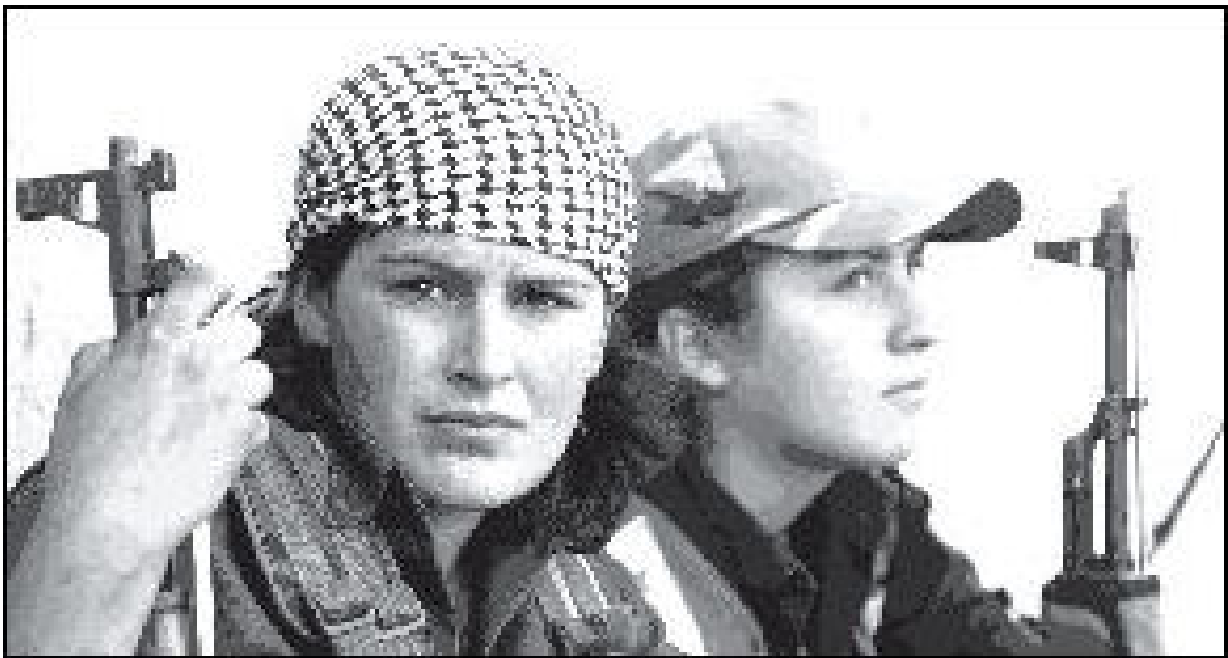


# Syria's Kurdish Revolution

## The Anarchist Element & the Challenge of Solidarity

Bill Weinberg

2015



The north Syrian town of Kobani has been under siege since mid-September by forces of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, popularly known as ISIS. Early in the siege, world leaders spoke as if they expected it to fall.

The US took its bombing campaign against ISIS to Syria, but targeted the jihadists' de facto capital, Raqqa, not the ISIS forces closing the ring on Kobani. But the vastly outgunned and outnumbered Kurdish militia defending Kobani began to turn the tide, while issuing desperate appeals for aid from the outside world.

The defenders and aggressors at Kobani are a study in extreme contrasts. ISIS is charged with committing massive war crimes and crimes against humanity in areas under its control—most notoriously, the massacres and enslavement of the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq. Rights for women have been utterly repealed, and a trade in sexual slavery (hideously called “marriage”) established.

Kobani lies within the autonomous Kurdish zone in northern Syria (now partially overrun by ISIS), which has issued a constitution guaranteeing equal rights for women in all spheres of life—domestic, civic, labor. An experiment in direct democracy has been launched, with power devolving to neighborhood and village assemblies, where

seats revolve and women have a 40 percent quota. These assemblies also send empowered representatives to canton assemblies. A parallel Women's Assembly, on the same model, has veto power over the canton assemblies.

Neighborhoods and localities also have peace and justice committees which resolve conflicts through mediation, and are to eventually replace the formal judicial system inherited from the Syrian state.

