



Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions

Trump's 'no fly zone' escalates U.S. war against Syria

29 July 2017, by **Jeff Mackler**

State Department officials asserted that the downing of the Syrian jet was in accord with U.S. policy to operate under its unilaterally established "rules of engagement" that include the "collective self-defense" of its "Syrian partners." Translated, the quoted phrases amount to a declaration that the U.S. and its imperial allies in Syria will attack any and all forces that seek to interfere with U.S. imperialist objectives.

In addition to its virtual "no fly zone" over the Raqqa region, U.S. generals have set up a similarly "protected" garrison at al-Tanf in southern Syria, on the key highway between Damascus and Baghdad, and where its "Syrian partners" and U.S., British, and Norwegian advisers are based. Here too, U.S. military tops have warned pro-Assad forces to stay out, having tagged this region with the newly coined euphemism, "zone of deconfliction."

After the June 18 downing of the Syrian jet fighter, U.S. officials cynically asserted that "the coalition does not seek to fight the Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them ... [but] will take appropriate measures to protect our forces." Then, just two days after they

shot down the Syrian aircraft, U.S. warplanes shot down an Iranian drone near the al-Tanf military base.

Establishing U.S. "No Fly Zones"

On several occasions, U.S. warplanes obliterated pro-Assad forces, including Iranian-backed militia, that had ventured inside its "protected zone" near al-Tanf.

After a May 18 U.S. attack, Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis declared: "We should not take this U.S. strike as a sign that the U.S. is getting more involved in Syria," an example of Orwellian doublespeak if ever there was one.

CBS News reported that on June 6 and again on June 8, when "27 [pro-Assad] regime vehicles drove within 18 miles of al-Tanf, which breached the [U.S.-declared] 34-mile radius of the army convoy's operations, U.S. aircraft first attempted to buzz the regime, but when the convoy didn't turn around, they [the U.S. forces] conducted a strike against some of the vehicles."

"The rebels being trained at al-Tanf

are from a number of Arab rebel groups, referred to by the U.S. as Vettered Syrian Opposition, or VSO, who oppose both the Assad regime and ISIS

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/origins> ...>," according to an article by Joshua Keating on the Slate website. Keating noted that "U.S. Special Forces have been increasingly fighting alongside these rebel groups in Southern Syria."

The Wall Street Journal's Yaroslav Trofimov reported: "The U.S. attack at al-Tanf is significant not because the U.S. has once again struck Assad's forces, but because it did so in defense of Syrian rebels." The same report observed, "Once skeptical about U.S.-backed anti-Assad 'rebels,' Trump stated in a 2015 election debate that 'we have no idea who they are.'" Trump had suggested that they might be ISIS and added that "We can't be fighting ISIS and fighting Assad." Today, the U.S. is indeed fighting Assad, directly and indirectly, but its focus on ISIS is more complicated.

A June 10 New York Times article, for example, noted that U.S. forces in Raqqa were attacking ISIS from the North, East and West, but not the South. ISIS forces were allowed to evacuate Raqqa, weapons and military

gear in tow, heading south along the Euphrates Valley toward Deir Al Zour, where obviously they might be useful in assisting the ISIS attempt to blockade Syrian forces in the city.

U.S. contemplates “stabilization light”

The public policy of the U.S. was presented in bold outline by several U.S. officials and top imperialist planners and reported in the June 23 New York Times under the headline, “U.S. Sends Civilians to Stabilize Recaptured Syrian Areas.” The referenced “civilians” include representatives from the CIA-directed Agency for International Development and representatives from the array of countries that are supporting the U.S. war in Syria. Billions of dollars are to be expended in this effort, not to rebuild Syria, but to insure the stability of the occupying force in the regions the U.S. seeks to establish under its control.

A minimum of 1000 U.S. troops would remain in these “recaptured” regions, according to The Times report, and undoubtedly qualitatively more if the U.S. warmakers believe they can further leverage their intervention.

In the same article, Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, expressed a note of caution: “Syria is not a country that we control. This is stabilization light. We do not have, nor do we intend to get, control of the place, which would enable us to move and do these state-building activities” (my emphasis).

She added, “What is also very important to understand is what is the tolerance of the Syrian government for the U.S. to go in and do these activities. There have been increasing tensions with the regime, with the Iranians and with the Russians and the possibility that we are backing into a war with the Assad government and its backers.” Needless to say, such a war has been underway for years despite the U.S. lie that its illegal, uninvited presence in Syria is to fight ISIS.

The June 18 attack on the Syrian aircraft was not the first such overt assault since 2011, when the short-lived Syrian Arab Spring was quickly hijacked by covert U.S.-backed terrorist forces aimed at the same “regime change” operation in Syria that the U.S. had previously orchestrated in Iraq, Libya, and Egypt. Since the April 7 U.S. Tomahawk missile attack on the Syrian Shayrat air base—under the pretext of retaliation for the unproven claim that the Assad government used sarin gas—U.S. threats and overt attacks on Syrian government forces and its supporters have become routine.

(A June 25 detailed article refuting President Trump’s accusation that the Syrian government used sarin gas in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 has been published on the German on-line website Welt N24 Politik. Its author, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, cites several top U.S. military advisers to President Trump as insisting that “this was not a chemical weapons strike.” But even after receiving reports that sarin gas was not used by the Assad government, or anyone else, the advisers note that Trump proceeded to bomb Syria anyway.)

The longstanding covert U.S./NATO/Gulf State monarchy regime-change war against Syria, wherein billions of dollars have been secretly extended to train and arm virtually all forces that aim to remove the Syrian government, has now become open. The notion that a civil war between competing Syrian factions prevails in Syria is a terrible fraud—one that is employed by both the U.S. government and its bipartisan propagandists, but also, tragically, by sections of the U.S. left. Syria, as with all poor and oppressed nations, is the undeniable victim of a U.S.-orchestrated imperialist attack, little different from the imperialist conflagrations that plague oppressed people and nations around the world—from the Middle East to Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Hillary Clinton’s election-time advocacy of a “no fly zone” in Syria—aimed at preventing Syrian and allied forces, including Russia, Iran and the Lebanese-based

Hezbollah, from ridding Syria of U.S.-backed forces—has now become President Donald Trump’s official policy.

