

# Lebanese Kurds and Rojava:

A transnational perspective

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>This thesis provides a transnational perspective to Lebanese Kurds, particularly regarding their activism and networks related to Rojava, the Kurdish areas in northern Syria. After Armenians, Kurds form the second-largest non-Arab ethnic group in Lebanon. By estimate, around 100,000-150,000 Kurds reside in Lebanon, most of them holding Lebanese citizenship. Since 2011, the war in Syria has led around 20,000 Syrian Kurds to seek shelter in neighboring Lebanon. In January 2018, Turkey launched an attack against the Kurdish forces in Afrin in northern Syria, which resulted in demonstrations in Kurdish communities worldwide, including Lebanon.</p> <p>The objective of the study was to find out whether, and by which means, Kurds in Lebanon try to influence the Rojava issue and whether they are part of some transnational networks related to Rojava. The primary material of the study is based on five semi-structured interviews conducted with the presidents of four Lebanese Kurdish associations and one unaffiliated Syrian Kurd in Beirut in July 2019. The material was transcribed, and thematic content analysis was used as the method to examine the textual data.</p> <p>The theoretical framework of the research is based on the study of transnational activism, transnational networks, and processes of transnational contention. Furthermore, characteristics of transnational practices of ethnic diasporas, transnational impacts on domestic activism, and transnationalism among the Kurds are presented. The substance of the study is also contextualized by an overview of the history of the Kurds in Lebanon, the recent political developments in northern Syria, the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava, and media coverage regarding the Kurds in Lebanon.</p> <p>The research found out that the limited political opportunities of the Kurds in Lebanon have weakened their chances to influence the Rojava issue. The community is divided along the borderlines of the Kurdish party political, which affects the attitudes of the Kurds towards Rojava. The transnational networks and processes between Lebanese Kurds and Rojava center on the sympathizers of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Furthermore, transnational women's organization networks form the most significant transnational links between Lebanese Kurds and Rojava. Two of the Lebanese Kurdish associations have relations with the women's umbrella organization Congress Star in northern Syria, and their local activism is largely influenced by the women's movement in the area. Thus, it is argued that the relationship between the Lebanese Kurds and Rojava is reciprocal.</p>			
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## List of Abbreviations

KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KPDL	Kurdish Democratic Party in Lebanon
KDPS	Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria
KNC	Kurdish National Council
NES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SKC	Supreme Kurdish Committee
TCA	Thematic Content Analysis
TEV-DEM	Movement for a Democratic Society
YPG	People's Protection Units

## 1. Introduction

*Hundreds of Kurds living in Lebanon have gathered outside the Turkish embassy in Lebanon to protest Turkey's ongoing military operation in northern Syria's Kurdish-controlled Afrin region. Protesters carrying Kurdish flags chanted slogans on Friday denouncing Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, including: "Down with Erdogan!" Lebanese policemen deployed around the embassy and erected barbed-wire barriers to prevent protesters from approaching. "All the Kurds here in Lebanon are supporting Afrin and saying long live the resistance of Afrin," said protester Hanan Osman.*

(An-Nahar, January 26, 2018)

This thesis provides a transnational perspective to Lebanese Kurds, particularly regarding their activism and networks related to Rojava, the Kurdish areas in northern Syria. After Armenians, Kurds form the second-largest non-Arab ethnic group in Lebanon. By estimate, around 100,000-150,000 Kurds reside in Lebanon, most of them holding Lebanese citizenship. While the Kurdish presence in Lebanon dates back to the early Ottoman centuries, significant waves of Kurdish emigration took place in the years following the First and Second World War (Kawtharani & Meho 2005). Most Lebanese Kurdish families originate from the border area between Turkey and Syria (Ibid.). Since 2011, the war in Syria has led around 20,000 Syrian Kurds to seek shelter in neighboring Lebanon.

Traditionally, the transnational ties between the Lebanese Kurdish community and Kurdistan have been close-knit. The development of their first political and social organizations in the 1950-60s was largely influenced by Kurdish leaders in Iraq and the presence of politically active Syrian Kurds in Lebanon (Kawtharani & Meho 2005). In January 2018, Turkey launched an attack against the Kurdish forces in Afrin in northern Syria, which resulted in demonstrations in Kurdish communities worldwide, including Lebanon. The citation at the beginning of the introduction is from an article published in the Lebanese daily An-Nahar in January 2018. It describes one of the demonstrations organized by the Kurds in Lebanon in solidarity with the Kurds in Afrin. A year later, in March 2019, Lebanese Kurds demonstrated against Turkey's victory in Afrin, as reported by another Lebanese newspaper, the Daily Star (March 18, 2019). In autumn 2019, Turkey launched another attack in northern Syria. Consequently, Kurdish demonstrations again took place in front of the United Nations headquarters in Beirut (Daily Star, October 13, 2019). Some of my local Kurdish contacts sent me pictures from the site.

The demonstrations stimulated by the Turkish interventions in Rojava were the factor that initially made me interested in studying the transnational relations of the Kurds in Lebanon. On

account of the demonstrations, the historical bonds between the Kurdish communities in Lebanon and Syria, and recently arrived Syrian Kurdish refugees in Lebanon, I made a hypothesis that the Kurds in Lebanon would be interested and active on the Rojava issue. I presumed that in addition to the demonstrations, the Kurds in Lebanon might be involved in other kinds of activities or networks to support the Kurds in northern Syria and gather support for the issue in Lebanon. These factors encouraged me to research transnational activism and transnational networks of Kurds in Lebanon concerning Rojava. The subject was very topical when I started my study in spring 2019, as the plight of the Kurds in northern Syria had gained considerable attention in international media. Furthermore, the successful resistance of the Kurdish forces against ISIS and the emergence of the Kurdish-led self-governance in northern Syria had been publicized.

My research aims to find out whether, and by which means, Kurds in Lebanon try to influence the Rojava issue and whether they are part of some transnational networks related to Rojava. To answer these questions, I interviewed the presidents of four Lebanese Kurdish associations and one unaffiliated Syrian Kurd in Beirut in July 2019. In the analysis, I utilize the theoretical framework of transnational social formation, transnational activism, transnational networks, and forms of transnational contention. In the theory section, I will also present some characteristics of the transnational practices of ethnic diasporas and transnational impacts on domestic activism. Furthermore, I contextualize the substance by presenting an overview of the history of the Kurds in Lebanon, the recent political developments in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, and the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava. I have also followed the reporting on the Kurds in Lebanon in the Lebanese and Kurdish media.

The Kurdish community in Lebanon has been tremendously understudied in the academic field. Only a few articles, Meho (2002), Kawtharani & Meho (2005), and Hourani (2011), have addressed the topic during the last two decades. There is no adequate research on the transnational activism and networks of the Lebanese Kurds. Hence, this thesis will provide new information on the Kurdish community in Lebanon and highlight their position in the transnational formation of the Kurds in the Middle East. Moreover, it provides new aspects to the recent history of the Kurds in Lebanon and Syria. Furthermore, it highlights the impact of the recent political developments in Rojava on the dispersed Kurdish communities in Lebanon and elsewhere.



## 2. Concepts and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of my research is based on the study of *transnationalism*, *transnational activism* and *transnational contention*. In social research, transnationalism has been frequently understood as *social formation spanning borders*. Transnational activism seeks to challenge local or global status quo through the formation of *transnational collective action* and *transnational contention*, often carried out in transnational social movements or transnational advocacy networks.

### 2.1. Transnationality

Over the past decades, the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora have served as prominent academic lenses through which the ramifications of international migration and the shifting of state borders across populations have been viewed (Faist 2010, 19). The research has focused to define the patterns of transnational social formations, as well as the contexts in which these cross-border phenomena have operated, such as globalisation and multiculturalism. Transnationalism denotes to migrants' durable ties across countries, and it can be used to capture all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organizations. The concept of diaspora also captures a cross-border process, it refers to religious or national groups living outside a real or imagined homeland. (Ibid.)

Vertovec (1999, 447-449) has described transnationalism as “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states”. Transnational networks are a central feature to transnational social formation, and they are sustained by various modes of social formation, mobility and communication (Ibid.). Transnational networks are essentially based on some kind of common identity or shared values and goals. Participation in socio-cultural and political activities, exchange of information and resources, and patterns of communication are their common characteristics. (Vertovec 2001, 573-578) Transnational networks often incorporate reciprocity and solidarity within kinship networks, and political participation in the country of emigration and immigration (Faist 2010, 11)

## **2.2. Research on transnationality**

The concept *transnationalism*, *transnational perspective* or *transnationality* has been a key intervention in the recent decades of social research (de Jong & Dannecker 2018, 497), and it has become a widely used concept in several fields of academic study. In the 1990s, transnationalism was primarily used to describe economic phenomena with connection to the global reorganization of production process (Ibid.). In the field of social sciences, use of the concept was significantly advanced by the pioneering work of Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994), who connected the idea of transnationalism with dispersed diaspora communities and the construction of their social fields. Instead of merely portraying patterns of living across borders, they wanted to develop a social theory that did not set nation-state as the primary unit of analysis (Glick Schiller 2007, 17). The rising awareness of spatial and cultural interconnectedness of people, cultural objects, and economic processes compelled researchers from various disciplines to reassess their agendas (de Jong & Dannecker 2018, 494). Consequently, transnationalism has become a conceptual milestone in social sciences and migration studies (Waldinger 2013). It has challenged the nation-state as a self-evident unit of study, although the concept is still mostly linked to combination of two nation-states: the country of origin and the host country of diaspora communities. (de Jong & Dannecker 2018, 496)

Transnational approaches have revealed the existence of social, symbolic, political and economic links between the host countries and the countries of origin that create *transnational social places* (de Jong & Dannecker 2018, 496). According to Faist (2010, 19), transnational approaches can be productively used to study central questions of social and political change and transformation. According to de Jong & Dannecker (2018, 498), the maturing of transnationalism as a social theory and the accomplished project of demarcation of transnational field of studies has given the transnational perspective a position where it cannot be ignored. Moreover, it has opened transnational field of research for dialogue and synthesis with other concepts and fields (Ibid).

## **2.3. Transnational activism and transnational networks**

In the last decades, various developments have facilitated the formation of transnational collective action: the development of electronic communications, the cheapening of

international travel, and flows of migration across borders (Della Porta & Tarrow 2005, 7–10). These phenomena have provided transnational activists with efficient communication and thus allowed performance of transnational campaigns (ibid.). The rising levels of education (Josselin & Wallace 2001, 7), and the spread of English as the lingua franca have as well facilitated the rise of transnational activism (Tarrow 2005, 35). Today, transnational actors constitute a diverse group, and thousands of transnational advocacy networks, social movements, and non-governmental organizations have evolved around human rights, women's rights and environment issues. Transnational activism may aim to influence and alter international politics, such as states' foreign policies, inter-state negotiations and international organizations (Hägel & Peretz 2005, 470), as well as local politics (Sperling et al. 2001, 1155). Erdem (2015, 314) argues that the role of transnational activism has become increasingly salient in the dynamics of world politics and it has challenged sovereignty of the states.

*Transnational advocacy networks* are a form of transnational networks that attempt a social change and as such differ from ordinary everyday networks of individuals (Sperling et al. 2001, 1155). Transnational advocacy networks are not necessarily based on a shared identity, but on shared principles and values. Keck & Sikkink (1998, 3) define transnational advocacy networks as a set of "relevant actors working internationally on an issue who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse and dense exchanges of information and services". According to them, besides trying to influence policy outcomes, activists may also aim to transform the terms and nature of the debate (Ibid.). Transnational advocacy networks function as the establishment of a *globalized civil society* (Sperling et al. 2001, 1155).

Transnational advocacy networks have typically been identified as *social movements*, but as Sperling et al. (2001, 1156-1157) point out, this categorization hides some of their distinctive features. Whereas mass mobilization, contentious and confrontational tactics, and attempts to bring politics out of conventional venues into the streets have been traditional characteristics of social movements, advocacy networks mobilize smaller numbers of individual activists, who use more specialized resources of expertise and access to elites. While social movements have mostly relied on demonstrations of mass public support and open confrontations with authorities, transnational advocacy networks offer new information to political leaders and reframe issues for elites in order to gain support. (Ibid.)

Despite some tactical distinctions, transnational advocacy networks and social movements have also common characteristics. In practice, the line between transnational advocacy networks and social movements is fluid. They both are principled actors, bound together by a common set of values and goals, and committed to social change that challenges the status quo. Hence, transnational advocacy networks often work with broader-based social movements with shared principles, and a social movement may contain a transnational advocacy networks within it. In turn, transnational advocacy networks often incorporate formal organizations and informal grassroots associations. Women's transnational advocacy networks have been among the earliest and most influential of global mobilizations challenging gender hierarchy and improving the conditions of women's lives. They have effectively mobilized for women's suffrage, protective legislation, and violence against women. (Sperling et al. 2001, 1157)

Transnational advocacy networks often encourage and contribute to the development of local movements. They may support grassroots mobilization, for example by offering opportunities for networking and models for effective local action. (Ibid. 1159-1160) Many transnational networks fund local civic activism as means to "strengthen the civil society". However, such civic activism is typically defined as "apolitical", since it is mostly nonpartisan and carried out by local voluntary organizations. (Ibid.) Sperling et al. (2001, 1169-1171) argue that grassroots activism should be interpreted in the means of a political act, because it attempts social change through its objectives on a local level. Hence, it can be seen as practical resistance to prevailing politics and status quo. The tendency to count only institutional politics, carried out in government ministries and legislatures, as political fades the political nature of civic activism. Even the participants of grassroots civic activism may not see their local practical resistance as politics, even though the practical grassroots politics of civil society constitute the fabric of democratic politics. (Ibid.)

