

# The Rojava Revolution

Co-operation, Environmentalism, and Feminism in  
the North Syria Democratic Federation

John Restakis  
Community Evolution Foundation

## Why Rojava... why now?

1. Need for a new imaginary
2. Need to apply our co-operative and social values and principles to scales of comprehensive systemic change
3. Need to learn the lessons of vanguard movements – sometimes in the unlikely places.

















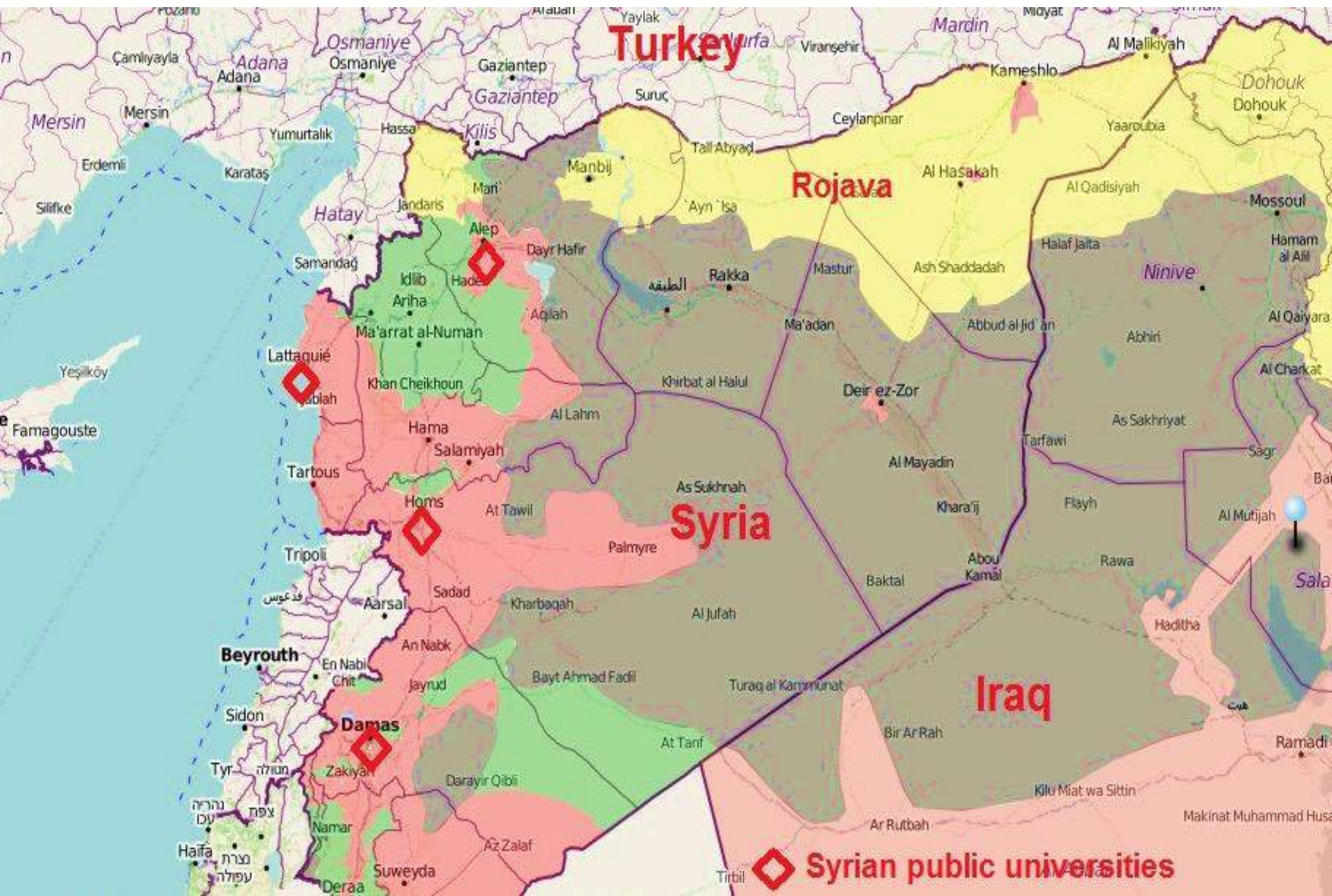
This is not all there is to what is happening in Syria....