“Deconfliction” is the new U.S.-invented term to designate the ever-expanding and always changing U.S. “no-fly zones,” that is, portions of Syria that the U.S. hopes to occupy now to maximize its leverage in a contemplated postwar Syrian negotiated settlement wherein Syria’s future is to be determined not by the Syria people or government but rather by the U.S.-established military relationship of forces on the ground.

As U.S. air war Middle East chief Lt. General Jeffrey Harrington stated, “Every war must come to an end, and when it does there will be a negotiated settlement.” In this context, Harrington bragged to the New York Times that his success in Syria resided in his efforts to increase the “space” controlled by U.S.-backed forces.

Syria’s Right to Self-Determination

With the Syrian government’s September 2015 request to the Russian and Iranian governments and Hezbollah forces in Lebanon to intervene on its behalf, Syria has retaken large parts of the country that were previously occupied by ISIS and other U.S.-backed forces. Some estimates put that previously occupied figure at two-thirds of the country. Syria, a sovereign nation, has every right to self-determination, that is, to defend itself from imperial attack and to seek the support of allies to challenge U.S.-led war and regime change efforts.

Al Udeid is the U.S. Central Command headquarters in the Middle East—the nerve center of its air campaigns in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It is from Al Udeid that the U.S. conducts its now 16-year war in Afghanistan and its current wars in Iraq and Syria. Al Udeid supplied the air and ground forces in the U.S./NATO “humanitarian war” that destroyed Libya’s infrastructure. U.S.-backed mercenaries from Qatar then proceeded to “liberate” Libya’s capital

of Tripoli using the pretext that the Gadhafi government was about to exterminate 50,000 unarmed civilians in Benghazi. British authorities now admit that there was no such threat. Neither did the Saddam Hussein government have the "weapons of mass destruction" that the U.S. warmakers insisted were about to be unleashed on the world.

U.S. general espouses policy objectives

"If the Syrians were going to make a run at our guys, we were going to be in a position to defend them ourselves," said Lt. General Harrington in a May 23 New York Times interview. "Our intent was to be in position to support our guys and get back into fighting ISIS." The reference to "our guys," of course, includes NATO and U.S.-financed and abetted terrorist forces aimed at Assad's removal. There are no other forces in Syria today that operate independently of U.S. imperialism and its coalition partners.

This May 23 article entitled, "Inside the Air War Over Syria: A High Altitude 'Poker Game,'" offers what The New York Times calls "a rare glimpse into how the [U.S.] military plans and orchestrates the complex ballet of strike, surveillance and refueling aircraft that keeps the war going around the clock."

This seemingly endless war has taken a terrible toll on the Syrian people. A respected polling organization—"ORB International, which does polling for Western nations, including the U.S. government"—nevertheless demonstrated that support for the Bashar Assad government and its Iranian allies far exceeds support for the U.S. and its "coalition partners," including the Free Syrian Army, al-Qaeda and similar groups. Support for ISIS was miniscule.

Regardless, recognition and defense of Syria's right to self-determination—"an inalienable right of all poor and oppressed nations under imperialist attack or threatened

by colonial occupation"—is the critical dividing line in the U.S. antiwar movement today. While not taking any position on the Assad government itself, U.S. antiwar organizations like the United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) are staunch defenders of Syria's right to self-determination. UNAC unanimously re-affirmed this stance at its recent June 16-18 national conference in Richmond, Va., where over 300 activists from 31 states drew up plans for future coordinated, independent, mass mobilizations against U.S. imperialist wars. (See UNAC's adopted Action Plan at unacpeace.org <<http://unacpeace.org>> .)

The principle of the right of self-determination of oppressed nations has its origins in the worldwide struggles of oppressed people to win their freedom from the world's chief colonizing and imperialist great powers that had previously divided and re-divided the world and subjected poor and conquered peoples to their rule. The history of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia is in great part a history of the just struggles of the conquered and occupied nations for freedom and self-determination.

Socialists and other democratically minded organizations have traditionally supported all such struggles against imperialist intervention, whether their leadership was socialist, bourgeois nationalist or even downright reactionary. This was the case, for example, when fascist Italy invaded feudal Ethiopia at the beginning of WWII, or more recently when the U.S. invaded Iraq and deposed the Saddam Hussein government. (Hussein had previously been a U.S. ally and surrogate when he invaded Iran in 1980 in a six-year war that took the lives of one million Iranians and 800,000 Iraqis.)

In all cases, the key criteria for opposition to imperialist war has been the understanding that, freed from direct colonial control, the working masses of these oppressed nations have the best opportunity to deal with their own indigenous oppressors. The resultant weakening and defeat of the imperialist occupier upon its forced withdrawal is an added bonus that factors into any world balance sheet

measuring the relationship between imperialist subjugators and their victims.

The right of self-determination includes Syria's right to call for help from Russia, Iran, and others as they see fit. Such support—"however equivocal and for whatever opportunist reasons it may be given"—can have a significant impact on thwarting U.S. imperialist objectives. As compared to late 2015, much of Syria today is free from the direct control of the forces let loose by U.S. imperialism. It is these forces that are overwhelmingly responsible for the estimated 500,000 Syrians killed, including 100,000 Syrian Army soldiers as well as the 1.5 million Syrian refugees that are today scattered across the Middle East and elsewhere.

This is not to say that the Russia's or Iran's primary objective is the liberation of Syria from imperialist control, and certainly not the establishment of a socialist or even democratic Syria. Vladimir Putin's objectives are simply to use Russian influence in Syria as a bargaining chip to negotiate with the U.S./NATO cabal and win some concessions with regard to NATO's threatening encirclement of Russia and its imposition of stinging sanctions arising out of Russia's opposition to the neo-fascist, US/EU-backed coup in Ukraine.

