

Rojava revolution: building autonomy in the Middle East

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With the rise of jihadist groups in the Middle East, I find myself troubled with the question of how the politics of “insurgency” in this region has shifted so dramatically from a secular leftist tendency that used to challenge political Islam and Islamic rules in the social life to an extremist Islamist tendency that finds its ideal society in the time of Prophet Mohammad centuries ago. It is not that left is not present or without alternative, but one cannot ignore how marginalized they have become.

Not long before, there were many radical and leftist movements throughout the region. From Kabul to Palestine, radical student groups, feminist organizations, national liberation and anti-colonial struggles, labor and peasant movements, and leftist intellectuals were those in the front-line of struggle against authoritarian regimes, regressive religious beliefs, and imperialist powers’ domination in the region. Where are they now? What happened that made jihadist groups the ones who change the geopolitics of the region? How have the politics of the younger generations reversed from criticizing Islam into promoting the most extreme reading of it?

Those are some questions for all of us from the region who wish another future for it. Yet, answering these questions has deep roots in the history of colonialism and imperialism in the region as well. Without doubt, those in the West who excitingly follow the mainstream media’s coverage of the Islamic State’s (generally known by its former acronym ISIS) brutal advance toward major cities in Iraq and Syria do not bother to look at the role of their governments in the current chaos. Not to mention how the mainstream media portrays the people of the region as fanatics who are divided into sectarian religious and ethnic groups that cannot co-exist together and have no respect to humane values.

A century of oppression and domination

Taking a glance at the contemporary history of the Middle East, one can look for the main cause behind the rise of these groups hidden in the politics of colonial powers in the region from the beginning of the 20th century until today. The upcoming centenary of the 1916 [Sykes-Picot secret agreement](#) that divided the Ottoman Empire into artificial nation states marks a century of colonial domination followed by corrupt governments in the hands of oil lords and controlled and supported by imperial powers.

This system of control through authoritarian regimes intensified during the Cold War in order to prevent the former Soviet Union's influence in the region. Consequently, an ongoing crusade against the left started by those regimes in power. The massive wave of oppression, arrest and slaughter of leftist activists and intellectuals throughout the region — especially during the 1970s and 1980s — has had irreversible effects on the social dynamics and movements in the region.

Leftist organizations were shut down, and tens of thousand of members of leftist parties, trade unions, and student movements were killed during the 1980s in the prisons of Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and other countries in the region. Many more were sentenced to long-term imprisonment, and many of those who stayed alive and outside of prison had to leave their own homeland and go in exile to seek safety for themselves and their families. It is during this time that jihadist groups started to rise because of the major support they received from Western powers in the role of proxy organizations to erase all traces of the political left in the region.

The Mujahedeen in Afghanistan are only one of many example of this practice. These groups provided extra assistance in silencing the left, after which they started to grow like cancer cells in every corner of the region. Moreover, in the last decade, these groups — especially after the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq — have gained a legitimate presence and status among the people as those who fight “foreign invaders” and “infidels”.

Despite their apparent resistance against the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, from the perspective of Western powers they are still the best choice in controlling the region with minimal costs. Simultaneously, it has turned the region into the killing fields where Islamist extremists can take their fight without making trouble in the Western countries. Many [reports](#) have mentioned the foreign Islamist fighters among the ranks of ISIS.

Neoliberal Islam

Extremist Islamist groups are only one component of the politics of promoting Islam as the natural enemy of the left. Since the wave of imperialist wars in the region after 9/11, a new agenda emerged aiming to promote “moderate” political Islam in accordance with the neoliberal world economy. The fundamental pillar of this agenda is the AKP government in Turkey. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) has been perceived as the ideal version of a moderate Islamic state with neoliberal economic policies that could both reconcile the people's rage against the West while responding to their own religious concerns, and work as agents of global capital in the region.