It is often assumed that transnational actors are autonomous in their attempts to influence states. However, forms of transnational actors can be distinguished by the nature of their relationship and their level of independence from states. The tendency of non-governmental and civil society organizations to present themselves as independent from states may partly fade the reciprocity of the relationship between transnational actors and states. The social movement theory has explicitly theorized social movements as actors who convey contentious politics directed against state politics. Hence, the role of transnational actors has frequently been seen only through their attempts to shape international governance by doing protests, agenda-setting and

lobbying directed at public officials and politicians. (Hägel & Peretz 2005, 470-474) Hägel & Peretz (2005, 467-468) argue that when transnational actors and states share common interests, there are opportunities for mutual influences. In such situations, states may try to use transnational actors to advance their objectives e.g. in foreign policy. Thus, states are not merely targets of transnational activists. On the contrary, the relationship between them is two-dimensional and prone to reciprocity, and states can influence and even initiate transnational movements. (Ibid.) Reciprocal relationships between transnational actors and states are eminently salient in diaspora politics (Ibid. 472-474).

## **2.4. Processes of transnational contention**

In order to understand the dynamics of transnational activism and contention, their processes need to be examined. The concept of *political opportunity structure* provides some means to examine the chances of transnational actors to successfully influence the local or global politics. It examines the local political environment and its prevailing dimensions which either encourage or discourage collective action (Tarrow 1994, 18). The five major dimensions of political opportunity structure are: opening up access to participation, shifts in political alignments, availability of influential allies, cleavages within and among allies, and state's capacity and will to repress social movement (Ibid. 85-92). An open political opportunity structure increases the chances of a social movement to be successful, whereas a closed one leads to diminished chances of influence.

According to Tarrow (2005, 10), there are three orders of processes that link domestic activists to the international system: two "local" processes, namely *global framing* and *internalization*; two transitional ones, called *diffusion* and *scale shift*; and two "global" processes, *externalization* and *transnational coalition formation*. Multiple of these processes can simultaneously take place in transnational movements, and they are not mutually exclusive. For example, diffusion can be found in the processes of global framing, scale shift, and in the domestic absorption of new forms of transnational contention (Ibid. 29-30).

In the social movement theory in general, framing refers to construction of meanings and symbols in a certain way in order to mobilize social contention. The concept is based on the theory of social constructivism, which claims that meanings are socially constructed and

negotiated. (Tarrow 1994, 119) Framing activity that is used particularly in the formation of transnational collective action and contention can be described as *global framing*. It refers to the use of international symbols to frame domestic conflicts. (Tarrow 2005, 32-34) For instance, transnational activists may utilize the framing of norms of human rights, women's rights and sustainable development in order to press states and international institutions to comply with their demands (Erdem 2015, 318). Choosing of an attractive frame is important, since the higher the degree of resonance the frame induces, the greater is the likelihood to successfully form collective action (Snow et al. 1986, 477). Resonant discourses are often less radical than non-resonant ones, which can lead social movement leaders to choose less radical approach in order to achieve greater support and social change (Ferree 2003, 305).

*Internalization* refers to response to foreign or international pressure within domestic politics, and *diffusion* to transfer of claims or forms of contention from one place to another (Tarrow 2005, 32-34). Diffusion can travel either through well-connected trust networks, media and the internet, or movement brokers. Diffusion produces spread of ideas and the emulation of local forms of collective action in other places and expedites the spread of contentious politics around the world. (Ibid. 101-102) *Scale shift* is a vertical process, and refers to the change of the level of coordination of collective action to a different level than where it began (Ibid. 32-34). It diffuses collective action to higher or lower levels, such as from local to global level. (Ibid. 205)

*Externalization* also refers to vertical projection of domestic claims onto foreign actors or international institutions (Tarrow 2005, 32-34). Externalization of claims aims to gaining international allies and attention, even intervention, and is often done by using universalistic appealing terms. In conflict situations the party put on defensive most often has an interest in shifting venues to bring in new allies and activate friendly audiences. Externalization depends on the networks of domestic activists, their international allies, and parts of foreign states and international institutions. It works through a sequence of phases that can vary depending on the domestic contexts, in framing of contention, and through different forms of collective action. (Ibid. 144-146) The process often starts with a "blockage" of domestic claims, which leads to the desire for transnational intervention (Keck & Sikkink 1998, 12-13). The blockage might be repression or merely lack of response for the domestic claims of the group (Ibid.). In order to be interesting outside a country's borders, the domestic claim must be framed in an appealing way. While often the symbols used for domestic audience can be extended to an international

level, sometimes the claim has to be appropriately reframed, such as when indigenous rights are reframed as human rights. In order to overcome the barriers set by repressive regimes and to get attention of potential allies, weak social actors may use three mechanisms: information diffusion, institutional access, and attention-getting direct action. (Tarrow 2005, 147)

*Transnational coalition formation* stands for the horizontal formation of common networks among actors from different countries with similar claims (Tarrow 2005, 32-34). Coalitions can be defined as “collaborative, means-oriented arrangements that permit distinct organizational entities to pool resources in order to effect change”.<sup>1</sup> There are four types of transnational coalitions, two of them short term and two long term. The short term ones include *instrumental coalitions* and *event coalitions*, and long term ones *federations* and *campaign coalitions*. *Instrumental coalitions* require only a low level of involvement and comprise groups that come together around an occasional conjuncture of interest or program, but drift apart after their common issue has dissipated. They have the lowest potential for sustained collective action. *Event coalitions* require a higher degree of involvement and have potential for future collaboration if the shared identities recognized during the collective action lead to formation of alliances. Event coalition include e.g. transnational protest events. *Federated coalitions* are long term but require only a low level of involvement from their member organizations, who can remain committed their own organizations’ goals, with long-term joint collaboration. As for *campaign coalitions*, they combine high intensity of involvement with long-term cooperation. (Tarrow 2005, 167-168)

All in all, the processes at the global level, externalization and transnational coalition formation, have the greatest potential to create transnational social movements. The local processes, global framing and internalization themselves do not produce no permanent links across borders. Although the transitional processes, diffusion of collective action and a shift in the scale of contention, help to unify the repertoire of contention across borders, they are only temporary procedures. Hence, externalization of domestic contention and the formation of durable transnational coalitions are the strongest signs that a fusion of domestic and international contention is taking place. (Tarrow 2005, 33-34) Externalization can be seen as the first step in permitting domestic actors to shift their claims to venues in which they can attract support from

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<sup>1</sup> Levi & Murphy (2004, 5). Direct citation in Tarrow (2005, 164).

influential allies, and coalition formation as the process through which such alliances are forged. (Ibid. 179)

## **2.5. Ethnic diasporas and transnational practices**

For ethnic diasporas, transnational communities abroad may provide safe havens for activism that would be illegal or dangerous in homeland (Vertovec 1999, 454). Institutionalised forms of political activism carried out by ethnic diasporas can be described as *transnational political practices*. Østergaard-Nielsen (2001, 2-4) defines them as “various forms of direct cross border participation in the politics of their country of origin by both migrants and refugees, as well as their indirect participation via the political institutions of the host country or international organizations”. For example, voting patterns or lobbying carried out by diaspora members in the country of residence may be influenced by homeland political events (Ibid.).

As Hägel & Peretz (2005, 472-474) point out, diasporas need to assume an active role in the relations between host states and homelands in order to conduct transnational politics. Dispersed communities can directly influence homeland politics by financing specific causes or disseminating their vision of national identity and politics. They can try to produce indirect influence by lobbying host states in order to affect their foreign policy towards homelands. The objectives for lobbying might be e.g. increases in economic aid and military support for the homeland, or recognition of the homeland as an independent state. (Ibid) As Østergaard-Nielsen (2001, 17) noted in her study on Kurdish and Turkish political organizations in Germany, sometimes ethnic communities adjust their political agendas to conform to internationally approved discourses of human rights. The attention of central policy makers may be drawn more easily by the use of democracy and human rights discourse instead of a merely national or ethnic one. Hence, it may be practical for ethnic-based transnational actors not to emphasize their possibly nationalist or revolutionary visions. (Ibid)

Four partly overlapping types of transnational political engagement of ethnic diasporas can be distinguished: *immigrant politics*, *homeland politics*, *diaspora politics* and *trans-local politics*. *Immigrant politics* refers to political activities that migrants undertake to better their situation in the receiving country. *Homeland politics* refers to political activities undertaken by dispersed communities pertaining their homeland domestic or foreign policies. It can either oppose or



support the homeland government. In turn, *diaspora politics* can be understood as a subset of homeland politics. It refers to groups that are blocked from direct participation in their homeland political system or who do not have a political regime to oppose or support. Sometimes diaspora politics is used as an overlapping concept with homeland politics. Also *trans-local politics* is a subset of homeland politics, and it comprises initiatives organized from abroad that aim to better the situation in the local community in homeland. (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2001, 5-6)

Engagement in transnational political activities may empower the members of dispersed communities. However, it may also lead to disempowerment. In some cases, intensive engagement in homeland politics has diverted the attention of diaspora communities from developing the socioeconomic conditions in the country of residence. Moreover, sometimes it has inflicted exclusion in diaspora communities that have problems with majority and minority issues. Representatives of different political, ethnic or religious factions may be pressed to cooperate. These problems can lead to non-presentation in the institutions of the host-country and weaken representation in immigrant political fora. (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2001, 20-22)

Vertovec (1999, 449) suggests that a special characteristic of the diaspora social formation is the “triadic relationship” between dispersed members of an ethnic community, the state of their residence, and the homeland. With respect to this, Akbarzadeh et al. (2019, 2) illustrate that Kurds present a rather exceptional case in the context of transnational communities, since the bulk of their transnational network is not geographically dispersed, as most Kurds live in close proximity and direct contact across borders of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Moreover, they note that Kurds lack the third dimension of the triad, namely a free-standing state, and suggest that the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan would come closest to forming it (ibid.).

Walhbeck (2018, 413) points out that in regard to ethnic diasporas, the notion of homeland can be related either to real or imagined homeland. He argues that “homeland” should primarily be understood as an idea that characterizes the community. Moreover, the perception of the “homeland” and the political projects connected to it are often significantly influenced by some type of traumatic collective histories. (Ibid.) For analytic purposes, I will regard the area of the historical Kurdistan as the Kurdish homeland, even if it was a sub-state area or autonomous region. This is the area where the prospective and imagined independent Kurdistan would be formed.

## 2.6. Transnational impacts on domestic activism

Although the idea and the content of the human rights are largely Western by origin, they have proved to be important frames for social justice movements in different parts of the world. Merry (2006) has theorized on the translation of transnational ideas, such as human rights approaches and violence against women, to local social settings. She argues that transnational ideas need to be adapted to local institutions and meanings, and the adoption and indigenization of human rights discourse can be seen as one form of framing. The term *indigenization* refers to the way new ideas are framed and presented in terms of local norms, values and cultural practices. In many cases, local activists, feminist NGO leaders, human rights lawyers, and academics work in a critical role as intermediaries, who translate the transnational ideas to local contexts. The intermediaries or *translators* shuttle between the transnational community and home community. They both understand the world of transnational human rights and know the local culture, which enables them to look both ways. This is crucial, as translation of transnational ideas is a two-way process. Translators not only refashion global human rights or women's rights agendas for local contexts as means to combat particular problems, but also reframe and portray local grievances in terms of these principles and the more powerful language of international human rights. (Merry 2006, 38-39) Simultaneously, translators work within national and transnational movements. Furthermore, they "negotiate the middle in a field of power and opportunity". In order to get global media attention and funding from international donors, they have to speak the language of international human rights, while simultaneously they have to present their initiatives in ways that are acceptable to their local community. (Ibid. 42)

Also Tarrow (2005, 186) points to the fact that new forms of activism do not simply appear in different places automatically. Transfer involves diffusion of forms of activity that can be adapted to a variety of national and social situations. Three mechanisms are important in the domestication of an innovation: the existence of brokerage between its originators and its adopters, the presence of successful mobilization on the part of sympathetic or enthusiastic activists, and its certification by authoritative actors, or the failure of attempts to decertify it. (Ibid.) Brokerage links two or more previously unconnected social actors by a unit that mediates their relations with one another or more actors. (Ibid. 190) Certification refers to the validation

of actors, their performances, and their claims by authorities. It operates as a powerful selective mechanism, since the certifying actor always recognizes a limited number of performances and claims. (Ibid. 194)

Transnational brokers provide domestic activists with access to resources, information, and legitimacy. For transnational activism to take hold in the new context, domestic mobilization must continue after external influence and intervention. Yet transnational intervention fails more often than it succeeds. The failure might be due to heavy-handed or culturally insensitive transnational agents who delegitimize their partners and produce a backlash against foreign intervention, dependence of domestic activists on the intervention or resistance of dissent domestic cultures. (Tarrow 2005, 199-200)

## **2.7. Research on transnationality among the Kurds**

The Kurdish communities outside of Kurdistan constitute a global diaspora, and plenitude of research has been done on transnationality among the Kurds within Europe. Since the 1960s, large numbers of refugees have been forced to flee Kurdistan, which has led to the establishment of Kurdish communities all over the world (Walhbeck 2018, 413). The largest minority communities can be found in Europe, particularly in Germany (Ammann 2004). Walhbeck (2018, 413) highlights that the dispersed Kurdish communities continue to be characterized by the various contemporary political developments in the Kurdish regions in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The Kurdish diasporas have been characterized by a discourse that presents Kurds as victims of persecution, which has functioned to maintain the politicized aspects of the Kurdish diasporas and to motivate transnational political mobilisation<sup>6</sup> (Walhbeck 2018, 413). According to Alinia et al. (2014, 53), the Kurdish diaspora has become mobilized on a large scale especially during the last two decades, which signifies the importance of their transnational ties. Moreover, the Kurdish diaspora has played a pivotal role in bringing international attention to the Kurdish issue (Ibid.).

