, and how they function to depoliticise the jineology project that has undergirded the proliferation of female militancy and female activity in the public sphere in the region. With the anti-state logics of these behaviours vitiated, they are represented instead as the result of the simple struggle against men, and the pursuit of Western freedoms, which see AANES frequently depicted as aspiring to liberal democratic statehood. While this is distinct from those representations of the region that see it as an illiberal – that is, terrorist, separatist, sectarian –

project, the representations that see AANES as liberal secular and liberal feminist nevertheless also absorb AANES into stateness.

It should be noted from the outset that studies deconstructing the representation of the women of the YPJ are plentiful, and they are valuable for the focus they bring to the racialised and orientalising nature of these discourses, and to the foreign policy and other impacts generated by these representations (Dirik 2014b; Gunaydin 2022; Toivanen and Baser 2016; Şimşek and Jongerden 2018; Shahvisi 2021; V. Dean 2019). In part because this is well-traversed territory, the discussion in this section of the chapter confines itself to exploring those representations that fit jineology into the discourse of liberal democracy and make the space from which anti-state alternatives can be articulated infinitesimally small.

The fight against men

It is rare, as I established at the outset, for Western media to engage with the holistic deconstruction of power that AANES discourses propose. This applies equally to the analysis of power that jineologists espouse, which places states at the centre of oppression, including gendered oppression. Instead, female militancy in the region is usually understood as an ahistorical and apolitical reaction to ISIS, and the illiberal misogyny that this group represents. An exemplar of this phenomenon comes by way of the Australian *60 Minutes* documentary *Female State* (T. Brown 2014), which is notable even from its titling for the way that it conjures the state as master signifier. Journalist Tara Brown's (TB) focus throughout this documentary is on the YPJ's fight against IS, and it is not apparent from the interviews that appear in the footage that female militancy has another cause or origin. She remarks, 'the women that we met were just incredible. … [T]hey are so committed to their cause, so committed. There is nothing token about their equality there. ISIS is threatening to take away the sorts of things we all hold dear and that's what these women are fighting for.' Brown describes her interviewees

as ‘ultimate feminists’, and more than once highlights their risk of rape if captured. In an interview with a fighter named Cudi Ossi (CO), Brown asks:

> **TB:** Is it a sweeter victory when women kill men who think [this] of women?
> **CO:** For us, when someone from ISIS is killed by the hand of a woman, for us we are so proud because this woman can kill the enemy of humanity.
> **TB**: And women’s rights!
> **CO:** Yeah, a woman has the right to save herself and protect herself. When we are fighting, one side should kill another side. If you don’t kill the side opposite to you he will kill you.

These quotations are interesting because Brown deploys the language of equality and rights, even in the face of a more complicated rendering from Cudi Ossi. While Brown appears to characterise the YPJ’s mission as targeting the attempt to build a caliphate based on the extreme subjugation of women, Ossi makes a more wide-ranging statement that accords with the ethos of self-defence I considered in Chapter 3. Namely, she identifies the right to self-defence as one that applies without being specific to ISIS: simply that a woman has the right to save herself and protect herself.

A similar set of representations prevails in journalist Itai Anghel’s (2015) documentary *No Free Steps to Heaven,* so named because of a claim that prevailed during the height of IS’ activity that its fighters feared YPJ members in particular because to be killed by a woman prevented access to heaven, despite it being a cornerstone of IS’ doctrine that to die in battle would secure one immediate entry. Anghel’s (IA) introductory narration also summons a familiar construction regarding a quest for nation-statehood:

> **IA:** The Kurds are the biggest nation on Earth who don’t have a country. There are about 35 million Kurds and the majority are located in this region [map depicted]. In Iraq they established autonomy, in Syria they’re currently fighting a war of independence. Rojava. As they see it, this group hour is a historical opportunity to achieve what they never did before and with this understanding they are going to battle.

Later, when observing female fighters, Anghel remarks that IS’ fighters’ fear when confronted by these women is interesting, ‘because normally Da’esh treats women like they are not human beings.’ And, like the bulk of the other long-form investigative journalism material I have

reviewed, Anghel frames the focus of the YPJ's fight on ISIS. He notes that 'their vision of independence is the promise of an all-out war against the vision of the Islamic State.' Anghel's documentary was filmed in Kobani, which was a central site in the battle against ISIS, and helped to propel the YPG and YPJ to international recognition.[35] Gayle Tazmach Lemmon's 2021 *New York Times* bestseller *The Daughters of Kobani* focuses on the battle for this city, and the fight that the women of the YPJ waged 'against ISIS … [fighting] alongside the United States.' The book's blurb notes that, 'these women would spread their own political vision, determined to make women's equality a reality by fighting – house by house, street by street, city by city – the men who bought and sold women,' and goes on to identify ISIS as the target of the YPJ's energies five more times across only two paragraphs ('the world's best hope for stopping ISIS in Syria'; 'helping cement the territorial defeat of ISIS').

Although there is nothing necessarily incorrect about the fact that the YPG and YPJ made significant contributions to degrading the threat posed by IS, what I wish to highlight is that this is a limited range of ways of understanding the YPG that has nevertheless become dominant. It is difficult to find accounts as prominent as these ones in the English language that do not discuss the women's liberation movement in northern Syria, in particular the rationale to join the YPJ, without reference to IS, or without reference to threats to individual freedoms faced by these women: sexual violence, and the culturally- and religiously-borne sexism of pressure to marry, remain in the home and/or wear the hijab. As journalist Liza Shishko comments in a 2021 newspaper article, 'joining the armed resistance in Rojava is seen as an opportunity to avoid the traditional path of a female in patriarchal society – marriage, family, and children' (quoted in Svetlova 2021). Likewise, the novelist Magda Tagtachian,

[35] The battle of Kobani was the first time that the PYD/YPG garnered mainstream and popular international attention. Images and information about the battle with IS went viral on social media under the hashtags #ObamaHearKobani and #SaveKobani. It was also the first Syrian city where the US began to coordinate militarily with the PYD/YPG (Salih 2015, 9), and US military attention remained on this battle for some time. As of January 2015, four months into the US-PYD/YPG alliance, three quarters of US airstrikes in Syria were in Kobani (Albayrak and Trofimov 2015).

who wrote the book *Rojava,* a Spanish-language novel where a fictional protagonist joins the YPJ, remarked in an interview that:

> I wanted to tell a story of women who go to war wearing make-up, carrying the Kalashnikov rifle and letting their hair down to detonate themselves among the beasts of the Islamic State. … When they go to Rojava, women escape from their families, running, in the sights of snipers, because they want to be free. … These women are forced to marry very young, they are chosen by their husbands (quoted in CE Noticias 2021).

Indeed, this is not an uncommon reason for a woman to join the YPJ (see Dirik 2022, 236). However, it is not the only reason: interview materials demonstrate that women also join to fight statist oppression, enacted by both the Syrian and Turkish state. Indeed, outside of the SDF-headed battles against IS, the majority of the fighting enacted by the NSAGs I have discussed in this thesis have been against the Turkish state and their proxies. A 2022 YPJ statement responding to a Turkish drone attack in Qamishlo reads:

> We promise revenge for our martyrs by defending and strengthening the revolution, and eliminating the Turkish occupation state and ISIS/Daesh mercenaries and ensuring the liberation of Rojava and north and east Syria. … Comrade Barîn Botan, real name, Raha Bashar, who grew up in a patriotic family in Afrin was affected by the Rojava revolution in her search for freedom when she was young. She joined the ranks of the Women's Protection Units. Our comrade Barin lived with great anger and hatred towards the occupying Turkish state, and she struggled with great determination to defeat the occupation. … We will avenge our comrades from the Turkish occupation forces and its spies, and this attack will not be able to make us retreat in any way. Rather, it will strengthen our hatred and malice toward the Turkish state even more. At this stage in which our revolution and its leaders are the target of genocidal attacks, we say to all the women of north and east Syria, join the ranks of the struggle (Hawar News 2022).

2022 interviews with YPJ fighters Ronahî Xebat and Dicle Tirbespiyê, published in Kurdish news outlet ANF, echo this: Xebat characterises the Turkish forces as occupying enemies, while Tirbespiyê remarks that:

> [The Turkish state] wants to destroy the Rojava revolution by attacking women. This is nothing new … Sosin Bîrhat, Ronahî Kobanê, Dilar Heleb, Jiyan Tolhildan, Roj Xabûr and Barîn Botan from the general command of the SDF and YPJ, were killed in Turkish drone attacks. The Turkish state wants to commit genocide against the people

> of Rojava and massacres the civilian population on a daily basis. As YPJ fighters, we will not give up protecting our people no matter what (quoted in Baran 2022).

Western media that frames the YPJ's self-understanding in these terms is comparatively sparse, while the kinds of representations I have discussed above are plentiful. Indeed, the production company HiddenLight, spearheaded by Hilary Clinton and with distribution deals with large platforms such as Netflix and Apple, has optioned Lemmon's book, discussed above, and there will soon be a dramatisation of the battle for Kobani available for streaming in the Anglophone world. While stories like *The Daughters of Kobani* have entered the cultural mainstream and helped cement a dominant understanding of the Rojava revolution, other dimensions of the jineologist project that do not fit so readily into a liberal discourse remain un-articulated.

The effect of these depictions is individualising and depoliticising. This is because they hold the struggle against patriarchy in isolation from broader struggles waged by these women, including against capitalism and the state, despite the fact that the AANES discourse, as I showed above, considers them inextricably entwined. Indeed, embedded in jineologists' critique of neoliberalism is a critique of the industry that has cropped up around media depictions of these activists, which includes movies and television series, music videos, clothing and video games.[36] Jineologists write:

> … liberalism has achieved … the sale of woman in the marketplace as a commodity. Men only turn their labour into commodities, whereas women's bodies and souls are commodified too. […] This is the trap that modernity has sprung for women. From turning women into fodder for advertisements, to sex and pornography, these are tools of exploitation (Jineoloji Akademisi, 2015, 50, 136, my translation).

