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Rojava: The betrayal of a Revolution

Mandy Moussouris

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The ongoing war in the Middle East, the Arab Spring followed by what seems to be a winter of war that rivals Game of Thrones has seen the death of many a revolutionary and many a revolutionary dream.

Within this ongoing war are stories of struggle against tyranny, struggles by ordinary people to gain some sort of control over their lives as they get buffeted between superpowers and ideologies fuelled by greed and underlying neoliberal capitalism. The struggle of the Kurdish people of Rojava is one such story. It is not a new one and it is not a perfect one. It is a story of courage and inspiration, of brave women and men, of complexity and of huge challenges. It is a story of our age, where competing geo-political powers fuel wars in other lands and on other people to further their own interests.

Since 2014, the Kurdish people and their peoples' defence units in Syria – the YPG (Male Defence Units) and YPJ (Female Defence Units) – have been defending their towns and areas against one of America's most wanted terrorist groups, the Islamic State (IS),

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after Syrian state forces retreated from Kurdish areas. IS on the other hand have been fighting the YPG and YPJ for control of the area. Turkey says the YPG and YPJ are linked to Turkey's most wanted terrorist group, the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party).

Over the years, the YPG and YPJ have pushed back IS and increasingly built a safe zone within their borders where feminist principles and a system of participatory self-management have been core to the society they are busy trying to protect and develop. The Kurdish controlled zones are collectively known as Rojava.

Whilst there are some problems and contradictions within Rojava, there are important revolutionary principles and social experiments taking place. For more information on this check out our educational series here.

There are many lessons we can learn from Rojava. One important one is how attempts by people to build self-management and fight institutions like capitalism and patriarchy get used and battered in the never ending war between Karl Marx's proverbial "band of warring brothers" and the states that support them.

When the war in Syria first broke out in 2011, after popular uprisings against the Assad regime, a vacuum in power developed which saw a number of different parties/organisations/interests fighting to fill the power vacuum. One of these groups was IS and this gave the United States of America (USA) the perfect excuse to get involved. Because the people of Rojava were defending their areas against IS and had succeeded in forcing them back the USA agreed to support their self-defence units (YPG and YPJ) with weapons. This assisted with the further push back of IS. At the same time the Syrian government and their supporters, backed by Russia, were also fighting IS but the USA does not support the Syrian Assad Government or Russia. Turkey, in turn, covertly supports IS because it does not support the Assad regime and it doesn't want a revolutionary Rojava on its doorstep that could spread into Turkey.

There are Kurdish people living in Syria, Turkey, Iran and Iraq and there have long been calls for Kurdish independence in Turkey

which led to the 1980's formation of the PKK, who have used insurrectionist tactics to fight for independence. As the YPG and YPJ have got stronger and brought larger areas in Syria under their control and gained access to arms via the USA, so the perceived threat to Turkey has increased, culminating in Turkey invading Afrin (an area in Rojava), through both airstrikes and ground troop attacks close to the Turkish border but within Syrian territory.

The Syrian Government has been reluctant to defend its border and has allowed the Turkish army to conduct the airstrikes but also has tacit agreement to support the Kurds, and has unofficially sent in "Popular Mobilization Units" (PMU) loyal to the Assad regime. Both America and Turkey are members and allies in NATO but are backing each other's so-called terrorists in the Syrian War and at the same time trying to save a bit of face publicly. As a result America has started withdrawing its political support for the Kurdish people in Syria and has made no statements condemning the attack by Turkey on Rojava leading to the death of hundreds of civilians, including many children.

And so, once again, like in Spain in the 1930s a movement of ordinary citizens to create a new, different and better life without patriarchy and capitalism is betrayed by the geo-political powers that claim to support them but ultimately only ever work for themselves alone and will crush any and everything to get what they want.