The Kurdish communities often are highly politicized with respect to homeland politics. In Europe, the character of the diaspora has changed following to the growth of the proportion of political refugees. Yet the diasporic Kurdish identity and transnationalism and are common features of Kurdish diaspora communities around the world. Political developments in Turkey

and the Middle East have a direct link on social relations and political activities among diaspora Kurds. The multiple organizations and associations established by Kurds in various countries indicate diaspora political activities. Both well-organized organizations with a more specific and transnational political agenda and small local organizations with social and cultural activities for the local community can be found. (Walhbeck 2018, 420) Walhbeck (2018, 420) argues that Kurdish organizations in exile are often connected to Kurdish political movements in Kurdistan in their initial stages. The connection can be either explicit, or more diffuse and indirect, but according to him the organizations are always influenced by the political and social divisions and allegiances in Kurdistan in a way or another at the outset (Ibid.).

In Sweden, Khayati and Dahlstedt (2014) have examined politics of belonging and the processes of diaspora formation among the Kurds in Sweden, describing the nature of the transnational networks and organisations created by the Kurdish community. They argue that diaspora populations act both outwards, towards the former homeland, and inwards, towards the country of residence. According to them, engagement and commitment in one direction do not exclude involvement in the other. (Ibid.) Also in Sweden, Alinia and Eliassi (2014) have focused on issues of identity, “homeland” and politics of belonging with regard to generational and temporal aspects among the Kurdish diaspora. They have noted that there are differences among the older and younger generations with regard to the way they identify themselves as migrants and Kurds as well as their perceptions of homeland and belonging (Ibid.)

In Germany, Ostergaard-Nielsen (2003) has analyzed trans-state political loyalties and activities of transnational communities among the Turkish and Kurdish communities. She has shown that Turkish and Kurdish organizations not only mobilize in relation to immigrant political issues such as citizenship rights in Germany, but also in relation to the domestic and foreign political situation in Turkey. Thus, they have become a linkage group between the countries (Ibid.). Lyon and Uçarer (2010) have examined the diffusion of Kurdish separatist contention to Germany, coordinated by the Workers’ Party of Kurdistan (PKK). They have traced the origin of Kurdish discontent in Turkey and the spilling of Kurdish activism into Germany through migration, diffusion, and activism. Moreover, they examined the efforts of the PKK to mobilize the Kurdish population in Germany.

In Finland, Toivanen and Kivistö (2014) have studied the transnational aspects and relations that have an influence identity options available to young Kurds in the local diaspora

community, including the use of new information and communication technologies. Moreover, Toivanen (2016) has approached the transnational political ties and practices of the young Kurds as a matter of belonging. She argues that the transnational political setting of young Kurds serves for a platform for constructing and enacting modes of belonging and non-belonging (Ibid.).

In the Middle East, studies have been made on the cross-border links and transnational formation between Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The Kurdish communities in the Middle Eastern countries outside the areas of Kurdistan have been less studied. Gourlay (2018) has examined the way in which pan-Kurdish identification and solidarity is shaped by ongoing crises in the Middle East. He argues that amid conflict, previously divided Kurdish populations increase cross-border interaction and co-operation (Ibid.). Akbarzadeh et al. (2019) have studied the impact of cross-border contacts and ideals of transnational Kurdish community on Kurds in Iran. Their study reveals that the Kurds turn towards their cross-border ethnic kin as they are pressed to identify with the Iranian state (Ibid.). Kaczorowski (2020) has researched trans-local ties maintained by Kurds in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul.

### 3. The Kurdish Community in Lebanon

After Armenians, Kurds constitute the second largest non-Arab ethnic group in Lebanon. By the estimate of my informants, between 100,000-150,000 Kurds reside in Lebanon today. An accurate figure is not available, as there has been no official censuses in Lebanon since 1932. However, prior to 1985, most sources estimated the number of Kurds to be between 60,000 and 90,000, with more than two-thirds of them living in the capital Beirut<sup>2</sup>. After thousands of Kurdish families had fled the country during the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, it was believed that their number was still in the same range in 2005 (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 3). According to my interviewees, thousands of Syrian Kurdish refugees have arrived to Lebanon since the breaking of the Syrian conflict in 2011. This has grown the size of the Kurdish community by approximately 20,000 Kurds.

Even though Kurdish presence in Lebanon dates back to the early Ottoman centuries, major waves of Kurdish immigration took place after the First and the Second World War. In the 1920s, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were forced out of Northern Kurdistan. Some of them settled in the newly established state of Syria, while others headed to the areas of Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. Lebanon's proximity to Kurdistan and relatively better living conditions appealed to Kurdish migrants. (Meho 2002, 60) In the two decades following the end of the Second World War, another major wave of Kurdish migrants flowed to Lebanon. This time a significant number of them came from Syria, escaping the poor economic conditions and the cultural and political repression. A considerable group of migrants came also from the villages of Mardin and its surrounding areas in Turkey. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 1)

Most of the Kurds set up their new home in the low income areas of that time Beirut, such as Ain Mreiseh, Basta, Burj al-Barajneh, and Zqaq al-Blat (Ibid. 3). Some of the migrants stayed outside the capital in Sidon, Tripoli and Beqaa Valley. During the Lebanese civil war, all the Kurds living in Beirut downtown, Furn el-Shubbak and Burj Hammoud were forced to move to Dahiye and other areas with large Kurdish concentrations. (Meho 2002, 61-62) Still in 2005, most Kurds had meagre socioeconomic means and were considered among the least literate communities in Lebanon (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 3-4).

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Muhammad Ahmad, *Akrad Lubnan wa Tanzimihim al-Ijtima'i wa as-Siyasi* (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Lebanese University, 1984-1985). Cited in Kawtharani & Meho 2005: 3. The original source is not available.

The social and political organization of the Kurds was first encouraged by Kamuran Bedirhan, who was a prominent advocate of the Kurdish national movement and one of the founders of the Khoybun League (Kawtharani & Meho 2005; Tejel 2014). In the 1920-30s Beirut provided a safe platform for politically active Iraqi, Turkish and Syrian Kurds to develop and disseminate the Kurdish national thought (Kawtharani & Meho 2005). In the 1950-60s Kurds in Lebanon established their first parties and associations in order to improve the socioeconomic and political status of the community, which was largely influenced by Kurdish leaders in Iraq and the presence of politically active Syrian Kurds in Lebanon. Moreover, Beirut served as a platform for disseminating Kurdish nationalism and Kurdish national movement in Iraq. (Ibid.) The establishment and the agendas of Lebanese Kurdish parties have been largely affected by Kurdish national politics and the Kurdish parties outside Lebanon, such as KDP in Iraq and KDPS in Syria. So to say, Kurdish politics in Lebanon have always been transnational and the community has always been part of transnational Kurdish networks in the Middle East. In the following chapters I will present a more detailed overview of the early social and political organization of the Kurds in Lebanon.

### **3.1. Kurdish cultural renaissance in exile**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries diverse movements of cultural renaissance emerged in the Middle East. Along with other ethnic groups, the Kurdish elite embraced the nationalist ideal and established the first Kurdish clubs in Istanbul. However, the First World War and the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923 posed major obstacles to the Kurdish movement and forced many of its most prominent members into exile. Refusing to face prison or death, the Kurdish intellectuals seek refuge in the British mandate of Iraq and in the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon. In exile, the Kurdish intellectuals benefited from freedom of speech and organization and continued animating the Kurdish cultural renaissance. (Tejel 2014, 839-840, 846)

It was within this context that Lebanon became a centre of Kurdish cultural movement in the 1920s. The Kurdish National Committee, Khoybun League, was established in Bhamdoun in October 1927, and one of its most prominent members, Kamuran Bedirhan stayed in Lebanon for two decades. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 27-28) The Khoybun League conceptualized modern Kurdish nationalism in Kurmanji dialect, and was the basis for the widespread doctrine

in Turkey and Syria. Furthermore, by creating diplomatic contacts with important state players and non-state actors of the region, Khoybun could become an essential regional actor. It disseminated Kurdish national propaganda, opened a Kurdish language course in Damascus and Kurdish night classes in Beirut, and published the Kurdish literature journals. Moreover, it encouraged the creation of various Kurdish committees and associations in northern Syria and in larger Levant cities Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut. (Tejel 2014, 846-847)

In Beirut, Kamuran Bedirhan started to broadcast Kurdish radio transmissions in Radio Levant in March 1941. He read news in Kurmanji dialect twice a week, and the informative programs reached Turkey, giving it real and symbolic importance. (Tejel 2014, 849) Moreover, Bedirhan published the weekly “Roja Nu” with Kurdish and French articles in Beirut in 1943-1946. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 27-28) The revival of Kurdish culture was instrumental in the creation of Kurdish national identity. The French authorities in Lebanon were well aware of the activities of the Kurdish cultural movement, and granted it a relative liberty, which allowed a favourable context to the emergence of a Kurdish culture and Kurdish national movement in exile. The Khoybun League was relatively successful in its activities, and within 20 years, the movement challenged the primordial attachments among the Kurds by notions of national and transnational community. (Tejel 2014, 853-854).

### **3.2. Kurdish national politics in Lebanon**

As an ethnic immigrant group with limited educational and economic resources, Lebanese Kurds have struggled to participate in social and political activities. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 22) Despite the frequent attempts of Kamuran Bedirhan to motivate them to focus on education and engage in social and political activities, the majority stayed uninvolved until the 1960s. (Ibid. 10) From that on, the Kurdish national politics and parties in Iraq and Syria have had a significant impact on the socio-political organization of the Lebanese Kurds.

The year 1958 came with many events that had repercussions on the Kurdish community in Lebanon and that eventually motivated them for socio-political organization. Firstly, following the establishment of the state union between Egypt and Syria, the first oppressive measures were initiated against the Kurds in Syria. Consequently, thousands of Syrian Kurds moved to Lebanon, among them politicized students and workers. They had a significant role in raising



awareness among the Lebanese Kurds about the objectives of social and political activism. Secondly, the Iraqi monarchy fell in 1958, which a few years later led to the outbreak of the 1961-1975 Kurdish war. As a home of thousands of Kurds, Beirut could serve as a needed publicity platform for the Kurdish national movement in Iraq and its leader, Mulla Mustafa Barzani. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 10) Lebanese Kurds disseminated news about the war, and accommodated and assisted Kurdish delegates sent by Barzani. (Ibid. 28) These activities not only bolstered the national self-awareness of Lebanese Kurds, but also made them consider methods to improve their socioeconomic conditions. This finally motivated them to establish their first socio-political organizations. (Ibid. 10)

The Kurdish Democratic Party in Lebanon (KDPL), also known as al-Parti, was founded in 1970 by Jamil Mihhu. It had started to operate clandestinely already ten years before, in July 1960. The party was established by a group of young Lebanese Kurds, with the assistance of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS). KDPL was regarded as the Lebanese affiliate branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq (KDP), which was led by Mustafa Barzani. At first, KDPL limited its activities to communication with local Kurds. It disseminated statements about the importance of education and naturalization as means to improve the social and political conditions of the Kurdish community. As of 1961, KDPS encouraged KDPL to assist Barzani in the publication of the Kurdish national movement. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 11) Since then, Lebanese Kurds, especially Kurmanjis, have proclaimed their support to Barzani and his successor, Masoud. (Ibid. 28) It was upon Barzani's call that Mihhu asked the Lebanese government to legalize KDPL's status. The party received license in September 1970. Soon after this, however, Mihhu's popularity among Lebanese Kurds diminished rapidly. In consequence, KDPL dismantled into several factions and subdivisions that recreated in Lebanon the inner divisions of the Kurdish leadership in Iraq and Syria. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 12) Among these was the Rezgari (Liberty) party established by Faysal Fakhru in 1975 (Meho 2002, 77). By the early 1990s, all of the Lebanese Kurdish political factions were disbanded. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 12)

In the mid-1980s, many Lebanese Kurds started to sympathize with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK's vision of a united Kurdish nation fighting for independence, appealed to the Kurds tired of tribal divisions and factionalism that characterized many other Kurdish political movements. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 28-29) In the beginning of the 1980s, the PKK had a training camp in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, in an area which was under the

control of the Syrian army at the time. (Tejel 2009, 76) In the Lebanese civil war, the PKK took up arms in solidarity with the Palestinians. (Ibid.) When the leader of the party, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured by the Turkish authorities in 1999, the popularity of the PKK deteriorated among the Lebanese Kurds. Many also shun the violent means of Öcalan to achieve autonomy and were more compelled by the new KDP leader Masud Barzani, who succeeded in the reconstruction of Iraqi Kurdistan by more peaceful means. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 28-29) Even though the contacts with representatives of Barzani's KDP in Iraq had virtually ceased during the Lebanese civil war, Lebanese Kurds' symbolic loyalty for Barzani remained throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Eventually the direct interaction between Lebanese Kurdish associations and KDP was renewed, as several meetings took place between them in the beginning of 2000s. (Ibid. 29-30)

According to Kawtharani & Meho (2005, 20-21), the majority of the Kurds did not participate in the activities of the parties. The most of the parties did not emerge out of Lebanese Kurdish political consciousness and they did not address the primary concerns of Kurds, such as finding jobs and securing food and medical aid. Various times Kurdish national issues (i.e., events in Kurdistan) overweighed local ones and strive for improvement of the general status of the community in Lebanon was neglected. (Ibid.) The borderlines between Lebanese Kurdish parties mostly followed the division between the Kurdish party political in Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Kawtharani & Meho (2005, 12) argue that these factions and subdivisions recreated the inner divisions of Kurdish leadership in Iraq and Syria. So to say, Kurdish politics in Lebanon have always been transnational and the community has always been part of transnational Kurdish networks in the Middle East.

