

**WE WILL DEFEND THIS LIFE,  
WE WILL RESIST ON THIS LAND**



**BUILDING A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL LIFE UNDER ATTACKS**

**REPORTAGE ON THE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL LIFE IN ROJAVA, NORTH-EAST SYRIA,  
AND THE EFFECTS OF WINTER 2023-2024 TURKISH ATTACKS ON THE REGION.**



**MARCH 2024**

Relatively unrecognized by the international public, Turkey has not only been killing civilians and politicians in North-East Syria for years, but also bombing basic civil infrastructure and means of life in the region. Looking at these attacks from a social-ecological perspective, they have dramatic effects on the people living and working on their land, and aim to cause migration and fear. Ecocide is a warfare of Turkish fascism against the people, all over Kurdistan. It causes long-term environmental damages on a larger scale in the whole Middle East.

The war of Turkey against the Autonomous Administration can be looked at from very different perspectives. One of them that we want to highlight is the social-ecological one, concerning people living and working on their land in balance with their environment. To make these effects more understandable, we focused on the region of Koçerata, in the most North-East corner of Rojava/North-East-Syria. This region, its people and located infrastructure were heavily targeted by Turkish drones and fighting jets resulting in deaths and injuries, destruction of civil infrastructure and livelihood. Long-term effects continue to harden the life of the people and will do so for the time to come.

Koçerata, the "Land of the Nomads", is a plain land with some hills and, due to the Tigris' river, very fertile. For hundreds of years Kurdish nomads have come down there in the winter from the highlands of North-Kurdistan, until the establishment of nation states in the region and the construction of borders.

Today the people who are descendants of the nomads of the old times are living mostly in villages, organizing their life as a part of the self-administration of North-East Syria. Still carrying on cultural heritage, their life is rather humble and self-contained. A life close to nature and communality has passed on through generations. Connecting heritage and local culture with grassroots democracy and popular self-defense, the people of the region of Koçerata have set strong foundations for developing social-ecology.

Social-ecology refers to the idea that a free, ecologic and democratic life is possible only when the relation between society and ecosystems are harmonious and free from domination. Throughout history, different systems of domination have imposed a mindset of separation between the concepts of “subject” and “object”. Within this basis, all forms of oppression have developed, such as patriarchy and ecological exploitation. Thinking of our society and communities as ecosystems allows us to understand that self-organization, connection with the land, co-existence of different identities, sustainable use of resources according to needs and in balance with the environment, and self-defense are all aspects of a free life. While large parts of the population have been distanced from this reality by the capitalist mentality and life-style, in some regions like Koçerata, people are resisting in order to carry on this way of life.

From October 6<sup>th</sup> 2023 to January 18<sup>th</sup> 2024, the region and its people have been subject to airstrikes carried out by the Turkish Army. Understanding the reality of people’s life and their perspectives, within the context of the consequences of the recent aggressions in North-East Syria, contributes to conceptualizing and building up ecological ways of living and has a great importance in times of global ecological crises. This rich and pioneering heritage is under massive attack but still, people will not even consider giving up their way of life or leaving their land. This report ultimately aims to share their perspectives regarding resistance and the challenges in the process of building up a self-organized society.

The report was put together with the help of the municipality of Dêrik, the peoples councils of Xanêserê and Girê Sîro and the Electricity Councils of the Canton of Cizîre. The research of Rojava information center has been very important.

The picture on the first page above, showing a destroyed power plant, is from North Press Agency archive.

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**Şengal** (en.: Sinjar): Mountain in South Kurdistan, Iraqi territory, home of the Êzidi people  
**Dicle** (en.: Tigris): River dwelling from North-Kurdistan (Turkish territory), 1,900 km in length  
**Firat** (en.: Euphrates): River dwelling from North-Kurdistan (Turkish territory), 2,800 km in length  
**Cizîrê** (en.: Jazire): Region in the west of the turkish-syrian border in Rojava. It is currently part of the Autonomous Administration territory.  
**Siwedi** (en.: Suwaydiyah)  
**NES** North-East Syria  
**ISIS**: Islamic State in Syria and the Levante, also known as Islamic State or Daesh.  
**Kurmanci**: One of the Kurdish languages spoken mainly in North and West Kurdistan.

# 1. THE REGION OF KOÇERATA - (RE)BUILDING AN ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY

## ***KOÇERATA - "THE LAND OF THE NOMADS"***

The land between the heights of the Mountain Cudi in today's Turkey, the mountain of Şengal in today's Iraq and the stream of the Dicle, is called Koçerata, the "land of the nomads". If one stands on top of the mountain Qereçox and looks down from there, the whole plain in its beauty unfolds in front of one's eyes.

Koçerata and the people living here carry a heritage of hundred years of communal life, depending on and living in coexistence with nature and the land. Within the revolution of Rojava, and the organization of a self-administrated multi-ethnic society, this heritage is being built upon, recovered where it was lost and a lot of work is done to protect it from alienation and commodification.

This region was home for hundreds of years to nomadic and half-nomadic tribes, Kurdish as well as Arab living and working together. While the Arabic tribes were moving around in the plain, the Kurdish half-nomads (kurd. Koçer) were staying in the plain for the winter and then moving to the highlands of the mountains in the North, mainly Cudi and Gabar, during the summer. For their herds, mostly sheep and goats, they would find more than enough food and refuge from the heat of the plain. The people lived like this until 1925. The creation of the Turkish state, with its politics of homogenization that led to the genocide of the Armenian and Assyrian people even before the state's official founding, led to various uprisings among the Kurdish tribes. While the uprisings were crushed and its leaders were hanged, the Turkish state tried to limit the movement between West and North-Kurdistan, i.e. Syria and Turkey. Many people fled from the Turkish massacres and military offensives to the part of Kurdistan under French leadership, among them also those organizing uprisings and resistance. These new border-politics, that were established by the newly created nation states in the Middle East also deeply influenced the life of the half-nomads, cutting them off from the highlands where they would spend half of their life and that were essential for their herding. Unwilling to give up on their ancestors' way of life, many continued to live in tents and moving in the plain until around 1945, when the French left the region and the state of Syria was built up. The Syrian state wanted to create a society according to the

habits of modernism, rather than following their heritage. In this period, a lot of the villages that one can still find today were built up. Zehra Ali, organized in one of the two peoples' councils of the region, still remembers this time. *"Until I was 15, every weekend, when we would not have to go to school, we were going with buses and pickups to visit our parents who were staying with the herds. It was the most beautiful life, we were really sad when we had to go back to school"*.

