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PEACEBUILDING IN A CONFLICT SETTING: PEACE AND RECONCILIATION COMMITTEES IN DE FACTO ROJAVA AUTONOMY IN SYRIA

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Introduction

In Syria people from some ethnic and religious groups have been discriminated against for decades. The violent conflict in 1982 in Hama between the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and the Alevi ruling elite caused the deaths of thousands of people (Kenner 2011). Kurds, the biggest ethnic minority group, were oppressed and stripped of citizenship rights for about 50 years. The socio-economic policies of the authoritarian Baathist regime played a significant role in the popular uprising in 2011, and ethnic and religious cleavages have come to the surface and have been expressed in violent ways. In the midst of this conflict, Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmens, and Chechens declared a Social Contract and the establishment of three autonomous cantons in Efrîn (Afrin), Kobanî (Ain al-Arab), and Cezîre (Jazirah) in January 2014. Representatives

of these ethnic groups established jointly managed councils in three cantons where the council co-heads and their deputies were chosen from different ethnic groups to ensure that each group has equal rights to administration. Local civil and community-based organisations that were established to replace the ones of the Syrian regime in the Rojava region, which covers most of northern Syria, have successfully resolved interpersonal and intercommunal disputes in a setting where the Syrian regime failed and cannot address such disputes.

The quickly changing course of the war and the uncertainty about the future have disappointed many Syrians and caused them to leave the country,¹ but members of these groups who did not leave the country have taken the risk to challenge the Syrian regime, the Syrian National Coalition, and the radical jihadist groups. This briefing examines the peace and reconciliation attempts at the interpersonal and intercommunal levels amid the civil war in Syria by focusing on the Peace and Reconciliation Committees (PRCs) in the Cezîre region of Rojava and makes recommendations for other areas based on the success of these PRCs. Analysing successful PRCs is important, because it demonstrates how local peace initiatives can prevent intergroup conflicts and further segregation of society based on their individual or ethnic, religious, and political identities. As this briefing focuses on the process of peacemaking and reconciliation, the next section attempts to briefly explain how reconciliation is perceived, as well as how the PRCs are formed and how they work.

Reconciliation and Formation of PRCs

'Reconciliation is a societal process that involves mutual acknowledgment of past suffering and the changing of destructive

attitudes and behaviour into constructive relationships toward sustainable peace' (Brounéus 2003, 3). Achieving a meaningful reconciliation process is usually difficult, painful, and complex; all parties involved in this process must grasp it to avoid greater failures and conflicts in the future (Bloomfield 2003, 15). Local peace and reconciliation initiatives have a great potential to address the root and proximate causes (of conflicts), build resilience, and prevent immediate violence (Peace Direct 2013). The PRCs in Rojava are local initiatives that have been operating even before the civil war to make peace between individuals, families and tribes, and reconstruct their relations so that they do not bear animosity towards each other. In the past, PRCs were usually created by elders — people that the society respects and believes could make just decisions to resolve conflicts. The culture of peacebuilding has existed especially in Kurdish localities, where people attempt to resolve their disputes and regulate daily or communal relations. People's houses (*Mala Gel*), women's houses (*Mala Jinê*), people's municipalities (*Şaredariya Gel*), and communes all have their own PRCs. These local organisations were created by people who share the same neighbourhood to find solutions to problems in infrastructure or to provide basic needs such as food, water and sanitation, electricity, and oil. PRC members are now typically elected by other members of these organisations or they voluntarily participate in its activities. Rojava Democratic Autonomous Administration (RDAA) encourages people to participate in these organisations and resolve their conflicts. As a principle of democratic autonomy, the RDAA tries to empower people to manage local affairs and contribute to the general administration.² Building and keeping peace between the people from different ethnic, religious, and political groups is also important to maintain political stability of the RDAA. It decreases the tensions and advocates the coexistence of diversities. The following section describes how the PRCs approach and resolve interpersonal

and intercommunal conflicts. Data was obtained in face-to-face interviews conducted with PRCs members in August 2014 and January 2015 in Serêkaniyê, Dirbêsiyê, Qamişlo, and Dêrik in Cezîre Canton.