The Turkish government, after being greeted as the model for the future of the Middle East,

gained more power and confidence in their claims for a leading role in the Sunni Islamic global community. However, Turkey's leading role only brought more devastation and sectarian violence between Shias and Sunnis. The reckless support of the AKP government, along with the governments of the Gulf countries, for the jihadist groups fighting against the Assad regime has plunged Syria into unprecedented chaos.

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the Turkish government has played a [key role](#) in worsening the situation by turning Turkey, and especially the country's southern provinces bordering Syria, into a transit location for extreme Islamists from all around the world on their way to Syria. Besides providing a safe haven for (aspiring) jihadists, there have been [allegations](#) that Turkey has also provided jihadist groups logistical and military support.

ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front are the two main jihadist groups that have benefited from this support. Looking at the current situation, the only way the "moderate" Islam agenda has been successful is in continuing the oppression and marginalization of the secular and leftist opposition. The [harsh crackdown](#) on the Gezi resistance last summer, which somehow represented the frustration of the people in Turkey with their government's neoliberal agenda, was a grave example of this.

There is little doubt that jihadist groups pose an immediate threat to the region. It is not only that they destroy every trace of civilization; even more horrifying is their role in trivializing the value of life, leaving a trail of death and destruction in their wake wherever they go. The question of "what is to be done" to stop this onslaught is no longer about wishing for a better future — it demands an immediate response.

However, viewed in a broader context, it is obvious that these groups are one part of a larger problem. Therefore, any alternative to the current situation has to be transformative for everyone suffering at the hands of not only jihadist groups, but also at the violence and suppression of authoritarian regimes and imperialist rule in the region.

The alternative? Kurdish autonomous rule in Syria

Kurds are known to be the largest nation in the world without its own state. The history of the Kurds is often associated with countless uprisings in the face of systematic oppression by the nation states controlling their lands. Since the creation of nation states after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by British and French colonialists, Kurdistan has been divided between four countries: Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Kurds were the first victims of colonialist agreements.

The secret Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 ignored the right of the Kurds to rule their own land. This led to many decades of massacres, oppression, and assimilation. The Kurds' language was banned, their rights were denied, and they were displaced from their ancestral lands. The artificial borders that were agreed upon in both the Sykes-Picot agreement and in the 1923 [Treaty of Lausanne](#) that fixed the borders of Turkey continue to haunt the Kurdish people living around them.

People in need of food and medicine in the Kurdish region of Syria cannot get any help from their families living on the other side of the border. While most of the guns and military equipment have been delivered to Syrian rebels through Turkey, the border between the two Kurdish regions has been closed, and many new military posts have been built.

As mentioned before, Syria is currently witnessing the most terrifying manifestation of these historic policies of divide-and-rule in the Middle East. The sociopolitical situation in Syria leaves no space for imagination. Therefore, it is critical for the left to seek an alternative and to strengthen its front. With the conviction in mind that in the most unexpected places the most realistic alternatives can emerge, the Rojava region in Syria (with Rojava meaning “West”, as in West of Kurdistan — a term used for the Kurdish region of Syria) can propose an alternative for the future of the region.

The Kurds in Syria have shown their ability and willingness to be an alternative voice in the middle of the turmoil in the region. Since the Syrian conflict intensified and turned into a civil war, the Kurdish movement led by the PYD (Democratic Union Party) in Syria has taken control of the majority of the Kurdish region in this country. In November 2013, the PYD announced that they had finished all the preparations for declaring autonomy, and a constitution called the Charter of Social Contract was proposed.

The people’s revolution in Rojava resulted in the construction of an autonomous region divided into three autonomous cantons each with democratic autonomous self-administration. The Cizre (Al-Jazeera) Canton declared autonomy on January 21, followed by Kobane Canton on January 27, and Efrin Canton on January 29.

The PYD insists on forming an alternative for all and not pursuing any ethnic group’s demands and interests. At the same time, they refused to become part of the civil war in Syria and declared that they would only use their military forces to defend themselves against any assaults coming from either the Assad’s regime or NATO-supported opposition groups, including jihadist groups such as ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. Yet, these three cantons have been under [immense attacks](#) by ISIS.