Similar critiques have been made in response to a 2014 spread published in the fashion magazine *Marie Claire*, which featured photographic portraits of female fighters (Griffin 2014). YPJ member Dilan commented: 'Isn't it odd that a capitalist consumerist magazine that

[36] This includes the 2018 French film *Les filles du soleil* (Girls of the Sun)*;* the Hulu series *No Man's Land;* and the 2018 multiplayer tactical first-person shooter video game *Insurgency: Sandstorm.*

objectifies women appropriates us in this way? It's ridiculous' (quoted in Letsch 2015). Indeed, a specific critique of the form of feminism that Hillary Clinton represents appears in *Jineology*:

> Liberal feminism, which advises women that the way to be equal with men is to achieve success in the business world, draws on progressive and commercial values. However, as the elite women who represent liberal feminism "rise up", the gap between improvements in their lives and the lives of the vast majority of other women widens. One of the most important examples of this is undoubtedly Hillary Clinton (Aydın 2020, 45, my translation).

Apart from obfuscating the struggle against capital that is the centrepoint of these women's resistance to patriarchy, which is discussed further in the next chapter, these depictions also obfuscate their opposition to state-based oppression, which, as I highlighted extensively in Chapter 4, drives many of these militias. Instead, the type of threat to women's freedom that is emphasised is the threat to a woman's individual liberty from religion and sexism, often reduced down to her corporeal person. Women's liberation is also individualised, understood more commonly as personal rather than collective: in an 'egalitarian and just society' like Rojava, 'women can be fighters, leaders and judges' (Svetlova 2021). Less acknowledgment is given to the other conceptions of self-defence I have canvassed above, which do not draw from a liberal framework, and often include the right to self-defence against the state. But, as I have endeavoured to point out, there is not nearly as much cultural output in the West about the YPJ's confrontations when their aggressors are the Turkish or the Syrian state, as compared to when their aggressor is an illiberal, non-state actor. While the opposing party that NES militants fight day-to-day has changed little, these same combatants now fight with the technological sophistication, flag, power and sanction of a nation-state. In an interview with an anarchist volunteer named Garzan (Tekoşîna Anarşîst 2020, 5), he remarks that the shift from fighting IS to Turkey has not in fact been substantial: 'on the ground, the enemy is the same as before. It has been widely documented how ISIS fighters put away the black flags of the Islamic State to fight under the red flag of the Turkish state, so now they have air support from an army

involved in NATO.' This disparity, too, helps re-enact the international order, disempowering non-state actors and empowering state actors.

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate the way that liberal state logics animate how secularism and feminism re-assert themselves in the place of alternate, non-state understandings of how to manage sectarian and gendered violence. In the AANES discourse, both secularism and feminism are critiqued via a deconstruction of the logics of the liberal state. First, both secularism and Western feminism are seen as promoting individual rights for national citizens. Second, they both manage difference through the common strategy of erasure, through the framework of unitary national identity, or the ostensibly equalising protection of rational law. An anti-state framework, on the other hand, emphasises collectivity over individualism, and autonomy, self-defence and social ethics over rights and law.

On the other hand, liberal statist discourses foreclose such critiques, and attempt to stabilise an understanding of AANES as secular and feminist. The effect of these articulations is not just that they are limited or partial. Rather, it is that they bring into effect what they name, by making the possibility of identity and agency contingent on embodying such liberal statist discourses. Western interest in AANES continues to be tied to the extent to which the region conforms to the nation-state model, including whether it emerges as 'secular', rather than as something else. For example, French support for AANES has in recent years emerged as a significant check on the United States' declining interest in the region, with French President Macron criticising the Trump drawdown in 2019 (Ma 2019), and between 2019 and 2021 meeting with AANES delegations (Shafaq 2021b). In the words of noted French secularist and feminist Caroline Fourest, who produced the 2019 film *Sœurs d'armes* (*Sisters in Arms*), about the role of YPG militants in combating the Yezidi genocide:

> Donald Trump played to repatriate his "boys" as soon as possible. Putin prefers the Syrian dictator. France understands their dream of a future that is both democratic and secular. This morning in Paris, the capital of a country that has always been faithful to the Kurds, a Rojava delegation came seeking support (Fourest 2019).

That French support in recent years has been tied to AANES' perceived – and imputed – secularism suggests that attention and survival for the region result to some degree from the extent to which AANES appears to the Western liberal state to resemble the self. Similarly, following the Turkish invasion of AANES, after the depletion of IS, attention towards the region shrank, and was re-invigorated only when Turkey and Turkish-backed Islamic militants were accused of persecuting Syria's Christians (McClure 2020), in the face of NES' contrasting secularism. With the visibility of AANES' precarious military situation contingent on the extent to which the administration can align itself with liberalism, alternative understandings – of the solution to ethno-religious conflict that is promoted in the region being a local, autochthonous response to specific socio-cultural, tribal and historical factors, and of specific theories about the deleterious impacts of the nation-state – fall away.

When it comes to gender, the summative impact of these depictions is similar: they align the YPJ with Western liberal feminism and therefore to Western liberal states who, indeed, they later allied with, causing the members of the YPG and later SDF to be frequently referred to as 'friends' of the West (Stephens and Stein 2015; Wall Street Journal 2014). Another book published about the conflict, a memoir by the former YPJ volunteer Joanna Palani, entitled *Freedom Fighter: My War Against ISIS on the Front Lines of Syria* (2019), published by the mainstream commercial publisher Allen & Unwin, encapsulates the impact of this discourse: when identifying her motives for volunteering with the YPG, she highlights that they were to 'fight for the European values [she] learned as a Danish girl' (quoted in Whyte 2016). As one analysis noted, the choice to ally with the YPG was sensible because they 'share a Western

understanding of human and women's rights contrary to the "moderate" Islamists whom Western states have been supporting with minimal effect' (Paasche and Gunter 2016, 10).

These examples evoke the way that recognition relies upon representations of identity as relational. Specifically, they capture the representational strategy of rapprochement that I discussed in Chapter 2 (in Todorov's (1984, 185) terms, seeing the other in the self, seeing the self in the other, imposing one's own image upon the other). When the fighters of Rojava are drawn closer to the West by virtue of their fight against a common enemy of the West, the self sees either itself in the other, or imposes its own image upon the other. This imposition is productive: by recognising AANES as liberal state-like, it interpellates AANES into stateness. Against an illiberal actor, the only subject-position available to the women's movement in Rojava is a liberal one, despite clear and persistent articulations to the contrary. Such representations underpin the friendly relationship that AANES has maintained with the West, and therefore it is these discourses which make possible the practices of intervention I have highlighted in other chapters, such as the professionalisation of the area's militias and the move towards federalism, at the heart of which lies the Western alliance with the PYD. In being recognised as if it were close to the Western self, AANES therefore becomes more like the Western self.

Such discourses produce a second, disciplinary effect. In (mis)recognising AANES, a large segment of AANES discourse is rendered unrecognisable: when Gayle Lemmon, for example, attempts to capture the AANES' political vision, she can resort only to describing it as falling 'to the left of Bernie Sanders' (Lemmon 2021b). Similarly, the author Michael Rubin (2019) wrote in *The National Interest* advocating for the US to maintain its alliance with the PYD after the Trump drawdown, arguing that the group merited the continuance of the alliance because it had substantially departed from its secessionist origins, and instead now spoke about 'decentralisation and democratic confederalism.' Despite naming these two political

philosophies, Rubin goes on to identify them as follows: 'much of Öcalan's political philosophy might be gobbledygook, but it is not the Soviet-tinged Marxism feared during the Cold War.' The use of the term 'gobbledygook' is interesting, because it demonstrates the way that democratic confederalism is not intelligible to the Western liberal actors who are friendly towards AANES. These illegible facets of the AANES discourse – those which explicitly oppose the statist logics of liberal feminism – are omitted or silenced, and fall into that space I have identified as 'non-narrativisable', experiments with radicalism that are not radically illiberal, but see themselves instead as radically democratic. Viewed under the microscope of liberal statist discourse, these articulations do not represent subject-positions from which one can speak, act, or be recognised, and they therefore fail to be viable subject-positions at all. Such non-state possibilities become reduced as a result. Volunteer fighter Garzan synthesises this idea when he states that:

> maintaining diplomatic relations … means crafting a narrative that other forces can support, because if the self-administration talks openly about a revolutionary horizon of democratic confederalism – that is, overcoming nation-states and bringing down capitalism and patriarchy – it will be easy for Erdoğan to get a green light from the superpowers to wipe out this liberated territory (Tekoşîna Anarşîst 2020, 8).

In the next chapter I discuss the AANES critique of the capitalist state, including jineologists' critique of the state, capital and its ties to patriarchy, and how the region has been drawn into its imaginary.

Chapter 7: Un-stating the economy and the environment

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the way that the AANES discourse deconstructs capitalism as a key imaginary of the state system, and as a statist solution for ordering the environment and the economy. In Chapter 1 I identified that the discourse surrounding capitalism, and of the state-capital relationship, has varied over time, leading up to the neoliberal era, whose logics animate the present conjuncture. In broad terms, I consider the discourse of capitalism to consistently apply the disciplinary logic of laissez-faire upon land, labour, and money, and I consider the state and its statecraft to be a primary force for imposing it. Polanyi's (1944, 144) definition indicates that laissez-faire has three key characteristics: a competitive labour market, the automatic gold standard, and international free trade. In this chapter I discuss some aspects of this framework, but I am led in my focus by how the AANES discourse ties capitalism to the state, and how this discourse challenges the limited forms of order and democracy that such a statist-capitalist formation is viewed as supplying. In other words, I am interested in demonstrating how the AANES discourse re-articulates the economy and the environment in the absence of the master signifier of the state, and what alternate understandings of order and democracy this yields. At the same time, I seek to demonstrate how narrow the space to speak and act upon such precepts is in the context of statist realism, such that the anti-state potentialities fomented in AANES are rendered moribund.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I examine the anti-state critique of statist capitalism in more detail from the AANES perspective. This discourse focuses on how the state system imposed the logic of capital accumulation as a means of maximising profit for those enmeshed in the power system, namely patriarchal and imperial actors. Statist capitalism also centralised markets, which became increasingly national and then international, rather than local, thus

propelling the system of international trade and finance. States, in this view, have also facilitated markets to penetrate and co-opt more and more kinds of social relation, turning land and labour into commodities. The final result of this statist-capitalist formation is the replacement of alternate ideas about freedom with liberal and then neoliberal ideas about freedom. The former takes freedom to mean the freedom of the individual, which creates individualistic relationships not only with law and order, as discussed elsewhere, but also with land and labour. Meanwhile, the latter takes freedom to mean the freedom of markets. The AANES discourse grounds its critique of statist capitalism in the same holistic critique of hegemony I have explored throughout this thesis. This holistic understanding cannot extricate the logics of capitalism from the logics of the imaginary of the state, and nor can either be extricated from patriarchy. Rather, they are all viewed as stemming from the epistemology of capitalist modernity, which establishes relations of hierarchy and pursues domination as a means of producing order. This dispensation drives not only social relations, but also how humans relate to the natural environment (and thus capitalist modernity is expressed through both the social and ecological spheres in the guise of colonial extractivism, the exploitation of women, and the monopolisation and centralisation of economic power).

