

# **Understanding the Kurdish Resistance**

**Historical Overview & Eyewitness Report**

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Until recently, few in the Western world had heard of the Kurds, let alone their revolutionary history. Brought into the spotlight by their fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), they have received a great deal of attention both from the mainstream mass media and from radicals and revolutionaries around the world.

Romanticized and often summarized superficially as a population fighting Islamists, the Kurds have a tradition of self-defense extending across several national borders. They have been fighting for their liberation since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, if not prior; the religious revolts led by Sheikh Said in 1925 and the uprising against assimilation in Dersim in 1937 are only two examples out of a long legacy of Kurdish resistance. But without a doubt, the most long-lasting and effective Kurdish rebellion has been the one launched by the PKK (Partiye Karkerên Kurdistanê—Kurdish Workers Party) 40 years ago. The resistance to ISIS in Northern Syria (western Kurdistan—Rojava)<sup>1</sup> and the fight for the autonomy of Kurds in Turkey (northern Kurdistan—Bakur) are the culmination of the PKK's decades-long struggle. Yet the PKK looks very different today than it did during its formation, and its aspirations have evolved alongside its political context.

What follows is my attempt to share what I have learned and observed during my visits to Kurdistan, in both Bakur and Rojava. It is a long and complex story filled with difficult contradictions, some of which will be presented below. In the face of incredible odds, the resilient Kurds have been able to put theory into practice alongside a well-crafted strategy. To understand their movement today, let's start by looking at how it emerged.

## The Early Days of the PKK

The PKK is the product of two different historical processes. The first and more fundamental one is the formation of the Turkish nation-state, a project based upon the elimination of all non-Muslims and the assimilation of all non-Turkish ethnicities. The second and more immediate accelerant is the powerful youth and student movement of the late 1960s and '70s in Turkey.

To understand contemporary Turkish politics, be it the official denial of the Armenian Genocide or the repression of the Kurdish movement, we must recognize how deeply ultra-nationalism is woven into the fabric of society. It is analogous to the Baathist regimes elsewhere in the region, which are now meeting their expiration dates. All the ingredients are there: a formidable and charismatic leader, Mustafa Kemal;<sup>2</sup> the creation of a national identity, Turkishness; and assimilation into a hegemonic yet constructed culture. In Turkey, the formal creation of the nation-state in 1923 was a modernizing project in its own right. Various vernacular languages (e.g., Kurdish, Arabic, Armenian, Greek) as well as the Arabic alphabet (modified and used in written Ottoman, Kurdish, and Persian in addition to Arabic) were scrapped in favor of the Latin alphabet; a language called Turkish was re-invented, by modernizing vernacular Turkish with a heavy dose of European influence. Forms of religious expression, from public gatherings to clothing, were repressed in the name of modern secularism. At the same time, Islam became regulated by the state, kept in reserve to mobilize against leftists or minorities. As a nation-building project, Ke-

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<sup>1</sup> Geographically, Kurdistan is defined by cardinal directions. So western Kurdistan, which is in northern Syria, is called *Rojava* (West); northern Kurdistan, which is in southeastern Turkey, is *Bakur* (North); southern Kurdistan, in northern Iraq, is *Bashur* (South); and eastern Kurdistan, in southwestern Iran, is *Rojhelat* (East).

<sup>2</sup> Known as Atatürk—the great Turk—after 1934.

malism essentially sowed the seeds of its own destruction; ironically, it is responsible for both the neoliberal Islam of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP, and the Democratic Confederalism of Öcalan and the PKK.

The degree to which this ultra-nationalism is hammered into those who live within the borders of Turkey is difficult for a Western audience to grasp. Every morning of her official schooling, a Kurdish schoolchild has to take an oath that begins “I am Turkish, I am right, I work hard,” only to file into a classroom with a portrait of Atatürk staring down from the wall, where she will hear teachers present the history of the Ottoman Empire and emphasize that Turkey is surrounded by enemies on all sides. She must go through the motions of patriotic holidays several times a year: the anniversary of the declaration of the republic (OK), the anniversary of the death of Atatürk (well ... fine), the Youth and Sports holiday (seriously?), the Sovereignty and Children’s Holiday (give me a break). For men, compulsory military service<sup>3</sup> is a rite of passage into manhood and a precondition of employment. It’s common to see rowdy street rituals in which young men are sent off to do their military service by crowds of their closest male friends.

Nationalism comes not only from the Right but also from the Left, and the 1968 generation was no exception. In contrast to their counterparts in other countries, this generation resembled the old Left more than the new. Many of the most revered veterans and martyrs of the leftist student movement saw themselves as continuing Atatürk’s project of national liberation from imperialist powers. It’s telling that the most promising move on the part of the leftist student movement involved launching a failed coup of their own with dissident members of the military. This powerful youth movement occupied many universities and organized large marches, including an infamous march in which members of the US Navy’s 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet were “dumped in the sea”—playing on the mythical imagery of Atatürk’s national liberation army dumping the Greeks into the Aegean Sea, a fairytale often repeated to Turkish schoolchildren. Though it was eventually crushed by the military coup of March 12, 1971, this student movement left a legacy of armed groups, including Deniz Gezmiş’s THKO (Turkish People’s Liberation Army) and Mahir Çayan’s THKP (Turkish People’s Liberation Party).<sup>4</sup>

One of the students active in the post-coup second wave of the student movement in Turkey was Abdullah Öcalan. Born in 1949 in the Kurdish territories of southeastern Turkey, Öcalan came to the Turkish capital of Ankara in 1971 to study. He was impressed by the student movement, which had gone as far as torching the vehicle of the American ambassador. Alongside the Turkish student movement, which left little space to talk about the Kurds, there was a new incarnation of Kurdish socialism on the rise, especially in the form of the Eastern Revolutionary Cultural Houses (DDKO). Other Kurdish groups had even started to organize guerillas in Kurdistan. Öcalan entered this milieu and advanced his idea of Kurdistan as an internal colony of Turkey, quickly gaining adherents. Comprising a nucleus of political militants, this dozen or so people came to be known as *Apocular* (*Apoers*), a term used for the followers of Öcalan’s thought to this day. Not all the members of this initial cadre were Kurds, but they all believed in Kurdish liberation from the Turkish state.