With the creation of the Syrian state, another period of attacks began to target the people's natural way of life. Under the ideology of the Ba'ath regime that proclaimed a mono-ethnic nationalist ideology of Arabs, the Kurdish people suffered denial of their identity and complete exclusion from the economical system of Syria. The land where they would graze their herds now belonged to the State that established a monoculture economy upon it, only allowing people that were loyal to the regime to work.

This way of oppression, that seems to be only economical on first sight, was an attempt to destroy the hundred years of social-ecological life in the region, making the Kurdish identity completely forgotten, laying the foundation for exploitation of humans and nature in its whole. What happened was that the people were neither allowed to grow and harvest to sustain their own life, nor to work for the regime to earn at least a small amount of money to survive. As in the whole Rojava, in the region of Koçerata more and more people were forced to leave for the bigger cities of Syria like Aleppo, Damascus and Raqqa. There, the people who lived independently from their own effort on their land had no other choice than to sell their labor force at the cheapest wage and work in sectors that were dangerous and considered as "dirty".



Landscape of Koçerata

After the destruction of the half-nomadic life style, that was the second stage of tearing the people away from their land. In the most evident way, an attempt to destroy social ties took place to strengthen industrialization and urbanism in the Middle East. As seen in the example of the Syrian regime, the local nation states that were created after the official end of the colonization played a crucial role in this process.

## THE CREATION OF A NEW LIFE ON THE BASIS OF OLD HERITAGES

When today the Rojava revolution is spoken about as an ecological revolution, one of the reasons for this is the resistance against politics that aim to destroy the ties between the people and their land. Experiencing decades of being left hungry and without rights, the people from Koçerata took part in the 2012 revolution that started in Kobanê and spread through the whole region. From the beginning of the liberation struggle in Kurdistan, the people of this region have always been a part of it. From most villages, young men and women gave their life throughout the whole of Kurdistan. Lots of young people from Koçerata went to fight against ISIS and are now taking responsibility in the establishment of the self-administration structures.

Beritan Ehmed, today working in the municipality of the self-administration, told us about the events in Koçerata during the revolution, when she was a part of the revolutionary youth movement: *"In Siwedi there was a military base of the Regime. When the revolution started we went there from our village to expel the soldiers. By this time the self-defense forces were already existing under the name of YXK (Yekiniyên Xweparastin a Kurdistan, Self-defense units of Kurdistan). Still we all came from from our villages, us youths but also our elders, we surrounded their military base and after some days they surrender, we let them go and they left for the areas of the regime"*



Beritan Ehmed, co-chair of municipality of Dêrik

After the Syrian state was expelled from the region, it became one of the most safe and stable areas in the whole of Syria. Once the autonomous administration was established, a lot of families returned from the cities they

were forced to move to and started to build up their life in their own village again. The villages are rather small, the biggest having 450 households.

During the French occupation and later during the time of the Ba'ath regime the region was of high interest because of its rich oil deposits. The oil fields of Koçerata are until now one of the main pillars of energy suppliance for the region. For this reason one of the biggest power plants of North-East-Syria is also based here, in Siwedi. The plant, built in 1983 by a French company, was one of the main gas and power station of the whole North-East-Syria, serving between 4 and 5 million people until the airstrikes in January. The plant, in normal running-times, processes every day 500.000 m<sup>3</sup> of gas, through a system of turbines, in order to produce the necessary electricity. Siwedi is also the only region's filling station for household gas bottles, with a rate of 13,000 bottles/day, which is particularly important considering that most domestic cooking in North-East-Syria is done with bottled gas. Since its foundation, the plant has ever fully been modernized. The negligence of the regime before, and the embargo since the beginning of the revolution, have led now to a situation where the procurement of necessary replacement parts is extremely difficult.

The region of Koçerata is today organized under two people's councils and municipalities, one of them in Girê Sor and the other one in Xane Serê. The people's councils themselves are bringing together around 30 communes. While the communes are the foundation of the organizing of everyday life on the village level, the people's council are where regional problems are resolved. The communes are the cells of the society and the councils are its body. Both of them elect two co-chairs, a woman and a man to apply decisions. At the same time, the Municipalities, which are responsible to organize infrastructural needs in the region, such as water and electricity suppliance are under the control of the People's Council. The level of organization in the region is very strong, based on the long-time ties between the people and the freedom movement, as well as the lively communal culture. One of the main objects of the peoples councils and the communes in the villages and the region is to strengthen social ties and organize the needs of society. Even though these ties have suffered during the time of the regime, when due to migration the social network of the villages were affected, they are still strong in Koçerata.