In 2019, it was also indicated by my informants that the majority of the Lebanese Kurds would not be involved in the activities of the Kurdish political parties. In the time of the writing of my thesis it remained unclear, whether any functioning Lebanese Kurdish parties existed. I understood from my informants that the KDPL party would have lost its licence within the two last years before the interviews in 2019, which implies that the party's licence would have been renewed at some point after 2005. On its website, the KDPL demands the Lebanese authorities to lift their ban on the party's political and social activities (KDP Lebanon 2021). In 2019, I was also under the impression that the Rezgari party would have ceased its activities and would not hold a licence to operate. However, a representative of the party appeared in a short documentary made by Rudaw in September 2020 that introduced the general situation of the

Lebanese Kurds (Rudaw, September 5, 2020). A month later, an article published by Rudaw (October 5, 2020) again mentioned the Rezgari party in a way that implied some activity. An article published in 2007 in the news site of Hezbollah (Moqawama, November 7, 2007) suggests that the Rezgari party would have allied with the Shiite group, which also implies the continuation of some activity after 2005.

### **3.3. Kurds in the Lebanese political system**

Unlike the Armenians, who are officially recognized as a distinct ethnic and religious group, Lebanese Kurds do not hold any special status on the base of their ethnicity. In the Lebanese sectarian political system, Kurds are counted by their religion as Sunnis. (Meho 2002, 61) However, Kurds have several times expressed their will to have an own ethnicity-based representation at the Lebanese parliament and at the municipality of Beirut (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 25-26). Also all of my Lebanese Kurdish interviewees raised up the topic and had been working on the issue on a way or another. One of them had been running as a candidate in the last parliamentary elections in 2018, and another one had made appeals to the Lebanese president in the early 2000s. According to Hourani (2011, 80), Lebanese Kurds can muster around 27,000 votes in Lebanon, out of which 18,700 in Beirut.

Until 1994, the majority of the Kurds did not have a Lebanese citizenship, which hindered the socioeconomic development and the political participation of the community (Meho 2002, 62). In order to maintain the confessional hegemony obtained in the 1932 census, Lebanese Christians strongly opposed granting citizenship to Sunni Kurds (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 3-5). In the early 1960s, Kurds appealed to the Minister of Interior, Kamal Jumblatt, on the citizenship issue. He provided them with “under study” identification cards, which allowed them to travel in and out of Lebanon. After the end of the Lebanese civil war in the 1990s, Kurds sought to the most powerful Sunni leader in the country, the new Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. In 1994, his government issued a naturalization decree that settled the legal status of all qualified non-naturalized individuals in Lebanon. As a result, around 18,000 noncitizen Kurds obtained citizenship. (Ibid. 6-8)

After the promulgation of their naturalization, Kurds considered Hariri as their champion. In the 1996 and 2000 parliamentary elections more than half of the 15,000 Kurdish voters in Beirut

voted for Hariri and his associates. However, Kurds gained very little in return for their support. The aides of Hariri validated this by the inability of the Kurdish associations to choose one representative leader for the community. As Kurds were subdivided into several antagonistic groups, they were unable to agree over the person. In the absence of alternative choice of patronage, Kurds have remained loyal to Hariri's leadership. (Kawtharani & Meho 2005, 25-27)

In 2011, it was estimated by Hourani (2011, 90-91) that 90 percent of the Kurds would be supporters of the Future Movement, while the remaining 10 percent would be with the Al Ahabash movement, a politically active pan-Sufi organization. In 2019, some of my interviewees indicated that the majority of the Lebanese Kurds would be supporters of Hariri's Future Movement. From 2016 to 2020, Saad Hariri was on his second term as the Prime Minister of Lebanon. However, the study of Hourani (2011, 86) revealed that only 8 percent of the Lebanese Kurds considered the Hariri's parliamentary bloc to represent them, while 92 percent had considered themselves unrepresented in the Lebanese Parliament. Hourani's (2011) study on the political participation of the Kurds after the naturalization has revealed that the number of Kurdish participation in the parliamentary and municipal elections has been steadily increasing since 1996. Up to 94 percent of the naturalized Kurds casted their vote in the municipal elections in 2010. (Ibid. 83)

### **3.4. Syrian Kurdish refugees in Lebanon post-2011**

While Lebanon hosts more than one million Syrian refugees, there is no official number for the Syrian Kurdish refugees in Lebanon. In July 2019, it was estimated by my interviewees that approximately 20,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees have come to Lebanon since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, especially after the ISIS attack on Kobane in 2016 and Turkey's capture of Afrin in 2018. In 2014, it was written in the Iraqi Kurdish news outlet Rudaw that "many thousands of Kurds fled the violence in Syria and went to Lebanon" (Neurink 2014). According to the article, the Syrian Kurds came from all over Syria: Damascus, Aleppo, Hasaka and Qamishli (Ibid). In 2016, the Lebanese newspaper Daily Star mentioned that numerous Kurds had sought refuge from the threat of ISIS in northern Syria and resided in Beirut's Basta neighbourhood, which has had a considerable Kurdish population already for nearly half a century (Nashed 2016). My informants suggested the majority of the Syrian Kurds to reside in

the Armenian quarters of Burj Hammoud in Beirut, and mentioned many of them to be from Afrin. According to them, Lebanon has been only a temporary stop for many of the Syrian Kurds on their way to Turkey and Europe.

Both the Rudaw (Neurink 2014) and the Daily Star (Nashed 2016) articles described the hardship that the Syrian Kurds had faced in Lebanon and their disappointment to the little help they have received from the local Kurdish community. Also the unaffiliated Syrian Kurd I interviewed stated that the Lebanese Kurds have not helped the exiled Syrian Kurds. Yet, the presidents of all the Lebanese Kurdish associations described the relationship between the Lebanese Kurds and the refugees to be good, and for example mentioned that many Lebanese Kurds have married with Syrians. The president of the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association stated that they do not differentiate between Kurds coming from different geographical areas and they help the Syrian Kurds in what they can, but the Kurds in Lebanon do not have much resources nor leverage. The president of the Newroz Association suggested that the Syrian Kurds have been curious to get to know the Kurds in Lebanon, and many of them have participated in the events and activities of the association. It was suggested by my interviewees that Syrian Kurds might be socially and politically more active and organized than the Lebanese Kurds. Reportedly, many Syrian Kurds have taken part in the demonstrations in Beirut.

#### 4. Rojava and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

Rojava is the Kurdish name for the areas in northern Syria, where Kurds are concentrated, i.e. the Jazirah region, Kobani and Afrin regions. In my thesis, when I use the term “Rojava”, “Kurdish areas in Syria” or “northern Syria”, I refer to these areas. Although the Kurds form the majority in northern Syria, Rojava is a multicultural and multi-religious area. It is home to e.g. Syriac Christians, Assyrian Christians, Armenian Christians, Yazidis, Turkmen and Chechens Arabs (Rojava Information Centre 2021).

Since 2014, a de facto self-administration governance has been operating in the area. The political system is based on the ideology of democratic confederalism developed by Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and has provoked many argumentations for and against. Some see it as a revolution with a potential to alleviate ethnic and religious tensions in the Middle East, whereas others criticize it for being another non-democratic and suppressive system. Öcalan presents the model as means for peaceful co-existence in multi-ethnic and religious societies of the Middle East, and proposes it as a solution to the Kurdish question. The three main pillars of democratic confederalism are the emancipation of women, grassroots policy-making, and preserving the ecosystem. (Barkhoda 2016, 80-81)

##### 4.1. Development of the administration

After the breakout of the Syrian crisis, the Syrian central government gave up its local authority and withdrew from the Kurdish areas in summer 2012. Following this, the Kurdish YPG-forces took control of the cities of Kobane, Amuda, Afrin and Qamishli. (Jongerden 2019, 64), and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) became the dominant political force in the area (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 62). The party initiated a process of self-administration, on the basis of developing a network of interconnected and self-administrated villages, neighbourhoods, cities and regions (Jongerden 2019, 65). In January 2014, Jazirah, Kobane and Afrin cantons officially declared democratic autonomy through a provisional constitution (Dinc 2020, 51). Later the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), took control of more areas from ISIS and other armed groups in northeast Syria (Ibid.). In 2015, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) was created to represent the political parties and organizations in north and east Syria. It is the

political body to which the SDF reports (Rojava Information Centre 2021), and it was active in forming administrative councils and governing in non-Kurdish majority areas liberated by the SDF (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 96). In March 2016, the establishment the “Democratic Federation of Rojava Northern Syria” was declared in the areas under the SDC control. In September 2018, it was renamed as the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria” (NES). (Jongerden 2019, 64) Nevertheless, Rojava is still commonly used to refer to the region (Rojava Information Centre 2021).

The Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) is the coordinating platform of political parties, professional and societal organisations, and different council representatives in NES (Jongerden 2019, 70). TEV-DEM is represented in the SDC, the executive body of the Federal Northern Syria, and its organization and structures span and connect all the administrative regions of NES (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 96). The PYD party was the prime mover in the formation of TEV-DEM and in positioning it as the driving force of the administration. (Ibid. 64). For many, the distinction between TEV-DEM and the PYD has remained vague (Ibid. 95). TEV-DEM was an essential actor in the driving of the social revolution in Rojava, which conformed the radical political agenda of the PYD (Ibid. 96). The PYD itself was established in 2003, and originally it operated within the PKK’s umbrella organization, the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK). Until 2015, the PYD’s internal code recognized Kongra-Gel, the highest legislative and representative body of the KCK, as its supreme legislative authority and Abdullah Öcalan as the leader of the party. The amendments made in 2015 removed these statements and named TEV-DEM as its official representative body, but nevertheless left a recognition of Öcalan as the ideological inspiration of the PYD. (Ibid. 61-62)

The PYD drifted into a conflict with the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a Syrian umbrella organisation of pro-KRG Kurdish parties (Jongerden 2019, 65). The KNC was led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS), the Syrian affiliate of Iraq’s Kurdistan Democratic Party, headed by President Masoud Barzani. Barzani had strong connections to the KNC, and had helped to establish it in October 2011. (Federici & Sayigh 2012) The motive of the PYD to develop an administration based on the idea of autonomous assemblies conflicted with the KNC’s aim to establish a similar kind of autonomy for the Kurds in Syria as in the KRG in Iraq. The conflict between the PYD and the KNC coincided with the prevalent crisis within the Kurdish party political system. (Jongerden 2019, 65) In 2012, the spread of the YPG checkpoints in northern Syria inflicted tensions between the parties. The PYD prevented other

Kurdish parties from setting up their own small armed units, and many KNC activists were arrested by PYD security personnel. The July 2012 Erbil agreement and the establishment of the Supreme Kurdish Committee (SKC) to jointly administer the Kurdish areas did not manage to overcome the deep-rooted differences and inequalities between the opponents. (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 91-92) Like the Assad regime and the wider Syrian opposition, the KNC denounced the PYD declaration of federal governance in northern Syria in March 2016 (Ibid. 83).

In an interview given in December 2016, President Assad described the federal structures created by the Kurds in northern Syria as temporary (ARA News, December 9, 2016). He stated that the Syrian constitution does not allow for federalism, but that resolving the political situation in the north would have to wait till the end of the Syrian conflict (Ibid.). The regime had done little to prevent the PYD takeover of the Kurdish areas, which led the Syrian opposition and the Kurdish opponents of the PYD to accuse the party of connivance of the regime (Allsopp 2015, 217). The PYD and the SDC did not aim to constructing a new state or replacing Assad. The principle issue for them was the change of the political system to a more democratic one, a self-government in a form of non-statist democracy, which conflicted with Assad's and the opposition's objective of centralised state rule. (Jongerden 2019, 64) In December 2016, Salih Muslim, the co-chair of the PYD party, stated in an interview that the Kurdish parties do not want to divide Syria and have no interests in fighting Damascus (ARA News, December 9, 2016). He said that the project of creation a democratic federal decentralized Syria is for all of the country, and the party is ready to discuss the issue with everyone: the Alawites, Druze, Sunnis, and others (Ibid.)

#### **4.2. The Kurdish women's movement in Rojava**

The PYD-led administration enforced regulation and largely encouraged social change in the area of women's rights and representation in society and politics. Since 2012, a co-chair system has been implemented, and every position in the administration has to be co-chaired by a man and a woman. Furthermore, women have obtained a 40 percent quota in every council, and women's associations have been established in every commune. (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 78) In 2016, the new Social Contract guaranteed the women's freedom and rights and equal presentation of the genders, including the co-presidency (articles 12, 13 and 14). It also



prescribed violence and discrimination against women as a crime and women's right to take decisions relevant to their affairs (articles 25 and 26). (Social Contract 2016) Laws have been imposed to ban child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy and dowry, and honour murders have been criminalized (Barkhoda 2016, 83). Academies and educational centres for women, where *Jineology*, the Kurdish "women's science", is taught, have been established (Ferreira & Santiago 2018, 496).

