

A libertarian communist fighting with the YPG

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Why I joined the revolution in Kurdistan

YPG-Training camp for international volunteers, canton of Cizîrê, April 12, 2017

This is the travel notebook of a libertarian communist who decided to join the revolution in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava).

I will try to hold it up do date (as far as practicable, as you can imagine) in order to keep you posted about my experiences and discoveries here.

I guess I should start with a short introduction of myself.

My name is Arthur Aberlin.

I don't want to make it too easy for our friends from the intelligence service – even though I'm pretty sure they already know that I'm here – so I won't tell you very much about my background, except the following: I was born in a workers family in a medium-sized town. I was lucky enough to study in a provincial college but given my study fields chances were low to find a job afterwards. I started to engage with the students movement and eventually joined a libertarian communist organization.

So, why did I decide to go?

An unavoidable question, I suppose... The first reason is, of course, my wish to put into practice my solidarity with the currently ongoing revolution in Rojava. I am aware of the intellectual masturbatory debates within the activist spheres that discuss whether one can call these events revolutionary or not, and, by the way, I have myself participated in such discussions.

Nevertheless, with time I gained more and more respect for imperfect action as compared to perfect theory. And I grew sick of being a simple observer of events that happen just a few days-trip away from us. The trigger was doubtlessly very personnel, but, as the saying goes, everything is political.

So, after several years of activism, I found it more and more difficult to give meaning to the militant routine... and I could sense, slowly but surely, a feeling of resignation taking over. It had been a while since I was following the situation in Syria; and I cherished the comforting thought that, worse case, I could join this revolution. A fantasy that allowed me to reassure myself about my true revolutionary nature, I suppose.

Anyway! On a January morning, reading the blog of a comrade who had taken the plunge – I hope I will meet him so I can tell him that, somehow, he gave rise to this turning point in my life -, I thought to myself that I'm standing at a crossroad:

- either I continue my everyday activism which I didn't find satisfactory anymore and which I feared would lead to an unpleasant ending of disillusion from my ideals and a lot of alcohol to forget about it.
- or I make my dreams real and I walk ahead to the unknown.

The next day, I had made my choice.

I started to think about how to join the YPG.

Getting to Rojava, easy as pie?

YPG-Training camp for international volunteers, canton of Cizîrê, April 21st , 2017

Today, just a short notice!

Firstly because I don't want to give too many details about the itinerary and the border crossing of international volunteers; Secondly, because this experience has already been discussed in detail by the comrade named Vicomte de Valnoir (french).

Just a few tips for those who are tempted by the idea of making this big trip, but who are still struggling with doubts about its feasibility: getting to Rojava does not require more than some preparation. So here are a few advises: avoid direct flights to your destination; begin with a first flight that gets you out of Schengen, then take another one to your destination; keep your luggage light, otherwise you will probably have to leave half of it aside, as it happened to me; get a good story ready in case you encounter a particularly eager customs officer.

When I was thinking about it in the beginning, the trip seemed impossible to me. I was actually deeply convinced that I could never make it. Retrospectively I should say that my last hitchhiking-trip was far more complicated than this one!

I don't want to play down the difficulties and dangers that lie on the road to Rojava. I have to admit that I myself was very lucky. There are so many factors that determine the success of the trip: the international, regional and local geopolitical situation, the military situation or maybe even what the civil servant sitting in front of you has had for breakfast... maybe luck is eventually the most important factor... which, by definition, is unpredictable.

In a nutshell, with some serious preparation you will be ready to join us if you want to. By the way, if you need further tips, you're welcome to contact me via my blog!

Everyday life in an YPG training camp

YPG-Training camp for international volunteers, canton of Cizîrê

Turkish bombings, April 25, 2017

Because of news from Turkish bombings on Sinjar and on an YPG base of Rojava (not ours) I will have to shut down all means of communication.

All of the fighters have to turn off their cellphones for safety reasons.

This afternoon, military airplanes, probably Navy Seals, have overflowed our camp. Were they to discourage Turkish aircraft from another nasty strike? The Americans must quite furious.