The recent widely televised two-part "Putin Interviews" with filmmaker Oliver Stone revealed Russian perspectives and politics in bold relief when Stone felt compelled to correct Putin's repeated assertions of friendship with his "U.S. partners." Stone asked, "How can you repeatedly call the U.S. your partner when it is ever surrounding you with NATO troops and imposing hurtful sanctions?" Putin could only smile and repeat his solidarity and claimed "partnership" with the U.S. while holding out his hopes that peaceful negotiated solutions of their differences would be forthcoming.

Putin, a spokesperson par excellence for a weak and isolated Russian capitalism, basked with Stone in the splendor of his ornate state-owned Russian dacha home, while praising

the Russian Orthodox Church, expressing his solidarity with U.S. imperialism's "fight against terrorism," and ridiculing the great 1917 Russian Revolution. Putin, who supported the U.S./NATO war that reduced Libya to rubble, lacked the good sense to hide his reactionary social views as he disparaged women and LGBTQI people. No liberating friend of the Syrian masses, Putin seeks a negotiated accommodation with U.S. imperialism. This is similar to other lesser capitalist nations that are increasingly compelled to bend to the dictates of the world's sole superpower.

Yet Russia's role in forcing the U.S.-backed armed forces in Syria to retreat cannot be dismissed, if for the sole reason that, absent an overt imperialist conquest, opportunities for future struggle of Syria's working

masses to advance their own interests will be that much greater. Tragically, history does not always offer a clear and straight path to liberation. Absent Russian and Iranian intervention in the Syrian conflict, the likelihood of US/NATO imperial victory would be virtually assured. The alternative to Russian and Iranian support for Syria can only be Syria's return to imperialist-imposed great power domination or perhaps formal division or incorporation into neighboring states.

Today, Syria's future rests less on the intentions of Russian or Iranian capitalists than it does on the future emergence of an independent anti-imperialist and socialist force inside Syria that champions the interests of the Syrian working masses and on capacity of antiwar forces in the U.S. and around the world to mobilize

millions in the streets demanding "U.S. Out Now!" "Self-determination for Syria!" and "Money for Jobs, Not War!" These are the starting points for the mass antiwar movement that can best serve the interests of the Syrian people.

In addition to marches, rallies, and teach-ins, the economic might of the U.S. working class must be brought to bear. Indeed, the struggles against all U.S. wars abroad and the fight against the ever-intensifying wars against working people at home cannot be separated; in many ways it is the same fight. We must say no to the wars of the one percent both at home and abroad. Not one more dollar, not one more bullet for Washington's wars!

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Regaining hope in Rojava

29 August 2016, by Jo Magpie

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 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.

June 6 2016

[Open Democracy](#)

Analysing the PKK: a reply to Alex de Jong

26 August 2016, by **Phil Hearse, Sarah Parker**

Alex de Jong has contributed two IV articles – [The New-Old PKK](#) and [A Commune in Rojava?](#) – that in our view make a sectarian and doctrinaire assessment of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) and its co-thinkers in the liberated cantons of north Syria, called by the Kurds ‘Rojava’.

In the first article, *The New-Old PKK*, comrade Alex challenges the widespread view that in the past decade or so the PKK has made a substantial political turn, and as the title suggests tends to stress that not a lot has really changed, it’s old wine in new bottles.

Actually, the PKK has changed on two main questions. First it has replaced its demand for an independent Kurdish state with the proposal for ‘democratic confederalism’. This is the idea of democratic self-rule for districts, towns and villages confederated into regional councils, and then wider federations on a national and potentially international level. In this process the mainly Kurdish areas of Turkey and Syria would have their own self-rule, but one based on equality, not ethnic exclusivity. Both in South East Turkey and in Rojava the PKK and its allies have been trying to put this proposal into practice.

Second the PKK has substantially deepened its position on women’s liberation, ensuring equality for women at every level both in its own organisations and the substantial part of Kurdish public life it influences.

First, though, is the issue of tone and timing. When the militants of the PKK and its allies in Turkey, and its co-thinkers in Syria are under ferocious attack from the Erdoğan regime and ISIS, this seems a particularly ill-judged time to carry articles full of sarcastic irony about the PKK and its leadership. In South East Turkey (‘northern Kurdistan’) between

September 2015 and April 2016, more than 1000 people – mainly Kurdish civilians but also some PKK fighters – were slaughtered by the Turkish army using airpower, tanks and heavy weapons of all kinds. Villages, towns and Kurdish suburbs were destroyed or wrecked and 500,000 people were displaced.

Could one really imagine that if the Zapatista base communities in the Chiapas cloud forest had been invaded by the Mexican army, 1000 indigenous people slaughtered and thousands imprisoned, International Viewpoint would be carrying articles at the very same time saying – “by the way Subcommandante Marcos’ theories are rubbish”? Why does the PKK get singled out for this type of treatment?

In Rojava the PKK’s co-thinkers in the PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its armed wing the YPG (Peoples Protection Units) have played an heroic role – at the cost of hundreds of dead and wounded – in the fight against ISIS, driving ISIS out of the town of Kobanî and rescuing thousands of the besieged Yazidi population threatened with massacre. By common consent, they have been the most effective fighters against ISIS in Syria.

The above mentioned articles break with the usual approach of the Fourth International of judging liberation movements primarily by their social practice: Alex de Jong instead makes a critique which is fundamentally ideological. In the past this has not been the case.

Did the Fourth International, for example, judge the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam (and its leadership, the Vietnamese Communist Party [Lao Dong]) primarily by its ideology, based on its semi-Stalinist origins? Did we wax lyrical about the ambiguous theoretical formulations of the VCP

and emphasise their dangerous concessions to a semi-Stalinist ‘stages’ theory of revolution? Not at all: we stressed their objectively revolutionary, anti-imperialist character in practice.