Second, I explore the AANES discourse's non-state solution for managing the economy and the environment in a manner that adheres with the non-hierarchical epistemology of social ecology. Drawing again on Bookchin and Öcalan's thinking on social ecology and democratic modernity, I show that these are constructed as alternate means of achieving order, which do not construe order as states do: rather than seeking to monopolise economic power, social ecology seeks to democratise, devolve and localise it; rather than seeking to commodify, maximally exploit, and impute market logics on land and labour, social ecology seeks to restore social relations to how these two things are managed; rather than understanding freedom as the freedom of the individual or of the market, social ecology takes it to mean the autonomy of

collectives and municipalities. Using examples from the political economy of the region, I explore how social ecology is implemented in AANES via communal economy and ecological industry initiatives. These include the efforts of women to reclaim economic freedom outside of statist and capitalist logics.

Finally, I conclude by demonstrating that, despite these self-understandings, and attempts made to apply social ecology to the environment and the economy, AANES is nevertheless re-absorbed into statist and capitalist logics. I show this by charting the slow integration of AANES into the global economy, which has intensified particularly alongside the entrenchment of US interests in, and recognition of, the region, and which has consequences for the statist enactments that such entrenchment demands from AANES. I also demonstrate that the region's ongoing dependency and comparative weakness in the international system forces it to bureaucratise and centralise its rational-legal institutions in the name of survival. Taken together, I argue that, despite clear efforts made to live in its shadow, the statist imaginary once again proves to be a powerful interpellative force.

AANES critique of statist capitalism

In the previous chapter I introduced the Apoist idea of capitalist modernity, and its alternative, democratic modernity. Öcalan consistently ascribes three features to capitalist modernity, which the historian and Rojava scholar Andrej Grubačić (2019, 1076) identifies as the nation-state, capitalism and industrialism. For example, Öcalan (2013, 421, my translation) identifies the three key 'weapons, which were successfully applied from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth and even the middle of the twentieth century' to be 'capitalism's tendency towards maximising profit, the regulation of power and authority through the nation-state, and industrialism, which began with the industrial revolution.' Öcalan, Apoist and other anarchist scholars see the state form as having facilitated an unprecedented degree of monopolisation,

both economic and non-economic (such as the monopoly over the legitimate use of force, which I discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, and even a monopoly over identity, which I argued in Chapter 6 forms a large component of liberal secularism). As long-time translator of Öcalan's work, and spokesperson of the 'Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan' International Initiative Havin Güneser (2021, 91) observes:

> the nation-state is capitalism's most fundamental tool for conquering and colonising society. Without the nation-state, which is more powerful than all past forms of the state, it wouldn't have been possible. … This nation-state unifies all of the different past monopolies, including the industrial, financial, and military monopolies.

This statement captures the tendency I have highlighted throughout this thesis of the state form to replace multiple, local and overlapping forms of authority with unitary and singular ones, monopolised by the state. To be clear, Öcalan does not critique the state as the source of an economic monopoly in the sense that he argues stridently in favour of free, competitive markets without a role for public ownership. Rather, he bases this observation off the work of twentieth-century economist and historian Fernand Braudel, who famously argued that, contrary to conventional wisdom, capitalists do not participate in free markets, but are in fact monopolists. Building off Braudel's view that capitalists are anti-market, Öcalan argues that, more accurately, they are anti-economy. He writes:

> those who dominate the economy, whether private individuals or state monopolies, are both thieves to the extent that they destroyed the commune. The communal economy was the first organisation that people resorted to to meet their needs. Both private and state monopolies mean stealing the communal economy. This robbery, carried out by capitalist modernity … undermines the foundation of society, which is the commune. The history of capitalism is the history of the destruction of the commune economy. [This] economic destruction is the cause of the collapse of the entire social sphere, morality and politics. Economic dissolution is social dissolution (Öcalan 2013a, 433, my translation).

Öcalan argues that the signifier 'economy', when articulated inside of a statist and capitalist formation, has a narrow meaning. As he describes, the capitalist statist approach to the economy is monopolistic. The economy is monopolised by the state, the result of the fact that

it is only the state form that has been able to drive this level of monopoly, unprecedented in human history. However, Öcalan is not using the signifier 'state' to hold it in tension with the private or market economy. In fact, he uses these two terms alongside each other: both, he argues, are not opposite but equivalent, because they approach the economy with a common monopolist logic, which is to 'dominate the market for profit' (Öcalan 2013a, 433, my translation). Instead, the term that 'state' is held in tension with in this quotation is 'commune,' which Öcalan argues is the truer, better location for the economy. That this a non-capitalist and pre-state understanding of economy can be established by looking to early forms of European economic organisation. On trade, for example, Polanyi (1944, 282–3) notes that the pre-capitalist and pre-state treatment of trade was not as an individual but a group undertaking, conducted under the principle of collectivity. Likewise, pre-capitalist markets showed little tendency towards accumulation, tending not to grow, and focused instead on supplying the provisions necessary for daily life (Polanyi 1944, 281). Indeed, this accords well with Öcalan's understanding of economy, which he constructs as the social space where people have their needs met, communally, and on the local or municipal level.

Thus, what makes the monopolistic approach wrought by statist capitalism 'anti-economy' is that it estranges the economy from society. I have argued in other chapters that the AANES discourse understands society in contraposition to the state – rather than understanding them as mutually constitutive – and locates the former as the true location of politics and order. Here, Öcalan also locates society as the true location of economics. As Azize Aslan (2015) notes, Öcalan's view departs from a traditional Marxist one because he does not see the fundamental conflict or tension of capitalism as that which exists between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but rather the one that exists been the monopolist capitalist and society. In her words, '[to Öcalan] history is not only the history of class struggles, but also the history of the struggle of society against hegemonic power and the state' (Aslan 2015, 3). Indeed, the idea of

returning the economy to society echoes Harvey's (2006, 23) description of the damage wrought by neoliberalism, namely that it attacked all forms of social solidarity that 'hindered competitive flexibility (such as those expressed through municipal governance)' and sought to replace it with 'individualism, private property, personal responsibility and family values.' Below I discuss what an economy grounded in municipal or local governance, and in society, might look like. However, it is first important to return to industrialism as a tenet of capitalist modernity.

As identified above, the idea of profit motive is essential to Öcalan's account of how, inside of capitalist modernity, the state and capital have exercised their power of monopoly – a power that is not necessarily public or private in nature – in order to narrow our idea of economy to signify accumulation, growth, expansion and domination. Öcalan argues these drives birthed industrialism, a term that he distinguishes from mere industry. Commencing with the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century and spanning into the 1970s, Öcalan argues that industrialism replaced other forms of economic productivity, such as agriculture. These shifts, such as the 'factory-isation' of production, helped maximise profit and thus, he argues, further re-oriented human activity towards capital accumulation. Likewise, too, he describes long-distance trade as a means of maximising profit, to which he attributes its concomitant rise. Reaching its zenith in during the industrial revolution, Öcalan (2013a, 218, my translation) argues that industrialism replaced other forms of economic productivity, such as agriculture, and further re-oriented human activity towards capital accumulation and profit. The Apoist consideration of the economy thus rejects not only capitalism and the nation-state as a source of monopoly, but also its specific instantiation in industrialism as a source of the drive towards capital accumulation. The alternative logic proposed, as part of democratic modernity, then, is the pursuit of social ecology, and its two key dimensions, which Öcalan (2013, 451) describes

as ‘communal economy’ and ‘ecological industry’. I discuss these two concepts further below, but first must situate them in the context of the alternate epistemology of social ecology.

Social ecology and the economy and environment

One of the key facets of the project to build democratic modernity (through the eschewal of the nation-state, capitalism and industrialism) is the adoption of an alternative epistemology, from which an alternative approach to economy and, by extension, the environment, can be drawn. In this section I argue that the AANES discourse articulates an ‘ecological’ approach to the economy, a term that has its roots in the work of Murray Bookchin. In Chapter 4 I canvassed the AANES discourse’s ecological approach to militarism, but will briefly repeat some of the facets of social ecology here in order to draw out how it bears upon political economy. Bookchin’s anthropological history argues that, as human society unfolded, it over time developed the tendency to produce power differentials and hierarchies. For example, human societies learned to seek to dominate nature rather than live alongside it, in balance with it, or complementing it, and men sought to dominate women (M. Bookchin 2006, 38). With the further passage of time, the ordering of society via hierarchies began to shape not only the development of patriarchy as well as the state, but also the economy. Echoing Polanyi above, Bookchin (2006, 41) observes that while, in pre-modern times, markets had been ‘modest, usually local affairs’, it is this drive towards domination – to command and consume everything around them – that caused markets to grow larger, more competitive, and to stretch over longer distances. This account matches the one I supplied in Chapter 2 regarding the emergence of capitalism, which necessitated the formation of states, entities unmatched in their ability to secure growth by nationalising and then internationalising markets; fundraising the capital for wars; and dominating more and more geographical spheres and arenas of human life to create new markets.

