

Syria/Rojava - Rebuilding Kobani: call for help from a city in ruins

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The liberation of Kobani was a bittersweet victory that left the town devastated. Reconstruction has begun and the need for solidarity and aid is urgent.

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“When Kobani was liberated, it was a beautiful feeling. A feeling of freedom,” my friend Mustafa explained to me. Mustafa is a local journalist, and after being detained for two weeks by the Turkish authorities when he fled Kobani in early October, he decided to return to his hometown to work and to help facilitate journalists inside the city. For four months, Kobani had been under a brutal siege. ISIS jihadists attacked the city from the east, west and south, surrounding it from all sides. To the north lay Turkey, forever against the autonomy the Kurds of Syria had created for themselves and therefore no friend of the Kurdish resistance in Kobani.

But after four months, on January 27, Kobani was finally liberated [[1](#)]. The Kurdish forces, led by the PKK-affiliated YPG and their female unit YPJ, but also supported by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Peshmerga of Iraqi Kurdistan, had fiercely defended the advances of the Islamic State and forced them out of the city. Aerial bombardments by the US-led coalition targeting ISIS positions in and around the city contributed to weakening the jihadist forces, but as the battle of Kobani has shown, these only play a secondary role when it comes to defeating ISIS.

“It was like being reborn again,” Idriss Nassan, the deputy foreign minister of Kobani said. Idriss had moved to the Turkish border town of Suruç when the situation became critical in Kobani in early October and had worked as foreign minister from there. Two days before the victory of Kobani, he decided to move back to his hometown and described the joy at being able to live in his city again after spending four months in Turkey.

The new center and food shortages

While the liberation of Kobani came as a long-awaited relief and was proudly celebrated by the citizens of Kobani, it was a bittersweet victory. More than 80 percent of the city has been destroyed entirely, reduced to little but a heap of rubble. Throughout the battle, YPG based its operations from the west where there was little fighting, except for ISIS’s mortar shells and the real danger of sniper fire.

As a result, the urban center has shifted west — the only part of the city where life still exists. Guerrillas, taking a break from the front-line in the villages surrounding Kobani, stroll through the

streets calmly with Kalashnikovs in hand, soaking up freedom. Men and women linger at street corners, chatting about the latest YPG victory in the villages.

A school now functions, with eager children hoping to forget the pains of the conflict. In itself, the school amounts to little more than a concrete foundation of a house on the western outskirts of the city. However, when you descend into the basement — chosen for its obvious protection from ISIS shells — there is a bustling environment of alternative education.

Throughout the four-month siege, there has been a constant shortage of food. With the border controlled by the Turkish military, which decides to let in supplies at its own discretion, people have had to rely on smuggling routes. But the cornerstone of the city's food production remains the bakery. "The bread has fed the resistance," one citizen explained to me.

The bakery, run by a family that bravely continued its work throughout the siege, has provided bread for free for all the fighters and the citizens that stayed behind in Kobani. Due to its indispensability, it had been a target of ISIS, and as a result they hid the bakery's location to any journalists until now. "I decided to remain in the city baking bread because I realized it was essential for the survival of the resistance," a member of the family of bakers told me.

The larger bakery, which provided the whole city with bread before the siege, was targeted by ISIS mortars in the early days of the fighting and as a result it was already closed down five months ago. Now it has been reopened, and besides its logistical importance, this is above all a symbolic victory. Ibrahim, the bakery manager, described how it had taken them ten days to rebuild because of the damage inflicted by ISIS's mortar shells.

Now it was finally functioning, and bread was once again being baked for the community. Ibrahim told me in an interview that "in order to feed the community, you must fight for it." Although of little strategic significance, for Ibrahim and many other citizens of Kobani, the reopening of the bakery was a long-awaited victory for which they had fought long and hard.

Aside from the daily supply of bread, the depot is where all citizens go to collect whatever supplies they need as the shops stopped functioning many months ago. I visited it one day to collect food for the house I was staying at. Behind the counter, they have piles of canned food, a selection of fresh vegetables, oil and household supplies. "It's just like a normal shop but without money," Mustafa joked. And it was exactly that: Kobani, the moneyless economy.

Meanwhile, families are slowly returning to Kobani after many months of anxiously awaiting the outcome of the battle in Turkey. For four months they watched the bombs rain down on their beloved city, and now they are finally back. I watched as families returned home, shouting "Long live the resistance of Kobani!" as they walked through the YPG border gate into their destroyed city.

One old woman told me upon arriving into Kobani that "the destruction of the city is incomparable to the lives we have lost." For her, the destruction lay not in the piles of rubble confronting her arrival, but in the memories of the many members of her family who were martyred in the resistance to free the city.