The revolution that is taking place in Rojava is a unique movement of hope and healing.



[https://www.facebook.com/MATurkce/videos/2006781062933696/?hc\\_ref=ARRyXQ-ifjvbG6yuTgqzqwivLUKLii736FZY89hkMgbr24NB2Ij-deFG\\_6NaJGJwMUE&pnref=story](https://www.facebook.com/MATurkce/videos/2006781062933696/?hc_ref=ARRyXQ-ifjvbG6yuTgqzqwivLUKLii736FZY89hkMgbr24NB2Ij-deFG_6NaJGJwMUE&pnref=story)









## Background

- Syrian conflict broke out in March 2011, when schoolboys in Deraa were arrested and tortured for writing anti-Assad graffiti.
- What began as a peaceful, pro-democracy uprising, degenerated into an armed conflict when Assad forces responded with brutal repression & armed force.



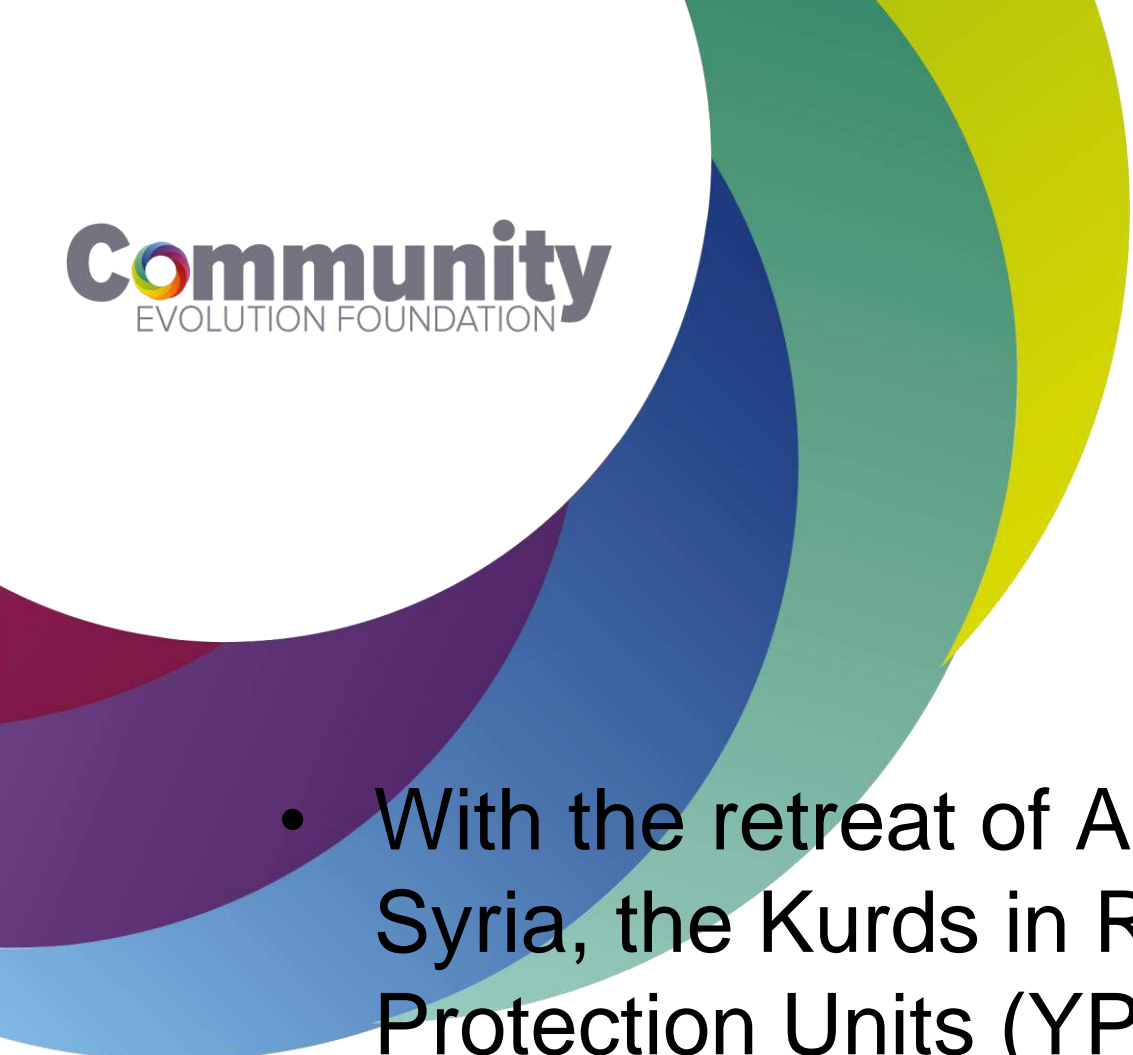
- 
- A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide consisting of several overlapping, curved, semi-transparent shapes in shades of purple, blue, teal, and yellow, creating a sense of movement and depth.
- Today Syria has become a battlefield for a proxy war among diverse interests. “Terrorists” are mostly militias funded & supported by neighboring states: Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar
  - The Assad regime supported by Russia, Iran
  - Kurds are among the various ethnic groups caught up in the conflict.