This system came to power when the Syrian state lost control of the north in 2012. The new constitution covers the three Kurdish-majority self-governing cantons, Afrin, Jazira and Kobani, a region collectively known as Rojava. While the struggle at Kobani has made world headlines, the media have not noted the democratic experiment in Rojava, much less its anarchist element.

The Rojava autonomous zone is largely led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), although other parties are represented in the canton governments. The PYD has followed a trajectory from Kurdish nationalism to a kind of anarcho-municipalism. Other ethnicities, Arabs, Assyrian Christians, are also represented in the Rojava cantons.

The overall coalition of the PYD and its allies is the Movement for a Democratic Society (Tevdem). The territory is defended by a militia network, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ). While there are women commanders of mixed-gender units in the YPG, the YPJ exists as an all-woman fighting force.

The three pillars of the Rojava autonomous zone are named as feminism, confederalism, and ecology.

Rojava is an inspiring example of popular democracy and militant secularism in a region under attack from the most ultra-reactionary manifestation of political Islam. The evolution of this example must be seen in the context of the long Kurdish struggle for self-rule in their homeland.

Rojava means west in Kurdish, and is the southwestern arm of Kurdistan, the homeland of the Kurdish people. When the victorious Allies redrew the boundaries of the Middle East after World War I, the Kurds were left off the map. Kurdistan is now divided between four nation-states: Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran—all historically hostile to Kurdish autonomy and its very identity.

Since the aftermath of 1991 U.S. Operation Desert Storm, the Kurds in Iraq have had their own autonomous zone, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

This has become the most stable, prosperous and secular part of Iraq, largely spared the chaos in the rest of the country until the ISIS advance into KRG territory in June. The KRG has grown increasingly close to the US and the West. It controls its oilfields and built its own pipeline to export crude oil to Turkey.

Saddam Hussein's counterinsurgency campaigns against the Kurds in the 1980s were genocidal, repeatedly using chemical weapons against civilian populations, most famously at Halabja in 1988. NATO ally Turkey gave Saddam a good run for his money in the same period. The war against the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in eastern Turkey cost some 30,000 lives in the 1980s and '90s. The PKK, founded in 1984, initially had a sort of Maoist take on Kurdish nationalism, and a personality cult around its leader, Abdullah Ocalan.

The PKK declared a cease-fire after Ocalan's capture in Nairobi in 1999 by Turkish agents acting on a CIA tip. As a condition of pending European Union membership, Turkey in 2002 legalized Kurdish-language education and radio broadcasts (theretofore banned, along with all outward expression of Kurdish identity). Since early 2013, Ocalan and fellow rebel leaders have been in talks with the Turkish government, ostensibly to end with disarmament of the PKK in return for increased rights for Turkey's Kurds.

But during his years behind bars at Imrali Island prison off Istanbul, Ocalan's politics have evolved. Moving away from his former quasi-Maoism, he has become inspired by Mexico's Zapatistas and read the works of Murray Bookchin, the late Vermont eco-anarchist and theorist of Social Ecology. In a 2011 prison manifesto, "Democratic Confederalism," he reformulated the revolutionary aspiration as regional autonomy rather than state power.

That year, revolution broke out in Syria, escalating to armed insurgency after the regime of long-ruling dictator Bashar Assad repeatedly massacred protesters. A four-way civil war ensued: between the Assad regime and its supporters, the various rebel factions under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, jihadist factions (most significantly ISIS), and the Rojava Kurds. The Kurdish PYD and its affiliated YPG militia force were able to effectively take power in Rojava in 2012.

The PKK and PYD are sibling organizations, closely allied and both adhering to Ocalan's thinking. The PKK and its allies in eastern Turkey have been building their own system of parallel power, also on the basis of assembly-based direct democracy, around a body called the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK). Simultaneously, the PYD and its allies launched Tevdem and became the actual power in Rojava. Popular power was being built on both

sides of the border along the lines of a libertarian municipalism rooted in the theories of Bookchin and the practice of the Zapatistas.