Thus, Bookchin and Öcalan identify the co-emergence of capitalism with colonisation. It is notable that here, too, statist logics played a role in intensifying this trend. As Scott (1998, 283) observes in *Seeing like a State*, a common colonial way of talking about African farming practices was that they were slothful and disorderly, specifically because they did not exploit the land to its fullest extent, focusing instead on low-intervention farming systems that were deemed far less 'industrious' than the high-intensity practices imposed by states. This example captures the statist drive towards exploiting, taming and dominating the natural environment. Likewise, jineologists provide a similar account of how patriarchy, the state and capitalism have likewise each been animated by this orientation towards domination. Jineologists often refer to women as the 'first' and 'oldest' colony, and the women's liberation movement as the first decolonial movement (Güneser 2021, 37–84; Jineoloji Akademisi 2015, 81–93; Öcalan 2016b, 36). Güneser (2021, 44) aptly synthesises the Apoist argument that the earliest emergence of the hierarchical relationship of patriarchy involved the 'seizure of the economy' from women – that is, the systematic exploitation of women as a class, who perform the bulk of the world's labour, for the least amount of remuneration. This occurs particularly inside of the family unit, where women's work has been deemed valueless. From this, she argues, stems all other forms of exploitation, with colonised peoples and 'workers overall' having their economies likewise expropriated through the subsequent work of the state, a uniquely potent and extensive concentration of the power of capital and patriarchy. Erciyes (2016, 74, my translation) likewise articulates the idea that the colonisation of women is the basis of all other exploitation. Apoists put this argument, which sees the state, capitalism and patriarchy as linked, in the following terms:

> Communities and peoples have their economies seized to make them dependent on the system—on a wage or on welfare. Analytically, capitalism and the nation-state are seen as representing the dominant male in the most institutionalized form. Capitalist society is the continuation and culmination of all the previous exploitative societies. It is, in fact, a continuous war against society and women. To put it simply, capitalism and the

> nation-state are the monopoly of the tyrannical and exploitative male (Güneser 2021, 45).

While capitalist modernity is positioned as a capitalist-patriarchal-statist formation that achieves order through domination, monopolisation, or the concentration of economic power, and mass expropriation, the AANES discourse, by contrast, centres social ecology. This principle was embedded in the 2005 contract of the KCK, in which democratic confederalism was first declared (Öcalan 2005b). Social ecology pursues order and democracy by attempting to first re-write the originary relationship of hierarchy from which all others flow, that is, to establish a non-hierarchical relationship with the natural environment. In Bookchin's (2006, 46) words, social ecology 'advances an ethics of complementarity in which human beings play a supportive role in perpetuating the integrity of the biosphere' (Bookchin 2006, 46). This ethics of complementarity focuses on keeping human society in balance with nature, that is, with one complementing the other. Within such an approach, rather than the order produced by domination and hierarchy, the order achieved here is the kind that results from avoiding the long-term serious destruction of the environment and human society with it. As Scott (1998, 283) observes, intensive agricultural practices such as monocropping may have looked tidy, orderly, and systematic in the 'eyes' of the state, but they have accomplished this by trading off long-term stability. Inside the epistemology of social ecology, collapsing the hierarchical relationship between society and nature has flow-on effects for all other forms of hierarchy – such as capitalism and patriarchy – which, in having a common stem, have a common solution. Because ecological and social crises are considered to be entwined, challenging extractivist and colonial relations with the environment is considered a key way of helping to produce democratising social effects. As the writer, engineer and activist of the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement Ercan Ayboğa (2021, 80) writes:

> [The question of how to meet human needs] relates to the question of democracy: that is, whether a society can take decisions under … radical democratic conditions free from imposed exploitative-extractive economic policies and corruption. We believe

> that in a socially and gender liberated, solidarity-based, radical democratic, and ecological society, there would be no pressure to over-extract material and elements form nature. … [Therefore] we connect ecology and democracy with each other.

This is an important re-articulation that positions democracy in an alternate web of signification in which social ecology, not the state, is centered.

The AANES' adoption of ecology – which sees economic and social processes as the result of how humans have configured their relationship with their environment – demands that the economy be considered in tandem with the environment, as I do in this chapter. I also consider them together because of the history of the Kurdish liberation movement, which has historically diagnosed that ecological destruction forms a pillar of capitalism. As Ayboğa (2021, 78) points out, Öcalan began considering 'the ecological question' in the 1990s, and some components of the Kurdish liberation movement, especially in Turkey, have sought to implement ecological principles through this period until the present time. Examples include the organising done to introduce more green spaces and urban gardening in the city of Amed (known as Diyarbakır in Turkish) (see Scalbert-Yücel 2021), and organising against large-scale dam projects in the Kurdish-majority ancient town of Hasankeyf, which was flooded in 2020 and its inhabitants displaced in order to make room for the Ilısu dam (see Dissard 2021). What is also important to note is how ecological destruction, accelerated by capitalism, is both a function of, and augments, the power of states. For example, Ayboğa (2021, 78) points out how environmental destruction formed a key component of Turkey's 'war on Kurds': this included bombing of mountains, burning of 'thousands of hectares of natural forest' and displacement of civilians from villages, which drove urbanisation. States' power is also often commensurate with the extent to which it can extract resources. Indeed, among the biggest polluters in the world are states' militaries: for example, the US military is the world's largest institutional consumer of petroleum (McCarthy 2019). As Ayboğa (2021, 79) also observes, the Turkish state's financial and other capacities have grown as it has invested in destructive dam-building and mining

projects; in *Jineology*, Ilden Kibar (2020, 185) also discusses the Turkish state's successful commercialisation of its water resources, observing that this fuels not only ecological destruction, but also patriarchal state violence, given that women traditionally bear the 'brunt of water injustice', as they rely upon it more heavily for labour such as domestic work and cleaning. Below I discuss the implications of Turkey's successful commandeering of the water supplies of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers through these dam projects, and unpack its links to Turkey's ability to vitiate AANES' attempts to enact social ecology.

Ecology has also been centered in the AANES democratic autonomy project. For example, ecology is written into the DFNS 2016 constitution, with Article 9 emphasising that 'democratic, environmental and societal life are the basis for building an ecological democratic society in order not to harm, abuse, and destroy nature'; meanwhile, Article 11 emphasises that DFNS 'is based on the principle of making the land, water and resources publicly owned; it adopts ecological industry and societal economy; it does not allow, exploitation, monopoly, and the objectification of women; it shall realise health and social insurance for all individuals'; and Article 42 states that 'investment shall be in special projects, which take into account the ecological balance, provide necessary services for economic development, aim at meeting social needs, and contribute to activate and establish societal economic activities' (published in van Wilgenburg 2016b). Each of these articles, which function as declarations of the administration's intended model of governance, capture aspects of the discussion above: the rejection of monopoly, emphasis on managing the economy and industry ecologically, and re-centering of society in the economy. In the next section I discuss how social ecology is enacted in AANES, and how it functions to dismantle statist logics.

Social ecology in AANES

The two key tenets of the social ecology platform are communal economy (also referred to as social economy and societal economy, an economy 'based on basic human needs, that is not profit driven, and serves social solidarity' (Öcalan 2013, 163, my translation)), and ecological industry. In this section I sketch how these terms are made sense of in the AANES discourse, and what kind of economic practices they have made possible.

Öcalan theorises that, in order to reverse the alienation of the economy by the state and return it to society, society has to become self-sufficient, that is, achieve the capability of producing its own needs. The key mechanism that he proposes for achieving this is to localise, communalise, or democratise, the economy. Öcalan (2006, 145, my translation) writes: '[a key component of democratic confederalism is] to provide for one's own economic production, and not to expect it from the state. [It] is against commodification, against centralised capital accumulation, and for social forms of production and common ownership of property.' KCK co-chair Cemil Bayik echoes this when he states that "'water, soil and energy belong to the whole of society and must be available for use by the whole society. As long as society is the communal proprietor of these goods, no individual can exploit them. … Least of all should water, land and energy belong to a State'" (quoted in Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 207). In other words, social ecology seeks to undo the state and capital's monopoly, which narrows our understanding of 'economy' to centre the scale and growth needs of the state and capital accumulation. Returning the economy to society, by contrast, means taking into account the growth needs and scale of society and municipalities, which are smaller, more local, and do not centre the drive to grow relentlessly. This model does not squarely reject 'markets, trade, product variety, competition and productivity' (Öcalan 2016b, 43, my translation; Hammy and Miley 2022). Instead, economic autonomy seeks not to allow these factors to dominate over others, and seeks to minimise profit and capital accumulation (Öcalan 2016b, 43). Likewise, ecological industry refers to the pursuit of industrial activities – which are often extractive and

polluting, and ‘concentrate economic and political power’ (Ayboğa 2021, 81) – without triggering these consequences, again by minimising the pursuit of profit and capital accumulation. To be clear, Öcalan does not prescribe a turn to agrarian socialism, but rather argues that communal economic principles should be applied to various sectors of the economy including agriculture, industry, the arts and sciences, which each have role to play in an ecological society (Öcalan 2013, 434). Öcalan is limited in supplying further specifics regarding what a communal economy with minimal profit motive, and that is predicated upon autonomy and ecological industry, looks like. For example, it is unclear from these renderings whether there is a role for any private ownership of property. Güneser provides a few further clarifications regarding the model, including that:

> no monopolisation of any sort is permitted. Property is not completely rejected, but property by accumulation is rejected. In that sense, monopolisation of property is rejected. … The idea is, through these multidimensional organisations, to aim for a system without wages. The idea is to overcome the wage system. … [And] [t]he basic necessities like food, housing, and health care should not be traded as commodities for profit (Güneser 2021, 115).

With these principles in place, it becomes necessary to turn to an examination of how social ecology has been made sense of in AANES through the past decade.

Self-sufficiency through communal economy and ecological industry

The region of NES that was inherited by the administration has particular political economic features that are worth canvassing. First, as with the Turkish examples I have provided above, the power of the Syrian state in NES had often been secured through ecological destruction and the implementation of capitalist modes of production and capital accumulation. Prior to the outbreak of the war, the regions of Kobane, Cizre and Afrin had been required by the regime to intensively cultivate their leading agricultural commodity to the exclusion of other cultivars. Cizre produced half of all Syrian wheat as a result, and was ‘barred from vegetable production and fruit cultivation. Any tree planting had to be approved by three ministries, which made it

all but impossible' (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 192). Kobane too was part of Syria's breadbasket, meanwhile that Afrin supplied around a quarter of all of Syria's olives. These patterns were not only driven by colonial capitalism, but were co-extensive with state-building: as Pimbert (2021, 116) points out, this region became the nation's core wheat supplier only when the Ba'athist government, in the 1960s and 1970s, began to attempt to centralise economic management. Despite being a varied food-producing region, one that was, in the past, full of 'biodiversity-rich forests, wetlands and grasslands' that 'coexisted with farming and pastoralism as part of a complex land use mosaic adaptively managed by local communities', it is resource extraction and industrial agriculture that rendered NES a major food importer (Pimbert 2021, 116). Finally, the region is and always has been oil-rich: today, it contains 80 percent of the country's oil and gas reserves (Hatahet 2019, 2), although it lacks a refinery at time of writing. These oil reserves were turned over to foreign companies in the 1990s by the Ba'athist government as part of the neoliberal turn (Pimbert 2021, 116). The region also historically lacks factories, a power plant, and processing plants for farmed goods, such as mills for flour; in 2008, Assad even banned the construction of large buildings (Lebsky 2017).