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<sup>3</sup> Although Turkey has universal conscription, it also has laws which permit one to pay nearly \$10,000 to be exempt from it. In addition, those with higher-level education are often able to land safer positions. Thus those who actually fight the wars are predominantly poor.

<sup>4</sup> Mahir was killed in a military raid during the kidnapping of NATO technicians with the demand of freeing Deniz and two others who would also be executed, Hüseyin İnan and Yusuf Küpeli. Deniz was hung by military rule.

This core group left Ankara to foment revolution in Kurdistan. The ideological flavor of the day, especially with Turkey in NATO, was Marxism-Leninism; founded in 1978 at a meeting in the village of Fis, the PKK (Partiye Karkerên Kurdistanê—Kurdish Workers Party) modeled itself on those principles. The first manifesto written by Öcalan that year closes by professing that the Kurdish Revolution was a part of the global proletarian revolution that started with the Russian October Revolution and was growing stronger through national liberation movements. The group acquired its first AK-47 from Syria and started carrying out small actions and agitating in towns in Northern Kurdistan. Öcalan traveled constantly, presenting lengthy lectures, sometimes day-long sessions, which were a major component of these initial efforts. This form is still seen in the political education sessions that all participants in the Kurdish movement are expected to complete, guerrillas and politicians alike.

This initial phase was cut short by another military coup only ten years later, in 1980—much bloodier in its consequences, with at least 650,000 arrested, more than 10,000 tortured, and fifty people hanged by the state. Öcalan had fled the country shortly before, and many of the initial cadre followed in his footsteps. Their destination: Syria. In fact, Öcalan crossed from Suruç in Turkey into Kobanê in Syria—two towns that have become symbols of the Kurdish resistance, and a crossing hundreds if not thousands of Kurds have made this past year to join the fight against ISIS. From Syria, Öcalan started his project in earnest and began to make contact with the Kurdish leadership in the region, arranging meetings with Barzani and Talabani, tribal leaders with a bourgeois nationalist line. He arranged for the first trainings of Kurdish guerrillas in Palestinian camps, and later in more independently run camps in Lebanon. The trained members of the PKK crossed back into Turkey to begin the armed struggle announced by their first large-scale action in August of 1984, the raids on the towns of Eruh and Şemdinli.

The PKK entered the 1990s with a guerrilla army of more than 10,000 and started launching attacks on Turkish military positions and other state interests such as government buildings and large-scale engineering projects. At the same time, what had begun as a concentrated effort by a core group of militants began to take hold within the entire Kurdish population in the region. Newroz 1992 was a turning point in popularizing the Kurdish liberation struggle.

Newroz, celebrated until recently mostly across Iran and Northern Iraq, represents the new year and the welcoming of spring. Although this celebration was even observed in central Asian Turkic communities, Turkey rejected it; the PKK advanced the idea of Newroz as a national holiday of resistance for Northern Kurdistan. Since the late '80s, March 21 has been a day of mass gatherings, often culminating in epic clashes with the police. Newroz of 1992 was especially brutal, as the ruthless police state that was to devastate Northern Kurdistan began to show its face; the killing of fifty people during Newroz 1992 in the town of Cizre was the opening act. The '90s in Kurdistan saw the dirtiest of civil wars, with the state employing paramilitary groups culled from both ultra-nationalists and Islamic fundamentalists. To dry out “the sea in which the guerrilla swam,” 4500 villages were evacuated or burned to the ground. Most of the 40,000 who have died in the war in Northern Kurdistan perished in the 1990s.

## **Öcalan’s Prison Years and the Peace Process**

Öcalan’s eventual capture on February 15, 1999 is a tale to be told, referred to by the Kurdish movement as “The Great Conspiracy.” Threatened by Turkish military action, the Syrian gov-

ernment finally told Öcalan that his welcome was over and he had to leave. The international cadre of the PKK scrambled to find him a new refuge, but no country would touch him. Shuttled between Greece and Russia, Öcalan finally found himself under house arrest in Italy. Since members of the European Union are not allowed to extradite prisoners to countries where capital punishment exists, one early morning Öcalan was shuttled to Kenya, where he was picked up by Turkish commandos. Drugged and tied up, Öcalan was flown back to Turkey; the video of this had a chilling effect across Kurdistan.

A new phase of the Kurdish Struggle was at the door. The PKK had to reinvent itself with its leader behind bars and sentenced to death, the only prisoner in an island prison about 50 miles from Istanbul. In the end, Turkey abolished capital punishment in its quest to join the European Union, and Öcalan's sentence was commuted to life in prison; this also meant that the Turkish state could utilize him in the future. Between 1999 and 2004, the PKK declared a ceasefire, although the Turkish state massacred closed to 800 fighters as they were attempting to leave the country to reach their main base in Iraq. This was the closest the PKK ever came to decomposition, and Öcalan's supreme authority was challenged. But as he himself has pointed out, "The history of the PKK is a history of purges"—the PKK cadre centered around Öcalan survived its challengers, including his own brother.

