

Northern Syria: Afrin and the Rojava Revolution

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A testimony from the author of "Serfkeftin: a narrative of the Rojava Revolution (forthcoming 2018)

The dark clouds of 21st-century fascism are once again hanging over the heads of the people of northern Syria. As if the inhabitants of the region often referred to as Rojava haven't suffered enough over the course of the past seven years of war, the Turkish state has come to the conclusion that the time is ripe to pick up the fallen, bloodied sword from the corpse that is Islamic State. Together with Salafist mercenaries carrying flags of the Syrian 'rebels' – one of the many components of what at one historical juncture seemingly all so long ago was a cohesive 'Free Syrian Army' – Erdogan's regime vows a 'swift operation' to destroy 'terrorism' in Afrin.

It is Afrin that has been a beacon of stability in Syria over the course of the war, not only taking in tens of thousands of refugees from elsewhere in the country, but establishing the principles of direct democracy, women's liberation and ecology in the midst of an otherwise catastrophic and tumultuous period. It is precisely this model of a socialistic, multi-ethnic, feminist canton advocated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) that Erdogan's AKP government sees as 'terrorism'. The irony could not be more obvious.

Background

For those who have been following closely over the past few years the events in not only Afrin, but in the other two cantons that make up the Rojava region (officially the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria), the current battle faced by the Kurdish forces is strangely reminiscent of the 2014-15 battle for Kobane. At that point, the so-called Islamic State was on the verge of reaching the Syria-Turkey border by securing the city known officially as Ayn al-Arab (a brutal reminder of the Arabization and monolithic nation-state mentality of the Ba'athist government). The Kurdish forces of the YPG and YPJ found themselves fighting off the fascist forces as Turkey allowed Daesh militants to enter Syria freely. Turkish tanks sat idle at the border, and soldiers watched the action, hoping for the elimination of the 'terrorists' – not Daesh, of course, but of the Kurds! The so-called international community was silent, until the U.S. intervened with airstrikes after an enormous amount of pressure in the form of massive global protests.

Today in Afrin, as Turkish planes and tanks aim to finish the job that the Islamic State was incapable of accomplishing, world leaders are again silent. Although a relationship had been forged in recent years between Russia and the YPG/J in Afrin, Moscow now seems to have withdrawn its forces, clearing the way for the Turkish incursion. The United States, although supportive of the YPG/J's operations against Daesh east of the Euphrates River, has wiped its hands of any association with their 'allies' in Afrin. The Syrian government has said that it will shoot down Ankara's planes – yet it seems as if the actions of Erdogan's regime have so far gone unopposed.

This understandably leaves the Kurdish people and their forces in Afrin feeling as if the old maxim 'the Kurds have no friends but the mountains' is once again deeply relevant. Perhaps they understood throughout the complexities and twists and turns of the war that this was always the case.

After all, my experiences in Rojava last year confirmed to me that the YPG/J was far from a 'pawn' of 'puppet' of anybody, despite the often misunderstood relationship between them and Washington. In fact, it was clear to me that they were preparing more than a year ago for not only an eventual Turkish military operation, but for the moment that self-reliance would have to be stepped up and a fight undertaken on their own to protect the territory of Rojava and the gains of their revolution.

My Inability to Understand Rojava Before 2015

Today, I am yelling at the top of my lungs in support for the people of Afrin and for the Kurdish forces of the YPG and YPJ. There are hundreds of solidarity demonstrations taking place across the western world. Yet, just over three years ago when the Islamic State was threatening to take Kobane, I lacked the understanding of the situation in the country to adequately provide that same solidarity. I didn't attend any of these protests despite the considerable threat that was being manifested toward an anti-fascist militia that espoused principles largely in line with my own.

Indeed, this is part of my confessions – or rather, self-critical assessment. I wasn't always the most supportive of the idea that what was taking place in northern Syria constituted a real revolutionary process. In fact, much of the reason that I have decided to undertake such a considerable amount of writing since the time I spent in Rojava last year is that my experiences there made me feel a sense of urgency about being critically reflective of my previous erroneous positions. I knew that if 'observation and participation' in the revolution has altered my understanding of Syria, there was at least the possibility that my work could have that kind of impact on others who perhaps hold positions akin to those I used to.

Let me break it down from the beginning. In 2013, exactly five years ago next month, I visited Kurdistan for the first time. This trip took me to the territory controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. Although I may have set foot in Kurdish lands, the week that I spent there did little to reveal the true nature of Kurdistan as a whole – or perhaps I simply didn't bother to look hard enough or investigate aptly. Nonetheless, I was convinced that the KRG was little more than a puppet entity of the United States. That assessment may not be so far off the mark – but the problem was that I failed to grasp the differences between 'the Kurds' of Bashur (Iraq) and Rojava (Syria), not to mention Rojhilat (Iran) or Bakur (Turkey). [See my previous article "The Kurds: Internationalists or Narrow Nationalists?"]