In the context of these conditions of economic deprivation, the Rojava Economics Department sprung up. By 2014 it developed an economic model that, in the words of its head, Abdulrahman Hemo, included 'a mixture of private enterprise and collectives. The aim is to make Rojava self-sufficient' (quoted in Bozorgnia 2014). This language is clearly reminiscent of the self-sufficiency model, and the mixture of public and private enterprise that it prescribes, that I described above. One of the first actions taken by the new administration in 2012 was to abolish the right to 'large private property' (Lebsky 2017), likely intended to address the deleterious consequences of a 2004 agricultural law, part of another suite of Ba'athist laws intended to introduce liberalisation, foster investment in agriculture, and increase efficiency, but which led to the expulsion of many peasants from their land, and ultimately enriched

landowners (Ababsa 2015, 211). In practice, and in order to avoid the use of force, private land has not been expropriated from private holders, only from the Assad regime itself (Hatahet 2019, 6; Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 199; Jong and Jongerden 2015). With the goal being to prevent new large landholdings from emerging, rather than to abolish them in their entirety, the right to private property was enshrined in the Rojava social contract (Article 41). While Saed (2017, 8) comments that the lack of violent expropriation is sensible in light of the disastrous consequences the practice yielded during the Russian civil war (creating enmity from socially influential landed interests), it is also largely ideologically coherent with what I have described above. The social contract focused instead on abolishing monopolies (Article 42), rather than pursuing full public ownership, while allowing for private enterprise to continue, and even to 'promote competition' (Article 42). In AANES, in the instances where private enterprise does exist, companies are expected to cooperate with self-governments, but not to be wholly controlled by them: for example, private agricultural companies have agreements in place to supply seeds, while AANES sets the price of wheat and has imposed a strict ban on the monopolising of the wheat trade (S. Muhammad 2022; Biehl 2015a; Shafaq 2021a). I do not focus extensively on the role of the private sector in this chapter, in part because it does not represent a large component of the economy. Private, particularly foreign, investment in AANES is limited by lack of confidence in what is an unstable, non-state region, and due to the difficulty in attracting international investment (which I discuss further below). More importantly, for the purposes of this thesis, I am interested in mapping the contours of the communal economy, and self-sufficiency, and drawing out their more significant ramifications for imagining the economy in the absence of the state.

The other key reform made to the management of land in AANES, then, was the establishment of land cooperatives, and the creation of a system of collective property where land was placed under the ownership and control of autonomous groups, in the understanding that the land

would be worked and used to produce goods that meet the needs of society (Cooperative Committee 2016). Collectives were first begun in 2013 (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 199), and focused in rural areas on promoting diverse agricultural production – both in summer and, in winter, through greenhouses – geared at challenging the area's wheat monoculture, facilitating ecological regeneration and promoting self-sufficiency. For example, as of 2016, 6300 acres of land in Serêkaniyê had been re-distributed to these cooperatives (Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 199). In cities, meanwhile, cooperatives were formed around non-agricultural production, including dairy, textiles and baked goods. Cooperatives 'must operate according to ecological principles' (Ayboğa 2021, 94), for example by agreeing not to utilise chemical fertilisers. Goals for self-sufficiency have been set, including that half of the economy should be based on cooperatively held and managed land. As of 2021, only 5 to 7 percent of land in AANES is cooperatively operated (Ayboğa 2021, 94) and, as of 2017, there were 185 known cooperatives (Hatahet 2019, 6). According to the 'Cooperative Contract' issued by the Rojava Cooperative Committee (2016), 'markets based on monopolising profit, speculation and inequality are not allowed'. Thus, local markets and needs are taken to be central, although this does not entirely rule out the possibility of regional or other forms of trade: 'a part of the produce of the co-operative is distributed to the members in order to satisfy the needs of the commune members, and the remainder is put on co-operative or local, regional, inter-communal and international markets.' Although the long-term goal of the administration is to maximally decentralise the economy, this process is highly coordinated and remains centralised in areas: when land is redistributed to communes, it is done by application according to need and ability, with some land that is earmarked for cooperatives retained by higher councils and held internally to the party structure because they are part of 'sensitive sectors' like electricity, gas or oil (van Wilgenburg 2020b, 107; see also Pimbert 2021, 119; Hatahet 2019, 7). I discuss the persistence of centralisation further below.

Another component of the shift to localise the economy involves not only the diversification of agriculture, but placing local economies back in balance with local ecologies. This has taken the form of encouraging a return to traditional, and indigenous, forms of livelihood, including animal husbandry (Pimbert 2021, 116), and achieving the production of food by utilising organic and local seed varieties rather than imported genetically modified seeds (S. E. Hunt 2021b, 315; Pimbert 2021, 116). Likewise, another means of returning to traditional and local practices has included attempts to promote the revival of plant-based medicinal remedies, in direct response to the industrialisation of healthcare (Ayboğa 2021, 95). These initiatives rely on the idea of nourishing a local economy, one that is self-sustainable and not reliant on, or oriented towards, broader markets and states: for example, when farmers distance themselves from reliance on fertilisers or pesticides, they do so, in the words of Pimbert (2021, 121) in order to 'reduce dependence on commodity markets for inputs', which 'enhances farmers' autonomy and control'.

Women's self-sufficiency

In Chapter 6 I began discussing the jineologist critique of capitalism as it manifests in liberal individualism, and I briefly highlighted how the loss of women's freedom has been further exacerbated, or at least transformed, in the neoliberal era. Prior to neoliberalism, as I noted above, women had their economies seized from them. In jineologists' view, neoliberalism, on the other hand, co-opted women's freedom and replaced it with market logics. As such, women's freedom is today commonly understood to mean participation in these markets, or with women themselves produced as commodities in them. The AANES discourse approaches the idea of returning the economy to women differently, on the basis of communal economy and self-sufficiency, which forms part of the same framework of self-defence I explored in Chapters 4 and 6. Just as with the monopoly over violence, the key for breaking down economic

monopolies also involves devolving economic power to women, albeit not to individual women, but rather to communities.

Women have thus participated actively in the proliferation of the communal economy. Women's cooperatives include textile, dairy product and bread cooperatives located in Dêrik and Derna (Pimbert 2021, 123; Hatahet 2019, 6). Their goals are to promote women's economic self-sufficiency, and therefore to challenge patriarchal systems, including the drive towards accumulation and self-enrichment that are considered a by-product of patriarchal, capitalist and statist ways of relating to the social and ecological realms. Hatahet (2019, 6) critiques women's cooperatives when he notes that women workers in them earn approximately $50-75 USD a month from the sale of their products, about half the mean monthly wage in AANES, concluding that this scarcely grants them autonomy. However, this kind of analysis understands autonomy through a narrow market lens. Financial autonomy is not the only goal of these cooperatives, which also allow participants to produce products that help meet their basic needs. Importantly, too, they capture the kind of democracy that the restoration of autonomy back to communes is meant to allow for, which is the decentralisation of economic decision-making. In an interview with Knapp and his co-authors (2016, 203), a women's cooperative member named Silvan comments: "'the idea of cultivating peanuts here was Medya's … and Yekîtiya Star supported it. Along with nuts, we want to produce vegetables like cauliflower for the market.'" Such an approach enhances women's autonomy not only by allowing them to live independently of men, but also to promote their own knowledge and traditional practices, and, in achieving 'self-confidence', feel a greater degree of freedom (Cioni and Patassini 2021, 135). This includes women's medicinal knowledge, and in the women- and girls-only village called Jinwar, residents run the Centre for Natural Medicine, alongside their own schools for adults and children (Alesali and Zdanowicz 2019; Cioni and Patassini 2021, 140). Located outside the city of Dirbesîyê, Jinwar was created in 2017 by the

women's organisations Kongreya Star, Mala Jin (House of Women), Congress of Free Women in Rojava (Kongreya Jinen Azadi), Jineolojî Committee, Cooperative of the Families of the Fighters, and the Committee for Diplomacy of the Women of Rojava (Cioni and Patassini 2021, 135). Villagers maintain a cooperative rather than a competitive economy, and do so according to the ethical principle of 'hevaltî, according to which the people of a community work together with the aim of taking care of all the components of the biosphere' (Cioni and Patassini 2021, 142). In sum, cooperatives are designed to resist the statist capitalist individualisation and commercialisation of land and labour, and minimise those activities associated with profit motive (such as prioritising long-distance markets over local ones, and fomenting extractivist relationships with how land is used, exploited and managed).

Social relations and spatiality

Many of these political economic measures entail spatial, symbolic and visual enactments, which I argue in this section help contribute to re-making social relations without the state. For example, in Jinwar, the village is made to *look* distinct, and is full of communal gardens; was consciously built not using traditional industrial materials such as rubble, but local 'organic materials deemed to be mother earth' (Cioni and Patassini 2021, 139), such as adobe; and its houses intentionally shaped to form a triangle, an important symbol in the village because of its association with women's ancient writing systems (Cioni and Patassini 2021, 145). Likewise, a popular push in Rojava is the campaign to 'green' it, both to centre ecology and undo the war and regime's legacies; thus, the campaign has included the establishment of more parks and municipal buildings that have trees and gardens planted outside them, to encourage communal use of public space (Ayboğa 2021, 90–92). Moreover, as part of the 'Make Rojava Green Again' initiative, the Internationalist Commune in AANES has planted 2000 trees per year since 2018, both in the form of establishing tree nurseries in the region, and to reverse deforestation (Pimbert 2021, 120; S. E. Hunt 2021a, 220). These communal economic practices

not only foster non-capitalist social relations, and enhance local autonomy, they also focus on visually manifesting non-extractivist relations with the natural environment by altering the look and feel of public space, centering its communal rather than extractivist, militarised or individual use. I note this in light of the fact that I have argued throughout this thesis that stateness becomes instantiated not only through sovereign power, but also the disciplining of people, bodies and their everyday encounters with space. Thus, efforts made to 'green' AANES in their own way help to resist the enactment of stateness. Finally, in the next section I discuss the ways in which this project has been significantly hindered.