In prison, Öcalan found time to read and write as he immersed himself in a panoply of thinkers and subjects. Many have referenced how he studied Murray Bookchin;<sup>5</sup> he also studied Immanuel Wallerstein and his World Systems Analysis, as well as texts on the history of civilization and Mesopotamia. Under the guise of formulating his defense for the Turkish courts as well as to the European Human Rights Court and providing a roadmap for peace in Turkey, he penned several manifestos in which he broke with his traditional views on national liberation, with all its historical Marxist-Leninist baggage, and formulated more palatable ideas under his conditions of imprisonment. These ideas were Democratic Autonomy and Confederalism.

A further development shifted the context of the Kurdish question. In late 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), headed to this day by the despotic Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, won the general elections and came to power, ending more than a decade of dysfunctional coalition governments. Modeling itself as what can be termed Islamic neoliberalism, the AKP set about integrating Turkey further into the global financial system by means of privatization, enclosure, and incurring debt. In effect, the debt once owed to the IMF is now held by the private sector. At the same time, Turkey was subjected to desecularization by a creeping fundamentalist morality<sup>6</sup> and the authoritarian rule of Erdoğan. Erdoğan presented this project as returning Turkey to its rightful historical place by reincarnating its Ottoman heritage and emphasizing economic growth for the nation.

In May 2004, the PKK once again began a phase of armed struggle, ending the ceasefire that had held since 1999. Kurds endured increasing repression by the Turkish State and cross-border operations into PKK positions in Northern Iraq. As he consolidated power, Erdogan came to realize that peace with the Kurds would facilitate his plans for regional domination that included petroleum reserves in Northern Iraq and a number of oil pipelines running through the region.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Western leftists are fascinated by the Bookchin-Öcalan connection, it is not as if Kurdish militants are walking around with Bookchin under their arms in the region. Sure, Democratic Confederalism resembles libertarian municipalities, but pointing to Bookchin as the ideological forefather reeks of Eurocentrism.

<sup>6</sup> There is no question that Muslims were subjected to a conservative secularism in Turkey prior to the AKP. Erdogan's electoral successes capitalized on the resulting frustration.

By allying himself with the large Kurdish population, he hoped to pass a number of constitutional changes cementing his power. To put the plans into place, in 2009, the Turkish Intelligence Agency started to act as an intermediary in negotiations between the AKP and PKK representatives in a meeting in Oslo.

Despite the renewed dialogue and various other overtures, the Turkish State continued its repression against Kurds. Starting in April 2009, the KCK (Group of Communities in Kurdistan) trials sent thousands of people to jail. Militarily, one of the most horrific attacks was the bombing of 34 Kurdish peasants on December 28, 2011 in Roboski, Şırnak. The Turkish state claimed they were members of the PKK crossing the border, but then had to admit that they were common villagers involved in cross-border commerce. To this day, no one has been brought in front of a judge for those murders, and the victims of Roboski remain fresh in many people's minds.

The ceasefires came and went with increasing frequency through those years; by the summer of 2012, the PKK had gained considerable territorial power. In this situation, compelled by his territorial ambitions, Erdoğan announced that meetings had been taking place with Öcalan. Three months later, during 2013's Newroz, a letter from Öcalan was read in which he announced another ceasefire. This ceasefire was relatively long-lasting, remaining in place until July 24, 2015. But just when it seemed like stability was returning to Turkey, a chasm opened in Turkish reality on May 31, 2013. This was the Gezi Resistance.

## Gezi

The Gezi Resistance was the largest and fiercest social movement the Turkish Republic has seen enacted by its non-Kurdish population. A movement sparked by a struggle against the development of a park in central Istanbul grew to an all-out national revolt against Erdoğan and his neoliberal policies. Kurds were present in the Gezi Resistance, too, especially after it matured into a non-nationalist and pro-revolutionary event. But for the first time in Turkish history, the Kurds were not the main protagonists of an insurrection.

The participation of the Kurdish movement in the Gezi Resistance is still a controversial topic. A subtle bitterness can be felt on both ends. Many in western Turkey felt like the Kurds were at best too late to join the uprising and at worst did not even want to, for fear of jeopardizing their negotiations and peace process. In response, Kurds in the region pointed to the lack of meaningful solidarity from ethnic Turks during massacre after massacre committed against them over the preceding decades. In reality, both of these positions are caricatures. Many Kurds participated in the clashes around Gezi from day one; shortly after the park was taken from the police, the Kurdish political party of that time (BDP) set up a large encampment at its entrance and flew flags with Öcalan's face over Taksim Square—a surreal sight. Additionally, Kurds were already engaged in their own civil disobedience campaign against the construction of fortress-like military bases in their region.

In the run-up to the Gezi rebellion, the aboveground wing of the Kurdish movement was in the process of forming the HDP (Peoples' Democracy Party) after more than a year of consultations as the HDK (Peoples' Democratic Congress). One of their MPs stood in front of a bulldozer along with only a dozen or so people to block the uprooting of the trees during the first protests in Gezi, well before it became a massive uprising. It is no coincidence then that when it was time to select a logo for the HDP, they chose an image of a tree.

Regardless of grudges, Gezi forever transformed Turkey—and with it the Kurdish liberation movement’s relationship to Turkish society in general and towards the AKP and the peace process in particular. Many Turks who were on the receiving end of police brutality had the veil lifted from their eyes and were finally able to imagine the suffering taking place in southeastern Turkey. The media blackout of the Gezi Resistance made it clear to the participants that they must have been kept in the dark about what was actually transpiring in Kurdistan. At the tail end of the Gezi resistance, when a Kurdish youth named Medeni Yıldırım was killed protesting the construction of a fortress-like police station in Kurdistan, the movement saw him as one of its own and organized solidarity demonstrations with the Kurds.

