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Anarchist Armed Struggle in Rojava and Beyond

An Interview with the IRPGF

Apatris

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1. First of all thanks for agreeing to this interview, it's most appreciated comrades! To start off with, how many comrades are in the IRPGF, and if you are comfortable answering this, what countries are you all from?

Unfortunately, for security reasons, we cannot divulge the number of IRPGF members currently in Rojava taking part in operations nor the countries they come from, as this kind of information may be used by states to identify the members. However, we can say that IRPGF comprises revolutionaries from both the 'East' and the 'West'.

2. Prior to the formation of the IRPGF were you all members of the International Freedom Battalion? If not how did you all meet up?

The IRPGF is a project that was in development for months before its announcement. This development took place in and across several different countries. However, if one wants to also take into consideration the building of the necessary revolutionary relation-

ships and connections that formed the foundation of IRPGF, one could say the development of the IRPGF actually dates back years. Many of these connections were made via meeting people in person, struggling shoulder-to-shoulder with them in their respective movements, and maintaining relationships of solidarity long after we were no longer in the same physical space, which ultimately led to the creation of a network of serious and dedicated anarchists hungry to advance the movement by any means necessary. So, while some of us were indeed members of the IFB prior to the formation of the IRPGF, the group itself has origins both in and outside the region.

3. What inspired you all to form the IRPGF? What constraints did you experience as anarchists training and or fighting within a non-anarchist battalion prior to the formation of the IRPGF? What do you plan to do differently in the IRPGF compared to other volunteer groups in Rojava that are fighting the Islamic State?

The formation of the IRPGF was inspired by various factors but two of the most important was the lack of an anarchist presence on the ground in Rojava and the desire to introduce something to the movement that has not yet been seen, which is a space, strictly for anarchists, to escape from the state, train in both guerrilla and conventional warfare for their respective struggles back home, and gain experience in how a revolution functions on a social level. While we have of course come across our fair share of anarchists that have refused to support the revolution because it doesn't live up to their romanticized, ideal commune, we are also aware of the fact that many anarchists have decided to hold back from going to Rojava because of the abundance of hammers and sickles and lack of circle A's. Thus, we saw it as imperative to change this political landscape and carve out a space for anarchism to not only exist but thrive.

This in turn makes our project fundamentally different than any other group here that exists solely to fight DAİŞ. While we are ob-

idarity, organizes fundraisers, etc. Also, another easy way to help IRPGF out specifically is to simply donate, as like many units here we are in constant need of decent medical supplies and other materials. Ultimately though, we want you to join us out here, to train, to learn and to build the future network of groups and movements that will cooperate and eventually have the capacity to challenge the systems of oppression that dominate us all.

**Silav û Rêzên Şoreşgerî,
IRPGF**

viously involved in operations against DAÎŞ, our aims go beyond defeating them, calling it a day, and heading home. We will indeed fight fascism in any shape it comes in, but we will do so while also building anarchist infrastructure in the region that makes it possible for anarchists to come, learn, and advance their respective struggles accordingly. In short, we are thinking about the big picture, which is the revolution spreading beyond Rojava, and as such we are fighting just as much for anarchism as we are for Rojava and anti-fascism. As far as experiencing constraints training and fighting within non-anarchist battalions before the formation of IRPGF – let’s just say that any international that didn’t know about anarchism before they met us knew more about it than they would ever have wanted to after. However, our experiences with folks from the region have been very positive, with many explicitly describing their own politics as anarchist.

4. What is your response to criticisms from some anarchists and leftists in the West that groups like the IRPGF, despite good intentions and practices, are comprised primarily of white activists who are basically seeking thrills or ‘self-discovery’? As you are no doubt already aware, this has also been a dominant narrative that has featured in Western media regarding volunteers from the West who are fighting for Rojava.

A question arises: What conditions and circumstances are required, for those who claim to be committed to fighting capital and the nation-state, those who live in safety and security, those often pursuing academic careers and individualist pursuits, to take the risks, make the sacrifices and give their lives to the struggle? It seems that many have a vision of a perfect revolutionary situation in which everything falls into place and they find themselves thrust into struggle, a struggle that fits into the continuity of their lives.