If comrade Alex says, as he did previously in a private letter to us, that his intention was indeed to just make an ideological critique of the PKK, then frankly he is doing the wrong thing. Because you can’t make a critique of a national liberation (or any other) movement without reference to its concrete political practice: or if you do, then it is scholastic and doctrinaire.

An example of this wrong approach was the assessment made by some people of the South African ANC in the 1980s that it was basically revolutionary with a ‘permanentist’ practice based solely on a reading of the ANC’s ‘Freedom Charter’, which promised ownership and control, of the economy by the people. In the real transition in South Africa, the function of this document was mainly decorative.

Both aspects of PKK’s substantial political turn have been inspired by the writing of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, on confederalism and women’s liberation. On the former Öcalan puts forward detailed analyses of the origin of the state and how to overcome it; on the latter he puts forward detailed arguments about the history of women’s oppression and the central role he believes that women’s liberation will have in creating international social justice.

Alex de Jong goes to some lengths to demonstrate that in his writings Öcalan has “a concept of women’s liberation is shaped by myths of a Neolithic matriarchal past.” Well, it’s clear that Öcalan does adhere to views about a Neolithic matriarchal

society that are very controversial. In fact there are many differences about the origins of women's oppression, including among Marxists. But is that the main thing we want to say about the PKK and women?

In the past five or six years the PKK's turn on women's liberation has been real and dramatic. It is not just a question of women's units among the guerrilla fighters. A feminisation process has gone deep into the PKK's practice and its mass work. In the liberated cantons of Rojava in northern Syria, and in the autonomous people's councils of 'northern Kurdistan' in Turkey, women are in the leadership at every level, implementing the 40% minimum quota, but also acting for example as co-mayors and co-leaders at every level. Because the PKK is a mass organisation, its line of prioritising the involvement and leadership of women has an impact in families and communities - and opens up many more choices for Kurdish women across the board. It goes into all the organisations influenced by the PKK, for example the HDP - the People's Democratic Party - in Turkey.

At the very least one would have expected an assessment of this process to be prioritised, rather than A-calan's theories of women's oppression. But it comes under attack from Alex de Jong precisely because he regards what underlies it as false theoretically. He says:

"A-calan's essentialist view of identities 'whether he is talking about Kurds or women' has passed through his 'turn' with little change. For the PKK, 'women' are the social subject that stands at the center of emancipation, playing a similar role to the proletariat in classical Marxism 'the universally oppressed subject whose emancipation entails universal emancipation. According to A-calan the 'role which once was allotted to the working class, today falls to women.'

"But the category of women itself is never interrogated. According to A-calan, women are biologically more compassionate and empathic than men and have more 'emotional

intelligence.' Womanhood is associated with motherhood 'women "possess life itself" and thus are supposedly closer to nature than men.

"This leads to seeing women as a homogeneous category with a singular ideology corresponding to its liberation struggle. The PKK's women's party 'Party of Free Women (PJA)' declared that "the women's liberation ideology is an alternative for all previous world-views, whether right-wing or left-wing."

So for comrade Alex the problem is that A-calan has 'essentialist' views about women and that 'the category of women is never interrogated'. Yes sometimes certain traits are ascribed characteristically to women in an essentialist way - but by no means always, while Ocalan often in fact dwells on how women's role has been socially constructed through a long history - the details of which are arguable, it is true, but the real issue to be confronted is this: is the deepening of the PKK's (and PYD's) women's liberation turn real or imagined? Is it really driving the political practice of the PKK (and HDP) in Turkey and the YPD in Rojava? We say it is real. Further we say this is the biggest example of a leftist or liberation movement putting women's liberation absolutely central in its practice anywhere in the world. This is the first thing you have to say about the PKK and women.

Alex de Jong is sceptical about the PKK's shift towards democratic confederalism on an all-Turkey level, and seems to attribute this to A-calan's reading of the American anarchist Murray Bookchin. But in reality, as many observers have pointed out, what's behind this turn seems much more like Otto Bauer's approach to the national question - ie that cultural autonomy, rather than full independence can be a solution, or at least an interim solution, for oppressed nationalities. It's obvious that this democratic confederalism advocated by Ocalan is a step towards self-government by the Kurds; and that the PKK's attempts to actually implement self-government by the Kurdish communities in south east

Turkey is designed to give practical meaning to this line. The Turkish government understands exactly what this is, which is why they attacked these communities with such ferocity. The same is true of their attitude to Rojava.

Once again, it is hard to see why this position of the PKK comes in for such harsh attack. You could criticise the Zapatista base communities on exactly the same basis. It is not an implementation of Murray Bookchin's ecological-anarchist ideas of a radically downsized society in which the cities are dispersed. It is about democratic, autonomous self-organisation.

In his article A Commune in Rojava? Alex de Jong wants to pour cold water on what he describes as the "illusions of anarchists and libertarians" about what is happening in the three liberated, mainly Kurdish, cantons of northern Syria. Their liberation of course is a formidable achievement by the YPG fighters, in the face of harsh attack by ISIS.

Comrade Alex's critique comes down to three things. First that Rojava is insufficiently socialist in its socio-economic organisation; second that the PYD-YPG has made impermissible political compromises with the Syrian regime and American imperialism; and third that the political organisation of Rojava is undemocratic, 'top down' and insufficiently 'bottom up'.

About the economy he says:

"A-calan's vision of a socio-economic alternative to such conditions can be described as social-democratic...The relatively vague economic proposals of the PYD for Rojava can also be called social democratic. The goal is a mixed economy with strong social services. The "social contract" of Rojava declares natural resources and land to be property of the people and their exploitation to be regulated by law. At the same time, the contract protects private property and declares that nothing shall be expropriated. About 20 percent of the land in Rojava is in the hands of landlords, and their property is protected by the social contract. Formerly state-owned farms have been distributed among poor

families. The formation of cooperatives is encouraged by Tev-Dem (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, or Movement for a Democratic Society), the governing structure of Rojava. In the longer term, cooperatives are supposed to become the dominant form of enterprise."