- 
- A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide consisting of several overlapping, curved, semi-transparent shapes in shades of purple, blue, green, and yellow, creating a sense of movement and depth.
- The Kurdish people have inhabited the region of Kurdistan since 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.
  - Like other ethnic groups in the region, they had no “nation state”. Nations states in the region were a product of European geo politics commencing in WWI with the formation of the Arab states under English & French dominion.
  - Kurds, through the intercession of Turkey, were denied an autonomous state.

- With the formation of the Kurdish Worker's Party in Turkey (PKK), a Kurdish nationalist movement was born & struggle for territorial autonomy launched in Turkey and throughout Kurdistan (in Iraq & Syria).
- PKK declared a terrorist group; leaders jailed including Abdulla Ocalan, the founder.
- In 2005, Ocalan & the PKK renounce the idea of the nation state.



- 
- A decorative graphic on the left side of the slide consisting of several overlapping, curved, semi-transparent shapes in shades of purple, blue, teal, and yellow, creating a sense of movement and depth.
- With the retreat of Assad military forces from northern Syria, the Kurds in Rojava establish People's Protection Units (YPG & YPJ) and secure Rojava and Kobani as autonomous territories.
  - ISIS is pushed out of the region and the Rojava forces establish a model of political economy based on communitarian direct democracy.
  - This is called Democratic Confederalism.

## Co-operative Economy & Democratic Confederation

Democratic Self Government entails:

- a) Rejection of the nation state as inherently repressive
- b) Direct democracy based on communal councils
- c) Federated and autonomous self-governing territories
- d) Inclusivity of all religious and ethnic groups
- e) Gender equality
- f) Co-operative economics
- g) Participatory politics



## Co-operative Economy & Democratic Confederatism

1. Rojava's political economy is based on the principle of direct democracy as the organizing basis for both economics and politics.
2. The foundation for this is communal control of both economic and political life.
3. Rojava is a unique instance of community directed democracy acting as the link between the organization of the economy and the organization of political life as an integrated system.



## Co-operative Economy & Democratic Confederatism

The form of direct democracy in the economy is co-operative organization; the form of direct democracy in politics is Democratic Confederatism.

## Co-operative Economy & Democratic Confederatism

- A key issue from the start was how to organize & create a strong community movement.
- The Kurdish community, oppressed for so many years, had many problems. Sooner or later, the conflict would end...