There are war tourists here. We have met them. They are largely ex-military who want a 6 month (or less if possible) adventure of

killing the bad guys which their own governments couldn't give them, so they use YPG, disrespect YPG and the revolution for which they have no concern. They complain that the locals are not grateful when in fact it is them who should be grateful to the people who have given over their lives to fight for all of humanity, without the privilege or ability to retire to a comfortable life in the west.

Then there are those who, in the same spirit as those who went to Spain during the civil war, have given their lives to struggle, risked their lives, for whatever amount of time, to support in any way they can the political movement in Rojava. These are people who understand the Rojava Revolution as a regional manifestation of what is an international struggle; they see the fight in Rojava as waged against regional agents of otherwise global systemic oppression and exploitation.

The western leftist who you refer to can tell us about "self-discovery" when they have given themselves up, when they are willing to risk everything, including the futures they imagine for themselves, with all their individualist interests and careers; I will listen to them when they are prepared to die for their convictions selflessly, to put the struggle before everything, even their own families and loved ones. One thing that must be very clear to everyone, here or staying home, is that the people of Rojava who fight, and the revolutionaries from elsewhere in Kurdistan who have dedicated themselves, they do not go home. We believe that serious revolutionary people who come here from abroad should do so with long-term plans, either to stay as long as possible or to bring training and knowledge back to their home countries in order to spread the revolution and continue to do revolutionary political work. But the idea that work done in earnest to help revolutionary struggle is wrong and should be abstained from is nonsense: Because one is from another country? This is internationalism. Because one is white? Because one has more privilege (safety, security, standard of living)? Patronizing people of color by fetishizing and othering their struggles is not solidarity. Solidar-

ning from coast to coast. Regardless, it is safe to say that at this point, while there are definitely small pockets of revolutionary activity within the US that have done great work in the social sphere, there is not a cohesive, serious movement with a clear and relevant revolutionary horizon (vision / aim / goal) that can address and attack State-caused trauma while also supporting an underground, militant group.

However, the question now should not be 'Okay, not now, so when?'. Rather, we should be asking ourselves, 'What can we do to make such revolutionary infrastructure a reality and are we ready to do what is necessary to truly advance the movement?' If the answer is 'no', then why not? These are important questions, as they may reveal both the issues that are stagnating the movement and a path forward. This is what we think must be done before armed struggle can be waged with any kind of substantial effect. Of course, if a group of revolutionaries or even an individual fed up with the capitalist nightmare decides to arm themselves tomorrow and start putting bullets in cops and bombing financial institutions they will have our full support and we will raise our kalash's in solidarity with them wherever we are. It would be ridiculous if we didn't, especially considering we aim to train anarchists to specifically carry out such attacks! However, we do so knowing full well that if there is no serious social counterpart to accompany their armed struggle, their overall impact on the movement may be minimal to none.

12. Finally, is there anything that you would suggest that anarchists around the world can do in their own countries to support both the IRPGF and the Rojava Revolution in general? And is there anything else that the IRPGF would like to communicate to anarchists around the world regarding Rojava, or anything else for that matter?

If anarchists are unable to physically come to Rojava, they can organize with or create a local Rojava Solidarity group that spreads information about the Revolution, carries out practical acts of sol-

We believe that the possibility of effective armed struggle is highly specific to the environment that the general struggle itself is being waged in. Throughout the 70s and 80s especially, we saw groups in both the US and Europe attempt to wage war against their respective States only to be brutally repressed. In the US alone there was the Weather Underground / Weathermen, United Freedom Front, George Jackson Brigade, Black Liberation Army, Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional, and more. While it is clear that these groups all had an impact on revolutionary struggle and their legacy is one we are proud of and stand in strict solidarity with – we should not fool ourselves into thinking any of these groups were on the path to enacting a full on revolution in the US (indeed, we should also note, that not all of these groups even declared this is as a goal), nor that they weren't all eventually brutalized and shut down by the State via intimidation, shackles, and/or murder. How the State was able to do so was different for each case but we do believe that most armed struggle groups missed a key component that is necessary for a successful armed movement.