Rûken Şêxo, spokesperson of the people's council in the village Girê Sor describes the life of the people and the creation of social-ecology in the region: *"The life of the Koçer [kurd. Half-nomads] is very simple and beautiful. We don't need a lot from the outside. In every house you will find a small garden, where the families are growing vegetables, herbs and plants, for example tomatoes, onion, salad. Some will also raise cows, chicken and turkeys". "We make things ourselves, especially yogurt, cheese and milk. My grandma always said that one should only eat what is growing in the very season. When I was young I thought that this was backward and that she didn't know anything, but today we follow this again.*

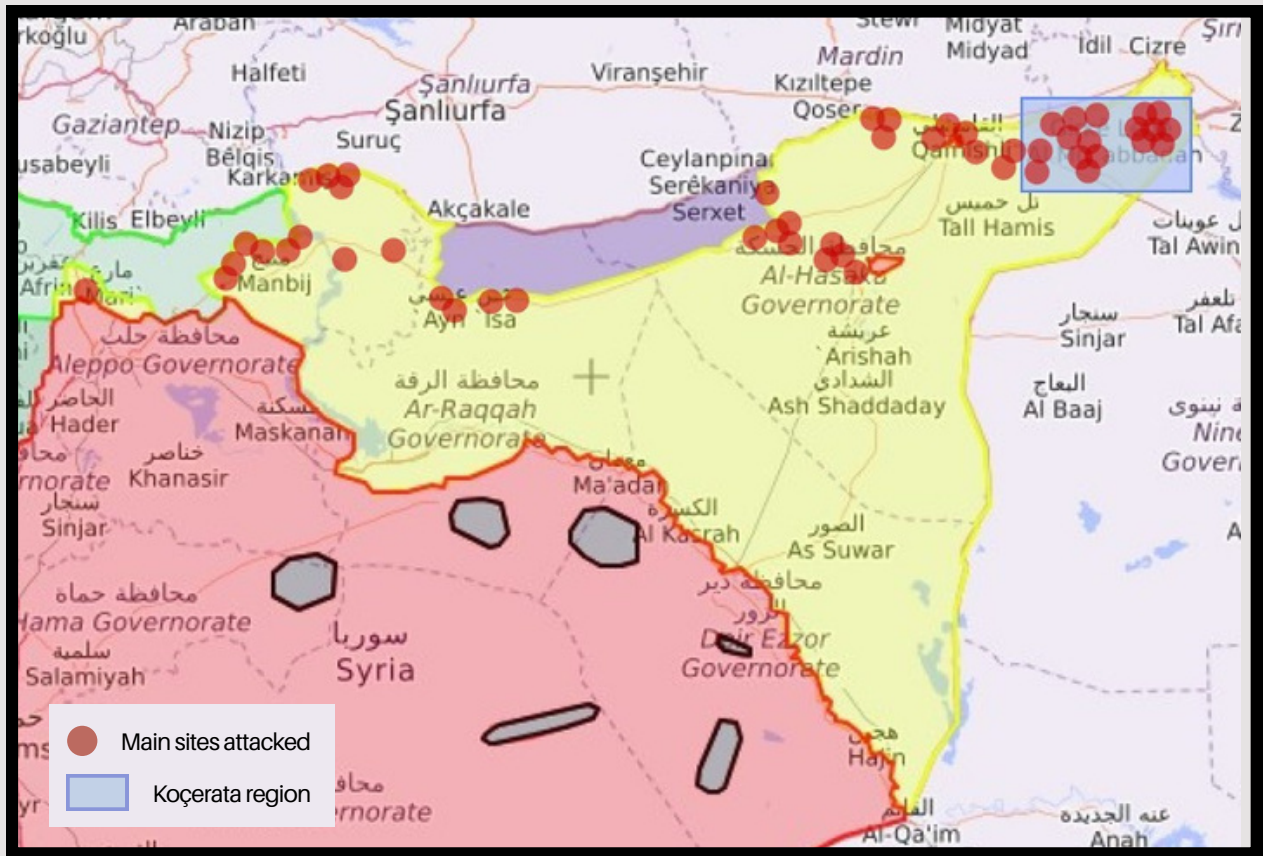




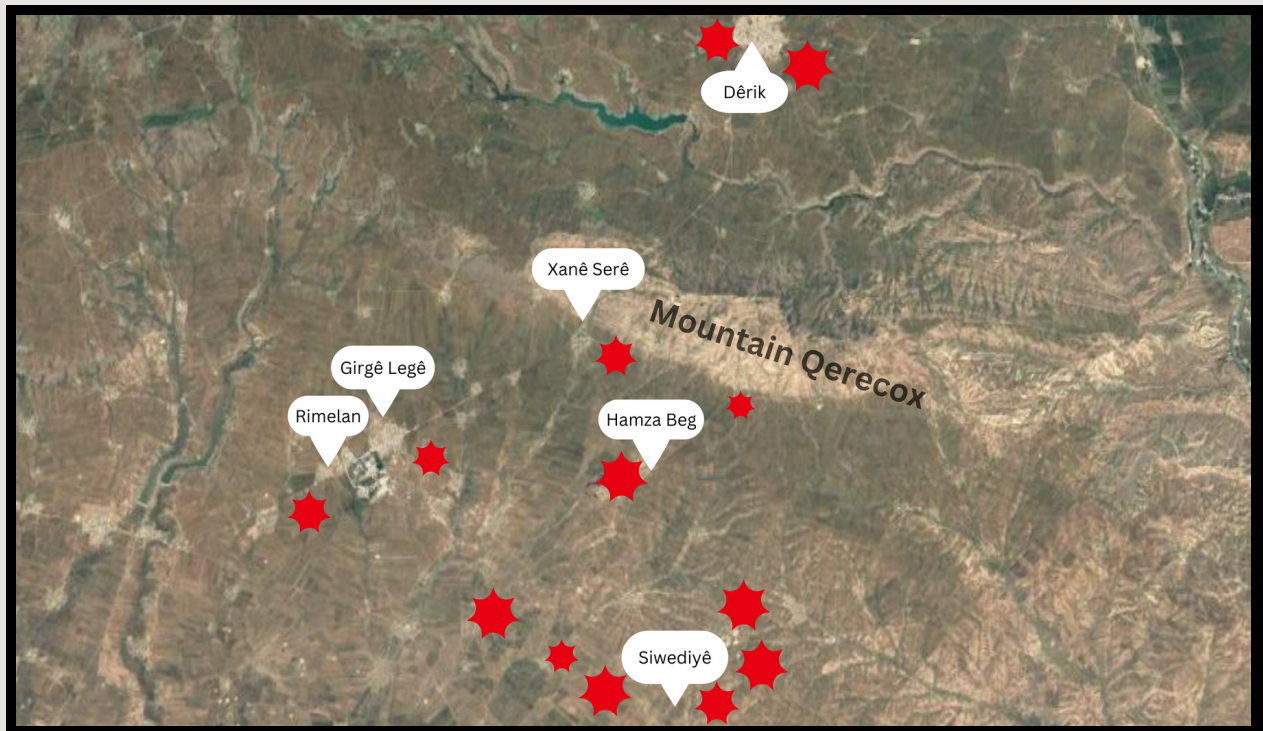
Village in Koçerata

*You see, the modern way of life, the chemicals in the food, the artificial products, they bring illnesses. She was a wise woman, and she got very old. She used to say to us to 'do not own more things that you need'. She advised us to only get 2 outfits for winter and 2 for summer, that is enough. From our childhood onward we learned to create everything by ourselves, from the things we have. This is also what we are going to teach to our children."*

Still, the whole process of building up and organizing happens within an atmosphere of war, lasting now for 13 years, with its main actor being the Turkish State and its attempts to break the autonomy the people of North-East-Syria gained from the Syrian state after their fight against ISIS.



Map of North-East Syria



Map of attacks in Koçerata

## 2. TURKEY'S WAR AGAINST ROJAVA: AN ATTACK ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL-ECOLOGY

The renewing and preserving of heritage and culture as well as the development of new social-ecological methods to work and to live are not taking place in an environment of peace but of one of under the shadow of global and local conflicts that are striking the region for years. The expansion politics that Turkey is pushing forward for the last ten years are the main factor that has to be acknowledged when aiming for an realistic understanding of the social-ecological situation, for these politics affect all parts of society, nature and land in the region.

Low-intensity war and special warfare have never stopped in the region since the beginning of the revolution (2012), killing hundreds of civilians and forcing millions to leave their lands, because the conditions to continue their life were no longer possible. These operations are part of a long process of war-on-society carried out by the Turkish regime, characterized by the continuous violation of human rights. Even though, in November 2022, heavy attacks were executed, targeting in particular the infrastructure for basic life needs (water and electricity), the most recent bombardments mark the worst escalation since 2019. The purpose of destroying the basis of people's life became even more explicit and clear. Beside the physical destruction, these attacks aim to harm society's psychological status and destabilize the region, in order to stop, by any means possible, the democratic process that is going on within the Autonomous Administration. Turkey openly announced its intention to threaten the North-East Syria infrastructure and define them as legitimate targets. This is based on Turkey's accusation of the Syrian Democratic Forces being terrorists, because of their alignment with the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