Back at the camp after a night under the stars, April 26, 2017

Somehow, bombings are just like misfortune, you never know who will be hit. And no matter how hard you try, you can't really protect yourself against it...

This is what a comrade told me yesterday evening, just before we split up to spend the night spread out in the fields, out of fear a bomb might be dropped above our heads... In this moment – lying there, watching the sky, monitoring this starlit night, so beautiful and yet so hostile, for the slightest light, the tiniest sound – one thinks of the people that have been living with the threat of bombings for decades: Palestinians, Afghans, Iraqis...

And I wonder how they manage to sleep peacefully even one single night in a year...

The atmosphere at the camp is a bit tense. Not only do we have to fear air strikes, but the Turkish army could also hit us with a ground attack. While we were getting ready for the training,

a few of us asked for weapons... but there are not enough for everybody, and I'm one of those who didn't get one.

Some time after the training, a comrade who had noticed my deception handed me something: a grenade. He quickly explained to me how to use it and concluded by saying: "it can help you for defense, just in case... or, as a last resort, if you don't want them to get you. At least you have the choice."

Holding an old AK47 in my hands, April 28, 2017

After the past bombing threats, life is trying to get back to normal at the camp... not that easy when you know that only about ten kilometers away from our base, near Tal-Abyad and Dêrik, our comrades are facing the world's eighth strongest army to keep this little piece of earth free.

I finally received a weapon to defend myself, an old Romanian AK47, probably twice as old as myself. Against helicopters or airplanes, I guess this will be as useful as an electoral program of Macron...

However, I fully understand that the Kurdish attach such great importance to the ideological dimension of the training before teaching how to handle a weapon. Because, as they say, if you put a weapon into the hands of a woman or man without ideological training, he or she will might one day turn into a bandit (and not the Robin Hood kind of bandit)...

Last night, we have again been overflowed by a helicopter. Nice American material, only that this time, a Turkish pilot was sitting inside... Luckily, a beautiful thick hill was standing between us and his 30 mm canon (not to mention the thermal optical sights that can detect heat, therefore bodies).

This reminds me another element from our lessons: the power of a nation-state relies greatly on its air-force. I had never thought about it this way. Obviously I was aware of the military importance of air force, but I had never linked that to the political issue. I hope we will manage to resolve this problem one day, otherwise I'm afraid any revolutionary effort is doomed to fail, and by saying that I mean, it will be buried under a carpet of bombs topped with two or three high precision missiles...

Funerals full of emotion

Nearby Dêrik, April 29th 2017

It's my second time assisting to a ceremony dedicated to the *shehiden* (martyrs) since my arrival in Rojava... The first time was quiet moving already. But this time was even more emotional, first of all because of the high number of buried martyrs (20) and because of the symbolic of their deaths, since they hadn't been victims of Daesh, but of the bombings of the fascist Turkish state on the headquarter of the YPG-YPJ forces in the canton of Afrîn. I can hardly describe the atmosphere and the feelings you get when you take part in such a ceremony, lost in a crowd of 6000 people who have come to honour the fighters that have lost their lives defending this revolution.

Such moments are at once loaded with sadness and filled with strength and courage, and, paradoxically, a kind of joy. People come from everywhere, from all communities, Syriac Christians stand next to Muslims, Yazidis, etc. And all of them gather to pay tribute to those who have fallen.

Of course, I don't want to idealise such events. One can easily see that the communities don't really mix up, but I think that the fact that they get together in the same place for the same cause is meaningful here.

From a Western point of view this cult of the martyrs can seem repulsive... but from what I understand, this is a way of materialising the slogan "*shid namerrin*" ("the martyrs never die"). They don't die because the fight for the cause (confederalism) goes on.

This gives courage... and you need plenty of it if you're up to face the fanatics from Daesh or the eighth world army (Turkey).