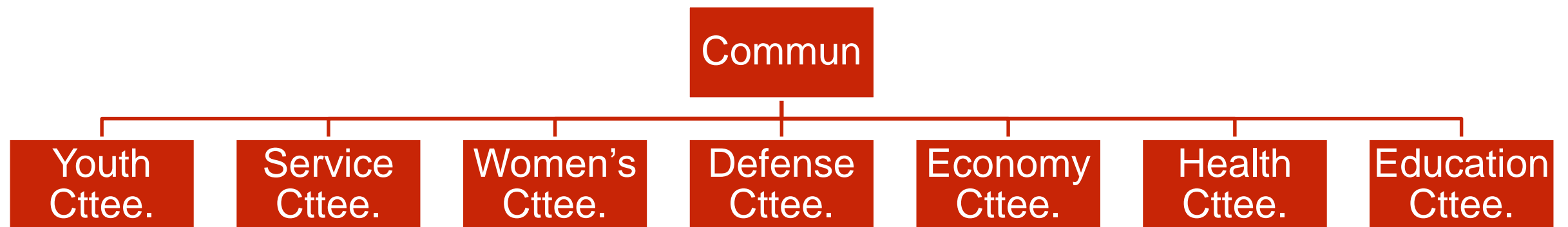
... how then to create a lasting community?



Co-operative Economy &  
Democratic Federalism

Co-ops & self-directed community  
councils were a means of doing  
this. They are the foundation of the  
system.