This furious yet joyous rebellion, initiated by a generation that came of age under successive unstable coalition governments only to become adults under Erdoğan’s decade-long iron rule, served to consolidate hatred against Erdoğan. This generation had been defined as apolitical or even anti-political, but in reality they were what Şükrü Argın has identified as counter-political.

## The Wild Youth of Kurdistan

Cizre is the epicenter of a region in Northern Kurdistan called Botan. The towering mountains in this region are the location of many PKK camps, and the towns at their base are some of the most rebellious. Cizre in particular continues to play an important role to this day. Cizre is where the 4<sup>th</sup> Strategic Struggle Period of the PKK materialized, shifting the point of conflict from mountainous landscapes dotted with guerrilla camps to urban epicenters in which cells of Kurdish militants organized.

In June 2013, in the town of Cizre, a group of 100 youth standing ceremonially in formation announced the beginning of the Revolutionary Patriotic Youth Movement (YDG-H).<sup>7</sup> With members ranging from their early teens to well into their twenties, this new organization coordinated urban guerrilla activity within every major metropolitan center inside Turkish borders. Kurdish youth began to employ Molotov cocktails instead of stones. The recent spike of urban combat in Kurdish towns and neighborhoods can be attributed to this new organization. Rebellious Kurdish youth were especially effective October 6–8, 2014, when it appeared that the city of Kobanê in Rojava was about to fall to ISIS. With the sanction of the official Kurdish leadership, Kurdish youth went on the offensive, devastating state forces. The implicit demand in the riots was for Turkey to stop providing logistical and material support to ISIS, and to allow Kurdish forces passage across its borders—for example, by allowing some heavier artillery to cross Turkey to reach Kobanê from Iraq. After the deaths of fifty people and the imposition of curfews in six different cities and martial law in the Kurdish capital of Amed, the Turkish government finally permitted the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga of the KDP to reach Kobanê with their weapons.

There are great political differences between the PYD and by extension the PKK and the KDP, the current regime of Kurds in Northern Iraq who have had autonomy since the first Gulf War in 1991. The PKK/PYD are fighting for a social revolution based on self-governance, self-defense, autonomy, and women’s liberation, with an emphasis on ecology and a critique of all hierarchies, most notably state power. The KDP, on the other hand, is cultivating a national Kurdish bour-

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<sup>7</sup> The word for “Patriotic” in YDG-H is *yurtsever*, which means more accurately “one who loves his or her homeland.”



geoisie and acts as a close ally of Erdoğan. In the 1990s, the KDP fought together with Turkey against the PKK. Tensions remain high.

The YDG-H is perhaps strongest in Cizre. After the uprising in defense of Kobanê, Cizre entered the national discourse again when youth rose up following the funeral of Ümit Kurt, taking control of the three neighborhoods of Sur, Cudi, and Nur. They were able to create an autonomous zone within these neighborhoods for two months by digging a total of 184 ditches around their neighborhoods. The Turkish state effectively lost control of this area as the youth took over, burning down at least five buildings belonging to the state or its associated interests—including a school where many of them were also students.

On a tour of Cizre, I asked some of the members of YDG-H why they dug ditches rather than building barricades, the traditional revolutionary method of asserting autonomy since time immemorial. My host, Hapo, explained that since the youth are armed with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms, the police cannot exit their armored vehicles, but they can still plow through barricades. But again, since they cannot exit their vehicles, they also cannot traverse the ditches. Hapo described how at first they used pickaxes and shovels to excavate these ditches, but then they commandeered construction vehicles. *The construction vehicles of the municipal government*, he said, sneaking a subtle smile. I realized he meant the municipal government belonging to the aboveground political party of the Kurdish Movement, the HDP.

The wild youth of Cizre are organized into “teams” of around ten individuals. Hapo told me that once the number of a team grows to more than thirty, they split into smaller groups. The teams take their names from Kurdish martyrs, often recent ones and sometimes from Cizre itself—an eerie reproduction of martyrdom and militancy. Teams claim their territory by tagging their names on walls, much as graffiti crews do elsewhere around the world. During the high point of clashes, each neighborhood establishes a base where explosives, Molotov cocktails, and weapons are stockpiled during the day in preparation for the confrontations that occur at night. The younger children are sometimes on the front lines throwing rocks at armored police vehicles, but they are always the ones who sound the alarm by running through the neighborhood shouting: “The system is coming! The enemy is coming!”

The division is clear for the Kurdish militants both in the personal and the political. There is the system, and there is struggle. Students leave the system (universities) in order to join the struggle. The system and capitalist social relations inevitably corrupt all forms of romantic love; hence, real love is love for your people, for whom you struggle. Young militants twenty years of age are not allowed to succumb to their carnal desires or fall in love. If they do, and they are honest about it, they will have to provide a self-criticism and hopefully get away with a punishment only involving a further, perhaps collective, self-criticism session *on the platform*, as they say in the PKK.

It is clear that the PKK is at a turning point: a new generation of militants is hitting the streets, transforming the character of the movement. Perhaps the formation of the YDG-H was a way for the old guard to assert more control over the rebellious youth of the Kurdish slums. Even if such a strategy was at play, the youth are proving hard to control; the official leadership is acknowledging that there are groups acting outside of their directives. Only Öcalan himself could reign them in. The future of the PKK and the Kurdish movement will be determined by this rebellious youth: will they follow the party line lockstep, or come up with their own ideas?