This component is the above-ground, social political wing that can continue to operate and provide for people while the underground, militant wing attacks the State by any means necessary. If either wing is missing from the equation, it is much easier to crush a revolutionary movement. Clearly, a solely above-ground group that organizes around social issues will only be allowed to take the movement so far and will remain helpless without an armed, underground unit to terrorize and preoccupy the State. Likewise, a solely underground group of armed revolutionaries only lasts as long as they can evade the State, which is a time that is severely decreased when there is no complimentary above-ground group to garner support, educate, revolutionize social relationships, fundraise, recruit, and so on. Note that the term 'above ground group' here is just a symbolic term that may literally refer to a single group or to the entire public revolutionary political infrastructure, span-

ity is putting oneself at risk to support the efforts of one's comrade and fight together for an international cause, and it happens when there is mutual recognition of a shared movement, struggle or responsibility. This does not mean co-opting or asserting oneself or one's organization by undermining the leadership, autonomy, agency or political vision and organization of comrades outside one's own country. Those committed to struggle in Rojava are fighting, however indirectly or incrementally, for the liberation of humanity. It is our responsibility to do the same in any of the possible ways we see fit.

It seems that in the minds of some armchair leftists actual revolutionary armed struggle is simply not real or genuine or serious unless it conforms to their perfect fantasy or it occurred in the distant past and can be safely romanticized. Although they will voice support, the idea of practical solidarity is silly or unrealistic to them. They will praise the revolution but treat it like it is another world, unconnected and irrelevant to our lives. They will say "but there is work to be done here! why go over there and get involved in that struggle when there is a struggle in your home?!" This is based on the unquestioned false assumption that there are different, unrelated struggles that should be prioritized based on geography or whatever other convenient reasons for avoiding risk and sacrifice; this is a convenient way to avoid recognizing a global context of historical events and responding according to a revolutionary sense of responsibility. Theirs is the idea that it is the place of leftists in western cities to talk, write and go to school, maybe organize a protest rally, but armed struggle is something for brown people far away; it is great when the other risks everything for humanity in a struggle that is on their doorstep, from which they cannot escape to security, but silly for us to volunteer and risk everything in solidarity, as part of an internationalist struggle. What they are saying is: if you believe in armed struggle against capital and the nation-state then the best thing you can do is stay home and dismiss, with un-

founded criticism based upon unfounded assumptions, those who act and risk everything.

5. And what is your response to criticism, again coming from some anarchists and leftists in the West, that groups like the IRPGF are tools or proxies of ‘US Imperialism’? I should point out that the Insurrection News collective completely rejects these kinds of criticisms by the way! We’ve also read criticisms from the same quarters that claim the YPG/J are in some kind of counter-revolutionary alliance with the Assad regime – what is the IRPGF’s response to these armchair critics from the West?

When imperialist forces are finished with their current project in Syria, they will have time and opportunity to reorganize their alliances, their priorities will change, and the US and its friends will be sure to prevent any threat to capital and fellow nation-states. The Assad regime too would love to crush the revolution. But currently Rojava has the effect of complicating, destabilizing and at times neutralizing relations between other larger players. People tend not to fight each other so much when DAİŞ is around, but as soon as they are no longer a priority, Rojava’s enemies will be united in their cause of crushing the revolution. The US has put on hold its decades old efforts, in collaboration with Turkey, Barzani and Israel, to defeat the revolutionary leftist movement in Kurdistan, and in particular eliminate the PKK. This is because the US, its NATO friends and its eastern antagonists are all involved in a web of contradicting alliances and oppositions while maintaining one thing in common: they each want to isolate and eventually eliminate Daesh while at the same time benefiting from (if not supporting) whatever damage the latter might do to their respective enemies. After all, the US is known to foster such groups for the purposes of disrupting and weakening other states and maintaining any instability that it can benefit from.

