

Statement from the International (Europe, Turkey, North America) Academic Delegation to Rojava

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The battle over Kobanê, which began in the summer of 2014, has brought to the world's attention the Kurdish resistance to the brutal forces that call themselves Islamic State (IS or ISIS). Contrary to the expectations of many, the defense forces have succeeded in fending off the attacks not only of ISIS, but also the al-Nusra Front and the Assad regime over the last two and a half years.

Less well known, however, is the fact that residents of the predominantly Kurdish areas of northern and northeastern Syria have established themselves as a new political entity that they call Rojava, comprising three autonomous cantons, one of which is Kobanê. There they have undertaken, to all appearances, a social and political revolution, characterized by remarkable efforts towards gender liberation and direct democratic self-government.

In December 2014, we, as a delegation of scholars from Europe, Turkey, and North America traveled to Rojava to learn more about the ideals and practices of this revolution and to witness at first hand, in one of its cantons, its claims to gender liberation and democratic self-government. Do its practices really constitute a revolution? Do they live up to its democratic ideals? What role do women actually play?

On December 1, we crossed the Tigris from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq and entered Cizîre canton. During the next nine days, we visited its major cities as well as rural villages. We attended a meeting of a self-governing people's council in a Qamişlo neighborhood. We spoke to representatives of TEV-DEM, the broad-based Movement for a Democratic Society that constructed the institutions of self-government. We met with journalists, members of political parties, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and others.

We encountered women from all walks of life, including representatives of the women's umbrella organization Yekîtiya Star. We conversed with leaders of the Syriac Women's Union, and visited a women's academy in Rimelan.

In addition, we met with members of the self-government in charge of economic development, health care, and foreign affairs. We visited an economics academy and toured cooperatives, newly established in dairy, construction, and greenhouse agriculture, as well as a women's textile workshop. We visited a flour mill and an oil refinery, both vital economic installations. Prior to the revolution, the main economic activities were state-owned and mills existed only in regions outside of Rojava, such as Aleppo and al-Raqqa. We observed neighborhood health clinics, a hospital, and a rehabilitation center, as well as a cultural center and a youth organization.

We were guests at the large Mesopotamia Academy of Social Sciences in Qamişlo, where we also met with the teachers union. Prior to the revolution, under the Syrian state's severe policies of assimilation and Arabization, the Kurds were not allowed to speak their own language, give their children Kurdish names, open shops with non-Kurdish names, found private Kurdish schools, or

publish Kurdish books or writings. The mainly Kurdish-populated regions had no possibility to establish a university. In order to study, students had to leave the region for Aleppo, Damascus, Deiraz-Zor, Hama, or Homs. But recently Rojava's self-government has taken the first steps toward creating a university.

The Mesopotamia Academy of Social Sciences, in Qamişlo, needs international solidarity, exchange, experience, and material support in order to succeed. To that end, we would like to forward the academy's appeal for lecturers who can stay and teach courses for some time, and for computers, projectors, and speakers. Above all it needs books to expand the library. Its ultimate aim is to have a multilingual, multidisciplinary library, but the teachers mentioned to us that at this point books in Kurdish, Arabic, and English are their priority. [1]

We visited the Newroz refugee camp, where Yezidis from Mount Sinjar emphasized their ambitions for self-governance and self-defense, and pleaded for international assistance. The refugees emphasized that they suffer under the embargo imposed on Rojava, lacking basic needs. The Yezidis told us that they feel that their suffering is being instrumentalized by entities like the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), various states, including the coalition forces, and international organizations like the UN, repeatedly stressing that the YPG (People's Defense Units) and YPJ (Women's Defense Units), as well as the PKK guerrillas had rescued them from Mount Sinjar in August 2014 and provided them with their basic needs ever since, in spite of the embargo and the war in Kobanê.

Across the canton we could see scars from decades of oppression and from the recent battles against al-Nusra and ISIS. We spent time with representatives of Rojava's defense forces. We met with the military command of the YPG in Sêrêkaniye, and with the Amûde branch of the YPJ. We visited a training academy for the internal security force, or Asayîş, in Rimelan.

The role of Turkey in the rise of al-Nusra and ISIS was explicitly brought up by almost everyone we met. People from all walks of life gave us accounts of clashes near the Turkish border that implied Turkey's military, logistic, and financial support for these two groups in particular.