But what exactly is wrong with the PYD's position that comrade Alex describes here? He himself says that in this mainly rural area in which capitalism is not much developed. Why should Rojava move rapidly towards the expropriation of private property, when it's clear that the dominant mode of production being promoted is that of people's co-operatives? What's wrong with that?

Second Alex criticises the PYD-YPG for its alleged military alliance with American imperialism and not expelling all Syrian government troops from the region. YPG fighters were in a de facto alliance with the US airforce during the liberation of Kobani. The bombing of ISIS by the Americans was a key factor in enabling the YPG to prevail in this Kurdish city: hundreds of civilians and hundreds of Kurdish fighters were killed in the battles to relive the city. In our view it is formalistic to criticise the YPG over this. Some US special forces have also been spotted in Rojava aiding the YPG fighters against ISIS. Probably both sides know this is a time-limited alliance.

Syrian troops in Rojava are mainly concentrated in Qamishli, although there have been several outbreaks of fighting between them and the YPG, the latest in May 2016. Paradoxically the regime still continues to pay the wages of local civil servants, an important source of income for local people. No one believes this is anything more than a temporary modus vivendi, and everyone knows that eventually the Syrian regime will attempt to crush a self-governing Rojava. But for the moment the YPG priority is to defeat ISIS, the main contemporary threat to Rojava, alongside the Turkish government. Faced with such gigantic enemies it is unrealistic to demand the YPG avoid tactical military alliances and stand-offs.

Finally is the issue of democracy in Rojava. Alex de Jong says that it isn't bottom up democracy there, it's top down:

"We should be careful not to project Euro-centric ideas of socialist revolution on Rojava (sic!). But in the absence of a working class that in its struggle for self-emancipation can be the driving force of social change, it is clearly the PYD itself that is playing the decisive role. Before being largely wiped away by the two counter-revolutionary poles of the Assad regime and Salafi jihadism, autonomous self-organization was an important element in the Syrian revolution, as shown by the grassroots structures that sprung up across Syria in the earlier phase of the revolution. The councils in Rojava, however, are the initiative of a political force, not of autonomous bottom-up initiatives. The PYD is the dominant force in Tev-Dem. The armed forces in Rojava (YPG, YPJ, and the security forces, the Asayi?) are trained in the ideology of the PYD and swear an oath to A-calan."

For someone keen on combatting libertarian and anarchist illusions, this statement is at least ironic. Search for a successful national liberation movement, especially one engaged in armed struggle, you will find a political party. In Vietnam local self-organisation was propelled by the NLF, in Nicaragua by the FSLN, in Chiapas by the EZLN (a political party by any other name). Popular self-organisation is not, as far as we understand it, counterposed to political parties "from above". Starting in Petrograd in 1905.

The ten members of the academic delegation who visited the three Rojava in December 2014 made a public statement about the democratic autonomy they observed:

"In Rojava, we believe, genuinely democratic structures have indeed been established. Not only is the system of government accountable to the people, but it springs out of new structures that make direct democracy possible: popular assemblies and democratic councils. Women participate on an equal footing with men at every level and also organize in autonomous councils, assemblies,

and committees to address their specific concerns. . . . Rojava, we believe, points to an alternative future for Syria and the Middle East, a future where the peoples of different ethnic backgrounds and religions can live together, united by mutual tolerance and common institutions. Kurdish organizations have led the way, but they increasingly gain support from Arabs, Assyrians, and Chechens, who participate in their common system of self-government and organize autonomously." [1].

A bit starry eyed perhaps, but this self-organisation is real.

Alex de Jong implies there are problems with human rights violations in Rojava. We don't pretend to know all the details of these accusations. But the main conflicts in Rojava have been with supporters of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) of Mahmoud Barzani. The Barzani mafia clan exercises near- control of the Kurdish enclave in Iraq, in competition and sometimes coalition with the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and Gorran (Movement for Change); it is bitterly hostile to the PKK and is closely aligned with the West, the US and the UK in particular. PYD leaders know Barzani works closely with Turkey, for example by frequent closures of the border gates from Iraq to Syria, which worsens the food blockade made by Turkey, and currently increasingly blocks the passage of journalists and delegations into Rojava from Iraq.

In a crucial passage from The New-Old PKK Alex de Jong makes A-calan's role central to his critique of the PKK:

"The Kurdish struggle has attracted attention for good reason, and the dedication of its militants in the worst of conditions should not be in doubt. But the much-lauded transformation of the PKK leaves much to be desired. It's not the clear example of a transition from authoritarian Leninism to libertarian socialism it is often made out to be.

"Before and after A-calan's capture" before and after what the PKK calls the "paradigm-shift" "one essential element of the party remained unchanged: A-calan is "the

leadership” (önderlik). But liberation cannot come from following the twists and turns of a single leader; liberation needs a collective struggle on the back on mass organizations that foreshadow the radical democracy we wish to see in the world.”

Of course the Trotskyist movement, by contrast, has never succumbed to the temptation to organise itself around the thought of a single great leader, now has it?

The role of central leaders in many progressive, liberation or revolutionary movements has often been problematic. For example while he was still politically active, it appears that every major decision in Cuba went via Fidel Castro. The over-centralisation of power around Hugo Chavez in Venezuela was a major problem of the Chavista movement. In Vietnam it appears that there was a

more collegiate leadership around Ho Chi Minh including Võ Nguyên Giáp and Pham van Dong. In the EZLN, who knows the real role of Subcommandante Marcos?

Clearly our tradition is against the elevation of single guru, all-seeing and all-knowing leaders. But whatever the excesses around Ā-calān in this regard, you have to make an all-round judgement of the movement.

