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Syria

# The PKK and the issue of self determination for the Kurdish people

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**Besieged by the jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) since October 2014, Kobani became the symbol of Kurdish resistance for Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), which includes the autonomous regions of the North East of Syria, populated mainly by Kurdish population and controlled by the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). Large parts of the Western left have mobilized around the issue, which deserves to be widely praised.**

It is nevertheless possible, in a constructive critical approach, to discuss two aspects of these mobilizations to enable us to come back to the central issue of any prospect of self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria: the liberation of the Kurdish people is intimately linked to the victory of the Syrian revolution.

The first element to question is the will to isolate the struggle for self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria to the dynamic of the Syrian revolution, as we have seen in the International Solidarity call with Kobani made on November 1 signed by a number of left figures, including Noam Chomsky. [\[1\]](#)

In a previous article, [\[2\]](#) we discussed the mistake to isolate the Kurdish issue of the Syrian revolution. We will add here that to deny this connection and deny the struggle of the Syrian popular movement for freedom and dignity is in the benefit of enemies of the Syrian and Kurdish people: neither the Assad regime or the reactionary Islamic forces have an interest in a developed political experience, Syrian or Kurdish, which exists outside of their authoritarian program.

This does not mean that we should not denounce the various sections of the Syrian opposition that still deny the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people and especially the role of the he National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, supported by the Western states, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies, which had an ambiguous attitude during the attacks of the reactionary Islamic forces, including Jabhat al Nusra, against the Kurdish regions in the past. These positions are all the more reprehensible that we must remember the decades of political, social and cultural oppression of the Kurdish people in Syria and policies of colonization or arabisations of the northern regions of Syria implemented by the Assad regime. The northern regions of Syria were also the poorest and the least provided with social services. Not to mention the silence of a large part of the opposition during the Kurdish intifada in Syria in 2004 and some even accusing it of serving foreign "imperialist" projects in order to weaken Syria. [\[3\]](#)

Second observation: the Western left has an uncritical view of the PKK and presents the autonomous regions of Rojava as examples of self-organization from below of the popular masses. Those two elements can be nuanced strongly.

First, we must address the authoritarian practices of the PKK and its Syrian branch, both in their internal organizational functioning and against other citizens and political actors. The authoritarianism of the PYD was demonstrated in its repression and imprisonment of activists and the closure of critical organizations or institutions, such as the independent radio Arta in February 2014. The members of the Syrian Kurdish opposition parties like the Yekiti Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria and Azadi party have particularly suffered from the repression of PYD forces in the autonomous regions of Rojava. [\[4\]](#)

In fact, there have been several protests against the PYD forces and their practices in some cities in Rojava such as Amouda and Derabissyat. In the end of June 2013 for example, the two cities have experienced demonstrations and other protest activities to denounce the repression and arrest of Kurdish revolutionary activists by YPG (Units of

protection of the people), the armed wing of the PYD. [5] In July 2013, new events occurred in Amouda the PYD did not hesitate to fire on the crowd, killing many demonstrators. Furthermore, since October 2014, mandatory conscription was decreed and implemented by the PYD in areas under its control. This decision has caused the departure of many young people from all communities, to escape imprisonment for refusing to serve.

Some protests were organised in recent weeks by the inhabitants of Amouda to condemn both the abduction of women and their enslavement by the IS on one side and on the other side the forced military conscription of young girls in the PYD -with the special case of Hemri Aidi, a young girl of 15 enlisted by force. YPG forces have actually repeatedly enlisted children in their ranks. [6]

We are far from the dynamics from below of the popular councils established in various "liberated" regions of Syria since 2011 with the involvement of local popular forces in the management of various sectors of the society. The Kurdish autonomous regions are on their side more led by dynamic from above and controlled by the PYD. The many portraits of the Kurdish PKK leader Abdullah Ā-calan that cover the walls of government centres of Rojava symbolize this fact.

Do these criticisms mean that we should reject everything? Absolutely not, the three cantons of Rojava provide a form of autonomy that are interesting on many aspects (women's rights, minority participation, secular institutions, etc...). These experiences of autonomy are moreover positive for a Kurdish nation oppressed for decades.

We should also not forget the distrust displayed by the PKK and the PYD to popular protest movement in the past when they were not launched on their initiatives or controlled the party. The PKK for example displayed a passive attitude during the Kurdish intifada in Syria in 2004, seeking more to calm the Kurds who rose up against the oppression of the Assad regime, or at the beginning of the Syrian revolutionary process in 2011. The PKK actually currently coexist in the cities of Qamishli and Hasaka with the forces of the Syrian regime and is not trying to get rid of.

Similarly in 2013 during the popular mobilizations in Turkey following the issue of the Gezi Park, the PKK carefully avoided any statement on the popular protests, while many Kurdish activists joined individually protesters in Istanbul and other large cities that had joined the protests. In Diyarbakir, the largest Kurdish city in Turkey, the number of demonstrations was relatively low. The PKK favoured at the time the consolidation and continuation of the peace process with the government of the AKP in 2012, which was severely challenged since then in view of the continued repression of the PKK and Kurdish activists in Turkey and the attitude of the Turkish government regarding Kobani.

These elements demonstrate the preference of the PKK to change from above and controlled by the party, rather than by changes from below and through mass popular movements.

This does not change the fact that we need to uphold a principled position of support to the Kurdish national liberation movement in its struggle for self-determination in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. It deserves, like all forms of struggle for liberation and emancipation, unconditional support. Once this fundamental principle established, it seems necessary to take a critical look at how these movements are

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[1] See excellent article of Pierre Rousset <http://www.internationalviewpoint.o...>

[2] <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress...>

[3] see <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress...> and <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress...>

[4] see <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/fi...>

[5] see <https://syriafreedomforever.wordpre...>

[6] <http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress...>