PKK and YPG forces rapidly mobilized after ISIS seized much of northern Syria and Iraq in June 2014. They coordinated with the Peshmerga, the KRG's military force, in northern Iraq, and played a key role in lifting the ISIS siege on Mount Sinjar, where some 100,000 displaced Yazidis were encircled and threatened with extermination.

In late October, when it became clear that the YPG had turned the tide at Kobani and was an effective fighting force against ISIS, the US began dropping arms and supplies to them, and targeting the ISIS positions outside Kobani with air-strikes.

So, we are witnessing the strange outcome of US imperialism, for its own ends, backing an anarchist-influenced resistance movement—for the moment.

Turkey's conservative President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been very unhappy about this. Under US pressure, he allowed a force of Peshmerga to pass through Turkish territory to come to the aid of Kobani in October, but refused to allow PKK fighters to cross into Syria to join the defense of the city.

The border has been tightly secured. The nearly 400,000 people who have fled the ISIS advance in Rojava have been allowed to cross into Turkey only at a few closely controlled checkpoints, where suspected YPG fighters are detained.

Turkish forces have fired on refugees who attempted to cross without going through the checkpoints, winning condemnation from Amnesty International. In a grotesque spectacle, Turkish tanks lined up at the border and did nothing as ISIS shelled and advanced on Kobani, not two kilometers away. Erdogan continues to call the PYD "terrorists," perversely equating them with ISIS.

The PYD, meanwhile, accuses Erdogan (a moderate Islamist) of cynically conniving with ISIS, allowing the jihadists to use Turkish territory as a rear-guard, in a bid to crush the Rojava autonomous zone.

All this has sparked widespread protests by Kurds and their supporters in Turkey, leading to street clashes both with police and organized Islamists that have attacked the demonstrations. In mid-October, this escalated to Erdogan ordering air-strikes on PKK strongholds in eastern Turkey, portending an end to the cease-fire. Members of the Turkish organization Revolutionary Anarchist Action (DAF) have mobilized aid caravans for Kobani and holding protests at the militarized border.

Erdogan has very shrewdly endorsed the demand of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Syria's opposition that the US adopt their program for the ouster of Assad, and begin a no-fly zone, in exchange for their cooperation against ISIS. But Erdogan is also calling for a Turkish-controlled buffer zone in northern Syria, the area now controlled by Tevdem. This is a deft move to pit the Syrian opposition against the Kurds.

The PYD-YPG has formed an alliance with the FSA against ISIS, and FSA troops have also joined the defense of Kobani. But there is tension between the two. FSA fighters recall that Bashar Assad's father Hafez Assad had supported the PKK in the 1980s (even while denying civil rights to Syrian Kurds). In confused multi-factional fighting in 2013, the YPG was accused of collaborating with the Syrian regime against jihadist and even FSA-aligned rebels. Ironically, the bitterly opposed Assad and Erdogan are both playing an Arab-versus-Kurdish divide-and-rule card.

While the FSA is an amalgam of former regime military commanders, moderate Islamists and angry but basically non-ideological foot-soldiers, the civil opposition that started the Syrian revolution in March 2011 still exists.

The Local Coordination Committees (LCC) have kept alive a civilian resistance, even under heavy regime bombardment in the besieged Syrian city of Aleppo. Civil activists even organized courageous protests demanding the return of their disappeared comrades in ISIS-controlled Raqqa. Their already precarious position cannot have improved since Raqqa has come under bombardment by both the US and Assad's warplanes.

The rise of ISIS has also seen the US in a de facto, unspoken alliance with Iran, which is said to have elite Revolutionary Guard units fighting in Iraq. The PKK has its own ally in Iran, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), which has waged a sporadic insurgency against the Tehran regime.

For the first time since the Spanish Revolution and Civil War of the 1930s, an anarchist-oriented movement is on the frontlines of the world struggle. The Zapatistas of southern Mexico have been an inspiring example since their 1994 uprising, but the marginal nature of the Chiapas rainforest is among the factors that have allowed them to survive.

Rojava, on the other hand, is strategically placed on the global stage, where the imperial powers play their Great Game. Over the past century, Kurds have been repeatedly cultivated as pawns, only to be betrayed, leading to the saying, “Kurds have no friends but the mountains.”

