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Syria/Kurdistan

On KobanĀ^a, Rojava and the Iraq-Syria wars

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Karman Matin, born in Eastern Kurdistan, spoke to D?HA about the recent developments in the Middle East and attacks of ISIS gangs at Kobanî Canton of West Kurdistan, Rojava.

Karman Matin, professor of international affairs in Sussex University in England told about himself: "I was born in Iran to a Kurdish family. I experienced the Iranian revolution as a young adult. My political consciousness was formed by that experience, which also entailed a period of Kurdish autonomy in the Kurdish region of Iran. My exposure to Kurdish national liberation is also dating back from that period. In terms of academic background, I have studied development studies for my first degree and then done a Masters and Phd in International Relations here at Sussex. Currently I'm working on a paper on the lineages of the current crisis in the Middle East, with a focus on Iraq and Syria where it's most explosive. I'm hoping my research for this paper will provide partial basis for a larger project on the Kurdish national liberation movement." Our interview with Matin is as follows:

Using your research on that paper, can you give context and historical background on Rojava and how it's been under attack?

Karman Matin - The project has been dormant there for a while. Kurdish nationalism has a long history there, just like other parts of Kurdistan. After the protests in Syria turned into a civil war as a result of Assad regime's repression of protests, the Syrian forces withdrew from a number of Kurdish-inhabited areas, which allowed for Kurdish forces and PYD to establish a kind of Kurdish self-administration in this area, in the form of three cantons, in Efrîn, Cizîr, and Kobanî. It heavily emphasizes grassroots participation, gender egalitarian approach, and increased women's participation in all levels of social, political, and public life. It's very ecologically conscious, and inclusive in its reach to different linguistic and ethnic groups living in that region-and there are lots of them, although in relatively small numbers. What's distinctive is that the whole notion of democratic autonomy is rejectionist of the traditional idea of nation-statism. It tries to address the so-called national question as part of the wider question of radical democracy. Although it emphasizes right of self-determination, it does not limit the realization of this right to the idea of a nation-state.

Can you say a little about the attacks on Rojava over the last few years from Al-Nusra and now ISIS or Daesh? Where have these attacks been coming from?

The Syrian army withdrew from this region and PYD established its cantons. The Turkish government was alarmed and all reports suggest that it encouraged and supplied radical Islamist forces within Syrian opposition to target these cantons and the Kurdish forces very early on. This continued and reached a climax with the rise to prominence of ISIS or IS, which has been constantly attacking Kurdish forces. Kobanî has been under attack for more than 18 months, in fact. After the advance of ISIS in Iraq, they intensified their attacks on Kobanî. Kobanî is in the middle of a vast territory controlled by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Without it, ISIS would have a much less continuous controlled territory. But probably once [the attack on Kobanî] started, it turned into a highly symbolic point given ISIS' rapid victory in other places. Not capturing it seemed very demoralizing and embarrassing for IS. In their media releases, you can also see that they are treating and talking about the Kurds and PKK using the word "murtad," which in Islamic discourse refers to Muslims who have left Islam.

I wonder if you could comment on the U.S. provision to Kobanî. What kind of agenda do you think the U.S. is pursuing?

I think the provision of arms was imposed on the U.S. because of the confusion of its strategy, which according to

Obama didn't exist well into this month. I think ISIS, the U.S., and Turkey all expected Kobanî to fall quickly. As it did not fall and days went by, the U.S. administration was increasingly embarrassed by its inaction. It was pressured by its critics at home, the Republicans and others. In this peculiar circumstance where world media was able to produce live coverage. Daily Telegraph had live coverage of Kobanî. And hence, at some point, the U.S. was almost forced into this intervention. But it could also be seen as a way for the U.S. to pressure Turkey to take a more active role in the coalition. Turkey, knowing what the U.S. wanted, tried to use Kobanî as an instrument for dictating certain terms on the U.S. Airdropping weapons and aid finally pressurized Turkey into a 180 degree turnabout in their policy by saying "we can do it without you, so you shouldn't overplay your hand." All in all, the U.S. is not left with many options. It's a difficult argument to sell not to engage PYD at some level. And what can come out of it is by no means predetermined and depends on the balance of forces, the particular aims the U.S. might define in negotiations with PYD, and what the PYD can and will put to them. So unlike many on the left, I don't think the U.S. has a kind of grand strategy. I think it's a very precarious situation the U.S. is in, with Qatar and Saudi and Turkey each having their own aims and agenda. Without them, it would be highly problematic for the U.S. to be engaged and without being engaged, the Iraqi government would likely fall, and that would make a mockery of U.S. foreign policy since the invasion of Iraq. I think the U.S. is in quite a difficult position and its reaching out to the Kurds doesn't necessarily mean conspiracy.

Speaking of Iraq, can you comment on the attack on Shengal (Sinjar) and on ISIS' emergence in Iraq, their seizure of arms? What factors made this possible?

I think the attack wasn't unexpected. The poor way in which it was defended by KRG, the so-called peshmerga forces, had to do with KRG's naïve optimism about ISIS being essentially concerned with central Iraqi state and not having any particular appetite to attack Kurdish region. Once the attack came, they retreated and it was only the YPG who came and rescued the Êzîdî (Yezidi) civilians. Anyone knowing a little about ISIS ideology and project would expect them to attack a non-Muslim minority right next door to them.

Can you talk about the current situation in South Kurdistan now?

Militarily, their defense is more effective. Politically, because of the poor performance of KDP forces, the rival party PUK is now politically on the offensive and trying to score political points by highlighting the poor performance of KDP forces especially in Shengal area. KDP has been generally very quiet and passive with respect to the war in Kobanî. Although now they claim they have been lobbying Turkey for help, publicly they did very little until last few days.