The region of Koçerata is by far not the only area in the self-administrated area that are suffering the effects of the war. Other areas are facing attacks on a daily basis. Koçerata still became a central target due to important infrastructural sites placed in the region which are essential for the production of electricity, cooking gas and petrol. Being mainly a rural and agriculture-based region, the relation between war and social-ecology here appears very clearly.

## TURKEY'S AIRSTRIKES CAMPAIGN IN WINTER 2023/2024

Between October 6<sup>th</sup> and January 15<sup>th</sup>, the Turkish army has carried on more than 650 strikes (with drones and fighting jet), hitting more than 250 places, many of them being hit several times. In this huge operation, 56 people have been killed (among them two children, 10-11 years old, and several members of the anti-drug internal forces), while at least 75 people have been injured. Among those injured were workers at their work site, collecting cotton in fields. The airstrikes have mainly targeted essential infrastructure, 18 water stations, 17 electricity plants, sites for cooking gas, and oil, but also schools, hospitals, factories, industrial sites, agricultural and food production facilities, storage centers for oil, grain and construction materials and medical facilities, villages. Even though airstrikes occurred in the whole North-East-Syria and affected the lives of people in the whole region, we want to focus especially on the region of Koçerata, to show the social-ecological effects more precisely and in detail.

The places hit in the region of Koçerata and the closer surrounding are the following:

- Siwedî gas plant, Dêrik
- Al Qaws oil facility, Çilaxa
- Oil well, Girkê Legê
- Dugurka oil well, Girkê Legê
- Power station Teqil Beqil (2 times)
- Segirka Daro power station,
- Girkê Legê
- Tafla fuel refinery site, Derik
- Oil filed maintenance warehouse, Rimelan
- Power plant, Rimelan
- Gas station, Rimelan
- Girê Ziro gas station, Derik
- Girê Dahoļ, oil field
- Electrical production site, Banê Şikeftê
- Countryside and agricultural fields in Bashout, Gire Kendal, Karbalat, Teqil Beqil, Dêrik
- Xana Serê water pumping facility, Dêrik
- Al-Tuwaiba, grain silos, Rimelan
- Covid-19 hospital facility, Dêrik
- Mirkamira nylon factory, Dêrik
- Anti-drug forces center, Hamza Beg

To get a broader overview on the Turkish military campaign autumn/winter we advise readers to have a look at the research of the Rojava Information Center: <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/>.



Result of the attacks on a oil facility, Hawar News Agency

The main objects of these airstrike campaigns have been the electricity and gas infrastructure. These attacks are particularly infamous considering that in the last years, the Autonomous Administration has focused on upgrading and expanding its electricity network to be able to provide electricity free of charge to its citizens. While at the beginning of the revolution the Autonomous Administration was able to supply in its territory more than 12 hours/day of electricity for free to the people, now, because of the intensification of blockade of river waters, and the attacks on infrastructure, this is possible only for 4 hours/day, on average.

