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# The fall of Rojava

Hard lessons learned

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The Turkish invasion of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES), often referred to by some as «Rojava,» has provoked a major backlash worldwide not only from leftist admirers of the People’s Protection Units and Women’s Protection Units (YPG/YPJ), but also by many mainstream Western liberals and even some conservatives for their heroic campaign against the Islamic State. The initially mostly-Kurdish fighters began their struggle against the genocidal, fascist self-proclaimed «Caliphate» in the most dire circumstances, when it seemed like the besieged town of Kobane would fall to IS and experience the same barbarism seen in other Iraqi and Syrian cities that had fallen under its control. Despite a lack of heavy weapons and adequate supplies, the male and female fighters managed to turn the tide with the help of US-led coalition airstrikes. Cementing their alliance with the US, the YPG/YPJ forged a coalition from the regions various ethnic and religious groups that would become known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and with coalition help the Islamic State was stripped of its last

territory in Syria, including its «capital» Raqqa which fell in 2017.

Anarchists in particular became enamored with the group based on its stated politics and the association of Kurdish political leader and PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party) founder Abdullah Ocalan, who developed the ideology of Democratic Confederalism with heavy inspiration from the late American leftist thinker Murray Bookchin. So inspiring was the struggle that some of these leftists joined the ranks of foreign fighters fighting in the ranks of the YPG/YPJ; some of those would even die fighting against IS.

Unfortunately, the left in general has had a poor understanding of the Syrian conflict, which is arguably one of the worst humanitarian disasters facing the world today, and what is happening now to the Kurds and their allies is the inevitable result of a series of political and ideological failings both inside and outside of Syria. And though it might seem callous or cold, if we want to avoid this kind of bloodletting in the future, if we want to turn back the tide of global fascist reaction, and if we want to abolish capitalism and replace it with a just and sustainable system, we must make a sober assessment of what happened in Syria.

First, it is important to say what the PYD (Democratic Union Party) accomplished.

1. The achievements in terms of women's equality are indisputable. Women fighting on the frontlines actually has a longer history in Kurdish society than Westerners realize, but thanks to their Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the phenomenon became more visible. Mobilizing both men and women is not only an ideological imperative related to equality and personal freedom- it is also a crucial practical measure in revolutionary struggle. That aside, the PYD also advanced women's rights in a number of crucial but often less visible (at least to the outside world) ways.

2. Despite having an ideology quite at odds with American neoliberal capitalism, they managed to forge a strong alliance with the US and its allies. Despite betrayal by the incompetent Trump administration, they won great respect from members of the US military, from the Marines and special operations forces who directly assisted them, to the generals in the Pentagon and former Secretary of Defense James Mattis. In fact, Mattis, the former Marine General still called by his call sign «Chaos,» suggested in an opinion article that his resignation in late 2018 was strongly influenced by Trump's announcement that he planned to order US forces out of Syria. The broad spectrum backlash we see now is thanks to the PYD's securing of an alliance with the US and other NATO allies.

3. The Syrian war has largely been a total failure when it comes to leftist internationalism, but international solidarity on display in «Rojava» was significant. What is more, the PYD and those foreigners who volunteered to fight with its military forces came back and spread an anti-Assad message that was desperately needed to counteract the shameful and reactionary behavior of large portions of the left who supported the Assad regime in the name of «anti-imperialism.» Although these factions would attack the Kurds as tools of Western imperialism, much of the left saw the dynamism of the PYD and its Western supporters, compared it to the authoritarianism and play acting of the pro-Assad left, and rejected the latter.

4. The idea that «Rojava» was an experiment in «stateless,» direct democracy is largely the product of PYD propaganda. In reality the group was far more centralized and authoritarian than admirers realized, and it nurtured a considerable personality cult around PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan (whom they call Apo). Despite this, the group did manage to at least set up a useful theoretical framework for such a democratic society, which deserves to be studied. Much of the difference between theory and practice when it comes to governance in the territory can be explained by the war and the surrounding interna-

tional situation, and how these issues were dealt with (right or wrong) are of crucial importance to revolutionaries. Plus, the fact that the PYD came to dominate politics in the region, for better or worse, is a tribute to its skills in political organizing, something that cannot be ignored.