What about Turkey? Can you talk about the state of the peace process, renewed military activity, and the political situation there?

The reality is the peace process seemed to never have been taken seriously by the Turkish side. There were certain reforms, but the real issues were never addressed - for example, the infamous terror law that is the basis of arrest and detention of thousands of Kurdish political activists and others. There was no change in the prison situation of Êcalan, which PKK had demanded. So there weren't really many concrete and important steps from the Turkish side. Now neither side has declared it dead. At least officially both sides seem to be still kind of committed to it. I think PKK will be much more assertive in its demands from now on, especially if Kobanî manages to decisively defeat IS. That will certainly strengthen their position. Especially if they and PKK manage to maintain some form of diplomatic line with the U.S., which makes a lot of European states more amenable to removing PKK from their list of terrorist organizations. That would again have impacts on PKK's negotiation position. All in all, I think PKK is in a stronger position than a month ago in relation to the peace talks. But the AKP has a history of political maneuvering in the approach to elections. One election is underway next summer, for the general assembly, which AKP sees as the opportunity to get the required majority or reform the constitution to allow a more powerful presidency, which is now

occupied by Erdogan himself. So in a way he needs the Kurdish vote. One would imagine the PKK and BDP, the official legal Kurdish party in Turkey, would read the AKP's hand here and act accordingly.

Can you say a little bit about the role of the solidarity protests in Turkey, attempts to cross the border, as well as the explosion of protests across tens of cities and their brutal suppression? How do you analyze that?

Well, there is a long history of such acts of solidarity. When Ā-calān was captured in '99 there was widespread protest in Iranian Kurdistan, for example, in which more than 12 people were killed in one of the Kurdish cities. So ordinary Kurds have a strong sense of solidarity with fellow Kurds elsewhere. It's mostly the circumstances that might limit the expression of such solidarity. And with modern means of communication, organizing events and demos of this kind is much easier than before.

Could you talk about the projects in Rojhilat [East Kurdistan, in Iran]? Could you give more details on that, as it's under-discussed?

PKK's sister party, PJAK, announced a new movement called KODAR, Democratic Society in the East. This was described not as a political party but as a movement, which seems to be similar to Rojava canton system: a radical bottom-up form of democracy with widespread participation of women and subaltern classes as the basis. The difference is in Rojava there are territories controlled by PYD. In Rojhilat. It's simply a concept, a concept which they seek a gradual propagation of. This has the advantage of not directly attacking the existing state form, and therefore having a chance of being an interlocutor of the Iranian state. In fact, PJAK have issued statements and letters to the Iranian state proposing negotiations and a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question. The situation over there is a bit different, because unlike Syria where PYD was the leading and hegemonic force and still is, in Iranian Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan, that's not the case. So it is a bit more complex than Turkey and the Syrian case. In Iran the non-PKK parties probably are all in all more progressive and radical than KDP and PUK in Iraqi Kurdistan. [These parties] might technically be more at ease with PJAK and PKK, but there are also serious differences between them.

Could you comment generally on the potential right now for the spread of radical political projects? Kobanî has become a flashpoint of resistance, showing the possibility of the survival of another way of life in the Middle East. What do you see as the possibility for radical democratic autonomy spreading in the Middle East in general?

If the Syrian experience survives the current onslaught by ISIS, I think it will have a very strong potential for being a model of democratic experience in the region. In a region that is ravaged by sectarian and ethnic conflict, the very formulation of that kind of project from a local force with considerable constituency is very important. But I also have no doubt that regional actors, Turkey in particular, will do everything they can to undermine it. While there is lots of potential, there is no automaticity. In the end, it ultimately depends on the wider balance of forces in the region: the PKK's relation with the Turkish state, the PKK and PYD's relation with KRG, and most immediately, whether the PYD in Syria can withstand IS assaults. At the moment, a successful defense of Kobanî is very crucial.

You mentioned sectarian conflicts. Can you say a little more about the origin of these kinds of sectarian divisions, in the Iraq War or in Syria?

The colonial states which were established in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire deliberately recruited the state elite from minorities in order to keep them weak enough not to challenge the colonial rulers, and strong enough to maintain internal order. In Iraq, the British made the Sunni minority the dominant power and in Syria France made the Alawi minority the dominant power. Once the colonial powers left, those minorities had already a lot of political and

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economic investment to defend through violence. That violence always appeared to have an ethnic and religious element from the start. Nonetheless, the open ethnic sectarian conflict was never of the kind that we see today; after all, people saw the state, rather than the ethnic identity of the state men, as the target of their discontent.

The Iraq war was the turning point because facing the insurgency from disempowered Sunni Arabs, the U.S. deliberately deployed and manipulated sectarianism—for example, by letting the Shia militia religiously cleanse many parts of Baghdad and different parts of Iraq. Much of the manpower of ISIS is not actually ISIS; it's actually ordinary Arab Sunnis in the region who hate the central state, in this case Iraq or, in Syria, Assad. And once they do find themselves joining the ISIS, there is very little way back, because then the other side indiscriminately attacks those areas, as for example Shia militia do in Iraq at the moment. People join IS not because they are extreme Salafis, but because there are real objective grievances that translate to support for ISIS. Once that support is expressed, you burn the bridges and it's difficult to get out. I don't think the social support of IS is very big. Its cadre is very small. But it finds itself in a large area where the population is so hateful of the other side that they find themselves on IS' side rather than be on the side of the central state.

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