The recent bombardments have almost completely erased the gains that the Autonomous Administration had made in its years of work. *"We had been working hard this year, replacing 11,000 old electrical lines, establishing two new ports in the city, repairing other ports that were old."* said Muhemed Zeki, from the Qamishlo electricity department to the Rojava Information Centre. *"As a result, we had been seeing a decrease in electrical failures. Of course, we had not finished our work; there were many other things to do. But these attacks have stopped us. Turkey destroyed both transformers of our northern station. Actually, the first transformer could have been repaired within a week, with difficulty, but after the second targeting, the station is completely destroyed. This has caused huge damage to our essential services: hospitals depended on the station, including the specialty hospitals for kidneys and for hearts and eyes. Two of the big bread bakeries and the two main water stations also depended on our electricity; now they have nothing. This has huge repercussions for all the people here."* The electrical situation was already drastically impacted, since Turkey

started cutting more and more the water flow coming to Rojava after the beginning of the revolution. At the time, the rivers were the main source of electricity for the region, almost 75% was from hydroelectric. For this reason in the last years the Administration was forced to move back to the use of energy sources based on fossil fuels.

Due to these circumstances and the ongoing embargo from all surrounding states, the Autonomous Administration had no choice but to continue the oil extraction of Koçerata inherited from the Regime.

This extraction ensures basic needs such as heat, cooking gas, and power for motors, as well as minimal economic income to sustain social services. Before the Revolution, the foundation of the local economy had been structured by the Syrian state in such a way that petroleum was made essential. The war generates social costs, and the revolution's isolation by surrounding states constrains the development of better societal and ecological alternatives. Attacks on oil facilities and wells result in significant environmental impacts. Oil leaks contaminate soil and water, endangering crops, livestock, wildlife, and public health. Moreover, airstrikes set fire to raw petrol and waste from refineries, which then causes severe pollution of the air and additional soil and water pollution from the smoke fallout. Furthermore, the Syrian Regime strategically built its refineries away from Rojava to maintain economic dependency on the central system. Therefore, the refinery methods in the region are less reliable and more vulnerable. Damage to oil facilities, their maintenance, and the resulting ecological consequences are challenging to address. Furthermore, the embargo restricts access to maintenance and cleaning resources, while the international non-recognition of the Autonomous Administration denies access to rights in international law for environmental crisis support.

One of the most critical infrastructural targets have been the electricity plant of Siwedi, in the area of Koçerata.

*"Being the main gas and power station of whole North-East Syria, when there is problems within the plant it effects the whole region"* told us Rûken Şexo, spokesperson of Girê Sor village. *"After that shelling almost 4 to 5 million people have been affected"*, and, in Cizîrê region, where 50% of the regular electricity comes from this plant, two million residents have been left without municipal services, electricity, power, and water.



Ibrahim Gulo, foreman in Siwedi plant

As Siwedi is also the only filling station for household gas' bottles in the region, damages on the plant directly compromise the possibility for the people to cook. *"If comparing with last year' shellings, now the situation is even more critical because the facilities producing oil for heating stoves have also been damaged this time, and most areas have no power for electrical cooking."*

After the first attacks in October, Mazlum Şêxmus, engineer and technical supervisor of the plant, told us *"35% of the machinery and instrumentation for electricity production has been compromised, moreover everything is around 40-50 years old, therefore, finding and procuring replacement parts is very hard."* In general, even when found, these parts are usually very expensive, need to come from abroad, and the embargo on North-East Syria constitutes another serious obstacle in this process. *"The situation is extremely difficult. It will take us a long time to bring it back to the status of before but we will work hard to repair what is possible."* he explained to us. Since then the situation has drastically changed. In January, the Turkish army carried out such heavy airstrikes on the station that the plant has been almost completely destroyed. Now the percentage of destroyed parts has reached 90%. This situation makes it impossible to even consider a normal process of repairing what has been bombed. Besides the material consequences, the inhabitants of the region felt a deep anger as the fascist Turkish State destroyed a strong symbol of their resistance. Siwedi was a strategic place to take a step towards autonomy. At the beginning of the Revolution, the locals expelled the regime and collectivized



Siwedi plant after the January's attacks, source: Ronahi tv

the plant. Later, ISIS made it an aim of conquest but the successful resistance of YPJ and YPG kept the place in the hands of the autonomous administration.

A lot of fighters who gave their life in this resistance were from the region themselves, which makes the destruction of the power plant not only a material matter but also one of significant emotional significance for the people of the region.

The economic damage is difficult to estimate but surely surpasses about 1 billion dollars just for the Siwedî plant, and more than 2 billion dollars for the whole of North-East Syria. This already huge amount is then easily exceeded when added to the sum damages of just last year's bombardments.

The economy of North and East Syria, which was already experiencing a general recession and a deep crisis, as a result of the attacks on infrastructure and vital economic sectors in the previous years, now finds itself in front of an even harder phase. In this context, the resources and efforts of the Autonomous Administration have and will be forcibly directed mainly toward emergent fixing and repairing actions, instead of toward progressing with building up an ecological system.

## **SHELLINGS ON KOCERATA**

Apart from the destruction of the the power plant in Siwedî and the connected refineries, there have been a range of attacks on Koçerata aiming to destroy civil infrastructure and the means of people to endure their life.

The shellings have stroke the water treatment plant of Xanêserê, which is responsible for the purification, and delivery, of groundwater, to the surrounding cities and villages, serving a population of more than 300.000 people (among Tirbespiyê, Girkê Legê, until Qamişlo).

Due to the cut of water from Turkey, the water situation was already very heavy, and, what was once called the fertile crescent, crossed by the Fırat and Dicle, had experienced in the last years heavy droughts. The rivers flow that was allowed to cross into Rojava decreased from 500 to 160 m<sup>3</sup>/second (42%, with peak-days of 80% of reduction), obviously affecting all aspects of life, drinking, hygiene and health, agriculture and food production, animal's life, economy, education and women situation. Women are often the most affected by the consequences of water shortage. Women, who are the main responsible for the life and the care of the communities, heavily face the lack of water in their daily activities. In short, the water crisis created by the Turkish state aims to deepen patriarchal dynamics. In addition, the Turkish state has also altered the water quality, releasing contaminant sewage residues in the few water still flowing into North-East Syria.