When you are the leadership of a movement supported by millions; when you insist on women’s equality at all levels; when you urge people to take control of their lives and destinies through democratically organised solidarity and struggle; and when hundreds of thousands start to do this in practice, then the social effects will be massive and long lasting. Against all that, the excesses

of extolling the virtues of ‘Āpo’ won’t count for much. In any case the movement has had no contact with Ocalan at all for over a year, and only spasmodic contact for some years before that, as he is held in isolation on the prison island of Imrali, so for practical purposes, while there is no doubt that his ideas are hegemonic, the leadership of the movement has to take its own decisions on both tactical and strategic issues.

Finally, the general issue of how revolutionary socialists should approach liberation movements. Alex says, well our tradition is one where we have combined solidarity with criticism, the two are not contradictory.

We agree with that, but the criticism must be accurate and proportional. And the priority of our tasks is clear: solidarity first.

A Commune in Rojava?

18 April 2016, by Alex de Jong

The discourse of the PYD, revolving around terms like democracy and equality and stressing women’s rights, exercises a strong attraction on the worldwide left. Likewise, the struggle of the YPG/YPJ fighters (YekĀneyĀn Parastina Gel, People’s Protection Units/YekĀneyĀn Parastina JinĀ, Women’s Protection Units), organized by the PYD against ISIS, receives widespread sympathy.

Different initiatives to support the “Rojava revolution” have sprung up worldwide. A German campaign unapologetically named Waffen für Rojava (Weapons for Rojava) raised over US \$135,000; other initiatives focus on humanitarian aid and political support.

In Rojava, the PYD says it is realizing a democratic society with equal rights for women, in which different ethnic and religious groups live together; political power is supposed to be organized through structures of

autonomous councils. The PYD maintains that in Rojava a unique revolution is taking place, inspired by the thought of Abdullah Ā-calān, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan, PKK). Even after his arrest in 1999, Ā-calān remained the political leader and the movement’s “philosopher.” To begin to understand the experiment in Rojava, and the attitude of the left towards it, one must consider Ā-calān’s ideology and compare its claims with developments on the ground. [2]

Roots of the PKK

Ā-calān was born in 1949 as a son of a Kurdish peasant family. The Kurdish provinces of Turkey were always the poorest parts of the country, partly because of racist state policies that discriminated against Kurds. Speaking Kurdish was a crime, and use of the letters x, q, and wê—which exist in

the Kurdish alphabet but not in the Turkish—could be prosecuted; even publications that mentioned the word “Kurd” were banned. The state tried to assimilate the Kurdish minority into the Turkish majority.

Ā-calān laid the groundwork for the PKK when, in the early seventies, he built the “Kurdish Revolutionaries” (Soresgeren Kurdistan, SK). This group adopted the notion of Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi that “Kurdistan” was an international colony, occupied by Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq. When in 1977 the group was reorganized as the PKK, it had won modest support among Kurdish workers who had moved from the countryside to the cities to earn a living. The SK was a product of the New Left in Turkey but had some important distinctions. In contrast to other Kurdish groups, the PKK was “the only organization whose members were drawn almost exclusively from the lowest social

classesâ€”the uprooted, half-educated village and small-town youth who knew what it felt like to be oppressed, and who wanted action, not ideological sophistication.” [3] The PKK was also exceptional in making armed struggle an urgent task.

Strands of Maoism and Third-Worldism were strong among the Turkish left at the time, and the early statements of the PKK clearly show such influences. They declared that the immediate goal was a “national-democratic” revolution for an “independent and democratic Kurdistan.” The struggle would take the form of a peasant-based “people’s war” led by a PKK claiming to be the representative of the working class. Allies of the revolution were “socialist countries”â€”although the ruling parties of the Soviet Union and China were criticized as “revisionist”â€”as well as “working class parties of capitalist countries” and “the liberation movements of oppressed peoples of the world.” After the “national-democratic” revolution, the struggle would proceed to a socialist revolution. [4]

When in 1980 the army staged a coup, the PKK had become the strongest Kurdish party in Turkey. After the coup, the Turkish left was repressed, as tens of thousands were arrested, tortured, and killed. Ã–calan escaped the repression because shortly before the coup he had gone to Lebanon and from there to Syria. The regime of Hafez al-Assad allowed him to set up a base of operations in Syria, and the PKK launched its guerilla war against the Turkish state, fighting which reached a peak in the mid-nineties.

An element that set the PKK apart from similar organizations was that it was a “guerrilla-party.” [5] In the PKK, being a guerrilla fighter and a party member overlapped; even cadres who did not have military responsibilities were expected to be prepared to join the guerrillas at any time. According to PKK leader Duran Kalkan, “this was not only of military value, but more important was its ideological and moral meaning.” Referring to the party’s 1986 congress, Kalkan stated,

Such a guerrilla makes ideologically a complete break with the ruling order;

he breaks in a certain degree with the hierarchical system of the state and of power. That is why at the third Congress there was a serious ideological renewal in the conception of really existing socialism; the really existing socialist line of individual and familial, petit-bourgeois equal rights and freedom was superseded. Such a measure has consequences inside society as well where it calls forth changes that bring closer freedom and equality. It destroys individual family life.

Revolutionizing Personalities

Kalkan touched upon what became a distinctive element of the ideology of the PKK and Ã–calan: the ambition to create a “new man,” characterized by a certain type of personality or mentality. According to Ã–calan there is a metaphysical “Kurdish mentality,” a certain “composition of the Kurdish psyche.” Ã–calan claims, “Many of the qualities and characteristics attributed to the Kurds and their society today can already be seen in the Neolithic communities of the cis-Caucasus mountain rangesâ€”the area we call Kurdistan.” [6] However, the Kurds have been alienated from their “true” identity by the attempts of the Turkish state to assimilate the Kurds and by traditional social structures, which Ã–calan calls “feudalism.”