The Main Principles of PRCs

The peace and reconciliation process of the PRCs in Rojava is guided by several key principles that help contribute to the committees' success. The principles mainly require cooperation between civil society organisations and an agreeable disposition of conflicting individuals or groups, otherwise PRCs would not be able to work effectively and would probably disappear.

Listening to both sides without pre-judgments

PRCs invite both sides to their offices upon a complaint. If one side fails to attend, the PRC members go to the person/s to listen to their account of the issue, which sometimes requires a visit at their home. They aim to understand the complaints, demands and needs of both sides to establish a platform for reconciliation. During this process, experts and people experienced in the field of the specific complaint are called upon. For example, in complaints of domestic violence, the committee asks for the contributions and input of *Kongreya Star*³ (Star's Congress) and *Mala Jinê*⁴ (Women's House) that operate autonomously to eliminate social and financial difficulties that women encounter. They also support women in domestic violence cases and, if women need it, *Kongreya Star* and *Mala Jinê* offer women protection from physical violence by accommodating them at *Mala Parastina Jinê* (Women's Protection House), established by the Cezîre Canton Council of Women in 2014.⁵ *Mala Parastina Jinê* is designed to provide a safe place where women, sometimes with their children, have access to shelter and food.

Proposing solutions to the parties

After listening to both sides and considering the deliberations of experienced people, the PRC proposes reconciliatory solutions in which the interests of both sides are preserved. For example, in cases of debt liability a payment plan is drawn up. If the indebted person is unable to make the payment in one go, then one of the proposals is to draw up a plan to pay in instalments and the lender is persuaded to accept the offer.

Second proposals

If the parties are not convinced by the initial proposal then the PRC makes a re-analysis of the case and congregates privately to make a second proposal. If reconciliation cannot be achieved for the second time, the PRC passes the case over to the courts⁶ of the RDAA. The parties decide whether they want to pursue a legal case in the courts. However, even if only one of the sides decides to pursue the case in the RDAA courts, then a hearing is conducted and the decision of the courts is enforced.

Reaching a solution without going to a court⁷

The PRCs try to handle cases before passing them over to the courts.⁸ One reason is that the court, unlike the PRCs, does not seek problem-solving and reconciliation but only enforces a decision it makes. For example, if the court sends a man who commits violence against his wife to prison, this may end the violence, but may not be enough to solve the problems the man and the woman have been dealing with. Imprisonment of the man or divorcing may be an immediate solution but it does not seem to work in the long run because elimination of such problems requires a broader social transformation. PRCs and other organisations work to transform society, in this case, by empowering women in society and eliminating violence against them. Such change requires transformation of men and

family relations in a wider context than is provided by a legal ruling. Further, while the responsibility of the court ends with its ruling, PRCs seek to end violence with the help of *Kongreya Star*, *Mala Jinê* and *Asayîşa Jinê*⁹ (Women's Security Forces) and other civil society organisations. They aim to make society understand that women's rights are protected by women's organisations, and women's armed units that are recognised in *Hevpeymanana Cîvaki*¹⁰ (the Social Contract). The PRCs operating under *Mala Jinê* play an important role in achieving this aim and transform society by offering training on gender issues and protection of women from violence.