Xoşnav Hesên,  
spokesperson of Girê Kendal village

*"The shellings are hurting the people of Koçerata, in all aspects of life" told us Xoşnav Hesên from the village of Girê Kendal. "These are from the attacks" he said, while showing us the deep cracks on the walls of his house.*

*"Around our village many places were bombed, a barn was also targeted, killing 200 sheep. We have been 12 days without electricity and water. Last year also, due to the attacks, the electricity was gone for 5-6 days. The sites hit that time were important but smaller, now the strikes have hit larger and more crucial places." For the population of Koçerata, as well as in many other areas of North-East Syria,*

having one generator for each village is not an affordable solution. The villages are mainly connected to the general electricity line, which leads, in case of lack of electricity, to heavily impact all aspects of life. One of this the access to water. Without electricity the water pumps can't work, the water can't be extracted from the wells and distribute to the villages. While this is in general a fundamental problem for human's life, in the region it is even more crucial due to the agriculture-based life of the people. *"Most of the people live from the products of the earth and the animals that they raise themselves." told us Rûken Şexo, spokesperson of Girê Sor village. "Without water, the plants are dying and the animals can not drink. The cultures are affected, the animal's life is affected. The base of people's economy, of families' economy in the region is based on this. Now the families are having economic problems, because they used a lot of money to plant and now everything is gone, the animals are dying because of lack of water". After almost two weeks from the beginning of the attacks it was possible for the Siwedî workers to restart part of the plant's power generation, and electricity had then been spread again through the villages. "The electricity partially came back, but still in most of the places was enough only for the water pumps. We could not use it for anything else. Before we had an automatic system which was giving electricity to the different villages, time by time. After the attacks in October it did not work anymore. The workers have to go and every time manually changing the connections but of course, many times this is not possible." This also constitute an additional danger for the workers, of more easily becoming targets for drone strikes. The airstrikes have compromised also the gas production, leaving thousands of families without any mean to cook their food, and forcing them to cook on petrol stoves, which smoke is negatively affecting health. "Lack of electricity has affected villages, ovens for bread,*

*hospitals. A lot of ill people have been affected because of the hygiene but also because of the need of electricity for some medical equipment” added Delal Şexo, from the village of Hamza Beg.*

## **THE WAR ON INFRASTRUCTURE IS A WAR ON THE PEOPLE**

Being in deep economical and political crisis for years, at the same time Turkey attempts to become an increasingly bigger local power, both military and economically. In this process Turkey doesn't seem to hesitate on all kinds of methods, from ground invasions and war from the air to the installation of mercenaries to destabilize or even occupy North-East-Syria. In this framework, the war waged against the Autonomous Self-Administration has assumed the form of total war. While on the physical-military side, massacres, killings, torture, invasions and material destruction, are perpetrated, on the psychological, cultural and existential sides, a special warfare is implemented to force migration in the region.

**“ With these attacks, the Turkish State wants to destroy the base of life of the people ”**

**“ They [the Turkish State and army] want to create fear in the people ”**

**“ As well as the Syrian regime before, now it's Turkey that wants to break the communal life of the region, and to attack the mentality of collectivity of the villages ”**

**“ They want to make the people flee, to empty the land ”**

**“ Without water, without electricity, gas for cooking, with the land destroyed, with the constant threat of new attacks, how can people live ?” ”**

**“ The objective is to make life as unbearable as possible for the people. ”**

**“ Kids today are afraid of everything, when they hear the sound of a car they hide themselves, afraid that it will be an airplan ”**

These voices from villagers we have met during our research, draw, clearer than any data or number, the picture of the politics of the Turkish State in the region.

Attacking the land, the fields, the animals, schools, hospitals, the electrical, gas and water system, aims to make the population, especially of regions like Koçerata, leaving their land and fleeing abroad.

These military operations aim to create fear and frustration. *"Creating, building up, is not a problem, the problem is war. You work so much, create so much, invest so many resources, and then, in one second it gets destroyed"* said Delal Şêxo from the village of Hamza Beg.

Parallel to this, the Turkish state also carries out specific targeted-killings, especially against people working with the Autonomous Administration. Women, for their vanguard and transformative role in the society, are particularly targeted. Women are indeed in the forefront of changing process of democratization. From local-self organization, education and health to art, culture and self-defense. This special targeting does not spare civilians from the same threat. On the contrary, the drone-strikes on civilians and children are a tactic used by the Turkish state to build up fear and the idea that no one is safe, that they can hit everyone, everywhere, at any time. According to different officials in the civil institutions in Koçerata, the Turkish state wants to destroy the possibilities of life, of stability, the heritage of the past, the effort of the present and the hope for the future, for a democratic and ecological way of life - which became possible throughout the Rojava Revolution.

### **3. “WE DON’T LEAVE OUR LAND, WE ORGANIZE OURSELVES” - RESISTANCE OF THE PEOPLE ON THEIR LAND**

Reviewing the attacks on the region between October and January, a clearer picture of the social-ecological situation of Koçerata appears. Even in spite of the destruction made and the hardships this creates for the everyday life, the search for strategies, ways to rebuild and to create alternatives prevail over desperation. While regions and people being object to an asymmetric warfare are known to be seen as passive victims struggling for survival, the preservation of ones own dignity and the insistence on living on and with one’s land is obvious. This reaction is relevant to understand social-ecology as a coexistence of people and their land and might be even better understandable in its historic dimensions and its respective practice.