Ecology in a context of dependence

The pre-war structure of the economy of northern Syria made it both domestically and internationally dependent. As I highlighted above, the historical agricultural policies applied to the region; the region's monoculture; its lack of critical infrastructure, resulting from intentional infrastructural underdevelopment; and its susceptibility towards drought (both natural and human-made) have stifled attempts to make a serious and large-scale shift towards an ecological approach to the economy. Abdulrahman Hemo lays out the difficulty created by these legacies out in an interview with Janet Biehl (2015a). In it, he identifies that 'in order to raise the quality of life' in the region and thus accomplish self-sufficiency, three things would be needed: an oil refinery, a fertiliser factory, and a power plant for electricity, all of which the region lacks as a result of its quasi-colonial exploitation. These, he states, would cost $300 million, $5 million, and $400 million respectively, sums of money that cannot be raised out of the communal economy or out of local investment, but would only be achievable through international investment alone. Indeed, as of 2022, the only region that has achieved food self-sufficiency is Raqqa (Abdullatif 2022b); the rest of the area is food insecure. As I have signalled before, the struggle to survive has often sat at loggerheads in Rojava with the goal of enacting a complete political vision. Saed (2017, 7) writes:

> The list of major challenges to securing basic necessities is rather long and it is difficult to make them cohere with an ecological outlook. Such problems are also the fruits of decades worth of economic marginalisation and intentional underdevelopment of infrastructure under Ba'athist rule… The end result is a revolution that, due especially to rampant warfare, has yet made little progress ecologically beyond good intentions and promising legislation.

As international volunteer Mahir comments in an interview, these patterns of historically ingrained dependence and colonial treatment of the economy of northern Syria are hard to shift, partially due to internal resistance from individuals (Tekoşîna Anarşîst 2020, 40). Saed (2017, 7) similarly gives the example that environmentally destructive small-scale drilling persists in the region, despite the asayiş's significant attempts to curtail it, which has reduced 'the revolution's popularity in some quarters.' Inhabitants of AANES live with the legacy of decades of statist and capitalist policies. As the Cizre finance minister Remziye Mihemed commented in 2016, prior to the war "'it would have been impossible to assemble three sewing machines for a textile workshop … because a day or two later, regime functionaries would storm in and shut it down. And the regime routinely prevented people from working in groups, to perpetuate dependence on itself"' (quoted in Knapp, Flach, and Ayboğa 2016, 193). On one hand, inhabitants of the region may not feel comfortable with social ecology, and this accounts partially for why the region's political economy has not been radically transformed. But what is more interesting about the implementation challenges faced in the region is that, I argue, they reflect the way that the state system prolongs its life by producing dependencies upon it. In this section I discuss how both the legacy and the present of the state system in AANES create statist dependencies that absorb and integrate the region into the global economy, and force it to enact stateness. What I wish to especially draw attention to when considering this problem is how other states help force the region's hand and suppress attempts made to exit capitalist and statist ways of relating to the environment.

Oil

The limitations of social ecology are most apparent when considering the goal of shifting away from extractivism and towards cleaner sources of energy. Such a philosophy has been rendered nearly impossible to act upon because AANES' key source of revenue, and therefore survival, is the sale of oil. The 2020 AANES annual report stated that $72 million of the region's $115 million of income came from oil sales (see van Wilgenburg 2020b, 108). This is similar to the 2021 figure, which saw 60 percent of the region's revenue stem from oil sales (Bartu and Ruttimann 2021). The region's other revenue sources are limited, coming from income taxes, fees and import duties (Hatahet 2019, 1). However, AANES requires financial solvency in order to achieve self-administration and independence from actors like, for example, the US, who pay SDF salaries (discussed further below). This is paradoxical precisely because a continued structural dependence on oil allows for the intrusion of markets and international trade into the region. It would be fair to suggest that AANES' government handed over the region's oil reserves to the market in 2019, specifically to the transnational corporation Delta Crescent LLC. This privatisation deal was struck under the Trump administration only after sanctions on this part of the country's oil reserves were waived. The agreement granted the US corporation exclusive rights for 25 years to exploit the region's oil, including to set up its first refinery. There were clear political incentives for making this agreement, which are tied up with survival. In forging the deal, AANES' goal was to attempt to formalise ties with the US and entrench its interests there, just as Turkey formalised ties with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq largely for oil (Zaman 2020b). In Chapter 4 I noted how AANES' militias have started to resemble those of the KRI, and it is again notable that states are again most capable of interfacing with AANES when it begins to resemble the KRG in the way that it may soon function as a similar petro-state. The US' ongoing investment and interest in stabilising the region and lending AANES military support has tended to hinge on this resource. Former President Trump most starkly put it in these terms when commenting on the 2019 drawdown,

during which he emphasised that the US' ongoing ground presence in the region would be around AANES' oil fields. By contrast, the Biden administration halted the Delta Crescent deal when it declined to extend the oil sanctions waiver in April 2021, on the basis that it did not seek to 'steal' the region's oil (Zaman 2022). Nevertheless, and despite this claim, US interests in AANES circulate around oil: as of 2021, the 900 US soldiers stationed in AANES help to jointly patrol with the SDF Critical Petroleum Infrastructure Guard (CPIG) in order to secure this reserve (Bartu and Ruttiman 2021). Today, CPIG is the force that attracts US investment in the form of training supplied by Operation Inherent Resolve coalition countries (Davis 2021).

Alternately, the region has also been forced to cut deals with other states, such as with Russia and Assad, who withheld supplies such as food and medicine until an oil agreement was reached in April 2021 (Bartu and Ruttimann 2021). As I noted above, it is the legacy of colonial economic management of the region that has made it dependent on other parts of Syria, and other countries, for food and energy imports. Another alternative that the region has pursued has been selling AANES oil to the Syrian government through smugglers, specifically because AANES could not access international markets – and cannot access them without states' authority – before the US sanctions waiver (Kevok 2020). This attracted US disapproval, which included the bombing of smugglers' tankers and barges (Kevok 2020). This reliance on using smugglers has enriched these middlemen (Hatahet 2019, 13), and contributed to inequities in the NES economy. However, there are few options for a region like AANES to manage its own economy other than to make such agreements. In the scenarios I have outlined where AANES sells its oil, it does so where the alternative is having it stolen.[37] Indeed, before such agreements were put in place with the US, Syria or Russia, the region's oil was extracted and sold by IS, a

[37] The same could be said of Afrin's olives, which AANES has accused Turkey of illegally stealing and selling olive oil products as its own (Oueiss 2020).

non-state actor, rather than sold consensually to state actors. Nevertheless, in both scenarios, the resource is extracted and sold on the market for profit. In other words, whatever AANES' position on extractivism and commercialisation is, it and regions like it may face one of two choices: either to participate as ostensibly willing and state-like actors in the global economy, and thus generate profit out of this deadlock, or be plundered.

What this demonstrates is not just that AANES' economy's historical dependence structures its present dependence, making it nearly impossible to meaningfully apply an ecological approach to the economy in a context where the imaginary of capitalism is so widespread, but also that it is states who have agency in the international system. Indeed, the largest oil field in what is currently AANES, known as Block 26, was, prior to the outbreak of the war, under the operatorship of two companies, Gulfsands Petroleum and Sinochem. This was the result of a production sharing agreement struck with Damascus in 2003 (Gulfsands 2022), a consequence of the neoliberal reforms to oil introduced in the 1990s that I highlighted above. In the absence of a similar agreement, in July 2022 Gulfsands' Managing Director commented that 'neither the SDF, the SDC nor the AANES have any sovereign rights under Syrian or international law. The AANES is stealing our property. The SDF and its affiliated are stealing what is legally contracted to Gulfsands and other commercial entities' (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2022). In a context where 'sovereign rights', and even commercial rights, are what take precedence over the kinds of rights espoused by AANES, and where the goal to exploit a resource for the purposes of self-sufficiency and local economic management is considered theft if that actor is a non-sovereign entity, the space for non-state actors to act is very narrow. As such, entry into statist logics is irresistible for those seeking survival and legitimacy.

Foreign investment

In addition to AANES' economic reliance on oil – which is exacerbated by other states – the region has been made susceptible to the reproduction of capitalism through the entrenchment of the US-AANES relationship. As David Harvey (2006, 27–28) notes, a key function of capitalism today is to keep countries open to the operations of US capital and support, as well as to maintain lending to foreign governments. This is demonstrably underway in AANES. In May 2022, the US under the Biden administration lifted an alternate set of sanctions other than those pertaining to oil, with the Department of the Treasury issuing a general license for AANES and parts of Turkish-held north-west Syria (Reuters 2022). This allows foreign investment in agriculture, information and telecommunications, power, construction, finance, energy, transportation, water and waste management, health, education, manufacturing and trade (US Department of the Treasury 2022). The SDF General Commander Mazloum Abdi tweeted in support of the authorisation, stating that 'we welcome all companies to invest here' (Mazloum Abdî مظلوم عبدي [@MazloumAbdi] 2022). This pattern of exemptions to the Caesar Act sanctions being applied only to northeast Syria creates two implications for the anti-state futures of Rojava. The first is that it risks dividing Syria, in direct opposition to AANES actors who, in seeking to implement democratic autonomy, resist the creation of such a formal division. Indeed, the Turkish response to this waiver has been to highlight displeasure that AANES is being granted further autonomy from Damascus (Zaman 2022). Connectedly, this exemption delineates AANES as a geographic region that can have laws applied to it by international actors independently of the nation-state of which it is a part. The effect this risks creating is one I identified in Chapter 2, concerning (mis)recognition. A constitutive and relational definition of statehood highlights the role that recognition (through difference and similarity) plays in bringing into being that which it names; the more that the US identifies the region as if it were distinct from Syria, as well as with identifying itself as friendlier towards the region than it is to Damascus, the more AANES is pulled away from the central Syrian

state, pulled towards the US, and thus interpellated into stateness. These two factors highlight the importance of representations for helping to legitimise the integration of AANES into the global economy, which, as foreign investment begins to flow into the region, vitiates its prior resistance to over-reliance upon international trade and finance. Such foreign investment flows are unlikely to be large, given that international investor confidence hinges on the presence of recognised laws and government institutions (such as a central bank) that would protect capital and investment projects. In other words, although this law was passed, foreign investment into the region has been slow to occur, precisely because AANES lacks recognition and state-like institutions (al-Omar 2022a). But AANES' survivability is limited the more that it is subjected to the vicissitudes of the open market, vicissitudes that are felt more severely by non-state actors than for state actors, especially one such as AANES which faces economic turmoil. During the COVID crisis, for example, AANES was forced to pay a higher price for basic needs such as gloves and face masks, unable to negotiate a bulk deal or access the UN COVID response fund dedicated for states (Rebrii 2020). While AANES itself could not access these resources, the UN instructed its relief agencies to fund private charities in the region, as long as they were registered in Damascus. Again, even non-governmental organisations enjoy more economic agency in the international order by mere proximity to stateness than AANES itself does. Advocating for the Biden sanctions waiver, Nadine Maenza, Chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), put the situation starkly: 'The AANES is now at the point where it will either become an aid economy that needs constant support or a commerce economy that can become self-sustaining' (quoted in Zaman 2022). Perhaps conscious of this, AANES passed an investment law in 2022 (Abdullatif 2022a) and, although it had previously been openly opposed to establishing its own bank system, announced plans to 'establish an independent monetary policy and financial institution akin to a central bank' in 2021 (Lebsky 2017; The Syria Report 2021; see also Dyjbas 2022). This affirms the argument

that survival and legitimacy hinge on whether AANES allows itself to be interpellated into the subject-position of statehood, or at least performs stateness for international actors in order to access necessary financial investment.