# Commune System





Neighborhood  
Council

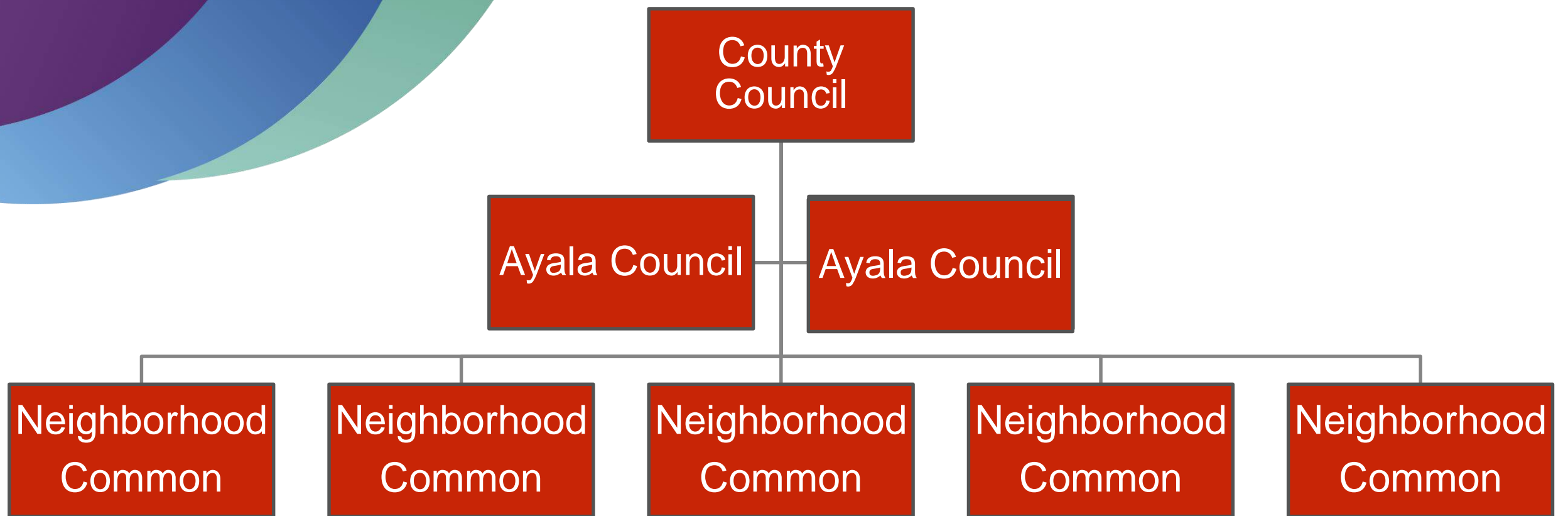
Commun

Commun

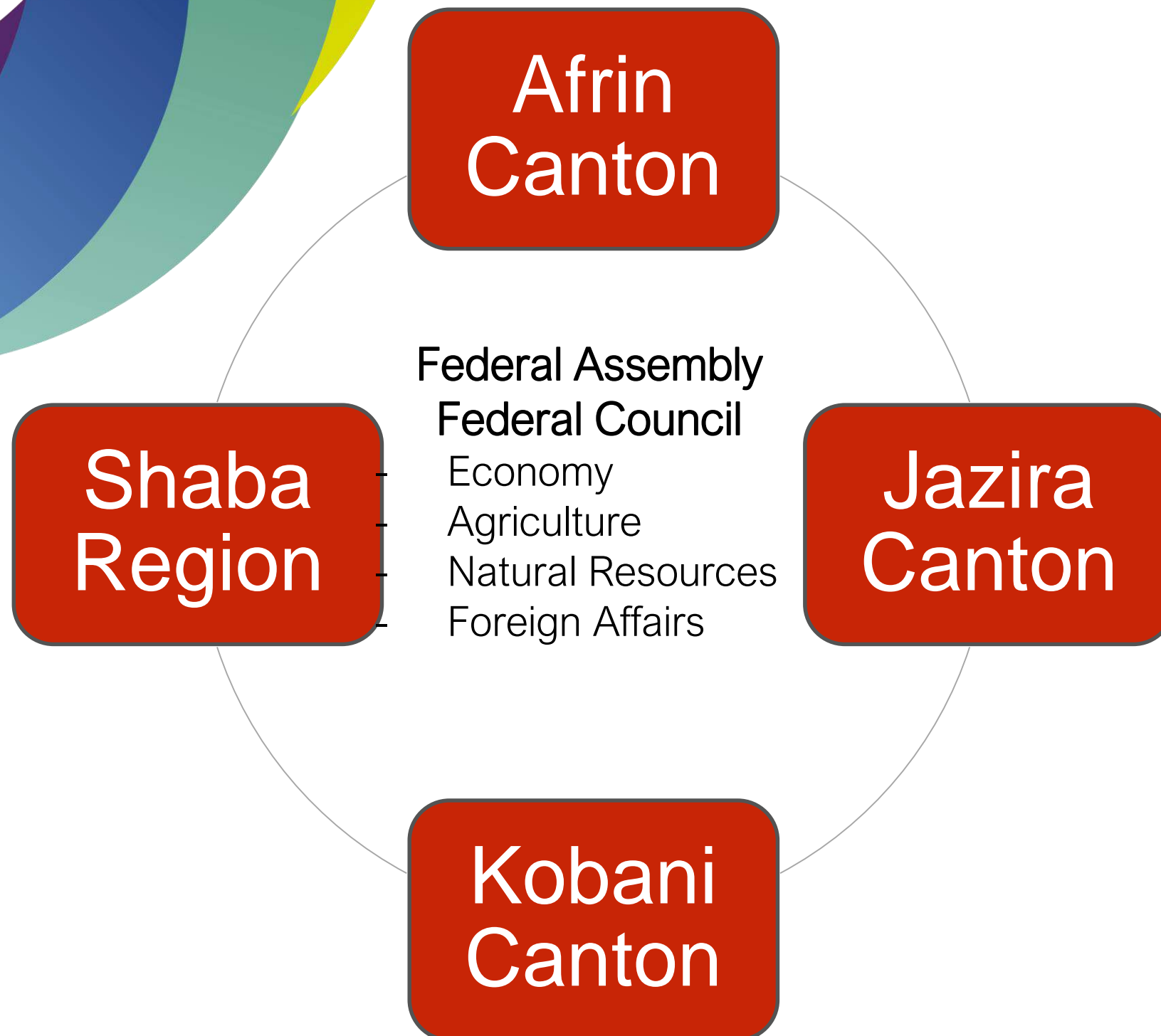
Commun

Commun

Commun













## Co-operative Organization

- Communes are the means by which civil society addresses collective issues at neighborhood, local, regional, and district levels.
- Co-operatives are the organizational form used to put collective solutions into practice.
- These are some examples...