Through criticism and self-criticism and hard work, PKK members were expected to free themselves of views and attitudes that they had learned in their “old life” and remold themselves into “new men.” The party journal *Serxweb* wrote,

The new man does not drink, does not gamble, never thinks of his own personal pleasure or comfort, and there is nothing feminine about him; those who [in the past] indulged in such activities will, sharp as a knife, cut out all these habits as soon as he or she is among new men. The new man’s philosophy and morality, the way he sits and stands, his style, ego, attitude and reactions [tepkî] are his and his alone. The basis of all these things is his love for the revolution, freedom, country, and socialism, a

love that is as solid as a rock. Applying scientific socialism to the reality of our country creates the new man. [7]

Already in 1993, Ã–calan claimed that the PKK, when it discussed “scientific socialism,” did not refer to Marxism, but to its own peculiar ideology that “exceeds the interests of states, the nation and classes.” [8] As remolding people’s mentality became central to the PKK’s conception of socialism, Marxist notions of classes and revolution were replaced by terms like “humanization,” “socialization,” and “liberated personality.”

Closely associated with its goal of remolding people is the PKK’s view of women’s liberation. The PKK’s distinctive practice of women’s liberation was developed in the second half of the nineties, when the participation of women in the Kurdish movement, both as politicians and as fighters, increased. [9] The PKK’s ideas on women’s liberation are heavily influenced by the myth of a prehistoric matriarchal past, when “woman was a creating goddess.” [10] With the rise of class society, the oppression of women began. These notions are clearly copied from Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

However, an important difference between the PKK’s theory of women’s oppression and that of Engels is the PKK’s neglect of socio-economic factors. Engels argued that with the rise of social classes came a division of labor that relegated women’s labor, and hence their social status, to a secondary position. Ã–calan instead puts the stress overwhelmingly on issues like “mentality” (a key word in his ideology) and “personality”; women’s oppression is said to be produced by attitudes that are transferred by the family from generation to generation and which are internalized by women. Such patriarchal attitudes oppress women by blocking them from social life and by men’s control of women’s bodies, behaviors, and sexualities; this explanation thus neglects the role of socio-economic factors. [11]

In the guerrilla war, independent women’s units were formed, as was

later an independent women's army—a practice that was adopted by the Syrian Kurdish movement when it organized the YPJ. The motivation was that this freed women from the sexism of male comrades and forced them to break with traditional notions of female obedience and servility. In mixed organs of the PKK and PYD, a mandatory gender quota exists. The leaderships have to include at least 40 percent women, and executive posts are shared by one man and one woman.

The PKK's thinking is strongly essentialist. Not only are women and nature often equated, women as such are assumed to have certain characteristics, such as empathy, an abhorrence of violence, and a closeness to nature. The PKK discourse on women's liberation sees the category of women, one it often regards as a homogeneous whole, as superseding political differences. As its women's organization stated, "The women's liberation ideology is an alternative for all hitherto existing world-views, whether of the Left or of the Right." [12] Today it is women as such who are assumed to be the vanguard of the struggle for liberation.

In the nineties, themes of class struggle and class formation largely disappeared from the PKK's ideology. As it moved from the Stalinist idea that socialism means a party-state that owns the means of production to the idea of the creation of a "new man," the PKK's conception of socialism became more abstract, increasingly receding into the future. "Democratic civilization" replaced an independent, socialist Kurdistan as the goal of the PKK movement. PKK expert Joost Jongerden describes "democratic civilization" as the umbrella term for three intertwined projects: democratic republic, democratic autonomy, and democratic confederalism. [13] The democratic republic entails a reform of the Turkish state, to recognize the existence of minorities, especially Kurds, among its population and to dissociate citizenship from Turkish ethnicity—similarly, the PYD suggests the Syrian state should abandon the pan-Arabist ideology of the Ba'ath party.

Democratic autonomy is a concept borrowed from Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), a U.S. libertarian socialist, and refers to a combination of social movements and cooperatives that would pre-figure a future egalitarian society. Bookchin was a Trotskyist when World War II ended and, like many Trotskyists, expected to see a wave of working-class social revolutions. When this did not happen, and the Trotskyist movement remained small and isolated, Bookchin reconsidered his ideas.

Bookchin gave up on Marxism, which in his eyes had made a fundamental mistake in seeing the working class as the revolutionary subject. Likewise, the PKK never saw the self-emancipation of the working class as leading the way to socialism. The early PKK was rather distrustful of the working class, which it saw as privileged compared to the peasantry and as too closely associated with the Turkish state in the city. In the early nineties, Å-calan stated that there were no pronounced class divisions in Kurdish society. [14] The real dividing line was between "collaborators" and "patriots," not between capitalists and working people.

For Bookchin, capitalism's weak point was not the contradiction capital-labor, but the contradiction capital-ecology. Capital, endlessly accumulating, destroys the environment. The struggle to save the ecosystem takes on an anti-capitalist character and can unite everybody who sees their lives threatened by the deterioration of the natural environment and who rebels against their alienation from it. Although today the PKK also considers ecology an important issue, for them it is not as central as it was for Bookchin.

For Å-calan, the contradiction driving liberation struggles is that between oppressed identities and the state. The oppression of certain identities is blamed by Å-calan on state policies that are lagging behind the development of the new civilization, a development that is unavoidable because of technological progress. [15] The task is to make the state allow the realization of the democratic potential that already exists. To this end, structures of

"democratic autonomy" are supposed to be built across existing state borders and inside the existing nation-states. These structures are based on recognizing and representing different identities, like ethnic groups, women, or workers. In Turkish Kurdistan, these structures are often intertwined with those of municipalities where legal Kurdish parties have been elected.

Structures of democratic autonomy should federate from the bottom up, in a system of "democratic confederalism." Å-calan describes this as "a pyramid-like model of organization. Here it is the communities who talk, debate and make decisions. From the base to the top the elected delegates would form a kind of loose coordinating body. They will be the elected representatives of the people for one year." [16]

The PKK ideology today rejects attempts to set up new states, seeing them as inherently oppressive. Seeds of the current PKK critique of states as such can be found already in its early history. From its beginning, the PKK criticized the Soviet Union and the Communist International of the early twenties for their critical support of Kemalist nationalism. Moreover, in the PKK's eyes, the Soviet leadership prioritized the national security of the Soviet Union over internationalist and anti-imperialist principles. The critique of the supremacy of Soviet *raison d'état* was generalized to nation-states as such. Another impetus for the PKK to abandon its project of a Kurdish nation-state was the multifaceted character of the population it considered to be Kurdish. For example, in parts of Turkish Kurdistan, identities had evolved along confessional lines. In Eastern Anatolia, the PKK was confronted with the fact that many people considered themselves Alevites, not Kurds. [17] To create a unified nation-state out of this heterogeneity would have required cultural assimilation, something to which the PKK was opposed.