Although we come from various backgrounds, we share some similar impressions from our journey. In Rojava, we believe, genuinely democratic structures have indeed been established. Not only is the system of government accountable to the people, but it springs out of new structures that make direct democracy possible: popular assemblies and democratic councils. Women participate on an equal footing with men at every level and also organize in autonomous councils, assemblies, and committees to address their specific concerns. The women we met embodied the empowerment, self-confidence, and pride recently gained by the women of Rojava. We saw banners and slogans that read: "The Rojavan revolution is a women's revolution." It really is.

Rojava, we believe, points to an alternative future for Syria and the Middle East, a future where the peoples of different ethnic backgrounds and religions can live together, united by mutual tolerance and common institutions. Kurdish organizations have led the way, but they increasingly gain support from Arabs, Assyrians, and Chechens, who participate in their common system of self-government and organize autonomously.

Wherever we went, members of the self-government and the armed forces insisted that any viable political alternatives for the region had to be based not on revenge but on shared interests and mutual trust. We met members of the Asayîş, the internal security units, as well as of YPG, and YPJ, who were Kurds, Chechens, Syrians, and Arab, all of whom emphasized that they seek common solutions for all peoples of the region. They face daunting challenges, but we are convinced that their aspirations are sincere.

As scholars and activists, we all left with a deep respect and admiration for the people of Rojava, for their progressive political program and actual social accomplishments. They have found in democratic self-government a practical way of solving their own problems. Still, Rojava suffers from pressing conditions that are outside of the control of its citizens. Therefore, we close by recommending that they be addressed as soon as possible:

First, Rojava exists under an economic and political embargo imposed by its neighbors Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Its economy, infrastructure, and defense all suffer from the resulting isolation.

Even though the KRG has opened the Semelka (Fishkhabour/Peshkhabour) border crossing for limited trade and personal transport since the Duhok agreement in October 2014, it decides over the border crossings arbitrarily and holds back humanitarian aid for Rojava, including the refugees at the Newroz camp. Even books for the Mesopotamia Academy cannot cross the border. The embargo strangles the capacity of the self-government to provide the population even with medical aid and basic humanitarian resources. It is imperative that the embargo be lifted. International pressure must be exerted on Turkey in particular to open its border crossings so that food, materials, medicine, and aid can get through.

Second, the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq have created scores of refugees, many of whom are currently being taken care of by the self-government. These refugees urgently need basic humanitarian aid, medicines, and hospital equipment. Similarly, many people have been wounded in the war and need adequate treatment, which is not available to them due to the embargo. The international community must help channel aid into Rojava for care of these people, in dialogue with the institutions of self-government.

Third, we call for international recognition of Rojava, including recognition by NGOs. It seeks not to become an independent state but rather to help create a genuinely democratic Syria and become integrated into it. Its unique system of self-government deserves to be acknowledged as a possible solution to the many ethnic and religious conflicts that ravage the region.

Against all odds, the people of Rojava have advanced a bold program for civic tolerance, gender liberation, and direct democracy. For this, they deserve the world's respect and its active support.

January 15, 2015:

Oktay Ay, researcher, Istanbul Bogazici University

Janet Biehl, independent writer, USA

Devris Cimen, journalist, Civaka Azad - Kurdish Office for Public Affairs, Germany

Rebecca Coles, researcher, University of Nottingham

Antonia Davidovic, lecturer of ethnology, University of Kiel

Dilar Dirik, Ph.D. student, University of Cambridge

Eirik Eiglad, editor, New Compass Press, Norway

David Graeber, professor of anthropology, London School of Economics

Lokman Turgut, journalist and researcher, Kurd-Akad, editor at StudiaKurdica journal

Thomas Jeffrey Miley, lecturer in sociology, University of Cambridge

Johanna Riha, Ph.D. student, University of Cambridge

Nazan Üstündag, professor of sociology, Istanbul Bogazici University

Christian Zeller, professor of economic geography, University of Salzburg

P.S.

* <http://new-compass.net/articles/statement-academic-delegation-rojava>

Footnotes

[1] Those members of the public who wish to make a donation, may visit the Facebook page PirtûkekboAkademiyaMezopotamyayê, “Donate a book to Mesopotamia Academy.”