It's really hard to imagine when you haven't experienced it, but these events are a million miles away from the stilted and deadly ceremonies we know from our States. Here, it all makes sense, there is no separation between fighters and people, we are united. There is none of this cold distance that exists between all mercenary State armies and the people they pretend to defend... Here, we merge together, we mix up, we hug, we discuss, we share water, this precious element during these hours under the burning sun. People are also flirting, in a discrete way... the gathering feels like a revolutionary merry mess – in fact, it is full of life.

International volunteers: ideal and reality

YPG-Training camp for international volunteers, canton of Cizîrê, May 10th, 2017

Before coming to Rojava, I often wondered who where those brave people who leave behind their comfortable everyday-life to defend the social revolution, putting their lives at risk in this armed struggle.

I reckoned, from the stories and "martyrs" I heard about, that most of them were revolutionaries who had followed their ideals. Reality is, as most of the time, far more complex than what it looks like from afar.

Let me tell you what I have observed up to now.

There are basically two kinds of motivations among the international volunteers: on the one hand, there are people who are indeed convinced revolutionaries; on the other, there are those who fight Daesh (frequently, former soldiers) in order to defend "their country" or simply because they want to add a few lines to their CV for private military companies.

Obviously these two categories do not reflect the complexity of each and every persons life course: Some of those who have come to fight against Daesh can develop sympathy for the revolution once they see what is going on here. That's by the way what the YPG-comrades are hoping for: that the contact with revolutionary ideals and fighters can convince them or at least, make them gain some respect for the project of democratic confederalism.

A few are openly reactionary

The presence of this kind of international volunteer is in any case a big topic among the revolutionaries. While most of them demonstrate a respectful attitude, others, at best, openly show disdain for the revolution, and at worst reveal themselves as deep reactionaries...

For convinced leftists as myself, this kind of thing clearly disturbed our need for revolutionary purity... especially when you have traveled several thousand miles to reconnect with the deeper meaning of the word "revolutionary".

So, what shall one think of such a compromise?

First of all, a practical consideration: the international volunteers (and particularly former soldiers and marines, especially the Americans) give us some certainty (admittedly, a tiny one) that imperialist powers won't abandon us too soon. For sure, if one or two leftists died from an Turkish attack, that's one thing. But it's another thing, and it involves a much bigger political cost, if several dozen former marines were killed after an air strike.

We are all heval

I am not suggesting that our Kurdish comrades use us as human security shield. On the contrary, they put a lot of trust in us. Revolutionary or not, we are all heval (this means something between "friend" and "comrade"). Neither do we serve as cannon fodder, nor are we treated as valuable, little objects one needs to preserve. We can ask for the occupation that we would like to have, according to our skills of course. That's the conclusions we have come to among revolutionaries.

And the idea that due to the presence of our Chuck Norris trainees we might avoid that a Turkish F-16 drops a 500kg bomb above our heads makes the ex-marines quiet bearable !

It's useful to remember the case of Spain in 1936, where thousands of volunteers joined the revolution and/or the international brigades. We frequently think of them as people motivated by revolutionary ideals. Again, reality reveals to be much more nuanced, as I could learn from my own family history and from studying the background of some of these volunteers. In fact, the big depression of 1933 and mass unemployment were important explanatory factors for the departure of many young workers to Spain.

Concrete solidarity put in practice

I digress, but this little historic excursion allows me to highlight two aspects. First of all, there is the weakness of the support that the revolutionary left gives to this large social movement, one of the most progressive in decades. I'm not talking about position statements or articles or meetings, but about effective and concrete solidarity initiatives. Secondly, what I will say now might be shocking but the revolution here won't get forward or develop thanks to a few nice phrases, but with concrete acts of solidarity.

Let me tell you a bitter truth: The first international volunteers in Rojava weren't revolutionaries, but former soldiers... their convictions might be the exact opposite to mine, but no matter how you put it, a concrete act stays a concrete act. Of course I would prefer that all of them were true revolutionaries but, by the end of the day, who's the one helping most the social revolution: a former soldier who joined our ranks, or the activists that debate about the question if our revolution is a true one from behind their computer screens several thousand miles away from us, and who in 15 years might have come to a conclusion if this fight was worth it or not? And, isn't the fact that non-political persons found their way to Rojava a proof that something important is going on here?