Having laid out these accomplishments, it's important to study the mistakes made by the PYD and the international left that supported them.

5. One of the first mistakes of the international left was either ignoring the Syrian revolution, or worse, actively embracing the criminal regime of Bashar al Assad. Those who did the latter entered into a *de facto* alliance with a literally fascist regime that is the sweetheart of the global far-right, and despite ideological differences both sides repeated the same propaganda often from the same sources. Although the PYD had already started establishing control over territory in 2012, many Western leftists did not take notice until several years after 2014, when the group first became heavily engaged by IS at Kobane. Few seemed to do the necessary work to look back on the start of the revolution in order to get a full understanding of what was happening. This has led to some embarrassing situations, such as leftists calling for a No Fly Zone to protect the Kurds now, while attacking the same idea as «warmongering» or «starting World War III» when it was suggested earlier in the war to protect civilians from the Assad regime and Russia's indiscriminate bombing. Today innocent civilians in the Kurdish-controlled territory are suffering the results of the world ignoring the same scenes when they were happening for years in Ghouta, Deraa, Aleppo, and Idlib. We must never again allow such hypocrisy.

6. Early in the war, Assad felt most threatened by the democratic, non-sectarian uprisings, and he and his allies set out to divide the opposition along ethnic and sectarian lines. With respect to Kurds, this was accomplished by pulling out most regime security forces, giving the PYD and its allies *de facto*

the left, owing to ignorance or outdated, moribund, reactionary ideology, took the wrong position on Syria, and we are all paying a terrible price for that today. Apart from the vast human cost of the war and the disruption it caused, it has directly led to the rise of far-right reactionary politics around the world and a new era of atrocities is on the horizon as dictators now know what they can expect to get away with under the cover of «national sovereignty» or fighting «terrorism.» If we learn nothing from the death and suffering of the Syrian people, we cannot call ourselves internationalists and we are not worthy of a better world.

Lastly, the whole tragedy of the Syrian revolution clearly demonstrates the dangers of the nation-state system and how important it is for a movement to understand how to navigate it, even if that movement, like the Democratic Federalists of the PYD, claims to reject it. The Assad regime managed to survive because it was, after all a recognized UN-member state, whereas none of the opposition, whether Arab or Kurd, was granted that legitimacy. States prefer to work with other states, and they prefer a «legitimate» tyrant who claims to provide «stability» to an unknown situation. Without that recognized state status, both the Kurdish-led opposition and the opposition in Idlib were forced to rely on American and Turkish protection, respectively. In order to avoid this state of affairs, a revolutionary movement, regardless of its politics, should seek to seize state power or at the very least secure a power sharing agreement in the recognized government. Naturally, there are dangers associated with such goals, but any movement that lacks the appearance of state legitimacy can be branded a «terrorist» organization and is thus fair game for military action from the existing state or from abroad.

For all its flaws, the so-called «Rojava Revolution» was arguably the most significant anti-capitalist movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although it made some of the same mistakes as 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist movements, it also avoided many of them and clearly tried to chart a new revolutionary path worthy of observation. Furthermore, the Democratic Federalist ideology of Abdullah Ocalan provides a very accurate analysis of the problems of the nation-state system and at the very least provides a foundation for addressing them. Tragically, the movement failed to fully realize the type of democracy it preached, nor was it able to form lasting bonds with the Syrian anarchists and other leftists whose own experimental self-governing bodies known as the Local Coordinating Councils (LCCs), received far less attention from the global left. Their sacrifice has so much to teach us, as does the Syrian Revolution as a whole. Most of

control over their territory. More crucially, the regime continued payments to the territories which helped alleviate the burdens of maintaining society. This support is one major reason why Rojava cannot be seen as a stateless or autonomous society, as it had significant dependence on the regime. This situation led to political clashes with non-Kurdish opposition, especially Sunni Arabs, who saw the PYD as being allied with the regime. Limited military cooperation with the regime and a disdain for taking offensive actions against it also eroded trust and led many to believe it was a regime ally. This perception was also perpetuated by the treatment of some Free Syrian Army units which had allied themselves with the YPG/YPJ but later fell out of favor with the group. In the PYD's defense, it is very possible that the group's latter approach to the regime might have had more to do with US policy than its own desires. The US was for the most part adamant about groups receiving military aid fighting only IS and not the regime, as the Obama admin never had much faith in the revolution from the beginning and by 2013 the consensus in DC was that Assad would have to stay.