Ultimately, Öcalan had to intervene for the ditches to be closed on March 2, 2015. When I brought this up to Hapo, who consistently expressed skepticism about the official leadership

of the HDP and the peace process, he said that Apo is the line they don't cross, and that their insurrection in Cizre has strengthened his negotiating hand within prison. I was left wondering how much of the leadership cult around Öcalan has to do with his imprisonment, and whether the democratic structures being put in place constitute an attempt to abolish himself as the leader.

On September 4, the Turkish military and police invaded Cizre and declared a curfew which would last for nine days. They enforced this curfew by placing snipers on the minarets of mosques to shoot anyone out on the streets. The siege was only broken under the pressure of a march organized by Kurds from surrounding towns, which was joined by the HDP's parliament members. When people finally entered the town, they found 21 civilians dead, 15 of whom died on the spot after being shot; the others died from their wounds or other illnesses because they could not get to the hospital. Among them was a 35-day-old baby and a 71-year-old man who had attempted to get bread during the curfew. The three rebellious neighborhoods of Nur, Sur and Cudi were riddled with bullets and larger ammunition. The state blamed the PKK for the deaths, although not one member of the state forces was injured—giving the lie to the pretense that the neighborhoods were filled with “terrorists.” This latest massacre in Cizre will be remembered for a long time and fuel the Kurdish movement.

## **The Revolution in Kurdistan**

Like the movements that preceded it, Gezi took great inspiration from the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, and the Arab Spring that were able to topple dictators swiftly. Although Erdoğan still sits on his throne in the palace he built for himself for over a billion dollars, Gezi was not a complete failure, as it opened a new space for joyful revolt in Turkey's future. Syria, another country that rose up during the Arab Spring, seems to have experienced a similarly bittersweet outcome. Bashar Al Assad crushed the rebellion in the central cities of Syria, while the periphery was thrown into a brutal civil war that opened up the stage for jihadist groups from Iraq and elsewhere to arrive and eventually converge under the banner of ISIS.

The silver lining in Syria was supplied by the Kurds in Rojava, who had been organizing clandestinely for decades to support the PKK in the north and to establish their own political and military structures. As in Turkey, the Assad regime did not permit the expression of the Kurdish identity or education in the mother tongue, underscoring the similarity between Kemalism and Baathism. A massacre in the city of Qamishlo, in which the Syrian regime killed 52 people after a soccer riot on March 12, 2004, is often cited as the forebear of the Rojava revolution. The main Kurdish political party, the PYD, is for all intents and purposes the sister organization of the PKK; Öcalan's portrait is ubiquitous in Rojava.

The PYD and others organized under the banner of Tev-Dem (Movement for a Democratic Society) took advantage of the approaching instability in Syria to declare autonomy on July 19, 2012. It was a relatively smooth operation, as preparatory meetings had already taken place in mosques throughout the region: more of a takeover than a battle. They organized themselves into three cantons running along the Turkish border, separated from each other by primarily Arab regions. These cantons are Afrin in the west, Kobanê in the center, and Cizre in the East. It was almost unbelievable that after decades of fighting, the Kurds—now in pursuit of Democratic Confederalism—had claimed their own territory.

Öcalan's Democratic Autonomy and Confederalism is the vision being implemented in Rojava. Autonomy, ecology, and women's liberation are the three central points of emphasis. The most basic unit of this new society is the commune. Communes exist from the neighborhood level to workplaces including small petroleum refineries and agricultural cooperatives. There are communes specific to women, such as the Women's Houses. All these communes are organized into assemblies that go up to the cantonal level. The current economic model in Rojava is mixed: there are private, state, and communal properties. In the Rojava Social Contract (something akin to their constitution), private property is not fully disqualified, but it is said that there will be limits imposed upon it. It is a society still in transition; so far, it is much more anti-state than anti-capitalist, but it is undeniable that there is a strong anti-capitalist push from within. Time will show how far the revolutionaries of Rojava are willing to take it.

The revolution in Rojava is a women's revolution; the Kurdish movement for liberation places women's liberation above anything else. In addition to having their own army and autonomous women-only organizations, almost every organizational structure from the municipal governments to the armed PKK formations is run by co-chairmanship of a man and a woman. Quotas are imposed for memberships and other positions, so that equal participation from both genders is ensured. March 8, International Women's Day, is taken very seriously by Kurdish women, and even more so now with the women's resistance exemplified by the YPJ (Women's division of the People's Defense Units—the YPG). In his writings, Öcalan recognizes patriarchy and the separation of genders as the first social problem in history. Perhaps paradoxically, many Kurdish women militants attribute their liberation to Öcalan and his thought.

## **The Fighters**

Even though the Kurdish seizure of power in Rojava went smoothly, the honeymoon was brief. After capturing a large amount of military machinery from Mosul on June 10, 2014, ISIS pushed north in Iraq and in Syria. With its advance came stories of massacres, enslavement, displacement, and rape. A month and a half later, in August, ISIS reached the Yazidi population, a non-Muslim Kurdish speaking community near the Sinjar Mountains, where they killed thousands and displaced near 290,000 people, 50,000 of whom were stranded on mountains without food or water. ISIS fighters seemed especially keen on wiping out this population belonging to a pre-Islamic faith with many animistic aspects, who had been persecuted for centuries as devil worshipers, withstanding more than seventy massacres in their history. The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government lacked the agility to intervene with its peshmerga forces—in contrast to the PKK, who mobilized rapidly, traveling across the country from its main base on the Iraqi-Iranian border in Qandil. In coming to the rescue of the Yazidi and arming and training this population for self-defense, the PKK gained credibility in the region run by Barzani and his KDP. Despite the tensions between regional Kurdish forces, all the stories and images ISIS circulated through social media had the effect of unifying the once disparate Kurds, as the PKK/YPG joined with the KDP in an uneasy alliance.