About imperialist support to the YPG-YPJ

YPG-Training camp for international volunteers, canton of Cizîrê, May 17th, 2017

Some pretend that coming to Rojava and risking your life plays into the hands of the US and their imperialist interests, others say that I get payed 5000 dollars each month by the billionaire George Soros...

What can I answer to such conspiracy accounts? That as an antifascist activist in France, I was already a fighter serving the interest of the government and paid by Soros? That I got a promotion and now receive orders directly from the top of the Empire, the USA?

Obviously, it's needless to answer anything to these trolls from the radical right who spend their life time criticising and discrediting all emancipatory movements so they can feel better in their own activist mediocrity.

But I will try to answer to those activists who are honestly wondering about the meaning of the imperialist "support" to the YPG-YPJ and who are intrigued about the authenticity of what is happening in Rojava.

These interventions need to be considered in their specific context.

This objective alliance started at the second battle around Kobanê, when the city was surrounded by the Islamic State and defended by the YPG-YPJ. IS was extremely well armed – principally due to the weapons they had seized in the huge American military stocks of Mosul, Iraq – while the YPG-YPJ only had a few weapons they had grabbed here and there, or that had been introduced to Rojava before the civil war. Despite their fierce defense, motivated by their revolutionary ideals, the military superiority of their adversaries pushed them back.

Daesh was about to gain control over Kobanê. While the YPG were cornered in two neighborhoods of the city, the USA decided to support their heroic resistance, even though the Americans had up to now ignored the Kurdish movement out of loyalty towards their Turkish ally. Their airforce destroyed the heavy material of Daesh, which modified the power balance and eventually allowed the YPG to earn a narrow and painful victory.

Much to the displeasure of Turkey

Where did this sudden change of mind come from? Had the American capitalists taken over the Kurdish movement? Was the Pentagon moved by some human feelings? Had US-multinationals been promised to access the abundant resources of Rojava? Of course not, they are already reserved for big Israel!!!! (just kidding)

The only explanation is the imperialist interests of the US. It's principal enemy at the moment is Daesh. As the adage goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. It's the same logic as when the third Reich allowed Lenin to enter Russia; or when Soviet war efforts against Nazis received support from the US. The Americans give us limited support. They know quiet well that, if Kobanê had fallen into the hands of IS it wouldn't have been their "faithful" Turkish ally that would have stopped weapons, goods and humans traffic towards the Caliphate.

Through their resistance, the Kurds have gained respect from the imperialist powers and are now considered as the most efficient force to get rid of their most urgent problem: Daesh. Much to the displeasure of Turkey whose principal enemy is and stays the Kurdish left.

Why didn't the Americans support the mercenaries who are armed by Turkey to fight Daesh? Because they ran away at the slighted attack by the Islamic State – admittedly, they had good reasons to do so, since IS has fearsome fighters but this is another question – and this precisely allowed IS to obtain even more weapons! The imperialists don't support us for fun, but out of necessity, because they consider us as their best tool against Daesh.

The mountains are the Kurds' only friends

YPG-Training camp for international volunteers, canton of Cizîrê, May 24th, 2017

This is an old saying which means that throughout history the Kurds could only rely on themselves in their fight against oppression and I think this sums up pretty well how they perceive the help provided by imperialist powers for their fight against Daesh. We openly discuss this matter with the YPG-fighters and leaders. They have no illusions about the motivations behind the support they receive from the USA, France and Russia.

So why do they accept this poisoned gift? I think, as I said in my previous post, they have no choice. Should the YPG have refused this help, which would have led to the total destruction of their revolutionary project, only to preserve some political pureness? Should they have taken the risk of their families and comrades getting massacred by Daesh, just not to be called "traitors" by some pencil-theorists?

Temporarily converging interests

Even now, the air strikes protect the lives of many YPG and YPJ-fighters. "What if the air strikes stop?" we asked. The comrades answered: "Well, we will continue to fight as we did before." The Kurdish comrades make it clear that they don't want any alliance with imperialists but that the air strikes are the result of temporarily converging interests.