That AANES continues to be tethered to Damascus through its lack of an independent banking system or currency itself is yet another way that the presence of international actors in AANES stifles the AANES discourse on the economy and the environment. AANES' use of the Syrian pound makes the economy subject to international pressures that are placed upon the Syrian state, including sanctions – such as on oil – and fluctuations in exchange rates. As a result, whatever international economic vulnerability the Syrian state more broadly faces, AANES too faces. For example, in May 2021 AANES, in conferral with its Fuel Directorate, raised the price of fuel by 300 percent, in light of the collapse of the Syrian pound; this decision was met with displeasure from AANES residents (Hassan 2021). Charlie Qerecox, a UK international volunteer interviewed in Clevenger's (2021) study, notes that although it would be economically advantageous for the region to adopt its own currency, he also notes that doing so would risk fuelling narratives that the region is separatist. Indeed, this has been the content of another set of articulations made about AANES by Turkey, who, in 2020, accused the region of printing its own currency. A fake 1 'dirav' note ostensibly issued by the Kurdistan Rojava Bank is available online (Rojava Network [@RojavaNetwork] 2020), and the accusation that AANES is attempting to build its own banking sector helps build the discourse, promulgated by hostile actors, that says the region is separatist or statist in orientation. Although the region remains as integrated in the global economy as does Syria proper, even an attempt to undo this integration might cause the region to enact, or be represented as enacting, stateness. In sum, moves made towards de-linking from the logics of statist capitalism – particularly its drive towards profit, its international orientation and its de-prioritisation of self-sufficiency – foreclose social ecology.

Bureaucracy and centralisation

In addition to these challenges, AANES' emphasis on a non-centralist treatment of the economy has been sabotaged, impeded or threatened by a variety of state actors. For example, international volunteers in the region allege that, in 2019, what were assumed to be members of jihadist militias setting crop fires were later apprehended and discovered to be members of Syrian intelligence (Tekoşîna Anarşîst 2020, 17). Meanwhile, the Turkish state is able to exploit its damming of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in order to control the downstream water supply into Syria and Iraq. In 2021, the Energy and Communication Committee of the AANES announced that the water level in the Euphrates had dropped to five metres, in violation of an agreement signed between Turkey, Syria and Iraq that Turkey has to allow 500 cubic metres of water per second into Syria (Medya News 2021a). Similarly, in 2020 the Rojava Information Center (2020) alleged that Turkish-backed forces cut off the flow from Allouk water station, depriving nearly a million civilians of access to water. Such actions place added pressure upon the region, which has experienced a drought and compounded difficulties in cultivating agricultural products. This has internal impacts upon popular support for AANES governance: for example, in the summer of 2021, farmers in Raqqa protested after being denied sufficient water supply for irrigating their summer-intensive crops, with the Irrigation Board citing low levels in the Euphrates River (al-Omar 2022c). Meanwhile, continued participation in war – largely focused on fighting with Turkey and its proxies – has kept AANES not only participating in the use of weaponry and other polluting military activities, but has, in the words of Hemo (quoted in Biehl 2015), 'forced us to centralise the war economy' in order to finance a war that, as of 2015, cost the administration $20 million USD a year.

A corollary of these resource limitations and inflation in commodity prices is that resources like oil are resultantly managed by burgeoning bureaucracies, and distributed in a centralised manner: in the case of the Raqqa farmers above, they are required to submit licensing

applications in order to obtain access to a quota of subsidised diesel (al-Omar 2022c). These sensitive sectors, which includes energy and food, have been maintained under AANES administration, rather than being decentralised, partially to diminish the possibility of price-gouging, although it continues.[38] Recent efforts to ensure food security in Cizre and Raqqa, meanwhile, have taken the form of farmers applying to access subsidised wheat seeds, with regulations existing around how much, what kinds and how many kinds of crops can be planted (S. Muhammad 2022; al-Omar 2022c). I note these examples because they are the kinds of behaviours documented by James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State* (1998), approaches taken to agricultural management that are highly centralised and implemented, typically by states, and which therefore reproduce a statist logic as regards order. As he shows, these processes were done in order to make modern farming more legible to the state, which prefers row planting and monocropping over intercropping in order to simplify, streamline and therefore maximise control over harvests (Scott 1998, 242–43).

Finally, as I have highlighted, a core component of the AANES discourse's attempt to re-write relations with the economy and the environment in order to escape capitalism and the state involve the exit from competitively waged labour. Indeed, as two of the quotes from Güneser (2021) above show, social ecology emphasises the goal of shifting away from dependence upon waged labour. I have already discussed the way in which this idea has been placed under pressure in Chapter 4, as salaries have been introduced to minimise defections and attract recruits to the YPG and the SDF. Not only does this system of wages apply to soldiers (who numbered around 70,000 in 2020), it also applies to police (30,000 in 2020) and civil servants (150,000 in 2020) (Haenni and Quesnay 2020, 7). The wages in AANES are higher than in regime-held areas, with salaries increased by 30 percent in 2021 (Hassan 2021). As with the

[38] For example, there is a thriving black market for diesel, and although AANES passed a law prohibiting currency dealers from discounting currencies when banknotes are damaged, most traders do 'not abide by it' (al-Omar 2022b).

increased levying of taxes over time (Bozorgnia 2014; Hatahet 2019, 8–9),[39] this kind of bureaucratisation goes hand in hand with stability, but also with further entrenching international interests in the region – as I noted in Chapter 4, the US pays SDF salaries, but it has also paid stipends to the Manbij Military Council, the Deir ez-Zor Military Council, demining engineers, and the Raqqa Internal Security Forces (van Wilgenburg 2020b, 108). As this process unfolds, the region looks more closely like a typical state bureaucracy not only because this further entrenches US access to AANES, who use this access not only to create new international markets in AANES, but also to re-fashion the region's militaries and bureaucracies, but also because it departs from its own discourse around the ties of all of these functions with the logics of statism.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have highlighted how the AANES discourse on the economy attempts to re-write social and ecological relations in the absence of the state and in the absence of hierarchy and domination, which are viewed as driving capitalism, extractivism, profit accumulation and the centralisation of economic power. These forces, they argue, come at the cost of women's, ecological and colonial exploitation. In its place, social ecology presents an alternative epistemology that, in the absence of hierarchy, seeks to re-embed the economy inside of society, and in balance with the natural environment. Such a solution to managing the economy and the environment is envisaged to allow for a return to local markets, which meet basic needs rather than seeking maximum profit; a return to the communal economy, which understands land and labour from a cooperative perspective; and thus restores social solidarity, previously been suppressed by the dominance of the statist capitalist imaginary. I have located inside this alternative discourse on the economy and the environment different ways of understanding

[39] Hatahet (2019, 12) notes that taxes are levied 'irregularly and arbitrarily' between regions, suggesting they are not entirely centralised, and set with some local discretion.

order, in the absence of hierarchy, and democracy in the absence of the freedom of the individual and the market. Thus, these efforts reflect a non-centralist, non-statist account of the economy that focuses once more on the role of the local and the multiple.

I have also argued that social ecology has been thoroughly foreclosed in AANES, as the region is interpellated into the subject-position of statehood. This tendency is perhaps most pronounced when it comes to the economy, as compared to the other arenas I have considered in this thesis. I attribute this to a number of factors including the globality of capitalism, the hegemony of the neoliberal discourse,[40] the degree of modern international economic interdependence, and the immediacy of people's material needs. Indeed, the core paradox at work in AANES is that in order to achieve a 'post-scarcity' society, which is what social ecology promotes (see for example Venturini 2021, 4), the region already needs to be post-scarcity: this would be the only solution for avoiding dependence upon the international system, and therefore being shaped by international factors. Poor soil quality, drought and hunger all minimise resistance to capitalism, and thus compound the tendencies I examine in this thesis. These tendencies include the difficulty of exercising authority over domestic or internal governance arrangements without international recognition or approval, which demands that this authority, or sovereignty, be exercised through the performance of stateness.

[40] As neoliberal resilience scholars have aptly identified, neoliberal capitalism as a system is very difficult to shift, even when it fails to deliver positive outcomes. Much of this difficulty in shifting it relies on its ideological and discursive power (namely that 'there is no alternative'), which makes it nearly impossible to imagine beyond (Mavelli 2017; Maher 2021; Queiroz 2018).

Conclusions: Anarchy and the order of the international

Throughout this thesis I have theorised both rupture and repair in the hegemony of the imaginary of the state system. The political project that has been mounted in AANES through the past decade, which understands itself as working toward a non-statist political order, represents a rupture. I have shown this by detailing what I have called the 'AANES discourse', a wide body of articulations produced within and around the region, largely by adherents of Apoism, who take democratic confederalism and democratic autonomy to be a holistic, autochthonous, and realistic method of organising society and politics. I have argued that the theory and practice of democratic autonomy demonstrate a rigorous and systemic alternate conception of how to supply order and democracy, which is built on top of logics other than those the state form supplies.