Of all of the Kurdish armed forces, the YPG is the newest. The people's defense forces were formed shortly after the revolution, and their numbers quickly swelled with volunteers joining to defend Kurdish territories from ISIS. This wartime mobilization is also supported by conscription, which has started to create tension among young people who are not interested in fighting

or who say they have already done their military service with the Assad Regime. But beyond this simmering point, in places such as Kobanê, the YPG and the YPJ are comprised of people defending their own towns and cities.

Kobanê became ground zero in the resistance as ISIS closed in little by little, taking villages on the outskirts of the city thanks to their recently obtained military superiority. ISIS was especially keen to capture Kobanê, as it occupies the most direct route between the Turkish border and the de facto ISIS capital of Raqqa. In addition, Kobanê was also the launching point of the revolution in Rojava. The YPG and YPJ offered a heroic resistance with the little firepower they had, mostly small arms supported by rocket-propelled grenades and the higher-caliber Russian *Dushkas* mounted on the backs of pickup trucks. As they retreated further and further into the city proper of Kobanê, the YPG and YPJ reached near-celebrity status, thanks in part to the West's romanticization and objectification of YPJ women fighting the bearded hordes of ISIS. Everyone from prominent leftist academics to *Marie Claire* magazine, who featured the YPJ (to the snickering of YPJ members in Kobanê), started singing the praises of the Kurdish fighters.

One has to admit the neatness of the contrast on the Rojava battlefield: a feminist army courageously resisting misogynist bands of fundamentalists. Apparently, many fighters within ISIS believe that if a woman kills them, they will not enter heaven as glorious martyrs. This belief is known by the members of the YPJ and used in a form of psychological warfare on the front lines. The women of the YPJ make it a point to sound their shrill battle cry, a well-known Kurdish exclamation of rage or suffering called *zılgıt*, before they enter into battle with ISIS. They are making sure the jihadists know they are about to be sent to hell.

Hundreds of Kurds from Turkey crossed the border to join the YPG forces defending Kobanê alongside PKK guerrilla units that moved into the region. Turkish leftists also started making the journey, becoming martyrs themselves. In one case, Suphi Nejat Ağırnaslı, a sociology student at one of the most prestigious universities in Istanbul, influenced in his own writings by the French journal *Tiqqun*, went to Rojava only to be martyred after a few weeks. The nom de guerre he had chosen was Paramaz Kızılbaş, a synthesis of the name of a well-known Armenian socialist revolutionary executed by the Ottomans and the Alevi faith, historically repressed in Turkey. This exemplifies the character of solidarity in the region: a Turkish revolutionary, assuming the name of an Armenian one, going to defend the Kurdish revolution.

As reported in the Western media, many Americans and Europeans also made the journey to join the ranks of fighters in Rojava. Some integrated into the YPG or YPJ; others joined other units, such as the United Freedom Forces (BÖG), comprised of communists and anarchists. Apart from international revolutionaries arriving in solidarity with the Kurdish struggle for liberation, there are also ex-military or military wannabes from the UK or the US who believe that the war against Islamic extremists that they were tricked out of by corrupt British and American governments has finally arrived. Some of these internationals have started to warm to the political philosophy of Democratic Autonomy as practiced by their comrades-in-arms; others quickly got out, realizing they were among "a bunch of reds."

The international revolutionaries fighting alongside their Kurdish comrades will return to their homelands with strategic experience in the battlefield and a renewed sense of inspiration and perspective on what is possible when people commit themselves to liberation.

In the middle of fall 2014, it appeared that Kobanê was about to fall. Solidarity demonstrations were held globally. Riots shook Turkey to pressure Erdoğan to stop supporting ISIS. In the meantime, meetings were held between the regional powers to figure out a response. YPG members in

Kobanê recount that it appeared to be a matter of hours before the city would fall; they retreated to a central part of the city, gathering their ammunition to be destroyed rather than captured by ISIS. It was at that moment, rather than a month earlier when ISIS had not even entered the city, that the much-promised US and French airstrikes finally began in earnest.

Beyond a doubt, without that aerial support, the minimally-armed YPG forces would not have emerged victorious. The fact that the bombardment came at the very last possible minute shows that, aside from whatever backroom negotiations and deals were taking place, NATO countries did not want an ISIS victory; but at the same time, they apparently wanted the Kurds to inherit a completely destroyed city.

NATO assistance in the Kurdish self-defense is a touchy subject, to say the least—especially considering that the capture of Öcalan was understood as a NATO operation. When this reality is brought up among YPG members in Kobanê, they first joke about “Comrade Obama.” Pushed further, they point out that while the US and Israel are bad, they aren’t nearly as bad as the Arab Regimes. But really, at the end of the day, it is simply a matter of survival. Ideally, the YPG would be able to obtain the necessary weaponry to mount their own defense; but lacking that, if the question is between ideological purity and survival, the choice seems clear.

## **Kobanê**

Immediately after its liberation from ISIS, Kobanê was a war-torn ruin in which most buildings had lost their upper floors to artillery fire. Aerial bombardment by coalition forces also did significant damage. Mahmud, a friend and comrade from Kobanê, showed me around the city he had never left in his life; his eyes filled with tears as he remembered all his friends who died in those streets. We were walking in a ghost town where the only people we saw were fighters or the small number of holdouts who had stayed behind or just returned from refugee camps in Turkey. They could be seen digging through the rubble, trying to salvage anything from the wreckage. Unexploded munitions and booby traps left behind by ISIS continued to kill even after their departure, with at least ten dead in the first two weeks following the city’s liberation. Despite the high toll paid by the Kurds—the number of fighters killed was above 2000—there was a sense of excitement and victory in the air, as news came in daily of ISIS units being pushed back further and further.