Successful Cases and Challenges of PRCs

Rather than going to the courts of the Syrian regime or of the RDAA, the number of cases brought to the PRCs shows that the people gravitate towards the PRCs where they have faith in their reconciliatory methods and the sense of justice.¹¹ Debt liability, buying and selling property, inheritance cases and domestic violence (mostly against women) are among the most common interpersonal cases brought to PRCs. However, the PRCs also try to solve inter-ethnic or inter-religious conflicts. Many Kurdish and Arab tribes have come into inter- and intra-tribe conflicts stemming from interpersonal or intercommunal disputes. Some of these conflicts even caused vengeance and mass killings. Recently, a 23-year-old dispute between two Kurdish tribes in Amûdê was settled after the PRC, Cezîre Canton Religious Affairs Council, and local commune members took the initiative and persuaded the tribes to end the dispute and vengeance (ANHA 2016a). In another example, a conflict arising from nationalist views and behaviours of Kurdish and Arab tribe members was settled by the PRC and Assembly of Wise People in the city of Tirbespiyê (ANHA 2016b). Sometimes Kurds and Assyrians also have disputes that may potentially

destroy coexistence and peaceful relations between the two ethnic groups. The PRC in Qamişlo mediated between a Kurdish family and an Assyrian family to prevent a dispute stemming from the fight between young members of the families from turning into an inter-ethnic conflict (ANF 2012). In Kobani, a 27-year-old conflict between two Kurdish families left eight people dead and eight others wounded (ANHA 2016c). The PRC members explain how the two families were reconciled as follows:

We had been trying to build peace between the two families, but we failed many times mainly because the sense of revenge was very strong and the families resisted forgiving each other for the deaths. We involved civil society organisations such as Arab Elderly Council of Minbic, Girê Spî People's Council, Sirrin People's Assembly and Kobani Canton administrative bodies, Kobani Canton Executive Assembly and TEV-DEM, so that they contribute to achieving a faster and more effective reconciliation. Through three months of visits and mediated negotiations, we attempted to convince the families that they should end seeking revenge because it caused deaths and destroyed the relations between the families in the past and it may cause further deaths and injuries in the future. As both families are Sunni Muslim, we also referred to Islamic orders that propose forgiving for God's sake and being a good Muslim. Religion, to an extent, played a role in bringing the two families to a common ground. Arab and Kurdish organisations visited the families and made them agree on forgiving each other. The Kobani Canton delegates mediated the negotiations between the families. All the sides, including the family members, who contributed to this process agreed on a non-

violent method of resolving the conflict. The families finally declared that they will avoid taking revenge for what happened in the past and decided to maintain dialogue and a peaceful relation with each other.¹²

Not all cases where deaths occur are easy to solve. It is difficult, in general, for people to accept the death of a family member or a close relative. The sense of revenge is very intense in most human beings due to the pain they suffer from what happened to them or their loved ones. As in the above-mentioned case, the PRCs usually try to make families understand that revenge is never a solution and does not bring any inner peace, but just deepens hatred and feelings of hostility. The PRCs keep visiting such families and receive help from as many people and organisations as possible to convince families to agree on a non-violent solution, and pay compensation if requested by victims' families. Many resist and it takes years to solve murder cases. Although it is practised, imprisonment is not considered to be a solution in the RDAA because, as many PRC members argue, imprisonment has two main disadvantages: (a) it punishes criminals by taking their freedom; and (b) the hostility and sense of revenge usually persist, which threatens peace and security in society.¹³ The PRCs are not authorised to imprison people. They rather encourage disputing people to compensate each other's financial loss, heal each other's suffering and pain, and transform their perceptions to find a mutually accepted solution.

Conclusion

The PRCs in Rojava have contributed to peaceful coexistence and reconciliation at the individual and communal levels by preventing and reducing violence, encouraging dialogue between people and groups, and practising problem-solving

with an important number of people and groups in conflict (Xelîl 2015; Cûdî 2015). Although the PRCs cannot solve all disputes, they still receive a great deal of support and respect from local people, which makes the PRCs legitimate, as well as a centre for conflict resolution for the local communities. Cooperation between local organisations and the PRCs strengthens both and provides them with an important chance to present local perspectives and practices for further peace and reconciliation in Syria. The PRCs' performance in a context where individual disputes may immediately transform into intercommunal conflicts shows that local initiatives may play a significant role in the efforts to change perceptions and ensure a violence-free society even amid a civil war. To achieve this, the RDAA may provide the PRCs with further support by helping to form more PRCs, especially in the multi-religious and multi-ethnic regions. PRCs should also be as inclusive as possible, keep diversity at their centre, and be used as an effective conflict resolution mechanism to allow people to vocalise their needs and perspectives on solutions to the disputes. The successful experiences of the PRCs may be an inspiring source for peace and reconciliation attempts in the rest of Syria and such success may lead to the emergence of a culture of peacebuilding and reconciliation. More attention should be given to the training activities that may include people from different groups and ages as much as possible, to ensure that people learn from each other's experiences and contribute to establishing a society free from violence.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