Throughout 2013, the focus of the United States was on whether it should engage in a direct intervention in the Syrian war by means of airstrikes on Syrian Arab Army targets. Understandably, this put the anti-war movement and socialist activists in the U.S. in a position of putting its emphasis on opposing any machinations of the Obama administration to launch a wider war in Syria. At this time, my principal obligation seemed clear – oppose the aggression of the Obama administration and my own government. I believe such a position is pivotal. However, all too often socialist activists in the western metropolises have a tendency to put anti-imperialism on 'steroids' – in other words, to reduce geopolitics to a single contradiction, refusing to seriously investigate the contradictions of the state in question, or of the other dynamics at play.

To be clear, it's not as if I saw the Ba'athist government as one that I was ideologically aligned with. It's not as if I didn't engage in some level of investigation of the situation on the ground throughout the whole of the country. In fact, in songs like "Hands Off Syria" – which I released in the Spring of

2012 – I explicitly mention that “there’s been problems in Syria for quite a long time.” Perhaps this was too little in the way of expressing the reality in the country, but it did try to account for the fact that the dynamics in the country were complex and that any defence of the Syrian state vis-à-vis imperialism wasn’t the same as overt support for the policies of that state.

Grappling with Kobane and the Resistance of the Kurds

However, the general tendency that I grew to express was more and more toward full solidarity with Syrian Arab state. The problem with this position wasn’t so much the fact that I explained the machinations of imperialism toward a government that defied its diktat in the region, particularly in regards to the colonial settler entity of Israel. The problem also wasn’t that I expressed how the U.S. government’s support for the so-called ‘rebels’ was creating a situation in which Shia, Christian, or even Sunni communities were facing genocidal consequences. It was simply that I was simplifying the narrative, and not giving voice to those who had been the victims of a monolithic Syrian state based on racial and ethnic prejudice for decades.

I first began to grapple with this during the battle of Kobane. It was obvious that the so-called Islamic State was enemy number one in the country. This was largely agreed across political lines – by so-called ‘moderates’ within the FSA, by the Syrian state, and of course by the Kurdish forces who were bearing the brunt of their fascistic attacks.

Kobane first highlighted the fierce resistance of the YPG/J to the world at large. Although these forces had defended predominately Kurdish lands in Syria since the beginning of the Rojava Revolution in the Spring of 2012, this battle would finally bring these fighters’ struggle to international attention, as well as that of the Kurdish question in general. Suddenly, the nearly 40 years that the Kurdish movement had fought the genocidal policies of the Turkish state also began to achieve a certain level of recognition.

It is true that the women’s revolution in Kobane and Rojava was fetishized in the mainstream western press. Beyond the H&M adverts, a more thorough examination showed that it was the consequence of a deliberate policy to liberate women from patriarchal oppression that was first undertaken in the ranks of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), not in Syria, but inside of Turkish borders.

It was not until the martyrdom of Ivana Hoffmann, a German internationalist in the ranks of the Turkish Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP) in Syria in March of 2015 that I began to seriously reflect on the correctness of my political understanding of Syria. I knew that there were communist parties in Syria that had been in a de-facto alliance with the Syrian state against the moves of imperialism. Yet, I did not realise that there had been Turkish communist groups that had been fighting side by side with the Kurdish forces. Not only were these cadres from Bakur but many of them – like Ivana – were young internationalists. Ivana did not die in Kobane, but her death became linked to that decisive battle in historical memory.

Investigation and Participation

I knew that I needed to investigate the matter further. Therefore, I made it my business to make sure that I travelled to Rojava to see for myself what was taking place in the areas of Syria which were experiencing what the Kurdish forces called a ‘revolution’. Was this really the case? Or was this a mere attempt by the U.S. to carve out a proto-state in a part of Syrian territory?

Any doubts I may have had about whether or not the ‘Rojava Revolution’ was a genuine revolutionary process were put to bed within mere days of arriving in Syria. I soon realized what an

absolute travesty it was that people who are generally aligned with the left in the west had fallen into the mistaken position of referring to these Kurdish forces as 'Zio Kurds' (despite a historical relationship with the revolutionary Palestinian movement), 'separatists' (despite an unflinching opposition to any plans to partition Syria), or imperialist proxies (despite fighting imperialism for nearly 40 years).

Let me be honest: admitting that I have been wrong, especially for years on end on such a key political question, wasn't easy. In fact, the hardest thing about being in Syria was having to engage in the daily 'tekml' - criticism and self-criticism sessions. Coming from our western experiences, it just isn't that easy to not take such sessions deeply personally, even if their focus is on improving the character of revolutionaries.