Å-calan claims the PKK's struggle is only the latest Kurdish rebellion against centralized state power. In a remarkable example of auto-orientalism, Kurds are presented as a

people without history that since Sumerian times (fourth millennium BC) has rebelled against state power, all the while remaining “in essence” the same. The “original sin” that caused the Kurds’ oppression was the formation of the state as such, against which they tried to preserve their “natural” free culture. Ê-calán describes his goal as a “renaissance” of an idealized society that during the Neolithic supposedly existed in what is now Kurdistan. The positive aspects of this mythic pastÊa central role for women in society, a “pure” Kurdish identity, social egalitarianismÊare to return in a modern form.

Ê-calán is not in favor of overthrowing existing states. Rather, these should be superseded at some point by the structures of democratic confederalism. Ê-calán’s critique of existing states is rather ambiguous in that the democracy he praises is often equated with the parliamentary, capitalist states of the West. For example, he claims that in European countries a “determined democracy” developed and that this led to the “supremacy of the West.” “Western civilization can, in this sense, be termed democratic civilization.” [18] And in 2011: “In principle, the Western democratic systemÊwhich has been established through immense sacrificesÊcontains everything needed for solving social problems.” [19] “Europe, [democracy’s] birthplace, has by and large left nationalism behind in view of the wars of the twentieth century and established a political system adhering to democratic standards. This democratic system has already shown its advantages over other systemsÊincluding real socialismÊand is now the only acceptable system worldwide.” [20]

Class and Economy in Rojava

Capitalist development has not progressed far in Rojava. It is a mainly agricultural region with only a small modern working class. But Rojava is very productive, and in Ba’athist Syria it resembled an internal colony. The region produced raw materials like wheat and oil that were processed

somewhere else. [21] Ê-calán has described the socio-economic situation in Rojava as one where on the one hand there were small, family-based economic units and on the other hand the state economy. [22]

Ê-calán’s vision of a socio-economic alternative to such conditions can be described as social-democratic: “In my eyes, justice demands that creative work is enumerated according to its contribution to the entire product. Remuneration of creative work, which contributes to the productivity of the society, has to be in proportion to other creative activities. Provision of employment to everybody will be a general public task. Everybody will be able to participate in the health care system, education, sports and arts according to their capabilities and needs.” [23]

The relatively vague economic proposals of the PYD for Rojava can also be called social democratic. The goal is a mixed economy with strong social services. The “social contract” of Rojava declares natural resources and land to be property of the people and their exploitation to be regulated by law. At the same time, the contract protects private property and declares that nothing shall be expropriated. About 20 percent of the land in Rojava is in the hands of landlords, and their property is protected by the social contract. Formerly state-owned farms have been distributed among poor families. The formation of cooperatives is encouraged by Tev-Dem (Tevgera Civaka DemokratÊk, or Movement for a Democratic Society), the governing structure of Rojava. In the longer term, cooperatives are supposed to become the dominant form of enterprise.

The PYD speaks of Rojava as a new experience, a new kind of revolution based on lessons drawn from the failure of earlier movements. The same applies to the choice of not expropriating property, explained as part of the refusal to use force in order to avoid the authoritarianism that disfigured earlier attempts to create socialism. The refusal of the PYD to expel Syrian government troops completely from Rojava and to join the insurgency against Assad is claimed to be based on the same

refusal of force. However, it was the uprising against the Syrian state that gave the Kurdish movement the chance to form Rojava as the Assad regime decided to focus on fighting the rebels.

We should be careful not to project Euro-centric ideas of socialist revolution on Rojava. But in the absence of a working class that in its struggle for self-emancipation can be the driving force of social change, it is clearly the PYD itself that is playing the decisive role. Before being largely wiped away by the two counter-revolutionary poles of the Assad regime and Salafi jihadism, autonomous self-organization was an important element in the Syrian revolution, as shown by the grassroots structures that sprung up across Syria in the earlier phase of the revolution. The councils in Rojava, however, are the initiative of a political force, not of autonomous bottom-up initiatives. The PYD is the dominant force in Tev-Dem. The armed forces in Rojava (YPG, YPJ, and the security forces, the Asayi?) are trained in the ideology of the PYD and swear an oath to Ê-calán.

The survival of Rojava against attacks from Islamic State is undoubtedly a victory for the left. The Kurdish movement deserves concrete solidarity in its struggle for self-determination, the more so because in Rojava people are trying to construct a progressive alternative.

There is no reason why the left cannot combine solidarity for the Rojava project with a critical eye on its limitations. Maybe Rojava can ask the question of how to overcome capitalism, but this can be answered only in a wider context in the region, in cooperation with other forces.

Considering the tensions between the Kurdish movement and many Arabs in Syria and abroad, this perspective is increasingly difficult. The decisive role of the PYD in Rojava and its refusal to expel Syrian government troops completely and join the insurgency against Assad has led to accusations that it “cooperates” with the dictatorship. Different Arab rebel groups, but also some other Syrian Kurdish groups, describe Rojava as a “PYD dictatorship.”

When there are reports about human rights violations, the first reflex should be serious concern. Amnesty International has sounded the alarm

over reports that YPG units have driven away Arab civilians. [24] PYD Co-President Salih Muslim has admitted that YPG fighters made a “mistake” when they opened fire on a

group of demonstrators in Ā,mĀ»de in July 2014. [25] Human Rights Watch has also reported critically of repression of protests in Rojava. [