The Congress Star (Kongreya Star) is the umbrella women's movement in Rojava. It was founded in 2005 under the name of the Star Union (Yekîtiya Star), and was renamed in February 2016. Under the Ba'ath regime, the activists of the movement were arrested and tortured. Nowadays, all the women who are involved in TEV-DEM's social, political, and military work are also members of the Congress Star. (Knapp et al. 2016, 60) Through its networks, the Congress Star aims to organize efforts for empowering women in society and to bring women from every segment into the public sphere (Barkhoda 2016, 83). The Congress Star is represented in the executive body of TEV-DEM, along with the PYD and other organizations. (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 95)

The Congress Star follows Öcalan's ideology on democratic confederalism and women's empowerment. The brochure of the organization states that "the women of the Star Congress have worked in line with the leader Abdullah Ocalan's principles, and believe in his philosophy and ideology about women's freedom in society" (Congress Star 2018, 16). The Congress Star includes women of all ethnicities and religions (Ibid. 7). The organization aims to "develop a free Rojava, a democratic Syria, and a democratic Middle East by promoting women's freedom and the concept of the democratic nation". Moreover, it "takes the development of a revolution in women's freedom throughout the Middle East as its basic goal, predicated on the development of such a revolution in Rojava and Syria". (Ibid. 8) The brochure highlights that the Diplomatic Relations Committee of the Congress Star has participated in several international forums around the world. Moreover, foreign delegations and women's organizations have visited the organization to learn about the Kurdish women's struggle in Rojava and mechanisms of women's self-organization. (Ibid. 17)

According to Allsopp & Wilgenburg (2019, 79), women always been present in the Kurdish political movement in Syria, and the political programmes of all Kurdish political parties have included provisions about women's rights. Notwithstanding, the leadership of the KNC parties

have traditionally been dominated by men, and the wide statements about equality have not been elaborated. In comparison, the PYD party and its administration have had significantly more female leaders. Surveys conducted in Syria in 2016 indicated that women's rights was one of the principal developments associated with the PYD-led administration in northern Syria (Ibid. 79-80).

#### **4.3. Turkey's military involvement in northern Syria**

For Turkey, the Kurdish seizure of control over northern Syria presented a problem and a domestic security threat rising from its own Kurdish issue and unresolved conflict with the PKK. It feared that a contiguous PYD controlled territory, encompassing its southern border with Syria would provide a haven for the PKK. (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 174) Despite the denial of connections to the PKK by the PYD, Turkey claimed the opposite and has seen the party as synonymous with the PKK. Turkey declared it would intervene against any attempt of the PKK to establish permanent presence in northern Syria. (Allsopp 2015, 218) Until 2019, US dependence on the SDF in the anti-ISIS operation provided some protection for the PYD against the Turkish threats (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 178).

Turkey's primary agenda in its involvement in Syria has been disrupting PYD ambitions and hindering the party from achieving territorial contiguity and weakening its prospects for a post-war settlement. Turkey conducted military interventions in Jarablus in August 2016 and in Afrin in 2018. (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 175) In October 2019, Turkey launched an offensive to create a "safe zone" in northern Syria (BBC, October 14, 2019). The 2016 offensive officially aimed at capturing the border town of Jarablus from ISIS and removing "terror groups" from the border. However, Turkey's more important objective was to prevent the PYD from connecting the Kobani and Afrin cantons. (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 177) In March 2018, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels took control of the Kurdish-majority city Afrin after a two month operation (Guardian, March 18, 2018). According to president Erdogan, the 2019 offensive aimed to "prevent the creation of a terror corridor" in northern Syria and it was launched amid the US troops withdrawal from the region (BBC October 14, 2019). Politically, Turkey has tried to keep the PYD isolated from wider negotiations on Syria's future on regional and international level and to prevent the international recognition of the PYD-led autonomous administration. (Allsopp & Wilgenburg 2019, 178)

## 5. Methods and material

My research is a qualitative study conducted in the method of the semi-structured interview format. I carried out five interviews on my field trip in Beirut in July 2019, four of which were done with the presidents of Lebanese Kurdish associations and one with an unaffiliated Syrian Kurd. I recorded each of the interviews and later transcribed them for analysis. I have used thematic content analysis as the method to examine the textual data composed of the transcripts. In this chapter, I will first reflect on the sampling in Beirut, the semi-structured interview format and the process of developing an interview guide, and the structure of the interviews. After that, I will provide short descriptions of the associations I visited. Finally, I will discuss the transcription process, the principles of thematic content analysis, and reflect on research ethics.

### 5.1. Sampling and informants

I decided to interview the leaders of Lebanese Kurdish associations because I presumed it to be easier to contact them instead of trying to randomly find Kurdish people on the streets of Beirut. I also thought that it would be more likely for them to know English and to be involved in social and political activism. What is more, I had read about the challenges of the research team of Dr. Hourani had had in building contact with Kurdish respondents to participate in their questionnaire on the streets (see Hourani 2011). Before starting my interviews, I had met Dr. Hourani by coincidence at a seminar organized by the Finnish Institute in the Middle East in Beirut in May 2019. She gave me the contact information of my first informants, and later I received more contacts through a snowball effect from the interviewees. The unaffiliated Syrian Kurd was a friend of my Syrian friend in Finland, so the contact was arranged through him. I began creating my networks with the Lebanese Kurdish association in June 2019 and conducted the official interviews in July 2019.

In the time of the writing of this thesis, it remains unclear whether there are any functioning Lebanese Kurdish parties at present. In 2019, I had understood from my informants that the parties had run out of resources and that the KDPL party would have lost its license within the two last years before the interviews. This implies that the party's license would have been renewed at some point after 2005. I tried to contact the KDPL party via email without a response. In 2019, I was also under the impression that the Rezgari party would have ceased its activities and would not hold a license to operate. (More on the issue, see above 3.2.)

Due to the impression that there were not any functioning Lebanese Kurdish political parties in July 2019, I ended up selecting only representatives of Lebanese Kurdish social and cultural associations for sampling. The associations whose presidents took part in the research were the Newroz Social and Cultural Association, the Lebanese Kurdish Association of Ain Mreiseh and Mina el Hosn, the Jin Women's Association, and the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association. I was supposed to have one more interview with the representative of a Lebanese Kurdish association outside Beirut, but it got canceled at the last minute due to the interviewee's family reasons. Short descriptions of the aforementioned associations can be found below:

**Newroz Social and Cultural Association** was established in 2014 by a group of Lebanese Kurdish women. In addition to cultural activities, the association organizes trainings for women. The association has between 200-300 members, and its current president is Hanan Osman. The association tries to change the views of Lebanese people on Kurds, since it is often thought that Kurds are not educated and not capable to participate in politics. Osman herself was running as a candidate in the communal elections in Beirut in 2018. The Newroz Association is part of the women's organization platform maintained by the Jin Women's Association.

**The Lebanese Kurdish Association of Ain Mreiseh and Mina el Hosn** was established in 1997 to help poor Kurds with e.g. health care and school fees. However, the association has recently struggled to meet sufficient economic resources. The association has 60-70 members, and its current president is Nasser Meho.

**Jin Women's Association** was established in summer 2019. According to its president Bushra Ali, the association aims to create a platform to incorporate different women's associations in the Middle East. Through the network the association aims to empower women, and the women's rights issue is important for the association. Ali is originally from northern Syria, but before coming to Lebanon she was working on the women's issue in a similar kind of association in Iraqi Kurdistan. Besides Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan, the association has contacts with other women's organizations in Turkey, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East and the Arab world, including Assyrian and Armenian organizations.

**The Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association**, established in 1963, was the first Kurdish association in Lebanon. The aim of the association is to help poor Kurds and to maintain Kurdish language and culture. The association has a small clinic that offers free health care, and it organizes a Newroz celebration every year. Moreover, it organizes Kurdish language teaching for the Kurdish youth. The association has contact with a few Kurdish associations of Lebanese origin in Germany and Sweden.

**Anonymous** The last person I interviewed was a Syrian Kurd living in Beirut. He moved to Lebanon 20 years ago from northern Syria. Until 2012, he used to visit his hometown in Syria twice a year. The interviewee is not a member of any of the Kurdish associations in Lebanon. I hoped that the discussion with him would help me to understand the general situation of the Kurds in Lebanon and Syria and bring a different perspective to my research.

## **5.2. Interview format and structure**

In a qualitative study, the quality and trustworthiness of the research, as well as the results, are vastly influenced by rigorous data collection procedures. Interviews are the most commonly used data collection method in qualitative research, and the most frequently used interview technique is the semi-structured format. Its advantage is the ability to create reciprocity between the interviewer and the participant, and allowing space for the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on the responses of each participant. Furthermore, the semi-structured format caters to the individual verbal expressions of the interviewees. In semi-structured interviews, the questions are collected in an interview guide, and they should cover the main themes of the study. The guide is meant to offer a focused structure for the discussion and not to be strictly followed. (Kallio et al. 2016, 2955)

In semi-structured interviews, well-formulated questions are participant-oriented but not leading, clearly worded, single-faceted, and open ended. Follow-up questions can be pre-designed or spontaneous. (Ibid. 2959-2960) Developing a rigorous semi-structured interview guide contributes positively to the trustworthiness of qualitative research in multiple ways: it enhances the credibility, confirmability and dependability of the study. Confirmability and dependability can also be enhanced by presenting the complete interview guide in the study

report, as it makes the research process as transparent as possible describes the way the data was collected. (Ibid. 2962-2963)

My interview guide was divided into three themes: theme A on background information about the association, theme B on the situation of Kurds in Lebanon, and theme C on their positions on activism and networks related to Rojava. The questions of theme C were the most relevant and important ones to my research. However, in order to grasp the situation of Lebanese Kurds and to understand the context better, I considered it necessary to ask background questions about the association and the circumstances of the Lebanese Kurds. I contemplated that in order to understand Lebanese Kurds' networks and transnational activism related to northern Syria, I should first know the general up-to-date context of the Kurds in Lebanon. As the relevant academic literature on Lebanese Kurds was little and not up to date, this kind of background information was needed. So, in the theme A, I asked about the establishment of the association, its purpose, members and activities, and its networks in Lebanon and abroad. In the theme B, I asked the participants about the general situation of Kurds in Lebanon, their number, their origin, their political activism, and the number of Syrian Kurdish refugees. The questions of the theme C aimed at finding out that what kind of transnational activism and networks Lebanese Kurds have in relation to Rojava. So for example, I made inquiries about the association's relations to Rojava, their activities regarding the issue, and whether they try to influence the issue or not. The original interview guide was made in English, but I had translated the questions also into Arabic in my notebook, which was with me during the meetings. The full interview guide is viewable in the appendix B.

Although I followed the interview guide during the interviews, I did not let it bind the conversations. I wanted to give space for the participants to discuss the matters they find the most relevant related to the topic. I thought that there might be some important dimensions on the matter that I did not realize to inquire. I asked a lot of spontaneous sub-questions to clarify the statements of the participants. Even though sometimes the conversations were meandering a lot, the interview guide gave an essential framework for the interviews, and ensured that the same basic questions were discussed with each of the participants.

The interviews lasted from half an hour up to one hour and a half. One of the interviews was done completely in English, one in Arabic, two of them half-English half-Arabic and one with a translator from English to Kurdish. During two of the interviews, the language varied between

English and Arabic depending on which language it was the easiest for the interviewee to understand and to response in. One of my informants translated the interview from Kurdish to English with another association leader she arranged me a meeting with. As I do not speak Kurdish, so I had to trust my interviewee for the right translation of the interview. However, these two participants have parallel standpoints to Rojava and they are part of same women's organization networks, which reduces the motive to alter the translation.

### **5.3. On transcription**

Transcription is the way of transferring spoken language to the written word, where different set of rules of language apply. It brings uninterrupted oral language into a static form of representation, which is necessary for the management and organization of data, since only written language can be sorted, copied, examined and quoted. Naturalized transcription and denaturalized transcription are the two main methods of transcription, where the former is a detailed and less filtered transcription, and the latter more flowing and laundered. Naturalized transcription focuses on the details of the discourse, and records in the textual data breaks in the speech, laughter, mumbling, gestures and involuntary sounds etc. Denaturalized transcription removes socio-cultural characteristics of the data, which in some cases could be useful for the study. It describes the discourse and the essence of the interview accurately, but limits description of accent or involuntary sounds and gestures. (Mero-Jaffe 2011, 232)

In my transcription, I have mostly applied the denaturalized transcription method, yet in some units I have noted gestures, laughter or other sounds if I considered it to provide useful information for assessment of the discourse. I transcribed the interviews in the language in which the discussion was flowing. Consequently, a few of the interviews are transcribed partly in English and partly in Arabic, and a couple of them entirely in English or Arabic. The interview that was translated from Kurdish to English is transcribed in English only. To make the typing on faster, I initially transcribed the Arabic speech in Latin alphabet.

### **5.4. Thematic content analysis**

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts. According to Burnard (1991, 461) TCA assumes that semi-structured or

open ended interviews have been carried out, recorded and transcribed in full. The method is used to categorize and codify the interview transcripts, and it is carried out in stages. TCA is utilized to portray the thematic content of interview transcripts through identification of common themes in the textual data. According to Anderson (2007, 1) TCA is the most foundational of qualitative analytic procedures and informs all qualitative methods in some way. TCA has been developed from Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory, content analysis and other means of analysing qualitative data (Burnard 1991, 461). In TCA, the researcher's epistemological stance is objective or objectivistic (Anderson 2007, 1).

