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Kurdistan

Regaining hope in Rojava

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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This is a revolution in consciousness, not only in politics, and it has transformed the lives of countless women and men for generations to come.

Sometime in early February, I was excited to receive an invitation to participate in a women's delegation to Rojava, the de-facto autonomous Kurdish majority region in northern Syria. The delegation was open to women journalists, activists and lawyers, and would be timed to coincide with International Women's Day.

I arranged to go with two people I hadn't met before: Ali, a friend of a friend, and Kimmie who I had interviewed over Skype for my book about female hitchhikers. She had already hitchhiked all around West Africa solo and had been blogging about Kurdish and Middle-Eastern issues recently, so she seemed like a good candidate for an adventure. None of us had any idea what to expect, not really. But we are all very open, flexible, and up for a challenge.

We needed that determination and flexibility to cross the border from the KRG – the Kurdish Regional Government in the north of Iraq – to Rojava. We had been informed that the border was “in the personal hands of” Massoud Barzani, the Prime Minister, and that we would need to get permission.

I had grown sceptical from years of organising in social movements: was I about to see a revolution with my own eyes?

This proved unimaginably difficult, as nobody able to give the permission is willing to answer the telephone or email. To add to this, around the time we began planning our trip, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, who are allied with Turkey, decided that the border crossing was no longer open to freelance journalists. Soon after that it was no longer open to any journalists, except for representatives of very large and well-known media agencies. Since we visited, the border has been completely closed down.

We finally got permission after two days of emails and phone-calls from our hotel room in Zakho, and a full day waiting at a checkpoint just before the official border crossing, a river that slices between the two countries. You cannot imagine the excitement we felt on that rusting blue boat as we drifted across the waters to Syria.

I had grown sceptical from years of organising in social movements: ecological, anti-militarist, feminist, movements for democracy, campaigns against fracking and motorways and airport expansion and wars, and wars, and wars. What I had learned was this: we can make tiny changes, we can have small successes, but what we are fighting is so much bigger than us. I learned to do positive action for its own sake, rather than dreaming of success. I learned how to not let defeat cripple me. But now, was I about to see a revolution with my own eyes?

We managed to arrive just in time for International Women's Day and we marched alongside thousands of women in colourful and ornate dresses, whooping and singing, through the streets of Derbesi – a village sliced in half by the Turkish-Syrian border. “Jin! Jiyan! Azadi!” we chanted – woman, life, freedom! Many of the women and girls carried flags or banners. All of them smiled at us with warmth in their eyes, even the women guarding the march with ageing Kalashnikovs, who kissed and hugged us just like all the other mothers, sisters and grandmas we met that day.

Over the next few days we had a whirlwind tour of projects. We visited a women's health centre in Serekaniye, run by a highly committed young doctor from the Netherlands on very scant means, with three Kurdish co-workers who she is training up. Between dealing with patients, Dr Ronahi answered our questions patiently, always smiling, switching

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between Kurdish, English, Turkish and Arabic. "Some women walk for many miles to reach the health centre from villages," she told us as a small group of women in black chadors arrived with children in tow.

What we saw was way beyond feminism as we know it.

The health centre was opened by Weqfa Jina Azad a Rojava, the Foundation of Free Women in Rojava, who are aiming to open a women's healthcare centre and a preschool in every neighbourhood in every city in Rojava. We also visited two preschools that they have already opened, as well as a women's academy.

It was becoming obvious after only the first couple of days that we had all massively underestimated the scale of this experiment. I had known about the women-only armed forces as they have been heavily covered by western media, and I had heard a lot of talk about the strength of feminist movements in the region. But what we saw was way beyond feminism as we know it.

Women in Rojava have completely taken control of their own systems in every aspect of their lives, from healthcare to education to law-making and justice, as well as three separate defence forces and an independent economic body.

Across the region, the society is organising itself into a coordinated democratic system that works from the bottom up, like a tree. This system is called democratic confederalism, and it comes from the ideas of Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK.

In this system, people first meet together at the local "commune" level, which can include a whole village or from 30 to 400 or more households. The communes then send elected, rotating delegates up to the next "neighbourhood council" level, comprised of the coordination boards of 7 to 30 communes. From there delegates go up to the District People's Council. Decisions are made at the level they affect and all representatives are elected, with one male and one female for every post.

There are commissions to deal with issues such as defence, economics and justice. There is a separate Women's Council at every level, and women-only commissions that work together with the general commissions, such as the economics commission. Kongira Star is the women's movement umbrella organisation which, like all other commissions and public bodies, are represented in The Tev Dem, or Movement for a Democratic Society.

Many laws have recently been passed in Rojava, thanks to the strength of the women's movement. They have outlawed polygamy and forced marriages and brought the minimum legal age for marriage to 18. Women now automatically get custody of their children in the case of a divorce. Women facing a wide range of issues can now go to the Mala Jin or Women's House. So far, there are thirteen Mala Jin in the Cizire canton alone.

Problems they deal with include husbands taking second wives, forced marriages, inheritance issues and domestic abuse. As a house of justice, the Mala Jin takes a mediation approach, involving discussions between all affected parties where possible – a couple, a family, two or more families or tribes – and finding a solution together. In serious cases, the women of the Mala Jin can decide on a punishment for the perpetrator, such as a period of banishment, or they can send him to the official court system, where he may face prison, though the women we interviewed in the Mala Jin expressed a strong wish to move away from prison and other non-restorative forms of punishment.