The Kurdish movement doesn't forget that the CIA and Mossad are primarily responsible for the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in the 1990s. And that currently the western imperialist powers deliberately ignore the deportations, massacres, use of chemical weapons in Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan), only a few kilometers behind the frontier.

This duplicity of the imperialist states only confirms the idea that the Kurds have about the essence of state entities. To them, nation states are cold monsters that will never govern the interests of the people. They are construction that serve to oppress and enslave. They know very well that when they will have to choose, the imperialists will prefer their alliance with Turkey, an important member of the NATO despite its support to Daesh, to their temporary support to the values of the YPG fighters.

Playing for time...

What is more, the YPG have learned to play the game of contradictions between the imperialists – especially between US-Americans and Russians – by carefully never choosing either side. These imperialists will certainly support us until the downfall of Daesh, just as they have supported other movements without sharing their convictions ; history gives us plenty of examples.

In the meanwhile, every life of a revolutionary we can save, every minute we win by navigating between these alliances, allow us to bring the revolution forward and to prepare for the unavoidable abandonment.

I started this post with a quote, I will end it in the same way with – just the once will not hurt – a saying by Lenin: "The Capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them."

Integrated in a tabûr of Kurdish “cadros”

East Front of Raqqa, August 12th 2017

It's been over two months I haven't written any personal account! Sorry for that, but after leaving the YPG-training academy, one event followed the other. I took part in the liberation of Mansoura, in the suburbs of Raqqa, beginning of June and from that moment on I have been constantly engaged in front line operations.

A feedback on what happened is more than necessary.

May 21st I integrated a tabûr (fighting unit) of Kurdish “cadros” – fighters who committed themselves to the armed struggle for the rest of their lives, I will tell you more about them in another article – in order to replace a hurt comrade.

All happened in an incredible rush. Within less than an hour I had to decide whether I would accept this posting or not. Only a few minutes earlier, while finishing lunch, I had been wondering what to do on such a day... now, there was just enough time to pack my stuff, and off I went in a white pickup truck heading towards Tabqa!

Objective: Mansoura, the final step before Raqqa

Tabqa had been taken from Daesh ten days earlier, and it was a major issue considering the siege of Raqqa. This is because, besides the city, the SDF had also gained the control over the most important hydroelectric dam of Syria.

But, when I arrived in Tabqa I couldn't find my tabûr : they had gone to a village nearby. I had to wait five days before they came back. Less than an hour after we met, we were on our way to the front line. Our objective: Mansoura, the last little town before the Western neighborhoods of Raqqa.

So, I would eventually face the men of Daesh. What did they look like? This question haunted my mind, even though, as you know, I'm here more for the social revolution, than to shoot at jihadists. The media – and Daesh's own propaganda – had framed a picture of fighters all in black, caricatures of terrorists dressed by a costume designer of some low-budget series, cold-heartedly perpetrating the worst atrocities. One could say, the enemy of our dreams...

A little nap, just like everybody

Our convoy stopped at a little village that had just been seized by the SDF, less than a kilometer from Mansoura. This was by all evidence our springboard for the assault of the city. Just after I put my feet on the ground, I experienced the first moment of stress: we heard gunshots only 200 or 300 meters away from our position... the village was not ours yet, or this is what it seemed like... but in the big house in which my tabûr had settled down, most of the guerrillas didn't seem to worry. In fact, soon most of them had fallen asleep.

After a while, I felt a little stupid to be the only one on a war footing, taking the shooting position whenever I heard the sound of a machine-gun. I ended up like everybody around me... and had a little nap. The rest of the day passed by in this semi-slumber, interrupted by occasional exchanges of fire. They were right to teach us at the academy that the most important quality of any fighter is patience!

Nevertheless, during a turn of guard, I got a glimpse of our firepower when two dochkas (heavy machine guns installed on pickup trucks) were systematically shooting at a few buildings on the

edge of Mansoura, during one hour. A little later, a comrade came to release me and take her shift – I had gotten quite thirsty, posted on this roof under the sun.