In short in TCA, the researcher groups the textual data in several stages, and employs names for common themes found in the transcribed interview material i.e. the actual words of the interviewee. Even though sorting and naming themes requires interpretation of some kind, it should be kept to minimum (Anderson 2007, 1). In order to conduct TCA, the researcher first gets immersed in the data by reading through the material, and by freely creating and marking categories for themes and distinct units of meaning found in the text. This first stage of analysis is known as "open coding". The researcher should highlight all relevant descriptions to the topic of inquiry from "dross", which refers to unusable fillers in an interview. In the next stage, the researcher surveys the categories and groups some of them together in order to create higher-order headings and to reduce the number of categories. In the following stage, the categories and sub-headings are again processed to remove repetitious or similar headings, and to create a new and final list of categories. (Burnard 1991, 462-463)

After that the researcher re-reads the transcript with the final list of categories and sub-headings to survey whether they cover all aspects of the interviews or not. Adjustments are made accordingly. Each interview transcript is worked through in the similar way, coding and creating list of categories and sub-headings. If needed, categories can be collapsed or subdivided. Eventually, after completing the TCA of every interview, the categories of all interview transcripts are combined. Each coded unit of the interviews is cut out and all the items of each code are piled together, and pasted onto sheets with appropriate heading and sub-headings. Multiple copies of the transcript ensure that the context of the coded sections is not lost, and complete transcripts should be kept for reference during all the process. All the sections should be filed together for writing up the findings. If anything seems unclear at the writing up stage, the researcher refers back to the complete transcripts and original recordings. Finally, at the writing up stage the researcher selects various examples of data of each section



and links the examples together with a commentary and possible literature. (Burnard 1991, 463-464; Anderson 2007, 2-3)

Burnard (1991, 465) notes that one of the difficulties of qualitative research and TCA is to find a method to present research findings in an honest and reliable way. He points out that the only way to present the findings without any interpretation or bias would be to offer the complete transcripts unanalysed. Clearly this would not be practical to the reader, who would have to then find out his own way to categorize the text. However, Burnard (ibid.) suggests that TCA stays close to the original material and allows the reader to make sense of the data presented.

### **5.5. Research ethics**

Research ethics determines how the people subjected in a research should be treated and how the data obtained from them should be dealt with. The most common principles of research ethics are: minimizing the harm caused for the research subjects, respecting their autonomy, and preserving their privacy. The procedure of *informed consent* is frequently used to meet the requirements of ethical research. (Traianou 2014, 62) Regarding the data it is important to consider if it is private or secret, and in which manner the findings are reported. Confidentiality and anonymization are often used precautionary principles to protect the data and people. Details that allow the people to be identified may be omitted, such as personal characteristics or contextual features of places. (Traianou 2014, 64-66)

In my research, I have taken the principles of minimizing the harm, respecting people's autonomy and preserving their privacy into account by filling up a consent form with each of the participants before starting the interview with them. I have also shortly explained them the topic and the purpose of the research. I have asked for permission to record the interview and for the consent of the participant to publish their name and possibly quotations in the thesis, and I let them choose to review the direct quotations before publishing.

Before starting the interviews, I was not sure whether the participants could find Rojava and activism related to it as a sensitive topic or whether taking part in the research could result in harm for them. To prevent any potential harm and distress, I addressed my interviewees that they are free not to answer the questions, if they wish so. That way I could respect their

autonomy in making decisions about possible risks. Apart from one, all the participants expressed their consent on publishing their name along with my thesis, namely all the presidents of the Lebanese Kurdish associations. The one Syrian Kurd unaffiliated with any of the associations wished to stay anonymous, hence I will not disclose his identity. All the data not published in the thesis, including the interview recordings and transcripts, are dealt with confidence, and the material is only in my use.

## 6. Analysis

In my research, I aim to examine the transnational activism and networks of Lebanese Kurds in relation to Rojava. The primary material of my study is based on the interviews conducted with the leaders of four Lebanese Kurdish associations (the Newroz Association, the Lebanese Kurdish Association of Ain Mreiseh and Mina el Hosn, the Jin Women's Association, and the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association) and one unaffiliated Syrian Kurd in Beirut in summer 2019. In the analysis, I utilize the theoretical framework of transnational activism, transnational networks, and processes of transnational contention. In the previous chapters, I have contextualized the findings by presenting an overview of the history of the Kurds in Lebanon, the recent political developments in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava, and media coverage regarding the Kurds in Lebanon. The extensive contextualization has been essential in the comprehension of the material and the transnational processes that occur between Lebanese Kurds and Rojava.

According to all of the association leaders, their association does neither carry out political activism nor particular activities around the Rojava issue nor try to influence it directly. The Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association conduct grassroots women's activism, which could be interpreted as political, even though the interviewees themselves did not count it as such (on grassroots civic activism, see above 2.3.). Even though Lebanese Kurds have been able to demonstrate in solidarity with the Syrian Kurds against the Turkish interventions in northern Syria, the poor political opportunities of the Kurdish community in Lebanon weakens their opportunities to influence the Rojava issue through transnational activism. However, I discovered that the political transformations and the so-called social revolution in northern Syria have influenced the thinking and forms of action of some of the Kurds. Thus, I argue that the relationship between Rojava and the Lebanese Kurds is reciprocal.

I observed that the attitudes of the association leaders towards Rojava largely depended on the political faction they favored in the Kurdish party political system. While the interviewees critical towards the actions of the PYD-led administration in NES did not have association level contacts to Rojava, the interviewees who sympathized with the political ideology of Abdullah Öcalan and the PYD-led administration had contacts with their association to northern Syria. Although the sympathizers of Öcalan claimed that they do not directly aim to influence the issue, their grassroots women's activism was largely influenced and inspired by the Kurdish

women's movement in Rojava. These two associations, namely the Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association, had relations with the Congress Star, the umbrella women's organization in northern Syria. It could be drawn that they formed transnational coalitions with the Congress Star, and they were part of larger transnational women's rights advocacy networks through their local activism (on transnational advocacy networks, see above 2.3.). The inspiration and influences they took from the Congress Star could be seen as a form of diffusion (on diffusion, see above 2.4.), and they framed the Rojava issue in a similar way through human and women's rights discourse. Additionally, I found out that some political leaders from Rojava had come to Beirut to seek support from Lebanese politicians, which can be seen as a feature of externalization of the conflict by the administration in NES (on externalization, see above 2.4.).

In the following chapters, I will present the research findings in more detail. First, I shall discuss the poor political opportunities of the Lebanese Kurds and the division of the community between different political factions. In the last chapter and its sub-chapters, I will discuss the transnational processes that occurred between some of the Lebanese Kurds and Rojava.

### **6.1. Political opportunities of the Kurds in Lebanon**

*"Political? We don't have political." "What can we do? We cannot do anything."* These were the responses of some of my interviewees to the question about the aims of their association to influence the Rojava issue. The political opportunity structure can be a helpful tool to understand the political landscape of Lebanese Kurds better, and it can be useful to explain why I did not find such activism oriented to support the Rojava issue as I expected (on political opportunity structure, see above 2.4.). As mentioned in chapter three, Lebanese Kurds have struggled to take part in politics, and most of them are not politically active. My interviewees confirmed this to be the case also at present. When analyzed through the major dimensions of the political opportunity structure (see above 2.4.), the political opportunities of the Lebanese Kurds can be seen as very narrow. The formation of their collective action has been discouraged by the state. The Lebanese Kurds do not have an ethnic-based representative at the parliament, even though they have strived for that since the 1990s. They also lack access to influential allies, as the Hariri family, whom the majority of the Kurds have considered as their patron, has not provided them with the political and socio-economical resources they have demanded (on

Kurds and Hariri, see above 3.3.). Moreover, it seems that the Kurds do not have licensed political parties in Lebanon at present, as the Lebanese government has not renewed the license of the KDPL for some years (on the ban of KDPL, see above 5.1.). Furthermore, it was stated by my interviewees that Syrian Kurds would get arrested if they tried to carry out any political activism in Lebanon.

The lack of political opportunities is evident in the association leaders' answers regarding attempts to influence the situation in northern Syria. They suggested that besides sharing news and demonstrating, Lebanese Kurds do not have chances to influence, but they try to help the Syrian Kurdish refugees with their needs in the realms of their capabilities. All of my Lebanese Kurdish interviewees raised up the topic of having an own ethnic-based representative in the Lebanese parliament, and they had been working on the issue in a way or another. One of them had been running as a candidate in the last parliamentary elections in 2018, and another one had made appeals to the Lebanese president in the early 2000s. Their strive for a Kurdish representative can be seen as a form of immigrant politics (on immigrant politics, see above 2.5.). The Kurds believe that having a Kurdish representative could better their socio-economic opportunities in Lebanon.

The political factionalism related to Kurdish party political has also weakened the Lebanese Kurds' political possibilities of influence. As it was mentioned in chapter 2.5, homeland political orientation may serve to disempowerment of ethnic diasporas and may lead to non-presentation in the institutions of the host country and weaken representation in immigrant political fora. Representatives of different political, ethnic, or religious factions may be pressed to cooperate. Kawtharani & Meho (2005, 20-21) have demonstrated this to be the case with Lebanese Kurds (see above 3.3.). In the next chapter, I will discuss the features of political factionalism that I observed among the Lebanese Kurds.

## **6.2. Division between different political factions**

Although in July 2019, it seemed that there were no officially recognized Kurdish political parties functioning in Lebanon, the division between the different Kurdish political factions, namely the sympathizers of the KRG president Barzani and the PKK leader Öcalan, was prevalent in the responses of the participants. The Newroz Association and the Jin Women's

Association shared ideological affinity with Öcalan, while the Lebanese Kurdish Association of Ain Mreisse and Mina el Hosn and the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association did not affiliate with it. This standpoint to Kurdish party political was projected on the attitudes of the association leaders towards Rojava and activism related to it. The conflict between the PYD party and the pro-KRG umbrella KNC in NES (see above 4.1.) might at least partly explain the phenomenon. The Öcalan sympathizing participants regarded the political transformations and the so-called social revolution in Rojava as an inspiration and a model to follow, whereas the unaffiliated ones expressed criticism and reservation towards the actions of the PYD party and its administration in northern Syria. This kind of division along the Kurdish party political is not unheard of in the Kurdish diaspora communities. Wahlbeck (2018, 420) has noted that political disagreements are often a source of serious conflicts within dispersed Kurdish communities.

The number of Barzani and Öcalan supporting Kurds within Lebanon remains unclear. It was suggested by Nasser Meho, the president of the Lebanese Kurdish Association of Ain Mreisse and Mina el Hosn, that 80 percent of the Kurds would support Barzani. In the same way as the KNC in Syria (see above 4.1.), he criticized the PYD for silencing criticism and being undemocratic. According to him, Lebanese Kurds like Rojava, but they are not fond of the politics of the PYD. In the view of Khaled Osman, the president of the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association, the Lebanese Kurds follow the developments in northern Syria with curiosity, for many of them have relatives in the area. He did not take a clear stand pro or against the PYD-led administration but considered the topic of Rojava important for all the Kurds, as it is part of Kurdistan. He portrayed that when the Kurds in Syria are hurt, also the Kurds in Lebanon feel the pain.

Hanan Osman, the president of the Newroz Association, and Bushra Ali, the president of the Jin Women's Association, sympathize with the ideology of Öcalan and the political transformations of the PYD-led administration in NES. According to them, there is a big interest and support to the self-governance in Rojava among Lebanese Kurds. Hanan Osman stated that the so-called Rojava revolution has had an impact on the social and political life of the Kurdish community in Lebanon, and they are following the social developments and the political way of acting of Syrian Kurds. She claimed that Lebanese Kurds see Syrian Kurds as role models and as a symbol of revolutionary work. Furthermore, many Kurds have visited Rojava to learn

about the revolution, and they have given lectures about the topic after returning to Lebanon. Some Kurds have even gone to defend Rojava militarily, for example, during the Kobane war.

### **6.3. Transnational processes related to Rojava**

Transnational women's advocacy networks form the basis for most of the processes of transnational contention that connect Lebanese Kurds and Rojava. The Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association have relations with the women's umbrella organization Congress Star in NES, and women's rights and empowerment are in a central role in their activities. The former organizes training for women, with various topics such as human rights, political participation, and self-defense, while the latter aims to create a platform to connect different women's organizations in the Middle East, and the Newroz Association is a member of it. These associations sympathize with the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan, and they refer to the political transformations and formation of the self-administration in Rojava as a revolution. They see the women's movement in NES as an inspiration for their grassroots women's activism in Lebanon. Even though they refuse to call their activities political, the civic activism conducted by them could be interpreted as such as it attempts for a social change (on civic activism, see above 2.3).

Their activism is transnational by nature as it is inspired by the women's movement in Rojava, it takes place within transnational coalitions, and is framed in the global human and women's rights discourse. The coalitions formed between the Kurdish women's rights organizations in Rojava and Lebanon can be seen as a feature of a transnational advocacy network, as they work on a common issue with shared values, common discourse, and exchange of information (on transnational advocacy networks, see above 2.3). In the following chapters, I will present a more detailed analysis of the features of diffusion, transnational coalition formation, and framing that I observed among the transnational Kurdish women's movement between Rojava and Lebanon. Moreover, I will discuss the externalization of the Rojava conflict by the NES administration.