Right now, ISIS has focused its [attacks](#) on the Kobane canton where the Kurdish self-defense forces YPG (the Peoples’ Defense Units) are fighting off the determined radicals of ISIS in a historic act of resistance.

Intercontinental similarities

Is Rojava becoming the Chiapas of the Middle East? This is the question I ask whenever I hear more stories coming from this tiny region that concern the only flicker of hope amidst this chaos. Even though academically speaking the Kurds can hardly be considered an “indigenous group”, their status and political situation in the Middle East can be compared to that of some indigenous populations in Latin America.

Despite some political differences between the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in

Chiapas and the Kurdish movement led by the PYD in Syria, there are many similarities between these two in terms of their position in both regional and international affairs. The pursuit of creating an autonomous government, the rise of popular assemblies, the emphasis on gender equality and empowering women on every level of social and political life, the anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian ideology, the stress on ecological preservation and respect for all living creatures, self-defense, and many other aspects indicate how the Rojava revolution resembles the resistance of the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico.

The Charter of Social Contract, as the foundation of Rojava's autonomous cantons, is a historic breakthrough in the region in terms of the democratic principles that guide social and political life. The Charter, which is currently being implemented in all three of the autonomous cantons, appears as a democratic agreement — inclusive of all parties involved in governing Rojava. Without exaggeration, it is the most democratic constitution that people of this region ever had.

The first paragraph of the Charter's preface says,

"[w]e the peoples of the democratic self-administration areas; Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians (Assyrian Chaldeans, Arameans), Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens, by our free will, announce this to ensure justice, freedom, democracy, and the rights of women and children in accordance with the principles of ecological balance, freedom of religions and beliefs, and equality without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, creed, doctrine or gender, to achieve the political and moral fabric of a democratic society in order to function with mutual understanding and coexistence within diversity and respect for the principle of self-determination and self-defense of the peoples."

It continues,

"The autonomous areas of the democratic self-administration do not recognize the concept of nation state and the state based on the grounds of military power, religion, and centralism" (translation by author).

The Democratic Society Movement, or TEV-Dem as it is known in Kurdish, is responsible for implementing these principals in everyday life. Without doubt, they have yet to achieve an ideal society, and the movement admits that it is still in the process of construction. Keeping in mind that the Rojava region has been under ruthless isolation by all sides, most importantly the Syrian and Turkish governments, Syrian rebel groups, and the pro-West Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. The Western media, including independent and alternative outlets, have largely ignored their resistance or have otherwise failed to pay attention to them. The Kurds have not received the solidarity and support they deserve.

Ertugrul Korkcu, a Turkish MP from the leftist pro-Kurdish HDP party (Peoples' Democracy Party), recently said that the Kurds are playing the role of the Russians in Europe in the aftermath of World War I. Politically speaking, the Kurds are not a homogenous group, but there is some truth in Korkcu's statement as the situation in the Middle East evokes the image of Europe in the early 20th century. More precisely, jihadist groups have become the tools in the hands of colonial powers and authoritarian regimes to establish and strengthen their hegemony

in the region.

Rojava can be an alternative as it exhibits a potential form of autonomous self-government that fundamentally challenges the oppressive rituals within religious communities and proposes a working pattern of co-existence with all the cultures and beliefs in the area, without violating the rights of any. Rojava's experience in autonomy can be a model for a democratic confederalism in the Middle East, where every community has the right of self-determination and self-government. Moreover, it is a very progressive experiment, as women are the very the engine of change. Hevi Ibrahim, the head of the autonomous Afrin canton, is just one shining example.

Rojava's alternative is neither imaginative nor utopian. This alternative has already proved its viability through practical solutions and the everyday realization of the ideas presented in The Charter of Social Contract. In fact, Rojava asserts itself as the most realistic democratic alternative in the most unexpected of places. Expressing solidarity with the Rojava revolution is an urgent task for everyone who cares about the future of the Middle East.