Mahmud is one of three brothers, all of whom are members of the YPG in one role or another. Like practically all of the YPG who have been through the conflict, they have shrapnel in their bodies and hearing loss from explosions and gunfire. An experienced machinist by training, he found a role in the ranks as a gunsmith—not only fixing weapons, but also manufacturing new designs, especially long-range sniper rifles. Yet he was only able to play this part until ISIS entered the city limits of Kobanê. After that, everyone took up arms to fight, including his 13-year-old shop assistant.

Stories of heroism are everywhere, from the sniper who blew up an ISIS tank by shooting his round into its muzzle to others who gallantly climbed on top of another tank to throw a grenade down its hatch. Stories pile upon stories as Mahmud takes me through the city streets, narrating the months-long battle of Kobanê. During one stretch, he didn’t sleep for five days straight—not only because they were under consistent attack, but also because he was so afraid. He said that at one point he wanted to die just so it would be over. From his platoon of about a hundred people,

only four are still alive; we spend many hours looking at pictures of his fallen comrades on his phone. Many of the YPG have smartphones, including Mahmud and his brother Arif, who would be reprimanded by their commander for checking Facebook while they were engaged in trench warfare. His brother Arif was a sniper. But he left the YPG after the trauma of shooting a comrade by mistake.

The stench of death was strong in some neighborhoods, with bodies still under the wreckage and the corpses of ISIS fighters rotting alongside roads littered with abandoned tanks destroyed by the YPG. To prevent the spread of disease, the bodies of ISIS fighters were usually burned; but the sheer number of corpses made it impossible to deal with all of them. Even surrounded by all this death and carnage, joyful moments were common, perhaps due to the news of advances arriving from the front. We spent our evenings hunting chickens with M16s for dinner, then smoking *nargile* after *nargile*, singing around a fire, waiting for the sun to rise over the Turkish border in the distance.

## National Liberation from Borders

Surreal as it was for US planes to assist radical leftist fighters, the aerial bombardment started to shift the tide towards the YPG as they took back territory from ISIS bit by bit, eventually pushing them to the western bank of the Euphrates and coming within 40 km of Raqqa. On July 1, 2015, joint operations between the Free Syrian Army and the YPG liberated Tell Abyad from ISIS. The significance of this was multifold. First, this was the most coordination to occur yet between the FSA and the YPG, perhaps appeasing some of the concerns of Syrian revolutionaries who regard the Kurds as pro-Assad. Second, an important ISIS border access point into Turkey was captured, closing a corridor they had been maintaining into Syria and Raqqa. But perhaps most significantly of all, the taking of Tell Abyad connected the Eastern canton of Cizire with Kobanê, creating an uninterrupted stretch of Rojava and breaking the isolation of Kobanê for the first time.

The Kurds are one of the many casualties of borders crossing the peoples of the world—in their case, the borders drawn by Sykes-Picot at the end of the First World War. These borders between Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran are the ones the Kurds are attempting to remove, and it is this experience that informs their critique of borders everywhere. The Kurds are often mentioned as a people without a nation-state; the PKK led a national liberation struggle for decades, and the Kurdish liberation struggle can still be classified as such—but not in the classical sense. It is almost like national liberation updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Both in Turkey and in Syria, the Kurdish movement is trying to provide a common fighting platform for all oppressed peoples, leftist revolutionaries, and others—a collective of peoples they often refer to as “the forces of democracy.” This platform resembles the intercommunalism of Huey Newton in that it promotes solidarity and common action while preserving the autonomy of each constituent.

This is evident in the politics of the HDP and, more significantly, in the self-governance structures in Rojava—especially in the eastern canton of Cizire, where Kurds, Arabs, and Assyrians live together, participate in communal-self governance, and mobilize fighting forces within the YPG. For a region plagued by ethnic division, the Kurdish proposition is a third way. This is how they refer to their project to contrast it with the choice between ISIS and the Assad regime on one side of the border, and between the AKP and Turkish nationalism on the other.

This proposition presents democratic modernity as an alternative to capitalist modernity and self-governance via confederalism as an alternative to the nation-state. The Kurds are not the only ones attempting to break the borders of the Middle East. In addition to ISIS who has successfully redrawn the map, Erdoğan also has his own ambitions under the rubric of the “Great Middle East Project,” in which Turkey would assume its rightful role (neo-Ottomanism) as the dominant regional power. Already today, most of the foreign business in Barzani’s Kurdish Region in Northern Iraq is Turkish capital. A strong PYD and PKK in the region would be an obstacle to this project.

## **Elections and a Massacre**

For thirteen years, the AKP has won overwhelming victories in Turkish national elections, holding power as a single party. The HDP was able to harness anti-Erdoğan sentiment with a clever political strategy during the run-up to the historic elections of June 7, 2015. The Turkish electoral system has a 10% threshold: unless a party receives 10% of the national vote or above, it cannot enter parliament, and votes cast for it are effectively void. To sidestep this, the Kurdish movement has usually run independent candidates who, after winning a seat, would become party members. While this run-around strategy helped to get about thirty-five representatives into parliament, receiving more than 10% of the vote would secure at least twice as many positions.