Another father, who had stayed fighting throughout the battle while his family escaped to Turkey, was emotionally reunited with his family after four painful months apart. He told me that "if we didn't have the love for our children and for our family, we couldn't have won this battle."

Dangers remain in a free Kobani

While people start to enjoy the slow normalization of their lives in the city, Kobani still feels very much like a ghost city, completely destroyed by the war. Unexploded bombs are scattered everywhere, often going unnoticed. Some are buried into the road, while others lie unobtrusively beneath the rubble. Children play alongside these bombs, not giving them a moment's thought. Every now and then, a loud explosion pierces through the city, and civilians exchange fearful looks, hoping that nobody was harmed. Half a dozen people have died as a result of such accidents in the last week alone.

The government of Kobani has said that "until all bombs and explosives are removed from Kobani, the city and villages will not be safe," [2] and have issued a call-out for international support in clearing the city. With the town mostly destroyed and unexploded bombs dispersed all over the only inhabitable part of the city, it appears that it will take a long time for normal life to resume.

However, Kobani's call for international assistance is likely to go unnoticed unless strong pressure is exerted to open a humanitarian corridor. Kobani — and the other Rojavan cantons of Afrin and Cezire — have consistently faced an unjust embargo from the international community over the last two years. Due to this embargo, Turkey only allows basic food supplies to cross the border, giving no permission for construction vehicles or building materials to enter Kobani.

As the HDP parliamentarian Ibrahim Ayhan says, "Until the border is fully free no help will be properly delivered." Idriss Nassan believes the international community has a duty, stating that "if the international community wants Kobani to be rebuilt and victory to be continued, they have to open this [humanitarian] corridor."

The reason emphasis has now been placed on the opening of a humanitarian corridor comes from a fear that, without such a corridor, Kobani will forever resemble a destroyed city. Refugees, anxious to return to the homeland they were forced to flee under the savage advances of ISIS, will not be able to return for months. The city will remain in its crumbled, depleted state, forever traumatized and scarred by the siege. Kurdish government officials recognize this, and it is for this reason that they have issued an urgent appeal for a humanitarian corridor to be opened.

From self-dependence to dependency — and back?

But is Kobani really free? While ISIS has been driven out of the town, the jihadist forces still sit uneasily on its borders. Furthermore, the city lies in ruins. The total destruction that one sees across the city is everywhere south-east of the border gate. This was ISIS's base throughout the conflict, and as a result, a target of the US-led coalition's bombs. Instead of targeting the supply routes that ISIS used continuously throughout the siege, they choose to target ISIS purely within the city's confines, condemning Kobani to dust and rubble. So why did the coalition decide to bomb the city rather than the supply routes of ISIS?

Mustafa believes this decision on the part of the US military was "a form of punishment for our system." Rojava, with its grassroots-democratic model, had painstakingly resisted international capitalist interests through its system of democratic confederalism [3]. This system, which focuses on autonomous self-dependence, has never fit easily with Western interests. As a result, many here believe the policy to bomb Kobani into oblivion has firmly forced its administration from one of self-dependence to dependency.

While the international community supported the Kurdish forces in their battle against ISIS, as of yet there has been no support to help the Kurds rebuild their city. Given the sheer extent of the destruction, it is also clear that the Kurds cannot rebuild the city alone. Since the international community bombed Kobani to the ground, it also has a duty to help it rebuild. When Rojava and its grassroots model of democratic autonomy were created, an actual city existed. The embargo that made life difficult for the Rojava administration could be negotiated around. But now that Kobani lies in total ruins, the people of Kobani need help.

If no such help is delivered, the city will forever resemble a ghost city, trapped between freedom and imprisonment. Aid is therefore essential, which requires a concerted international effort to force Turkey to open a humanitarian corridor. Enwer Muslim, the Prime Minister of the Kobani canton, has said that “the resistance of Kobani was a victory for humanity and will stand as an example in history. In the face of ISIS’s barbarism, Kobani stood up for humanity. Now is the time for humanity and the international community to stand up for Kobani.”

With this plea for support, careful attention must be paid to ensure the rebuilding of the town will be done in the same spirit of self-dependence that was used to liberate the city.

Yvo Fitzherbert

P.S.

* [Roarmag](#)

* Yvo Fitzherbert is a freelance journalist based in Istanbul. He writes for a number of different publications, with a particular focus on Kurdish politics. Follow him on Twitter at @yvofitz.

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 34383), [Syria/Rojava - Kobani liberated! Kurdish forces push ISIS out of town](#).

[2] See on ESSF (article 34384), [Syria/Rojava: A call for international aid to rebuild and normalize life in the canton of Kobane](#).

[3] See on ESSF (article 33276), [“The Kurdistan Workers’ Party transforms itself into a force for radical democracy.” - The new PKK: unleashing a social revolution in Kurdistan](#).