### 6.3.1. Diffusion of the Kurdish women's movement

The women's rights activism conducted by the Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association are largely inspired by the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava. These two associations describe Rojava as a symbol and source of power in their work, and the women's movement in the area as pioneering. I observed diffusion of forms of action and ideology regarding the issue from northern Syria to Lebanon (on diffusion, see above 2.4). The leaders of these associations sympathize with the ideology of Öcalan on the self-governance of the Kurds and the empowerment of the society through the empowerment of women. Many of the aspects they mentioned in the interviews were similar to the content of the brochure of the Congress Star, the umbrella women's organization in NES. The president of the Newroz Association, Hanan Osman, described the Rojava revolution as something incredible and a great thing in the history of Kurds in both politically and in the terms of women's rights. She considers it to be significant that different ethnic groups are presented in the governance system, and regards it as a sign of democracy. Regarding the women's rights advancements in NES (see above 4.2.), she refers to the new laws that prohibit polygamy, child marriage, and paying dowry. Moreover, she suggested that the violence against women in Rojava has decreased due to the criminalization of honour killing. According to her, these political and social developments have affected Lebanese Kurds:

*HO: We, as association, we see the revolution of Rojava as a great thing in the history of the Kurdish people recently, because what the Kurds did in northern Syria was something incredible. They established a self-government, and in this government they have all the ethnic groups with Arab, Syrian, Armenian, and each one can participate with their own language, his own flag, his own colour, so you can see democracy. This is in political way. On the woman way it was great also, because they gave women a lot of rights, and a right that even women can establish her own army and can fight. And in Rojava also, many rule has changed now. For example, they cannot marry a lot of women, they have to marry just one. A young girl shouldn't be married, it's forbidden. It's forbidden to pay money when you get married with a woman, you shouldn't pay for her, because she's not an object for selling. And the violence is less now, you cannot put violence against women, because it's forbidden. You cannot kill woman just to say "I protected my honour" or "she has a relation". So, many thing changed, and this affect the Kurds in Lebanon as well.*

According to her, the Newroz Association does not have activities regarding Rojava, but they talk about it in the activities and often the discussion automatically goes to the subject. Ghazale Ramo, representative in the committee of the association, indicated that the Rojava revolution has had an impact on the Kurds in Lebanon and it has made them want to be part of it:



*GR: The revolution affected a lot the Kurds here, and we wanted to be part of this revolution and we are so proud of them, especially the women. When we go anywhere we talk about this experience. So it's a great thing that happened.*

Bushra Ali, the president of Jin Women's Association and originally from Rojava herself, described Rojava as an essential part of the association and as their source of power. The women's revolution has made her believe that as a united force women can achieve anything. According to her, the different ethnic groups did not know each other in Rojava before, but now the revolution has shown that they live and work together and empower each other:

*BA: It's [Rojava] like a source of giving us power. -- And empower us, and we think there isn't anything it's impossible. It made us think everything is possible. -- And we see that women, if they are related to each other and united force, everything would be possible, they can do a lot of achievements. -- For example we were in Rojava, but we didn't know Arabs. Arabs didn't know us. We didn't know Armenians or Assyrians and they didn't know us. But this revolution shows us we can live together, we can work together, we can empower each other. So it is one side of what happened.*

According to Ali, the aim of the association is to put light on the strategic side of the women's revolution in and the resistance of the Kurdish women. She suggests that the Rojava revolution has a bigger message than just that Kurdish women can hold weapons and fight, as it has already been shown in the media across the world. She herself has deeply dived into to the topic and written a book about the organizational and strategic side of it. In her own words, she travels to northern Syria regularly to study the revolution, women's political participation, liberation and fight for freedom. In Lebanon, the association holds conferences and meeting around the issue. Just like it was written in the brochure of the Congress Star (2018) (see above 4.2.), Ali compared the significance of the Rojava revolution to the impacts the French and the Russian revolutions have had to the world. According to her, it would be injustice to say that relevance of the revolution would be limited only to the geographical area of northern Syria. She believed that the experience of the Kurdish women could benefit the Lebanese women too, and that is the reason why she left Suleimaniya, where she earlier was working in a women's association, to establish the Jin Women's association in Lebanon:

*BA: We want to show the Lebanese woman how they can benefit and how they can take experience from the Kurdish woman. This is how we are here for. To show them how the Lebanese woman or the Arab woman benefit according to the circumstances and conditions they live under. We have to be like a bridge between those two parts.*

According to its brochure (2018), the Congress Star follows Öcalan's ideology and principles on democratic confederalism and women's empowerment. It states that the organization aims to "develop a free Rojava, a democratic Syria, and a democratic Middle East by promoting women's freedom and the concept of the democratic nation". Moreover, it "takes the development of a revolution in women's freedom throughout the Middle East as its basic goal, predicated on the development of such a revolution in Rojava and Syria" (on Congress Star, see above 4.2.). These citations depict the will of the Congress Star to spread its ideology and the so-called women's revolution of Rojava as a model for women's liberation across the Middle East. Moreover, they depict that democratic confederalism is also one of the main pillars of the women's umbrella organization. The Newroz Association and the Jin Association also support the self-administration model developed by Öcalan. According to Hanan Osman and Bushra Ali, it would be the best solution for the future of Syria. Osman directly referred to the books of Öcalan saying that Kurds should not try to establish an independent Kurdish state with official borders, but instead aim for the foundation of a democratic nation where all the different ethnic groups could live freely and with the guarantee of basic rights:

*HO: I think it is the best, specially this scenario or this solution, we can call it, it is the view or the map that leader Öcalan, who is in prison for 20 years in Imrali. As I told you before, he has written five huge books about the solution of the Kurdish problem. And he is saying in these books that Kurds cannot build a country of their own, it's very hard to establish a country with borders, so the Kurds should not ask for borders or for liberation a country. They should be liberated by their culture and have a democratic nation, not a state of our own.*

Ali stated that the Syrian conflict should be solved by Syrian people and Rojava shows the best model for the future of the country. The ideal solution would be a self-government and a non-central Syrian government, which would allow each of the different groups to govern themselves and include a fair presentation of them in the Syrian government:

*BA: I think the best scenario is that Syrian issue to be solved by the Syrian people, and the best scenario is already shown in Rojava. So the best thing is to have self-government with a non-central Syrian government. Each part or each piece in Syrian can be governing himself by himself without the intersection of the government or putting pressure on those people or ethnic groups, who live there. So each one can administrate himself by himself and the government would be one government with all those people be involved in it, and there wouldn't be division between us and the Syrian government. One Syrian state with all those ethnic groups who can be represented in it. So self-government would be the best.*

In the case of Lebanese Kurds and Rojava, it seems that at least two out the three needed mechanisms for the domestication of a diffusion can be found (on the domestication, see chapter 2.6.). There exists brokerage between the originators (the Congress Star) and the adopters (The Newroz Association and the Jin Association) of the idea, and the new forms of action have been successfully mobilized by the sympathetic activists in Lebanon.

### **6.3.2. Transnational coalitions: the Congress Star and the demonstrations**

The Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association are part of transnational women's organization networks, and they both have relations with the umbrella women's organization in NES, the Congress Star. Besides this, the Newroz Association is part of multiple of women's organizations in Lebanon, such as the Lebanese women's council and the Lebanese Democratic Women's organization. According to Hanan Osman, the Newroz Association does not hold formal meetings with the representatives of the Congress Star, but they have attended their conferences and visited northern Syria several times. For example, the committee of the association visited the Jinwar Women's Village that provides a safe place for women who have faced violence and who have been freed from ISIS. In the village the women organize everything from shops and supermarkets to cooking and fixing cars entirely without men, and according to Osman, the association wanted to go and study the experience. The association also participated in the Women's Day March in Afrin to show their solidarity and support to the locals under the Turkish attack. The representatives of the Congress Star have also visited Lebanon:

*HO: We have relation with a woman organisation called Congress Star, it's also a woman's organisation in north Syria and they are very active. They come to Lebanon, go to Europe. So when they come here, and several time we went and met them in Rojava, and they held many conferences, so we are also member of that organization.*

Bushra Ali, the president of the Jin Women's Association also tries to visit Rojava every year to see what is going on with the women's case and to learn about the local civil society movement. Since she is originally from Rojava, she has a lot of important contacts in the area and she is regularly in touch with the Congress Star and has been invited to participate in their conferences and workshops around the women's issue. She has also invited representatives of the Congress Star to come to Lebanon to talk about the women's issue in northern Syria:

*BA: There is a woman organisation called Congress Star, which is a woman organization, the biggest one in northern Syria. -- So for example we get some invitation to participate in conferences or workshops, and all those conferences and workshops want to highlight the situation of Rojava especially with the woman revolution. Sometimes we ask one responsible from Rojava to come, beside me she can come and express what's going on, especially on the revolution of woman.*

In parallel, the brochure of the Congress Star highlights that its Diplomatic Relations Committee has participated in several international forums around the world. It also mentioned that foreign delegations and women's organizations have visited the organization to learn about the Kurdish women's struggle in Rojava and about the mechanisms of women's self-organization (see above 4.2.). It is characteristic for transnational advocacy networks to this way encourage the development of local movements and to support their grassroots mobilization by offering models for effective local action (on encouragement of local movements, see above 2.3.).

These transnational networks that the Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association have with the Congress Star could be interpreted as loose long term loose transnational federation coalitions (on transnational coalitions, see above 2.4.). Moreover, it could be suggested that the associations act as translators or brokers (on the concepts, see above 2.6.) between the origins of the ideas that have spread or diffused from Rojava and their new context in Lebanon. As it was mentioned in chapter 2.6, the presence of successful mobilization on the part of sympathetic or enthusiastic activists is important in the domestication of an innovation. Furthermore, the existence of well-connected trust networks and movement brokers enable diffusion (see above 2.4.). Bushra Ali, the leader of the Jin Association, described the role of the association as a bridge between Rojava and Lebanon:

*BA: We want to show the Lebanese woman how they can benefit and how they can take experience from the Kurdish woman. This is how we are here for. To show them how the Lebanese woman or the Arab woman benefit according to the circumstances and conditions they live under. We have to be like a bridge between those two parts.*

The demonstrations organized by the Kurds in Beirut, mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, provide an example of short term event coalitions in the context of Lebanese Kurds and Rojava, as they have from time to time erupted to protest the Turkish interventions in northern Syria (on event coalitions, see above 2.4.). All the association leaders stated that their association does not take part in politics and does not have a role in organizing the

demonstrations. Instead, the demonstrations have been spontaneous and emotional gatherings of ordinary Kurds. According to Hanan Osman and Bushra Ali, sometimes the demonstrations have been called together by the Kurdish community councils found in the areas of Kurdish concentrations in Beirut, which have the mission to solve social issues and arguments within the community. According to the unaffiliated Syrian Kurd, the KDPL party could organize some demonstrations with a legal permission when it still had a licence to operate in Lebanon.

According to Hanan Osman, there were many demonstrations especially during the Turkish interventions in Kobane and Afrin. According to her, the Kurds naturally gathered and protested without the associations organizing it. However, once the representatives of different Lebanese Kurdish associations gave a speech together to support the Kurds in Syria. Also Khaled Osman, the president of the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association, described the demonstrations as emotional reactions of the Kurds to the events in Rojava. Notwithstanding, he stated that the majority of the people present in them have been sympathizers of the PKK, and there have been also many Syrian Kurds. The president of the Jin Women's Association, Bushra Ali, stated that the Syrian Kurds organize themselves according to the law in Lebanon, and they naturally go and protest to the events in Rojava and they give aid based on their economic situation. According to her, the Kurds organize themselves by themselves, and as the Syrians were already organized before coming to Lebanon, it is easy for them.

In February 2021, the Newroz Association, the Jin Women's Association with the representatives of the PYD party and the Congress Star organized a common demonstration in Beirut demanding for the release of the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan (ANHA February 15, 2021). Also the representatives of the Armenian world in Lebanon participated. Hundreds of Kurds gathered in front of the UNHCR in Beirut and made appeals to the international community to take actions for the liberation of Öcalan (ibid.). This is also a clear sign of transnational coalition formation, and might imply that the relations between the Lebanese associations and the Congress Star would be moving towards a more solid campaign coalition (on campaign coalitions, see above 2.4.). This and the other demonstrations organized by the Kurds in Beirut can be seen as a form of diaspora politics (on diaspora politics, see above 2.5.).

### **6.3.3. Externalization of the conflict by the NES administration**

As it turned out in the interview with the Newroz Association, some political leaders of NES have visited Lebanon in order to seek support from the Lebanese government and from the Lebanese Kurds. They have met with some of the Lebanese politicians, such as MPs and parties, and sometimes held conferences to meet with the Kurdish community in Lebanon, and they have also visited the Newroz Association. According Hanan Osman, the leader of Newroz Association, the aim of these visits has been to put light on the so-called Rojava revolution and to gather support from Lebanese people, Kurds, and women's organizations. According to her, there is a lot of propaganda against the NES administration and the media abstains from fully covering the issue due to pressure from the Turkish government.

These activities of NES political leaders can be interpreted as externalization of the conflict in Syria (on externalization, see above 2.4.). The Kurds in Syria are stuck between a rock and a hard place, as they on the one hand seek legitimacy for their self-governance and wish to be recognized as a federal entity apart from the Syrian central government, and on the other hand face a continuous threat from Turkey which tries to prevent the formation of permanent and stable Kurdish rule in northern Syria (on these issues, see above 4.1 and 4.3.). The NES administration could be seen as a weak sub-state but quasi-state actor, who seeks more powerful international allies from abroad and thus itself acts as a transnational actor. As it has been mentioned earlier, externalization of domestic contention and the formation of durable transnational coalitions are the strongest signs that a fusion of domestic and international contention is taking place, and they the greatest potential to create transnational social movements (see above 2.4.). The presence of these both factors in the context of Lebanese Kurds and Rojava implies that there is potential for long-term transnational formation between the parties.