¹Interview with Dr Wendy Pearlman, 3 May 2016: <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/article/3158-fear-experiences-of-syrian-refugees-in-jordan-turkey-and-lebanon-an-interview-with-dr-wendy-pearlman>, accessed 10 December 2016.

²Interview with Çinar Salih, TEV-DEM (*Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk* — Democratic Society Movement) representative, 16 June 2015.

³*Kongreya Star* is an umbrella organisation that has an important number of women organisations (i.e. women's houses, all-women communes, all-women workplaces, all-women cooperatives, etc.) in all districts and provinces of the RDAA as well as in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo. *Kongreya Star* was established before declaration of the RDAA; however, the Syrian regime forbade its activities and arrested many of its members because they participate in political activities for the rights of women and Kurdish people.

⁴*Mala Jinê* is a social affiliate of *Kongreya Star*. Women who encounter domestic violence or any socio-economic problem usually visit *Mala Jinê* first and ask for protection or help.

⁵Interview with Emîna Umer, Head of Cezîre Canton Women's Council, 20 August 2014.

⁶The courts are 'official bodies' of the Council of Justice; however, their system is different from that of courts that exist in Syria and other states in the world. To work at the court of the RDAA one does not need to be a lawyer or have studied law before. People who want to serve at the courts need to study at Mesopotamia Academy of Social Law and Justice. The graduates of this academy are employed as lawyers, judges and prosecutors. Interview with Ebdulhemîd Bekîr, Head of Cezîre Canton Council of Justice, 21 August 2014.

⁷Mesopotamia Social Law and Justice Academy members in Qamişlo noted in the interview (18 January 2015) that the aim is to put the PRCs at the centre of conflict resolution. Similarly, in a conference at Boğaziçi University (Istanbul,

Turkey) on 16 June 2015, Çinar Salih, a TEV-DEM (Democratic Society Movement) representative said that 'TEV-DEM aims to expand the PRC system in Rojava and let people resolve the conflicts on their own. TEV-DEM may even demolish the courts because if people are used to solving their conflicts, they will not need the courts anymore'.

⁸ A similar process is observed in the *Sulh* section of Sharia. The disputing parties who agree with the *Sulh* do not have to go through the trial process in the Sharia court. This can save time and cost for the parties and indirectly facilitate resolution of cases in the Sharia court. The *Sulh* in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia is one of the functioning examples (Wahed 2015). Turkey recently started a similar system called reconciliation courts (*Uzlaşma Mahkemeleri*) that aim to settle various types of economic, social, and individual disputes out of court.

⁹ *Asayîşa Jinê* is a female branch of the public security forces and authorised to investigate crimes committed against women. All these three organisations work in cooperation to decrease the problems that women face and provide security and a social space for women.

¹⁰ *Hevpeymanîya Cîvokî* is the Social Contract, or the constitution, of the RDAA. It defines the principles of the political regime and the authorities of the social, political, and economic organisations and institutions. To read the full text of the Social Contract, visit https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/english-version_sc_revised-060314.pdf, accessed 10 December 2016.

¹¹ Interview with Tariqê Brahîmê Êzîdî, Member of Serêkaniyê Peace and Reconciliation Committee, 24 August 2014.

¹² Skype interview with the PRC members in Kobani Canton, 13 December 2016.

¹³ Interview with Mesopotamia Social Law and Justice Academy members, 18 January 2015.

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