Once again, many western leftists have a fantastic vision of revolutionary struggle that is cleanly cut out along the lines of

Shayrat air base in central Syria? Do you think this action by the US is going to alter how the war in Syria will play out, and if so, what do you think it might mean for the future of the Rojava project?

We can only speak for ourselves but we think it would be obvious to most that the US striking Shayrat air base is nothing more than a political move by Trump to distract from his train wreck of a first 100 days in office, rally his neocon fans, win over some democrats, show that he doesn’t have any intimate connections with Moscow, and convince people that he (sometimes) has human emotions. We don’t believe that the action will alter how the war in Syria will play out because we don’t believe that it was much more than geopolitical theater. Russia was warned ahead of time before the strike and in turn Assad was warned, which allowed risk to Russian and Syrian personnel at the base to be minimized. To that end, we really don’t see the Rojava project being affected by Trump’s antics, this time around at least.

10. Have the IRPGF been involved in any military operations since its formation? Will the IRPGF be participating in the operation to liberate the city of Raqqa from Islamic State control?

Yes, the IRPGF is involved in the liberation of Raqqa and we will be announcing more details about this soon!

11. How do the IRPGF feel regarding the possibility of armed struggle / guerrilla warfare in the West? In Greece for example there are the armed revolutionary anarchist organizations such as Revolutionary Struggle and the Conspiracy of Cells of Fire, and throughout Europe and other parts of the world there have been mostly small-scale sporadic attacks / actions for some time now by anarchists operating under the banner of FAI-IRF (Informal Anarchist Federation-International Revolutionary Front). Do you think that at this point in time armed struggle is a realistic option in say a European or US context?

that we engage in debate hold steadfast to the claim that ‘every car needs a driver’, we have surprisingly had great and productive political discussions with our friendly neighborhood reds. Most importantly though, they have respected our autonomy and have largely treated us as fellow revolutionary guerrillas, rather than pawns to put to play in a chess game, which has made partaking in armed struggle together relatively smooth. This is not to say the anarchists haven’t caused some trouble and made some parties upset. This is also not to say that we wouldn’t immediately become enemies once more if they tried to consolidate power. However, for now, we have recognized that it is mutually beneficial for us to fight fascists together by day and argue about democratic centralism by night.

8. Recently you posted a photo on your Twitter and Facebook accounts that showed members of the IRPGF and another group, RUIS standing in front of a wall with a slogan spray-painted in Greek that expressed solidarity with the squats in Athens that have been under attack by the state. This is the first time we had heard of RUIS. What can you tell us about them? Are they also an anarchist volunteer combatant group?

The Revolutionary Union for Internationalist Solidarity (RUIS) is one of the founding members of the IFB and was organized by a dedicated group of militant Greek anarchists. They have sent members to fight in Rojava but have remained focused on the practical side of the struggle, and like many of our Greek comrades, they do not have a social media presence nor intend to have one. Additionally, they have written only one text which was about the announcement of their group and all other theoretical discussions and criticisms have been kept to the group members and other anarchist groups they are in solidarity with.

9. What is the position held by the IRPGF and other groups and comrades you fight alongside in Rojava regarding the recent US airstrikes that targeted the Assad regime’s

pure principle, without any murkiness or necessity for pragmatic decision-making. They will not act until everything is convenient and two-sided. Many have misconceptions and a lack of understanding for the complexities involved with the revolution and the task of defending it. There is purity in theory. There is no purity in war. And there is a world of difference between military cooperation and political alliance; the conflict in Syria is one of the greatest examples of multi-sided complexity in war. Today you may be clashing with those whom tomorrow you will have to make a deal with in the midst of a mutual enemy, and the situation changes every week. The lives of the people and the survival of the revolution are at stake.