### **6.3.4. Framing in the global human rights discourse**

As it has been noticeable also in the previous parts of this chapter, the associations involved in women's rights activism mostly framed the Rojava issue by the terms of global human and women's rights. For example, the president of the Newroz Association described the development of the self-administration in NES as a significant achievement for Syrian Kurds, since through it they have achieved many basic rights that they were earlier deprived of. She listed many such things: denial of political participation, practicing of Kurdish culture and

festivals, using Kurdish language and naming children with Kurdish names, imprisonment and torture for political activism. She also expressed her wish that the Syrian government would become more democratic and finally grant the basic rights to the different ethnicities that live in the country:

*HO: It's very important what's going on in Rojava. It's their right and part of the history of the Kurdish resistance, and the Kurds in Syria their work have arrived many rights. Maybe the Syrian regime did not massacre them, maybe they [the regime] didn't do as Turkey has done during the past years. But also in Syria the Kurds could not participate in politics, they couldn't practice their culture, they couldn't use their language, they couldn't even name their babies, it was forbidden to name them [with Kurdish names]. They had to have, for example, if have a Kurdish name, they went to register a girl, they would give her another name, without knowing what's her name on the paper. So it was a tragedy. They couldn't practice their festivals, for example we have Newroz festival, it was forbidden. They use to do it inside houses, many of them were in jail, they were tortured, they were killed just for asking or demanding for the Kurdish right for politics and political work. So it was tragedy. It is a time for the Syrian government to be more democratic and the Kurds to be part of this institution and give everyone his right, not just for the Kurd.*

The same phenomenon was prevalent in the analysis of the diffusion of ideology and forms of action from the Kurdish women's rights movement in NES to Lebanon. Regarding the women's rights advancements in NES, Hanan Osman mentioned e.g. the laws that prohibit polygamy, child marriage, and paying dowry and criminalization of honour killings:

*HO: We, as association, we see the revolution of Rojava, was a great thing in the history of the Kurdish people recently, because what the Kurds did in Northern Syria was something incredible. They established a self-government, and in this government they have all the ethnic groups with Arab, Syrian, Armenian, and each one can participate with their own language, his own flag, his own colour, so you can see democracy. This is in political way. On the woman way it was great also, because they gave women a lot of rights, and a right that even women can establish her own army and can fight. And in Rojava also, there is many rule has changed now. For example, they cannot marry a lot of women, they have to marry just one. A young girl shouldn't be married, it's forbidden. It's forbidden to pay money when you get married with a woman, you shouldn't pay for her, because she's not an object for selling. And the violence is less now, you cannot put violence against women, because it's forbidden. You cannot kill woman just to say "I protected my honour" or "she has a relation". So, many thing changed, and this affect the Kurds in Lebanon as well.*

Both of these examples could be considered as signs of global framing process, and as it was mentioned earlier, diffusion is often present in global framing (on global framing and diffusion, see above 2.4.). A similar kind of framing can also be found in the brochure of the Congress

Star (2018), presented in chapter 4.2. It could be speculated that along with the ideology, the style of framing would have also diffused from northern Syria to Lebanon. The parallel use of discourse is one of the factors that illustrate the ideological affinity and connection between the Newroz Association, the Jin Association, and the Congress Star.

Although it was not in the primary scope of my study, this tempts me to speculate about the purpose of the use of the frame. As it was mentioned in chapter 2.5., sometimes it is beneficial for transnational actors to adjust their agendas to conform to internationally approved discourses of human rights, as it might draw more attention and support from outsiders than a merely ethnic or national one. Hence, framing is also related to the externalization of contention. As mentioned in chapter 2.4., externalization often starts with the blockage of domestic claims, which leads to a desire for transnational intervention, and in order to make the case interesting to the foreign audience, it must be framed in an appealing way, such as by the use of international symbols or global human rights language. This leads to contemplating on the possibility that by emphasizing the human rights and women's rights discourses, the officials of NES might seek to solicit more support from outsiders. Namely, it has been argued in the recent research on Kurds and transnationalism that the tendency of Kurdish diasporas to present Kurds as victims of persecution has functioned to motivate transnational political mobilization (see above 2.7.).

As mentioned in chapter 2.5., dispersed communities may try to influence homeland politics by disseminating their vision of national identity and politics and to gain legitimacy or recognition for their homeland as an independent state. In the case of Rojava, legitimacy would not be sought for an independent state but for the PYD-led self-governance. However, it would require more study to adequately conclude that to which extent this is relevant in the framing of Rojava carried out by the Lebanese Kurds. The speculation does not stand for narrowing down the worth of the actual women's rights advancements in NES (see above 4.2.).



## 7. Conclusions

This thesis aimed to provide a transnational perspective to Lebanese Kurds, particularly on their activism and networks related to Rojava, the Kurdish areas of northern Syria. The objective was to find out whether, and by which means, Kurds in Lebanon try to influence the Rojava issue and whether they are part of some transnational networks related to Rojava. In short, it seems that the Kurds do not seek to influence the issue directly apart from the demonstrations organized in Beirut, at least not through the associations interviewed for the research. This is probably partly due to the limited political opportunities of the Kurds in Lebanon. Furthermore, it seems that the community is divided along the borderlines of the Kurdish party political between the supporters of Abdullah Öcalan and those of Masoud Barzani. The political side is projected in the attitudes of the Kurds towards Rojava. The transnational networks between Lebanese Kurds and Rojava center on the sympathizers of Abdullah Öcalan. The so-called revolution in Rojava has had a significant impact on the thinking of this part of the community. The majority of the Kurdish demonstrators in Beirut have been sympathizers of Öcalan and the PKK party. Also, many Syrian Kurds have been present. The sympathizers of Öcalan describe the Rojava revolution as an inspiration and source of power in their work. Thus, I argue that the relationship between the Lebanese Kurds and Rojava is reciprocal. Simultaneously, the Lebanese Kurdish community acts towards Rojava and is influenced by the political and social developments in the area.

The material of my study was based on five semi-structured interviews conducted with the leaders of four Lebanese Kurdish associations (the Newroz Social and Cultural Association, the Lebanese Kurdish Association of Ain Mreiseh and Mina el Hosn, the Jin Women's Association, and the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association) and one unaffiliated Syrian Kurd in Beirut in summer 2019. I analyzed the material through the framework of transnational activism, transnational networks, and forms of transnational contention. Moreover, I examined some characteristics of the transnationalism of ethnic diasporas and transnational impacts on domestic activism. Furthermore, I contextualized the substance by presenting an overview of the history of the Kurds in Lebanon, the recent political developments in the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, and the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava. I also followed the reporting on Lebanese Kurds and Syrian Kurdish refugees in Lebanese and Kurdish media. Moreover, during the interviews, I tried to map the general situation and the number of Lebanese Kurds and Syrian Kurdish refugees in Lebanon. This extensive contextualization was essential for

comprehending the material and the transnational processes between Lebanese Kurds and Rojava.

Those interviewees who sympathize with Öcalan are involved in grassroots women's activism related to the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava. Furthermore, transnational women's advocacy networks form the basis for most transnational processes that connect Lebanese Kurds and Rojava. The Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association have contact with the women's umbrella organization Congress Star in NES. Women's rights and empowerment play a central role in their activities. While they said they do not directly aim to influence the issue, their grassroots activism was largely influenced and inspired by the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava. Hence, I argue that the leaders of these associations act as translators or brokers (on the concepts, see above 2.3.), who help to bring and adapt these new ideas from Rojava to their new context in Lebanon.

Regarding the processes of transnational contention (see above 2.4.) I observed: 1) diffusion of ideas and forms of action from Rojava to Lebanon through the transnational women's organization networks 2) transnational long term coalition formation between the Congress Star in Rojava and the Newroz Association and the Jin Women's Association in Lebanon 3) formation of short term transnational event coalitions in the course of Turkish interventions in Rojava 4) externalization of the Rojava conflict by NES administration through seeking international allies from Lebanon 5) global framing of the Rojava issue in terms of global human and women's rights discourse.

Traditionally, the transnational ties between the Lebanese Kurdish community and Kurdistan have been close-knit. The development of their first political and social organizations in the 1950-60s was largely influenced by Kurdish leaders in Iraq and politically active Syrian Kurds in Lebanon (see above 3.2.). Hence, the current influence of Rojava on the minds and the social and political organization of Lebanese Kurds continues the same course of action. It seems that the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava has encouraged an unprecedented wave of Kurdish women's activism in Lebanon since two associations that work on the issue have been established since 2014. The observations conform to the argument that Kurdish organizations in exile are often influenced by the political and social movements in Kurdistan at their outset (see above 2.7.). Moreover, they demonstrate the claim that diaspora populations can

simultaneously act and engage towards the so-called homeland and the country of residence (see above 2.7.).

The events in Kurdistan have always influenced the Kurds in Lebanon. The history behind the transnational influence of Kurdish national politics in Lebanon might partly explain the present impact of the events in Rojava on the Lebanese Kurds. In the recent study of transnationalism among the Kurds, it has been highlighted that the dispersed Kurdish communities are characterized by the various contemporary political developments in the Kurdish regions in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria (see above 2.7.). It has been detected that political developments in Kurdistan have a direct link to social relations and political activities among diaspora Kurds (see above 2.7.). These arguments seem to be valid also in the context of the Lebanese Kurds and Rojava.

The lack of patronage and political opportunities in Lebanon might also partly lead the Kurds to look outside for an alternative. Some studies have suggested that in situations where Kurds are pressed to identify with the state, they tend to turn towards their cross-border ethnic kin (see above 2.7.). It has also been argued that engagement in transnational activities may empower the members of dispersed communities (see above 2.5.). It is worth mentioning that although the Öcalan sympathizing associations saw democratic confederalism and self-governance as the ideal administrative system for northern Syria, they did not raise it a solution for the dysfunctional Lebanese confessional system.

This thesis provided one perspective to transnational activism and networks between Lebanese Kurds and Rojava. Furthermore, it has drawn new information on the Kurdish community in Lebanon and highlighted their position in the transnational formation of the Kurds in the Middle East. Moreover, the study has provided new aspects to the recent history of the Kurds in Lebanon and Syria. It has also highlighted the impact of the recent political developments in Rojava on the dispersed Kurdish communities in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Despite the extensive contextualization of the interviews, a broader sampling among the Kurdish community would be useful to confirm the findings. Four of the interviews were conducted with the leaders of Lebanese Kurdish associations, who likely hold a higher social position with more years of education than the Kurds in Lebanon by average, which means that their opinions might differ from the general public. Moreover, I began the research as an

outsider, without much prior knowledge about the complexities of the community. It might have caused me to leave out some relevant questions or aspects, even though I tried to minimize the prospect by semi-structured interviews and giving space for the informants. Also, a tiny language barrier occurred sometimes between my participants and me, as my Arabic skills were not completely fluent in 2019. Developing my Arabic vocabulary would allow me to ask more precise follow-up questions in the future and take the Arabic conversations to a deeper level with those who master only a little English.

A more focused study on the Kurdish women's movement and its impacts in Lebanon would undoubtedly be required soon. It could be easily done, for example, by the examination of the social media channels of the Kurdish women's associations. A more comprehensive analysis of the forms of action of Kurdish women's activism in Lebanon would also be needed. A comparative study in some other dispersed Kurdish communities would be required to unravel the prevalence of the diffusion of the Kurdish women's movement in Rojava to elsewhere. It would also be interesting to research the transnational networks of Kurdish women's organizations in the Middle East on a larger scale. The transnational formation between the Lebanese Kurdish community and the KRG should be naturally studied as well.

All in all, the Kurdish community in Lebanon has been tremendously understudied in the academic field. Only a few articles, Meho (2002), Kawtharani & Meho (2005), and Hourani (2011), have addressed the topic during the two first decades of the millennium. A revised overview of the Kurds' present social and political organization would come in handy and provide a basis for further research on the community. It would be interesting to study the Kurds' relations with the Lebanese Arab and Armenian populations. A fascinating topic would be the networks and allegiances formed by the Lebanese Kurds in the sectarian political system of Lebanon. At times, parts of the Kurdish community have formed loyalties with the Sunni Future Movement, the pan-Sufi Al Ahbash, the Shia Hezbollah (on these, see above 3.3.), and the Armenian Tachnak party (Tejel 2009, 18). Furthermore, the number and the overall situation of the Syrian Kurdish refugees in Lebanon post-2011 should be surveyed more thoroughly. In the coming years, it remains to be seen whether the Syrian war will be considered a factor that brought a third significant wave of Kurdish migrants to Lebanon.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWEES

1. Hanan Osman and Ghazale Ramo, Newroz Cultural and Social Association, Beirut, July 2019
2. Nasser Meho, the Lebanese Kurdish Association of Ain Mreisse and Mina el Hosn, Beirut, July 2019
3. Bushra Ali, Jin Women's Association, Beirut, July 2019
4. Khaled Osman, the Lebanese Kurdish Philanthropic Association, Beirut, July 2019
5. Anonymous, Beirut, July 2019

## APPENDIX B: THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Questions:

#### Theme A: Background information about the association/party

1. When and how was the association/party established?
2. What is the purpose of the association/party?
3. What kind of activities do you have?
4. How many members do you have?
5. Who are leading the association/party?
6. Are you part of some kind of transnational networks?
7. How did you come to the association/party and what are your responsibilities?

#### Theme B: Situation of the Lebanese Kurds

1. How many Kurds would you say that there are in Lebanon?
2. How would you describe their situation?
3. From which areas are they originally from and when did they come to Lebanon?
4. Are the Lebanese Kurds politically active in general?
5. Did any Kurds escape the Syrian civil war to Lebanon? Around how many?
6. Are they politically active in Lebanon?

#### Theme C: Relations to Rojava

1. How would you describe your association/party viewpoint to Rojava?
2. What kind of relations do you have to Rojava? (e.x. relatives, friends, political people)
3. Are there political movement between the Lebanese Kurdish community and Rojava?
4. What kind of activities do you have regarding the Rojava issue? (e.x. protests)
5. Do you aim to influence the Rojava issue somehow?
6. What is your goal regarding that?
7. What are your means and strategies to reach this goal?
8. How big part does the Rojava issue form of the work and agenda setting of the association/party?
9. Are the Lebanese Kurds interested in the Rojava issue in general?
10. How important do you see the Rojava issue to all the Kurdish people and the Kurdish nation in general?