The US is now maintaining that the PYD is a separate organization from the PKK, so Washington is not breaking its own law by backing a State Department-listed foreign terrorist organization. In November, left-wing German lawmakers actually unfurled the PKK flag inside the parliament building to protest the EU’s listing of the group as a terrorist organization.

Now that the US, of necessity, is backing the PYD against ISIS, what will become of the Rojava autonomous zone? Once ISIS is defeated will the PYD ultimately be crushed in deference to Washington’s NATO ally Turkey? It can seem that the PYD stands an almost inevitable chance of being betrayed as both anarchists and Kurds, two groups that have historically been subject to serial betrayals.

Or, will the PYD be wooed away from the PKK with the promise of arms and support, and groomed as an imperial client? PYD co-chair Salih Muslim met in Paris in October with the US State Department special envoy for Syria, Daniel Rubinstein. In a bid for support, PYD rhetoric emphasizes a common struggle with the West against Islamist terrorism.

Is it possible to imagine a third alternative? Is it possible that the heroism of Rojava, contrasted with the brutality of ISIS and Assad and the cynicism of Erdogan, will inspire a general revolution across the long-divided Kurdish lands? Dare we dream of an independent (or at least highly autonomous) confederalist and revolutionary Kurdistan with ISIS, Assad, Erdogan, the ayatollahs and US-backed Baghdad regime all defeated?

The answer may partially lie in whether anti-authoritarian forces worldwide can mobilize effective solidarity with Rojava and find tactically astute ways to respond to a complex political reality.

As this is written, Kobani remains under siege, even if the ISIS ring around the town has been driven back. Any extension of the Rojava revolution, indeed its survival, depends on the defeat of ISIS, first and foremost.

What can we do to help?

At a minimum, supporters in the West can demand that Turkey open its borders both ways—to refugees fleeing Kobani and PKK militants coming to its defense. We can demand that the US and EU both drop the PKK from their hypocritical terrorist organizations lists.

We need to raise our voices today in defense of Kobani as our forebears did in solidarity with the Spanish anarchists fighting to defend their own autonomous zones and against a fascist advance.

—December 2014

Bill Weinberg is the author of *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* (Verso Books, 2000) and is currently at work on *Pachamama Rising: The New Indigenous Struggles in the Andes*. He is editor of the online World War 4 Report, where he blogs on global autonomy struggles.

See also a compilation of material on the situation which is regularly updated: Resources on the Rojava revolution in West Kurdistan (Syria) published on Anarchist Writers: <http://anarchism.pageabode.com/print/1464>

## GLOSSARY

DAF: Revolutionary Anarchist Action, Turkish federation that has organized solidarity with the Rojava Kurds.

FSA: Free Syrian Army, the main rebel coalition opposing the Syrian dictatorship of Bashar Assad.

ISIS: Now calling itself simply the Islamic State, the former Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is still popularly known as ISIS in the West. Ultra-reactionary formation that emerged from al-Qaeda in Iraq. Also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh, the Arabic acronym for Islamic State.

KCK: Union of Communities in Kurdistan, the PKK-led self-government structure in eastern Turkey.

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government, ruling body of the Kurdish autonomous zone in northern Iraq.

LCC: Local Coordination Committees, the popular civil opposition network in Syria.

Peshmerga: “Those who face death”; the KRG’s military force.

PJAK: Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, PKK-aligned Kurdish formation in Iran.

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party. Founded in 1984, led an insurgency against the Turkish state until the capture of its leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1999. It has since moved from Maoism and Kurdish nationalism to libertarian municipalism and zapatismo. Currently honoring a ceasefire while building autonomous parallel power in eastern Turkey.

PYD: Democratic Union Party, PKK-aligned Kurdish formation in Syria.

Tevdem: Movement for a Democratic Society, PYD-led self-government structure in northern Syria (Rojava).

Yazidis: Kurdish-speaking ethnic minority in northern Iraq whose pre-Islamic religion is considered "Devil-worship" by ISIS. Targeted for extermination by them.

YPG: People's Protection Units, territorial militia of Tevdem.

YPJ: Women's Protection Units, all-woman counterpart to the YPG.

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