#### **SOCIAL-ECOLOGY IN TIMES OF WAR**

Ecological factors have been among the causes contributing to the onset of the war in Syria. Droughts and regime policies resulted in a massive exodus to urban centers, limited access to basic needs, and humanitarian crises, ultimately led to the uprisings of 2011. During the subsequent war, numerous human and ecological crimes were committed, such as the use of chemical weapons by the Regime and Turkey, or the scorched-earth strategy employed by ISIS in its retreats (e.g poisoning water sources and destroying oil infrastructure and chemical factories). The current attacks led by the Turkish State must be understood in this broader context of war and ecology.

Besides the direct ecological consequences of the water dams, destruction of oil infrastructures and the tree cuttings, there are also indirect ecological consequences that involve hindering the progress of the Revolution. This systematic destruction of basic infrastructure forced the administration and the whole economy of North-East Syria to devote themselves toward continuous works of reparation and rebuilding, injuring in high costs, in terms of human and financial resources. This warfare impedes the development of agro-ecology and eco-industry, which the Autonomous Administration views as priorities. Notably, outside Koçerata, grain silos, bulgur and lentils factories, agriculture material factory, other production cooperatives and warehouses have been targeted,

indicating the Turkish state's determination to break the production of the region. Also, the policy of the Turkish State consciously recreates the same conditions that led to the depopulation of the countryside before 2011. Exodus from rural to urban areas would weaken local food production and economy, increase dependency on external markets, and create challenges in social organization.

The paradigm of the Rojava revolution aims to foster the development of a society based on grassroots democracy, women liberation and social-ecology. In this framework ecological sustainability, self-sufficiency, local production and consumption and decentralization are crucial. However, the decentralization of certain infrastructures faces challenges due to the embargo. The construction of smaller, decentralized infrastructures—such as electricity production—is on the agenda, but some necessary materials are still unavailable and cannot be transported across borders. The Revolution must address these limiting factors. The unavailability of certain material adds further difficulties to the maintenance of existing structures and leads to increasing dependence on oil. The process of decentralization faces other difficulties since most of the economic production is connected with the petrol that is used to make gas, which is not available everywhere. Even in the case that the building of new infrastructures could be started, it would still face the threat of destruction. Essentially, this aggression attempts to eliminate the still-present experiences of social-ecological life and to obstruct the emergence of a social and ecological revolution in order to perpetuate the capitalist system - despite its inevitable collapse due to environmental factors. Institutions have to draw emergency plans during and after each wave of attacks, which compromises their capacity to work on the long-term projects. Additionally, plans regarding the use of different sources of energy (solar, biogas from animal manure and organic wastes or wind energy) and the development of organic fertilizers could not develop on a large scale because of the limitations of the conditions and the necessity to reply to emergency situations and immediate consequences of war. As for ideological and practical resistance, the Revolution draws inspiration from the wisdom of natural society and adapts to current contexts. In spite of the aggression of capitalist modernity, a decentralized and ecological economy finds examples in the sustainable aspects of traditional ways of life. In contexts of forced settlement, remapping of the region, and environmental changes imposed by hegemonic powers for centuries, the people of Koçerata develop their solutions in line with their values and cultural heritage. Aligned with their will to keep their land, they conserved ecological and sustainable practices through their agriculture and shepherding as well as through the sharing of resources.

In the whole region of North-East-Syria, direct and indirect attacks to countryside areas and agriculture fields compromise not only the activities related to food production, but also the attempts to recover the original quality

of the soil, impoverished after years of imposed intense monoculture. The transition to sustainable and traditional methods of agriculture and agroecology is led not only by the will of recovering techniques from the past, but it fully reflects the principles of richness in diversity, and resilience, in communities as well as in ecosystems.

Attacks on agriculture also aim to weaken the material autonomy of the communities. However, the connection with the land, the strong sense of community and self organization have demonstrated to be able to be empty, unoffensive and ineffective in the psychological warfare of the Turkish state.

Connection with the land and the re-establishment of a balanced relation with nature also constitutes a fertile framework for the development of democratic relations, that refuse hierarchy, systematic domination and patriarchy. The transmission of knowledge, which is happening in the form of agricultural techniques as well as in other fields of life, represents an important tool of strengthening one's culture of resistance against the fear that the Turkish state wants to create among the people.

Making people flee does not only aim to physically empty the land, but also to interrupt the culture and the transmission of knowledge; for example, traditional agricultural methods, seasonal changes and local plants. However, the strong connection with the land, which shows its strength even in the hardest situations, compels people to stay and continue engaging with the continued passage of knowledge.

Staying on one's land, and remaining organized is also a way to carry on the identity, traditions. The connection with the land, the presence of a strong community and its self organization also helps to protect the community from the influences of liberalism, consumerism, alienation and commodification.



Shepherding in Kocerata

## DEFENDING THE LAND, CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL-ECOLOGY

The foundation of ecological resistance lies in the connection between people and the land. In kurmancî, *welat parezî* literally means defense of the land and more generally refers to the support of the revolution. The land is the home, it needs to be protected from aggression and must be taken care of in order to ensure the continuity of life. It demonstrates a certain ecological consciousness or the conviction of the necessity to develop an ecological approach in the struggle. While there have been a lot of attempts made to alienate and displace the people in Koçerata, most of them have made the decision to stay on their lands. This determination to resist and build local autonomy forms the roots of both self-defense and ecological practices. Among the population of Rojava, *welat parez* people manifest a great resilience in time of aggression, on the level of their high spirit and their force of initiative. Indeed, they knew long ago that a Revolution would face repression. A woman from the commune of Girê Zîro told us "*We are not leaving, we are organizing ourselves even if we face daily threats, on a daily basis we have şehîd (martyrs); they've only left this path for us to resist.*" The self-defense depends on the autonomy and effective self-organization of society.



People's assembly in Siwedi, after the attacks of December 2023

The society's ability to achieve its social and ecological aspirations gives its resilience against attacks and other external pressures. Self-administration adds value to the land. The quality of people's lives depends on the well-being of the environment they live in. An environment where it is possible for the members of the community to live closer to natural rhythms of life, grow and consume local healthy food, produce durable goods with natural material. As politics are rooted in decentralized local contexts, society can develop itself through ecology.