While going downstairs I didn't expect myself to face, for the very first time, two soldiers of the caliphate.

The assault of Mansoura

East Front of Raqqa, August 23d 2017

In the night of may 27th we left our defensive comfort, in a village of the surroundings of Mansoura, in order to get ready for a night operation.

Several dozens of militiamen and -women gathered at the lower end of the village for a briefing, and this was when I understood that the operation we were talking about was nothing less than the assault of Mansoura. And my group was the first one to enter the city.

This was certainly the best opportunity to gain valuable military experience, but I was also struck by a sudden fear... would I be able to carry out this mission? Or would I break down and run away? I had hardly any time to give a thought to such questions. As if I was at the top of a roller coaster, I could see the fall getting closer and there was no way to escape it. Our group started to move towards Mansoura.

In a single file we crossed the fields in the direction of the buildings I had been observing in the afternoon of this same day. We seemed particularly vulnerable at night, exposed by the moonlight, but again, I appeared to be the only one to worry about this. The other comrades? They seemed to be on a touristic hike.

Fumbling from building to building

After ten minutes, we had reached the enclosure wall of the city. After fearing the machine guns, I now was anxious about mines or other traps Daesh was an expert of. Inside the city: ruins, an atmosphere as in Fallout, the famous post-apocalyptic video game. We spread out. Fumbling from building to building, each door, every dark corner or tiny pile of rubble could hide a sniper or some explosive device.

My biggest fear was not to react quickly enough to an order, given my poor knowledge of the Kurdish language. In keeping with the video games metaphor, I had the impression of starting a new game at the highest level of difficulty, without the possibility to change the options or to try again in case I failed.

The factory, which turned out to be totally empty, was just the first step of the operation. The first housing blocks of Mansoura are at 500 or 600 meters from this point. Our next target: a building several floors high, still under construction, which would provide a good point of support to gain control over the city.

I understood that I would be guarding the bottom of the building, alone...

Again, we were advancing quickly, uncovered. And again, I was feeling this fear of mines and snipers, that had taken grip of my stomach. All of sudden, the darkness of the night was torn by lightnings: the city was being bombed. The building we were heading to now became visible in the bright flashes of the explosions.

It was time to get inside. I grew heavy hearted, thinking: here we are, let's get it started. Kneeling on one knee, holding the Kalashnikov to be ready to shoot, squinting the eyes in order to see the tiniest movement around me, I was giving cover to the comrades who were entering the building. From the outside we could see their advancement from one room to the next by following the lights of their torches that were shining through the windows.

A few minutes later we received the signal meaning that we should join them inside. Most of the hevals (comrades) went up to the roof, but not me. The head of the unit had placed me at the first floor. I understood that I would be guarding the bottom of the building, alone...

What to do? Shoot?

A staircase under construction, in nearly complete darkness, growing stress, tiredness, the weight of the heavy equipment that sours. Outside, in the night: shadows, nothing but shadows here and there, each more threatening than the one before.

At one moment which seemed endless, the silhouettes started to move. About hundred meters away from me, within my visual field. Friends or enemies? Nobody had told me anything, and these shadows were following our path.

What should I do? Shoot, and risk to hurt a comrade? Or let them get closer in order to recognise their uniforms, but taking the risk to get shot at? Luckily, before I could take a wrong decision, my head of unit came running down the stairs to tell me that I definitely should not shoot.

This had been a tight timing. The shadows were actually another tabûr joining us, and little by little I recognized the befriended faces. Big relief. And less stress for the two or three units that followed us.

When I was relieved from my position, I dragged myself up to the roof, looked for a little corner that offered some protection from the wind, closed my eyes, hoping to find some rest... at that moment, we received the order to move on.

Two terrorised soldiers of Daesh

East Front of Raqqa, August 16th 2017

In the afternoon of May 27th, I was getting off the roof where I had been on guard, overlooking the city of Mansoura, and walking towards the kitchen of the house where my tabûr had settled.