Any revolutionary force, if it is to be successful, must maintain a confluent balance and integration of principle and pragmatism. In the case of imperialist, nation-state and counter-revolutionary forces generally, there is little to be said about principle in any genuine or pure sense anyway; they are purely opportunistic according to their basic interests. The forces of the Rojava revolution may be the only players in the region who are not motivated by opportunism as the US, its allies and its capitalist nation-state enemies so thoroughly are.

6. What have been the IRPGF’s observations regarding some of the volunteers who come to fight in Rojava for ‘adventurist’ kinds of reasons and, to put it bluntly, have really shitty politics? How are these types of volunteers viewed by both your Kurdish comrades and also your comrades in the IFB? There is a narrative that we read quite a lot in Western media that says that these types of volunteers often end up being politicized in quite a radical way due to their experiences in Rojava. Based on your observations, is this a truthful narrative?

While the number of adventurists / war tourists and those that in general have ‘really shitty politics’ is definitely on the decline, due to a purposeful reworking of the application process on the part of

YPG International, it is an unfortunate reality that a large number of them are still here and are still coming here. If we are talking about people not with just a lack of strong political lines, but with explicitly shitty ones, then the narrative that these types often end up reevaluating their shittiness and become more radicalized (in a good way) is false in our experience. In fact, we have mainly seen the opposite, which is that they come already with a chauvinistic and orientalist view of the area and these views only become further entrenched as they stay here. This has often been a direct result of an inflated sense of self worth and entitlement, which takes a heavy hit when they arrive here and are not catered to nor fawned over like they thought they would be, being the Western heroes that they are (sarcasm). For example, we've actually heard volunteers state, after six months of being here, that they deserve special treatment and favors because they have 'done their time.' One could write a dissertation addressing the amount of problems just in that statement alone; indeed, these types of volunteers are very problematic for many reasons. As for those with a lack of strong / coherent political lines, as one would expect, we have seen mixed results: some have developed a nuanced critique of capitalist modernity, the State, and patriarchy, while others have rejected any type of political engagement, as they view war and politics as something completely separate and unrelated (you'd be surprised how many ex-military types don't agree with Clausewitz).

While these types of volunteers, both the apolitical and shitty-political types, don't find themselves mixing with the IFB too much (as one would expect, they tend not to express a desire to fight with explicitly communist and socialist groups), they do unfortunately often end up in Kurdish taburs. From our experience, at the end of the day, as long as the things they do and say are not too egregious, they are generally accepted and treated more or less like family, as that is the culture of the region. In general, we have seen that it takes quite a lot of ignorance and acting out to be forced out of a tabur and this is something that as anarchists is difficult to accept

/ agree with. It is also true, however, that the Westerners tend to also flock together and again, as one could imagine, many of them actively seek to not engage with the Kurds at all. In fact, we're aware of some Westerners even wanting to create an explicitly all Western tabur (no Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, etc. allowed). While fortunately that would probably never be allowed to happen, it is a testament to the type of seriously problematic people that have shown up to this Revolution thinking they can also take it over.

7. How is anarchism viewed by other combatants in Rojava, particularly among the foreign volunteers? It is our understanding that the IFB and its member organizations are predominantly communist groups, have there been any difficulties or disagreements due to your ideological differences with these groups? Is there much time in between training and operations etc for political and ideological debate among comrades from the different volunteer battalions and organizations?

As has been discussed elsewhere already, foreign volunteers that are not a part of the IFB vary drastically ideologically and their responses to anarchism vary accordingly. In regards to the IFB, you are correct that the majority of its member organizations (and in turn, its members) are some flavor of communist (Marxist-Leninist, Hoxhaist, Maoist etc.). However, some anarchists have also joined these groups due to the previous lack of a strong militant anarchist presence on the ground. Additionally, all member groups of the IFB must work together in some capacity, either during operations or away from the front, and as such we are in rather continuous contact with one another. Thus, there have been plenty of opportunities for political discussions / disagreements / debates to arise and we are happy to say that not only have we welcomed these moments but we have agitated to specifically create such moments. Nothing warms our hearts more than the look of shock (and sometimes horror) when communist comrades learn that anarchists do not form parties nor implement central committees. While most