The decentralization of the economy reduces dependency on the global capitalist market and explores and restores ecological alternatives. Unsustainable practices tend to be replaced by sustainable ones.

The decentralization of the economy reduces dependency on the global capitalist market and makes it a big threat to any imperialist attempts of regional and global powers. Further it explores and restores ecological alternatives, as unsustainable practices tend to be replaced by sustainable ones.

The Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria encourages the establishment of cooperatives, agro-ecology, like the production of organic fertilizers, and eco-industries based on the cooperative system and on a circular approach to production and consumption. In a centralized economic system, numerous localities depend on a single infrastructure. Military attacks can therefore paralyze the society by targeting a few key areas. Decentralization, however, could reduce the effectiveness of this warfare. A single attack would affect just a part of the whole infrastructural network and the impact could be balanced by the operational continuity of other decentralized sites. Additionally, a decentralized system implies smaller and simpler infrastructures that can be more easily maintained. Furthermore, better self-sufficiency is the answer to withstand embargo policies, ensures logistic support to the civilians and military structures for the continuation of social life and self-defense.

Local social and economical autonomy fosters the ability of people to organize their own forces. Despite external factors such as embargo and war creating obstacles for the progress of social-ecology, the strength of the social network resists the enemy's attempts at displacement and psychological warfare. Considering the violence of the attacks, the consequences are still limited, because after years experiencing war, a strong solidarity among people and the determination to stay on the lands, the population has develop their ways to withstand collectively the hardships. The municipality visits the different Communes to inform them, share evaluations about the situation, listen to their needs, try to find solution together, and to organize collectively the whole society, make every one taking responsibility for it. The people of Koçerata pull their resources in times of difficulty. Neighbors share generators and water pumps during electricity shortages. Some villages deliberately limit their electricity for hours to support others. Certain families combine financial resources to afford a communal water pump system independent from electricity. During the attacks of October 2023, the five hundred workers of Siwedî repaired and maintained the infrastructure to restore electricity to the people, despite the airstrikes and the fear to be targeted again. A worker remarked, *"It's our people, we have to rebuild and continue working. We've seen the fighter planes coming and going, but we must work. If we don't work, the people can't survive."* Various strategies, have been devised to safeguard both people and their lands.



During the airstrikes in late December, the Koçerata community mobilized to create human barriers around the Siwedi power plant. This stemmed from the belief that Turkey might refrain from bombing civilians extensively due to potential retaliations from the Kurdish Self-Defense Forces and global responses. Instead, Turkey seemed focused on eroding morale. Hence, for several days, crowds congregated around the power plant, aiming to shield it from airstrikes.



Action of human shield in Siwedi, December 2023 . Source: DicleFM

Later on in January, even on the ruins of Siwedi the high spirit of the community couldn't be defeated. Then came the time of new initiatives. Many villages began pooling funds together to support the installation of local generators or solar panels. Yet, the priority is to set up an emergency plan, but for their long-term strategy towards social-ecology, the force of solution is already there: initiative from the base, self-organization, and decentralization. Resistance and autonomy go hand in hand with ecological consciousness. This connection has its deeper roots in the history and the mentality of the Kurdish people, especially among the Koçer. In Kurmancî, the expression *berxwedan jiyane* that translates to resistance is life, expresses a certain understanding of life among the people. This has to be understood with consideration for the

people's endurance of long times of occupation and attacks by different empires in the past as well as modern states in the current day. Beyond mere survival, this embodies a quest to restore the essence of existence, representing the rightful path to living. Confronting a system driven by devastation and death, the struggle of the people for their land is one driven with love and respect for nature to realize its profound revolutionary significance. Advocating resistance for the people necessitates acknowledging the vital importance of sustainability.



Action of human shield in Siwedî, December 2023

## CONCLUSION

The ecological crisis and the increase of global conflicts, often for the sake of natural resources and their exploitations, are showing every day more how solutions cannot be found neither in State politics or in technology alone. Especially in times and areas of conflict, the social-ecological problems tend to be seen as second rank of importance. Opposite to this approach, the attempts made by the autonomous administration emphasize how, even in times of attacks, social-ecology can represent an answer for both the problems. As we witness, against wars and environmental destruction, social-ecological models, self-sustainability and decentralization can really constitute a solution for a lasting peace in the region. In this framework, the reality of Koçerata must be known as a meaningful and inspiring example of resistance.

This is not just an example of theory but it is, in first place, an example of practice of resistance and self-organization. Against the current centralized, urbanized and mono-culture global system, based on exploiting human-land relationships, Koçerata can suggest sustainable ways of living, working and producing. This region is at the same time unique, for its history and specificity, but not alone. Every place, every community can recover its democratic heritage, and, on this basis, build strong communities and a life in harmony with nature. Values of resistance, connection with the land, communality and freedom are not limited to one geography but parts of our life, of our being part of humanity, being part of Nature. Telling about Koçerata also creates



Agriculture cooperative's assembly, November 2023

connection with many other struggles, carried on by people around the world to defend the land and build a democratic life. Understanding that the resistance in one place, however important, cannot be really successful alone. Local solutions and global changes, toward a social-ecological model, are both needed. The example of Koçerata wants to be a source of strength, hope and inspiration to think also about how we can resist and defend our territories, how we can build alliances with struggles in other geographies, communities and free life.

The Turkish state is one of the main threats to this way of life. Examples like Koçerata can only continue and grow if the attacks on North-East Syria are stopped. Everyone concerned with social and ecological justice should feel this as their own responsibility too. To defend Koçerata and the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria means to protect the seed of a different life that can blossom one day, in one's own territory and in many others around the world.

*"Resistance and revolution are like Spring, they can blossom in many different places, but it's on us to protect them and make them grow."*



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