My throat was burning with thirst, and I started to hastily drink water from the tap (which is rarely a good idea for western stomachs, which turn out to be so fragile when confronted with the tough bacterias of the Middle East). Only when I was about to leave the room, I realised I wasn't alone in the kitchen: two persons were sitting at the back of the room, their hands were tied together, and their eyes covered with bandages.

A bit unsettled, I asked a comrade about them, with my little knowledge of Kurdish. The answer couldn't be clearer: they were two captured soldiers of Daesh. Who were they? Foreign volunteers? Syrians? How did they get into this?

A multitude of questions rushed through my mind.

At lunch time, a young comrade loosened their ties, and as a consequence of the encounter that followed, many fantasies crumbled away. Actually, the two captured soldiers turned out to be teenagers, children even! One was about 12 or 13 years old, the other one 14 or 15. Their

sunken eyes looked terrorised. What kind of propaganda does the caliphate make us swallow? We tried to reassure them by giving them something to eat. Strange moment. They were just two young villagers who had been recruited by Daesh which was using them as fighters to oppose our advancing troops. I brought them some water. The curiosity I had been feeling during all this time now suddenly seemed obscene, once I was facing the most trivial reality of war.

This first – unexpected – encounter was interrupted by the arrival of another unit. We left the place to them. The night was getting closer, and our troops were to leave for an operation this same evening.

An unexpected gift

Eastern Front of Raqqa, August 30th 2017

The first building was taken without any confrontation. In the distance, we heard the explosions of bombs falling on Mansoura.

Here we were, moving through the empty streets towards our new target. We were getting more and more tired, but the urban environment was keeping my senses alert. All anecdotes and advices given by the academy were piling up in my head: beware of the mines, beware of the traps, beware of the ambushed snipers who could literally be anywhere.

When we finally reached our new position, we felt extremely relieved.

As some were searching for covers and mattresses, we were deploying on the roof. I was given a hammer and burin and told to drill the loopholes in the wall surrounding the roof. 30 minutes after our arrival, we were finally authorised to rest. I dozed off with the feeling of having fulfilled my duty. After a few minutes, I was sound asleep.

After one or two hours, someone woke me up. We had to leave again.

I hadn't dressed up yet when a comrade tapped my shoulder to hand me an unexpected – and un hoped – gift: the rocket-launcher of our unit! The previous carrier wasn't coming with us, I had no clue why, and now it was up to me to shoulder this responsibility. Obviously I had been warned that due to my height I would certainly be asked to carry material, but this was a bit fast to my taste...

Back to the still unfriendly and dark streets of Mansoura. But this time, with an engine on my back powerful enough to blow me up 22 times. On top of that, it was wrongly fixed to the tube and this stupid rocket was threatening to fall at the slightest sudden movement and to blow away your favorite blogger...

Two comrades downed by the snipers of Daesh

Eastern Front of Raqqa, September 6th 2017

Mansoura by night. After we had taken control over two buildings, our unit was about to get hold of a third one. After a nerve-wracking progression – at first, we entered the wrong place and then had to leave again- we finally reached the right one. Once again on the rooftop, the wall, the burin the hammer, the loopholes. I eventually fell asleep in a corner of the cold roof, covered with a little piece of cardboard. I was still alive!

Awaken at dawn, our group split up. With three other comrades, I was occupying the next building. We had been warned about the presence of enemy snipers.

In case you were wondering: advancing by day is neither easier nor more reassuring. Maybe it allows at least to face death with a clear sight ? On such morbid thoughts we took the first rooftop. First shift, nothing to report: explosions on the horizon, some scattered shootings. When the next shift arrived, I fell asleep. Strange routine: maybe things were easier than I thought.

When a comrade woke me up for a new shift, I caught a glimpse of his sad eyes filled with tears. While I was sleeping, two comrades from our unit had been downed by snipers of the Islamic State, two others heavily wounded by a land mine.

I had fully entered the war.