7. Unfortunately due to its conflict with some elements of the FSA, and despite its continuing alliance with some FSA or former FSA units, PYD propaganda often cast all other FSA groups as jihadists, allied with jihadists, or few in number and without influence relative to jihadist factions. This narrative blended perfectly with the propaganda of the regime and Russia; even though it was not explicitly pro-Assad as in the case of the latter, it did still implicitly supported the regime's narrative about its opponents. Moreover, the blanket jihadist label was an Islamophobic, racist trope which was largely responsible for the shameful lack of solidarity between leftists and the revolution at large.

### **Conclusions**

Although the conflict between the SDF and Turkey has only just begun and there is no reason to expect it to end soon, there

are several lessons we may take based largely on the points listed above (although they are by no means exhaustive). These lessons may apply to situations in many countries but for the sake of this publication, Ukraine will be used as an example where applicable. It is appropriate not only because Ukraine and the Syrian opposition share a common enemy -Moscow-, but also because Western failures in Syria emboldened Putin to intervene in Ukraine in 2014.

First, it is necessary for anti-authoritarian revolutionary left movements to study and mimic the grassroots political organizing techniques of the PYD. Even if the organization of military units and training is impossible, political organizing ensures that when the time comes, militants will have a not only a pool of willing recruits, but even more important for an insurgency, a sympathetic population.

Second, the role of women in all aspects of the revolution and revolutionary organizing cannot be overstressed. In Ukraine participation of women during Maidan, in the volunteer movement, and in the Ukrainian Armed Forces represents a positive step in this direction. All these examples help normalize the image of women taking an active role in revolutionary activity and resistance.

Third, revolutionary movements, especially during an armed insurgency, must think carefully about who their allies are. Any revolutionary group must acknowledge that it will have to work with groups that do not necessarily share their ideology to a high degree, if at all. It is necessary to look critically at the principles of one's group and work out a set of strict guidelines of what groups one can work with as well as a set of «red lines,» i.e. which groups cannot be allies under any circumstances. Also, though international support from governments is often necessary, it is important not to become dependent on such support. The failure of the Syrian revolution as a whole was largely thanks to various outside actors with contradictory goals backing their own factions.

Fourth, it is paramount to reach a wide global audience in order to secure international support. It is very significant that a relatively small population of Syrian Kurds, without a state of their own, managed to secure such international sympathy across a wide section of the political spectrum, whereas Ukraine, a large independent UN-member nation state, seems to get only a fraction of the sympathy and almost none of it from the left. Future Ukrainian leftist revolutionaries must portray Ukraine's struggle against Russia accurately as an anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, anti-fascist struggle. Ukraine must become a symbol of a global struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors, and vice versa. In this way, Russia's larger, better-funded, and more experience propaganda machine can be countered via a more compelling narrative on an international scale. At the same time, it is important to be truthful when promoting a narrative and also to make sure that narrative is not in any way inadvertently reinforcing an opponent's propaganda.

Fifth, it is important for future revolutionary groups not to accept rapid concessions in exchange for what seem like quick gains. By making a deal with the Assad regime, the PYD won breathing space and de facto autonomy in its regional enclave, but at the expense of long-term security. For if it were not Turkey invading their territory today, it would have been the Assad regime with Russia and Iran's backing. Indeed we are likely to see that happen in the future as Turkey's campaign unfolds, and any NES territory not occupied by Turkey or their allied forces will most likely be turned over to the regime. Governments of all kinds have proven adept at containing revolutionaries or insurgent groups in small enclaves almost indefinitely. Although this often gives such groups enough autonomy in their own communities to alleviate some of the grievances that led them to rebel in the first place, their isolation typically leads to lower living standards and thus limited appeal to citizens living in the rest of the country.