The election of June 7 presented the possibility to displace the AKP and sabotage Erdoğan’s ambitions of increasing his powers by means of constitutional changes that would make him the ultimate patriarch of Turkey. Selahattin Demirtaş, the youthful and charismatic co-chairperson of the HDP, made “We won’t let him become president!” one of his main campaign slogans. The hatred of Erdoğan that had culminated in the Gezi uprising intersected with discontent over Erdoğan’s support of ISIS and enthusiasm inspired by the resistance of Kobanê. Consequently, the HDP secured 13% of the national vote and 80 MPs, creating a situation in which no single party could form a government by itself and necessitating that a coalition form to assume power.

The relationship between the armed PKK and the electoral HDP is delicate yet complementary. The HDP must strike a difficult balance: they receive their legitimacy in the eyes of the Kurdish population as the aboveground wing of the armed struggle, but they also need to distance themselves occasionally in order to play the political game successfully on the national scale. Erdoğan and his cronies, who are shrewd and aware of this, stoke the fires wherever they can by pitting the HDP against the PKK and both of them against Öcalan, whom they portray as more levelheaded—an easy task, when communication with him is controlled by the state and no one has heard from him in five months. The HDP is in a precarious position as a legal and unarmed political party often subject to the same repression as PKK members.

Following the election, no one could work out how to create a coalition government. As everyone’s attention was focused on the electoral stalemate, Erdoğan made it clear that he would push for early elections to give the population another opportunity to bring the AKP to power. Then came the massacre in Suruç.

It was just another delegation of young leftists from Istanbul to Kurdistan. This one was organized by the Socialist Youth Associations Federation with the goal of giving a hand in the rebuilding of Kobanê, bringing toys to refugee children, and planting trees in the region. On the

morning of July 20, 2015, SGDF organized a press conference at the Amara Cultural Center, the de facto convergence center for volunteers traveling to assist with the refugee camps. In the midst of this, a suicide bomber killed 34 people. This massacre shocked the whole country, setting in motion a downward spiral of events. Two days later, Erdoğan cut a deal with the US to allow them use of the Turkish Incirlik Air Base against ISIS in exchange for their tacit support of a new campaign of annihilation against the PKK. Seizing upon the murder of two police officers the day after the bombing for justification (a retaliation later explicitly disowned by the official channels of the PKK), the Turkish government began a massive air campaign against PKK positions in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. In addition, raids took place across the country, resulting in more than 2000 arrests and continuing to this day. So belligerent were the actions of the AKP that they even arrested one of the injured from the socialist delegation bombed in Suruç.

The AKP claimed that it was going after all the extremist terrorists in the country: the PKK, ISIS, and the Marxist-Leninist group DHKP-C (The Revolutionary Peoples Liberation Party — Front). Of these three, the DHKP-C does not hold a candle to the others in terms of numbers or effectiveness; it seems they were thrown in for good measure. While the AKP and Erdoğan claim in the media that they are also going after ISIS, in reality this is nothing but window dressing. Of the 2544 arrested by the end of August, less than 5% were arrested on allegations of belonging to ISIS, and many of those were later released. Of the bombing campaign totaling approximately 400 airstrikes, only three targeted ISIS. These airstrikes are targeting PKK camps, especially the central one of Qandil—but civilians have also been killed, such as ten in the nearby Iraqi village of Zelgele.

Although the Suruç bombing targeted the Kurdish movement, it is being used as an excuse to decimate it. As of this writing at the beginning of September, according to the Turkish Human Rights Association more than 47 civilians and 47 PKK guerrillas have been killed. The PKK is hitting back hard wherever it can: as of now, at least 92 policemen or soldiers have been killed, and 24 officials of the state or security forces kidnapped.

In response to this repression, Kurdish towns and cities rose up with demonstrations and riots in every single town for many nights in a row. The response by the state was brutal; media pundits observed that the country had regressed to the bloody 1990s. While this was certainly the case from the standpoint of the state, the Kurdish movement has evolved: Kurds in more than sixteen towns took the initiative of declaring autonomy from the state and began to emphasize their right to self-defense. These declarations were met with more brutality and arrests. Especially in the towns of Silopi and Cizre, the state responded by using snipers to go after children and citizens who weren't even directly involved in the conflicts. House raids and extrajudicial executions soon followed. Bombings of the countryside have resulted in catastrophic forest fires, inflicting yet another form of anguish on the region. Many towns in the region are still declared special security zones, a designation akin to martial law; curfews and operations by special forces are widespread.

A new early election has been called for November 1, 2015. It is already clear that the run-up to the next election will result in escalations from the AKP and Erdoğan, who has shown that he is willing to do anything to hold on to power, even thrust the country into civil war. It is possible that he will use his executive powers to postpone the election for a year on the grounds that there is a security risk for elections to take place. The successes of the Kurds on both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border, their smart political choices and heroic fighting maneuvers have pushed



the AKP and Erdoğan to a breaking point. If the current drive for a truly fascist police state is any indication, his fall from power will be as brutal as his reign.

I am inspired by the perseverance of the Kurds who are attempting to break out of stale leftist dogmas while still insisting on revolution. The transformation of a social movement of millions does not occur overnight, but they have begun to implement new social relations and structures that aim at abolishing the state and other hierarchies, such as men over women or humans over non-humans. From my observations, I believe that this stubborn multigenerational struggle has the potential to transform the world's most sectarian region into autonomous zones of cooperation and solidarity. As long as they are able to survive ISIS and the Turkish State and continue constructing their revolution from below, they will have much more to teach those of us fighting for liberation elsewhere.

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CrimethInc.  
Understanding the Kurdish Resistance  
Historical Overview & Eyewitness Report  
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