We had concluded an agreement with the Islamic State

Raqqa East front, Septembre 13th 2017

The first of June, it had been three days already since we had entered Mansoura, and since we had been holding the same defensive position next to the main road leading to the city centre. The exchanges of fire between our troops and those of the Islamic State were frequent, but the fighting was not very intense, particularly for my unit, which is neither a unit of snipers, nor of mine-clearers, nor of heavy weapons.

Since the middle of the day, a rumour had been circulating that the jihadists had given up. My Kurdish had improved, so I could understand that we had found an agreement with the Islamic State: they would leave the city, abandon their heavy material and munitions, and we would let them slip away to Raqqa.

In the first place, I was a bit disturbed by these news... but here, things differ quiet a bit from the western anti-terrorist mystique (“It’s impossible to negotiate with terrorists!”) and from fantasies about what a revolution should be like; here, we are in a war situation. I will deepen this point in another post.

A pitiful caravan of jihadists

My thoughts only reached that far when all of sudden a comrade rushed towards us and ordered to hide inside the building.

I quickly understood why. Only a few seconds later, in a cloud of dust, a long row of enemy vehicles appeared on the road that we were supervising, heading towards Raqqa. What a tight situation: we were only 10 YPG at this place, facing 150 to 200 soldiers of the caliphate passing by only one hundred meters from us. Might as well say that, if anything went wrong, we were dead.

But it was obvious that this pitiful caravan of retreating jihadists did not have any interest in things turning bad. For their escape they had seized anything with wheels: motorcycles, tractors, damaged cars, pickup truck and even a backhoe loader that was transporting some combatants in its shovel.

This scenic cortege immediately made me think of a story my grand-mother used to tell me: the difference between the German army proudly entering her city in 1940, in straight rows and shiny uniforms, and the same army fleeing in 1944, taking with them anything they could carry except their dignity.

The inhabitants of Mansoura — that I was about to meet — must have felt similar emotions.

We have a huge political responsibility

East front of Raqqa, Septembre 20th 2017

Less than fifteen minutes after the cars of the jihadists were out of our sight the city of Mansoura all of sudden came back to life. People came out of their houses, got together with their neighbours, and started to wander through the streets, carefully. In the beginning, they were carrying a white flag with them.

Some time later the inhabitants that had fled to the border of the city in makeshift camps came back to move into their houses again. People seemed to be happy. Hard to know if this was because Daesh was gone or because the fightings were over, without having lasted too long and without having caused too much damage.

A few came towards us to invite us for tea, or simply to tell us what Daesh had done to them. They were far from being the majority though. Most people simply greeted when passing by close to us... hard to know if these gestures were signs of complicity or rather precautions one takes towards the winners of a war.

The challenge to establish democratic confederalism

We have a huge political responsibility towards the liberated populations.

War is only the continuation of politics by other means (Clausewitz, worth reading!). By the end of the day any military action only makes sense if it is linked to a political objective. This is a principle that the FDS have fully integrated. We have heard it all along our training: the real challenge of this revolution will only begin with the defeat of Daesh.

And Daesh has already, virtually, been defeated. It is only a matter of time. The destruction of its troops is only secondary, and this is why we preferred to negotiate their departure from Mansoura.

The real challenge is to establish democratic confederalism in the region of Raqqa where the jihadists have managed to gain popular support.

If we succeed, not only will the revolution have made a huge step towards an anti-state and egalitarian model of society, but we will also have eliminated a fertile ground of a possible resurgence of jihadism.

From this point of view, the victory over Mansoura is a great move. The SDF have to the highest degree avoided destruction and civil victims which has shown to the population that we care about them. Secondly, by limiting urban fights, we have protected our own troops, which was absolutely necessary before the battle around Raqqa.

As far as the Islamic State is concerned, it has been defeated on several points in Mansoura. Firstly, it had to abandon a lot of material – tens of tons of explosives, tanks etc. Secondly, it can't count with discontentment of the population. Thirdly, as the fighters chose to save their lives rather than to continue the fighting – just as any ordinary mortal would have done – it won't be able to produce its habitual mystical narrative about the martyrs.

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Arthur Aberlin
A libertarian communist fighting with the YPG
2017

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