

*Mesopotamian Indigeneity: The Kurds and Democratic
Confederalism Governance Model*

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This paper is originated from my doctoral research investigated the discourse about Kurdishness within the Kurdish political movement in Turkey from an indigeneity perspective. My findings suggest that the Kurds' self-determination model in Turkey incorporates the main themes of indigeneity, including self-identification, unique language and culture, and historical and spiritual bond to a defined territory. The historical development of the Kurdish self-determination dates to the terminal stage of the Ottoman Empire (Bozarslan 2008). However, the Turkish Republic's establishment based on the Kemalist ideology that recognizes only Turkish ethnic identity (Yeğen 2004) has led the Kurds to struggle for their self-determination that has appeared in various forms, including uprisings, rebellions, guerrilla movement, and the political movement. While the struggle of Kurds in Turkey for self-determination has continued for almost a hundred years, the conditions in other nation-states in the region have not been very different. Other countries were also established based on the denial of Kurds and other indigenous peoples. As Mesopotamia has evolved into the Arab and Turkish nation states as the Middle East after WWI, the Kurds in their historical land with the other indigenous peoples were either identified as minorities or their existence was completely denied.

The limited visibility of the indigenous peoples of the Middle East in the international arena is concerning. Looking at the experience of indigenous peoples globally as victims of assimilation, oppression and marginalization, we see that Kurds have strikingly similar experiences within so-called nation states, including Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. Pointing out the

Kurds' situation in these states are various, such as Kurds in Iraq now have the autonomous Kurdistan Region since 1992, and there is Kurdistan province of in Iran. In terms of the suggested self-determination model, the Kurdish political movement (parliamentary politics) in Turkey and Syria advocates for the same model: *democratic confederalism*. The model, democratic confederacy, proposed by the Kurdish political movement in Turkey, based on gender equality, environmental sensitivity, and active citizen participatory democracy (Jongerden & Akkaya 2013), is also vital for recognizing the Middle East's multi-ethnic structure.

This model of self-determination, democratic confederalism, also raises awareness on the indigenous peoples of Mesopotamia. Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the pro-Kurdish party in Turkey, advocates for recognising the multi-ethnic Mesopotamia. One of the interviewed previous deputies described Mesopotamia as a honeycomb. He states: "Every pore is filled with different nectar from different flowers, but all the pores are horizontal, which does not involve any hierarchy". This interpretation of Mesopotamia is vital because of the historical reality of Mesopotamia, which nation-states have denied. He, therefore, pointed out the importance of the democratic confederalism governance model in recognition of indigenous peoples in the region.

Thus, the self-determination model of democratic confederalism/autonomy enables other nations that are invisible within the nation-states of Turks, Arabs, and Persians can have a say in the decision-making process with their own identities, languages, and culture within their ancestral land. This is highly significant because studies on indigeneity and international law have already distinguished ethnicity and indigeneity concepts by pointing out that historical land/ancestral land is a crucial factor for indigenous peoples. Therefore, whilst cultural and linguistic rights for minorities was clarified in the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007) strongly emphasizes land rights for indigenous peoples. "The Declaration affirms indigenous peoples' right to "maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned – or otherwise occupied and used – lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources" (Article 25); (United Nations 2021).

To sum up, as my research findings suggest, the Kurdish political movement in Turkey claims that the demand for democratic autonomy is not utopian; on the contrary, it has existed in Syrian Kurdistan since 2012. Indeed, after the Democratic Union Party (PYD) declared democratic autonomy in the Kurdish populated area based on democratic nation principles. In 2014 following the liberation of three cantons, Cizire, Kobani and Afrin of Rojava, democratic autonomous administrations were created (Knapp et al., 2016; Allsopp and van Wilgenburg, 2019). The self-determination claim by indigenous peoples is still the most debated notion in

both academia and international law, also within the Kurdish political movement in Turkey. The Kurds have already developed and shown that grassroots democracy would be an alternative model for the indigenous peoples of Mesopotamia and the other indigenous peoples of the world.

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