Through a reading of the literature on the critical and historical literature on the state form, I proposed that statist logics organise dominant ideas about how to achieve order and democracy in three key ways. First, statism tells us that the best way to achieve security, and avert conflict, is through a state that holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. This monopoly applies both to the domestic and international arena, which present two faces of the same system, or constitute one another. Second, inside of a statist discourse, it is assumed that liberalism, and its 'rights' framework, wherein protections flow from the state through the rule of law, is the best method for supplying order and democracy to minority groups. Third, statism envisages capitalism, namely capital accumulation, market primacy, and the commodification of land and labour, to be the best means of securing economic survival. I deconstructed the first assumption by exploring how internal non-state armed groups, and foreign fighters who travel across borders, challenge the state's monopoly over violence. I deconstructed the second assumption through an exploration of how ethno-religious minorities and gender minorities seek not rights

and law, but autonomy and ethics. Finally, I deconstructed the third assumption through an exploration of how the economy and environment can be approached through self-management, with a focus on sufficiency, meeting social needs, and sustainability rather than extractivism.

Security, rights, and the fulfilment of material needs, such as food, water, shelter, and energy are indeed the building blocks of stability and peace, and thus order and democracy. And each of these solutions (the use of force to coerce; liberalism; and capitalism) do provide a means of supplying these essentials to large numbers of people. I argue, however, that these are solutions to supplying order and democracy that have been formulated through the eyes of the imaginary of the state. What these solutions have in common, therefore, is that they are each premised on centralism, or monopolisation. In other words, statist realism dictates that security, rights and material survival may only be obtained through the state's myriad monopolies: over the legitimate use of force, over identity (which must be secular, economic, national, and individual, encapsulated by the figure of the citizen); and over the economy.

I asked what happens if we stop taking the modern state system to be the most natural, neutral, or superior means of producing order and democracy in the international system, but instead understood it as contingent, temporary, and partial, with its dominance held in place by the power it exerts as a discourse. My study of AANES has proceeded from the wager that we can access novel, alternative conceptualisations of order and democracy if we stop taking the state as transcendental, ever-present and inevitable. In my study of the discourse of democratic autonomy, I have argued that it represents not only a small grassroots political experiment, but must be treated as a source of grounded political theory, one that builds a holistic epistemology, a rigorous and encompassing understanding of order that is non- and anti-state. In the dissertation's theoretical chapters, I showed that if we historicise the state form by tracing it back to its sixteenth and seventeenth century European origins, we can see that the statist

discourse – which has come to dominate both our lives and the discipline of International Relations – conceives of the state as the necessary pre-condition for forming society.

Meanwhile, inside of the discourse on democratic autonomy, this originary state-society relationship is reconfigured, and the signifiers are held in a different relationship, where it is the state that works against society and against social solidarity. Centralisation and monopolisation achieve order and democracy by priorisiting the survival needs and preferences of the imaginary of the state form. By contrast, decentralisation (of the use of force, identity, and the economy) represents the means of achieving order and democracy in the imaginary of the state form's absence. At its core, then, decentralisation refers to the devolution of authority from the state back to society.

In Chapter 4, I argued that rather than centralising and professionalising military power, AANES encourages the dispersal of this power to autonomously organised non-state armed groups on the basis of 'self-defence' rather than state militarism. In Chapter 5, I argued that rather than managing borders and allegiances through the homogeneous figure of the citizen, whose allegiance is predictable and defined by states, who manage who goes to war, who lives and who dies, AANES conceives of foreign fighting as a means of participating in the international that draws on a more complicated conception of identity and allegiance. In both cases, violence is re-conceived in a decentralised fashion. Rather than being motivated to use violence to coerce or rent-seek, groups who might previously have occupied the category of non-combatant are encouraged to meet their own security needs, and protect themselves and one another with the motivation of social ethics. Similarly, in Chapter 6, I argued that rather than producing the individual citizen with a uniform identity that maps onto the (national) identity of the state, AANES conceives of identity as multiple, overlapping and collective. A plural understanding of identity, taken as part of a broader framework of decentralisation of authority, allows minorities to relocate military, epistemological and moral-ethical power back

into their own sub-state communities, rather than relying upon the state to provide security and law as a guarantor of freedom. Finally, in Chapter 7, I argued that AANES pursues the decentralisation of the economy by encouraging decisions about how to manage the economy and the environment to be dictated by the needs of society rather than the statist capitalist drive towards centering its monopolistic – and destructive – drives to maximise markets, profit and extraction.

Throughout this thesis, then, I have shown how the AANES discourse locates the true site of authority, morality, order, and democracy to be the local and multiple, rather than the national and the singular. Its vision of democracy and order is drawn from the needs and preferences of the gaze of the local, not the state. Inside of the AANES discourse, such a view is not only one alternative method of providing order, but is superior. This is because democratic autonomy is conceived of as avoiding the production of hierarchies that states are predicated upon. These include those hierarchies which force civilians, especially women and ethno-religious minorities, to rely upon militaries for security, or which see minority groups forced to subordinate their ethnic, religious and other affiliations to the state. The monopolistic drive towards capital accumulation that is deemed to be characteristic of states is also critiqued as a driver of persistent conflict in the international system. These insights become available to us only when we consider problems of political organisation without reference to the state as master signifier.

On the other hand, I have theorised how the imaginary of the state system manages these ruptures, suturing them closed not soon after they occur. I have argued that AANES does increasingly demonstrate state-like tendencies, despite the pattern of representations to the contrary. This process is a discursive and constitutive one, and involves representations of the AANES project as statist. These representations help bring into being what they name. Such discourses, which interpellate AANES' identity into stateness, license interventions from, and

relationships with, other states, primarily Western liberal ones. These, in turn, cause AANES to itself resemble a state. This constitutive process has taken the form of Western liberal states relating to AANES as if it resembled the identity of the self, or of AANES enacting stateness for the purposes of generating affinity with these states, in order to access acceptability, legitimacy and thus survival. Alternately, other, less friendly discourses render AANES state-like in constituting it as a secessionist or ethno-state project. These representations license interventions that threaten the region's survival, such that AANES risks destruction unless it performs stateness in order to exert agency and thus, again, survival. I have argued that understanding the complexity of this bind is the key insight that a post-structuralist approach supplies: inside of such a framework, the identities of political actors arise out of how they are interpellated, that is, spoken about or represented. Within this process of subjectivation lies the possibility of agency and identity itself. But when the range of identities made available to AANES on the level of discourse is radically narrowed, and when it is states who wield the most agency in the international system, the administration's possibilities for action conform accordingly. Thus, in the past few years, AANES has hosted a series of centralising currents: the SDF is beginning to look like a standing army; it allows itself increasingly to be understood as a liberal secular and liberal feminist project; and its economy is reliant upon extraction and centralised bureaucracy. Meanwhile, its more radical anti-state currents have become more obscure: flows of foreign fighters into the region have declined, and attention on the administration's fight against statist aggression is minimal.

I argue this in order to more broadly address how stateness reproduces, or re-enacts itself, in the international order, and to correct for the deficit in how we conceptualise political projects that threaten to rupture the imaginary of the state system. When such projects fail, we often diagnose their failure as the result of internal dysfunction. This is not to preclude the role of internal dysfunction. However, when we appraise these movements, it is better to do so with

full context, including of the international factors at play. The contribution of this thesis, then, has been to draw attention to the role of other states in reproducing stateness, either by requesting it, demanding it, or (mis)recognising it in others, and rendering stateness an irresistible pull. I have pointed to the United States and Turkey in particular, one a sometimes-ally and the other an aggressor towards AANES, and highlighted how they both continually render AANES the subject of a state-based discourse. The involvement of other states in the re-fashioning of AANES into a more state-like shape is not incidental, and the role of states is made apparent throughout each chapter.

My attention has been not only on the actions of these states, but on the discourses that drive those actions: I have done this in order to demonstrate that the international order does not re-enact itself through exercises of imperial and neo-imperial material power (state-building interventions, invasions and incursions) alone. In drawing attention to the role of representation, I show that the modern state system is not inevitable, but rather held in place by a powerful discourse. In arguing that stateness is a productive discursive category, the result of performances demanded of state and non-state polities alike, helping to bring into being what it purports only to name, I show that this process is an immanent one. In other words, this thesis argues that the state system is not pre-settled, but instead asserted anew through every interaction and every representation, and thus its continuance is not the result of neutral or largely consensual developments. The purpose of this insight is two-fold. First, it re-politicises what it means to live inside the imaginary of the state system – reminding us that its continuation is the result of mechanisms of power, not consent. Second, and connectedly, it opens up space to continue contestation. In the words of an unnamed Belgian academic and supporter of the Center for Solidarity and Cooperation with Universities of North and East Syria (CSCUNES): ‘the idea that a revolution is actually possible spread from Roajva, and this

renders other peoples' revolutions envisage-able, imaginable, and ultimately practicable' (quoted in Rojava Information Centre 2022, 21).

Retaining a focus on contesting the modern state system represents a means of validating the struggles of not only AANES, but other projects like this, and continues to draw academic attention to the potential harms that the state system presents to women, undocumented migrants, ethnic or religious minorities, and refugees, to name a few. In arguing that AANES is not (only) internally dysfunctional, dishonest or riddled with compromise, and that its supporters are not necessarily naïve or impractical, I wish to bring my focus back to highlighting what a reparative reading of the AANES project, whatever its futures, might lead us to conclude. First, AANES is a site of rich political theorising, helping to inform and deepen critiques of the modern state system. Second, even if it is a near impossibility for a twenty-first century polity to substantively exit the nation-state system, what AANES shows is that perhaps this is not what is required in order to live outside of its imaginary.

Rather, AANES shows that living and acting through local and multiple politics allows anarchy to exist under the shadow of the state. This is an anarchy that is positively conceived: not the type of anarchy that must be expunged in order to preserve the distinction between sovereignty and anarchy, in Richard Ashley's (1988) terms, where anarchy refers to the absence of order, and sovereignty to the only option for its presence. Instead, the anarchy fomented is the kind theorised by Walter Benjamin and others: a positive presence, order that blooms in the multiple and the local. Such an understanding helps to target the imaginary of statehood, which is the more common means by which it persists in the modern era: as a discourse that encapsulates not only the power of the sovereign, but also the disciplinary biopower of spatial enactments, symbols, rhetoric, and iconography. In the words of Rosa Burç (2020, 89), 'municipal structures … eventually make the nation state's physical and imaginative borders obsolete for the political realm of community life.' As AANES meets the functions of a state without

reproducing the association between the capacity to maintain order and statehood, it helps to collapse the imaginary of the state. As it does so, it helps to foster non-state imaginaries, even as the state system functions around us.

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