Lorin Women's Food Co-op









Kongra Star Women's  
Assn. Food Market





Kasrik Agricultural Co-op





















Hevgirtin (Solidarity) Co-op



## Integral Approach

- CED – Territorial, community-driven development
- Co-operative – Economic Democracy
- Democratic Self-Government – Communal Direct Democracy

All three methodologies are integrated within a single comprehensive vision of systemic change.

The model here is civil organizations directing development – TEVDEM, Kongra Star, federated communes

## Elections

In July 2017, the Constituent Council of the North-Syria Democratic Federation set the terms for elections in North Syria.

- Sept. 22 – Election of communes
- Nov. 3 – Election of towns, districts, cantons
- Jan. 19 – Parliamentary elections for People's Democratic Council



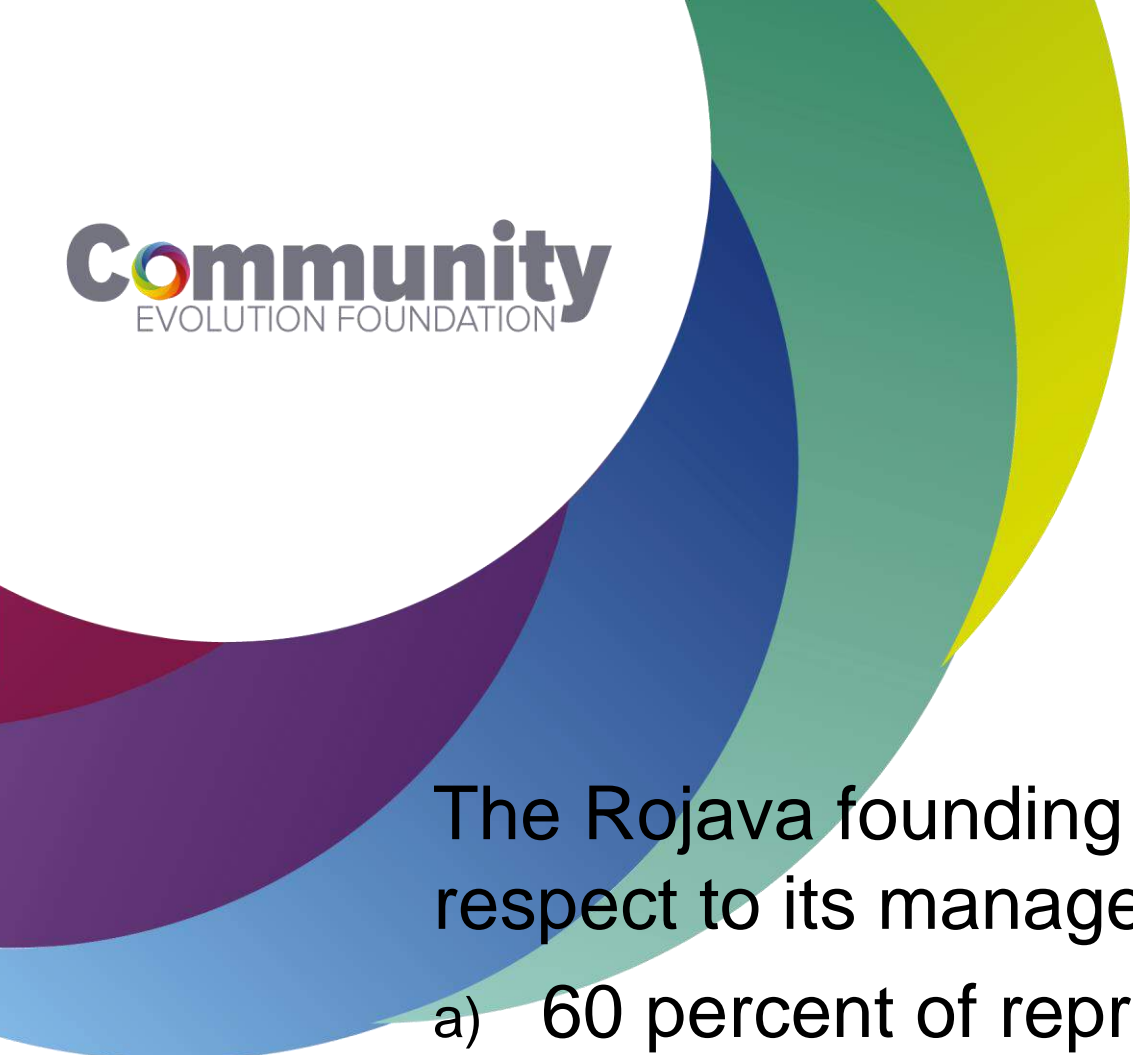




## Elections

- 565 candidates stood for 12 municipal councils.
- Of those 565 candidates 237 were women. There were also 28 Arab, 23 Syriac, 8 Qeldani, 8 Asûrî, and 1 Chechen candidates.
- The elections in Til Temir were postponed until a later date citing security concerns owing to the ISIS attacks.
- Elections postponed in Mabji & Raqqa where the final stage of fighting is taking place.



Four overlapping, curved bands in shades of purple, blue, teal, and yellow, sweeping from the left side of the slide towards the center.

The Rojava founding council passed four declarations with respect to its management system Rojava in August.

- a) 60 percent of representatives in the national parliament will be elected directly by voters through ballot boxes.
- b) 40 percent of the parliament's seats will be reserved for minorities via a quota system.
- c) There must be equal participation of men and women.
- d) Each member of the parliament and the councils is entitled to run for elections for two terms.

## New Developments

1. Defeat of ISIS in Syria; liberation of Raqqa
2. Referendum in Kurdistan Region of Iraq; Political brinksmanship of Masoud Barzani
3. Embargo agreement between Iran, Iraq, Turkey
4. Battle of Kirkuk
5. Incursion of ISIS in Iraq



## Key Impressions

- Sophistication of the systems being built.
- Co-operative networks
- Nested & integrated systems
- Consistency and clarity of values & principles.
- Speed with which progress is being made.
- Continuity between economic structures, social structures, political structures.