The women's economy unit, or Aboriya Jin, are largely involved with co-ordinating co-operatives. They told us proudly that they had just given a grant of 700 cubic metres of land to a group of women who are going to use the land collectively. They also talked about a seed bank project that is being developed. Later, we had the chance to

visit a cooperative that is just being set up.

The Greenhouse Project is a little piece of heaven in what used to be the front-line. This is where I saw trees and even a butterfly for the first time in Rojava, and where the air is the cleanest. A woman with mischievous charm and a contagious energy showed us around the project she is setting up. After everything is running smoothly, women from eighteen communes will take over from her and grow food collectively, as a cooperative. They are also establishing an on-site education facility to teach women farming skills, traditionally seen as men's work.

A great deal of importance is vested in education at every level of every system. A huge percentage of the population is illiterate. The Kurdish language was banned by the Assad regime in Syria, as well as by the neighbouring Turkish state, and the region kept economically poor. Add to this an incredibly patriarchal culture with entrenched ideas about women and we can begin to get an idea of how incredible this transformation really is.

Women are now attending academies where they learn about a wide range of topics, including the history of the region, leadership and responsibility, ethics, law, democratic politics, the system of Rojava, legal self-defence, the autonomy of women, ecology and more. Classes are taught on women's history, based on Ocalan's sentiments that "Housewifisation is the oldest form of slavery". This is really radical stuff. Women in communes, villages and refugee camps are being taught about their own bodies and reproductive systems, challenging centuries of shame and self-hatred. Lessons are participatory, involving discussions and debates rather than the traditional top-down teacher-student dynamic. Classes are also taken out into the community and organised within communes and councils.

Women have their own separate defence forces at three different levels, which are run alongside, but independently from, the male forces. Aside from the YPJ – the women's military force, which has been the subject of many western documentaries and news reports, there are the asayish, who are often described as being like a police force, and the HPC, the newly formed civilian defence force.

Criticism and self-criticism are built into the system at every level. Women in the organisations we visited often asked us, "Do you have any criticism for us? What could we improve?" Women in Jineology or "women's science" study and critically analyse feminist movements in other countries, as well as other kinds of social systems, liberation movements and ideologies, including feminist, anarchist, socialist and libertarian movements and ideas. They see western feminist movements as highly reformist.

The second week

Our second week in Rojava was very different from the first. We were no longer treated as visitors, no longer on a tour, but were a part of the fabric of Rojava. We were staying in the newly opened International House, taking part in daily activities like cooking collective meals, participating in somewhat lengthy meetings about household issues, going to Kurdish language training and social events alongside other European people who have chosen to live in Rojava – people who are making documentaries, people who are founding projects, people who have been fighting or are in the process of training to fight.

This is where I began to understand what life inside Rojava could really be like for me if I stayed.

We all thought about staying. For me, these thoughts were always fleeting. I had a husband waiting for me back home, unfinished commitments and responsibilities that made staying impossible, or at least highly irresponsible. Ali

changed her mind several times, but ultimately decided it wasn't quite the right time to make such a large spontaneous decision. But Kimmie decided to stay.

Saying goodbye to Kimmie was tough. The day we left, she came with us in the car as Jiyan – the woman who had been our translator, guide and friend – drove us back along the seemingly endless road, through a string of cities and villages interspersed with the same oil wells and dreary countryside, then into some mountains, and finally the river that divides Syria from Iraq.

This revolution is not only bottom up, it's also inside out.

I remember feeling that I was not quite the same person who had been in the little rusting blue boat two weeks earlier, seemingly a lifetime ago.

The day after we left Rojava, the border closed. Since that day, nobody has been able to enter or leave legally, except a handful of medical professionals. People leaving by irregular means are arrested and imprisoned in Iraq.

Rojava is now facing an escalating crisis: not only sandwiched between ISIS, Assad and a very angry Turkey, but the supply route has been cut and a large scale famine is on the horizon. The chemical fertiliser that the agriculture depends upon has now run out and crop production has decreased dramatically. Only a third of the usual wheat harvest will be produced this year. Food and fertiliser imports have ceased because of the embargo. The region must become completely self-sufficient, and fast.

Some friends in Rojava are now raising funds for an ambitious project to transform the region from a chemical-dependent wheat monoculture, into a diverse organic farming culture. The plan is for the region to make all of the organic fertilizer it needs by collecting biological waste from the towns, villages, and farms, alongside a full education programme to teach residents how and why they should separate waste.

My lesson

All these years of organising in social movements in Europe taught me that hope was futile – but I was wrong. There is a real revolution happening now, in my lifetime, and it's more beautiful than I imagined possible. It isn't perfect, nothing ever is, but the strength, love and determination of the women in Rojava has shown me what struggle really means. They have shown me the real meaning of solidarity, and they have given me hope.

People ask me if I think this revolution will last, will somehow make it. I don't know what the future will bring. But I do know that this revolution is not only bottom up, it's also inside out. This is a revolution in consciousness, not only in politics, and it has transformed the lives of countless women and men, perhaps for countless generations to come.

In some ways, the revolution has already won.

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