To be clear, this does not mean that I think those journalists and activists who have been to government-held areas of Syria are necessarily wrong in the positions they have put forward in the so-called western alternative media. Given the malicious war propaganda put forward by the western mainstream press, particularly in the U.S, it is important to defy these perspectives. I do not doubt that the Ba'athist state enjoys considerable support in many areas of Syria. Personally, I know countless Syrians who may have been critical of the state before the war, but who have increasingly sympathized with Bashar al-Assad's leadership and view his presidency as a stabilizing factor. This is particularly true, from my experiences, among Christians from Syria who see the Ba'athist government as a secular and moderate force.

In fact, it does not surprise me that many who have been to Damascus and other regions of the country see the government as a progressive entity. Especially given the war and the outlook of the factions opposed to the state, this seems to be an entirely understandable conclusion. In some parts of Damascus, I am certain that the Ba'athist state may be viewed as the bastion of progressiveness, secularism, and inclusiveness. I do not doubt the sincerity of the journalists and activists who have reported on this reality within the country. The only thing I doubt - and have come to understand - is that their views are incomplete.

What is a secular, progressive government to an Arab Christian, Alawi, or even Sunni living in a considerable part of the country is the same government that I came to see that for an Assyrian, Kurd, or other ethnic minority in the north of the country was a 'fascist' regime. The stories I heard of the repressive policies of this state were harrowing. For sure, if I had simply gone to Damascus, I may have just reinforced my existing beliefs and perspectives. Yet, I was eager not to do precisely that. I was eager to see more of the country, to do what many of my other journalist colleagues as yet hadn't done.

It is true that the Syrian Arab state has been part of the so-called 'resistance axis' to Zionism and imperialism in the region. Yet, everything has a dual character. The state's orientation vis-à-vis imperialism may be progressive. It may be anti-colonial. However, it is internal policies that have also exhibited a considerable degree of colonialism as far as the Kurds are concerned. It seems laughable to many in the north of the country to seriously speak of a 'resistance axis' to occupation when their lives have been characterized by exclusion and suppression of their language and culture.

The Left Must Express Its Solidarity With Afrin

Things changed post-Rojava. Gone was any conception or idea that perhaps the administration behind this region's transformation was anything less than revolutionary. Gone was any semblance of thought that this governing structure was a proxy of imperialism. Gone was any notion that this system should not be supported overtly. I knew that I had to turn over a new leaf in raising my voice

in solidarity with Rojava, and of convincing those who thought as I previously had – who were at the very least skeptical about ‘the Kurds’ – that this was a historical process worth supporting, even if critically.

Of course, I’m well aware that just as the views of those who have only travelled to Syrian government-held areas are limited in scope, so are mine. My assessments are frank, sincere, and I believe correct. However, I certainly won’t fall into the trap of claiming that I am a Syria ‘expert’ or that I possess all of the answers. I will only assert that what I have seen gives me tremendous hope in the potential for humanity and for socialism’s revival.

Until now, I do not think I have clearly expressed that I know my previous position on Syria to have been incorrect – or perhaps to phrase it better, to have been far too simplistic and incomplete. In that regard, take this as my public self-criticism. I will never again be so arrogant and simplistic to believe that major world conflagrations can be boiled down to a single contradiction. I will do my utmost never again to fail to express my solidarity with the struggle of the oppressed and downtrodden resisting fascistic structures and barbarism.

Three years ago, I should have been in complete solidarity with the resistance of Kobane. Honestly, I failed. Today, I am demanding the international left engage in a serious assessment of just how significant the Rojava Revolution is at this historical juncture as the radical left reconstitutes itself globally. Solidarity with Afrin should be front and centre at this moment. I fully believe that anything less than this is a full betrayal of the principles of humanity and abandonment of one of the most progressive forces currently in existence.

Although it is, of course, true that my writings on Rojava may be reflective of the human flaw of containing romantic sentiments – and I believe they probably are – I would not consider it an overstatement to say that the revolution being defended with the gun by the YPG and YPJ is akin to the vanguard of humanity.

That makes it all the more difficult to be within the confines of western capitalist modernity while this attack on Afrin takes place. My soul and my spirit are in Rojava at this crucial moment. I yearn to be able to be there to physically resist the attacks of the fascist Turkish government and mercenaries against this radical, democratic experiment. Although I know that this is not possible for the time being, what is possible is that we do all we can in the western metropolises to raise our voices to make sure that Afrin does not become a victory for the neo-Ottoman ambitions of the Erdogan government. Anything less is indeed to betray the principles of revolution and internationalism. •

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