- Key role of third tier organizations (TEVDEM, KONGRA Star; Hevgirtin.
- Inclusive co-operative membership; workers, non-worker supporters.



Four overlapping, curved bands in shades of purple, blue, teal, and yellow, curving from the left side of the slide towards the center.

## Risks

### Internal

- Intolerance of dissent
- Emergence of competing influences from other actors (ethnic & religious minorities, political movements)
- Insufficient training & education of leadership
- Transition from war economy to sustainable “peace” economy

### External

- Competition & conflict within broader Kurdish community (KDP)
- Reaction of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, to declaration of Kurdish independence in Iraq



A series of overlapping, curved bands in shades of purple, blue, teal, and yellow, sweeping from the left side of the slide towards the center.

## Lessons

1. Comprehensive, large scale co-operative economy is possible
2. Integrating economic with political democracy within a single system is crucial
3. Systems building from grass roots upward
4. Organizing civil institutions (TEVDEM, Kongra Star, Commons)
5. Plural & multi-interest institutions
6. Clear social, cultural, economic, & political vision
7. Comprehensive education & training – communal, political, institutional



## Preconditions of Rojava's success (so far...)

1. The opening of a political space for revolution, occasioned by the Syrian conflict.
2. Solidarity of purpose occasioned by ethnic & cultural struggle & collective identity.
3. Clarity of vision & purpose facilitated by the power of Ocalan's ideas.
4. Organization of military capacity & the ability to defend achievements.
5. Correlation of co-operative ideas with traditional values & cultural practices.



A series of five overlapping, curved bands in shades of purple, blue, teal, and yellow, curving from the left side of the slide towards the center.

## Lessons

Rojava encourages us to think big, to have hope, and to understand that alternatives exist... the paradigms we live in are not set in stone.

It is possible to build a democratic and co-operative political economy where peace, equality, and communities come first.

If it is possible in Rojava – it is possible anywhere.

# Thank You...

[restakis@gmail.com](mailto:restakis@gmail.com)

[www.communityevolutionfoundation.org](http://www.communityevolutionfoundation.org)