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Anarchy in the YPG

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“If you self-criticise it means you truly want to work on something, resulting in less conflict and a constant striving for self-improvement.”

Black October explained that the Tekmil traced its origins to the Maoist practice of criticism and struggle sessions.

“Yet the PKK adapted and modified it, turning it into one of the most important aspects of the guerrilla struggle and party life,” he explained. “To acknowledge and address our shortcomings and those of our hevals (comrades) allows growth and development for both the individual as well as the community.”

IRPGF members noted that tasks are equally divided and rotated, everything from guard duty, to cleaning toilets, to composting. Men and women participate equally in militias.

Black October credits the YPJ’s ideology and propaganda with a major shift for women’s place in Kurdish society. He said he was moved to tears by their expressions of joy during a Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebration.

“During the festivities, a group of young girls were dancing around the fire holding hands and shouting “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi!” or “Woman, Life, Freedom!” he explained.

“Their voices were filled with the confidence of free women, though most were not even teenagers yet. Their laughter and joy filled the air and it was their voices that were the true sounds of the revolution.

“I was overcome with emotion. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I turned to one of my comrades saying, ‘even if this revolution is crushed by our enemies, the revolution had already succeeded.’”

Contents

International volunteers form anarchist brigade with long-term plan to create democratic confederation across Turkey and Syria	5
Ocalan and Bookchin	7
American air support	8
Inclusive revolution	9

enemy. This leads them to treat the YPG/J's alliance with the US very delicately.

“Well for one it is important to acknowledge the fact that without coalition air support the YPJ/YPG would not have had the same success,” said Heval Sores.

“But they learned their lessons from the past. The betrayal of the Kurds at Sykes-Picot have taught them to be careful and only rely on themselves.

“Apoji movements (Kurdish organisations following Ocalan) have fought over 40 years and they have since learned how to use the political interests of the different players to their advantage.

“And they know what the interests of the US are and that in the long term they are the enemy. We as militant anarchists need to learn from this and do the same thing.”

Inclusive revolution

While international media has lauded the YPG/J for their success against IS, and the inclusion of women, members of the IRPGF say that the radical ideology which has produced such success is rarely covered.

The YPG/J and associated militias are designed to work as collectives, with each unit spending hours a day critiquing themselves, other members of the group, and their actions. The process, known as Tekmil (Kurdish for “review”), is credited with minimising hierarchies in the fighting groups, as everyone is given a chance to put opinions forth.

“The Tekmil criticism and self-criticism system work extremely well,” said Heval Sores. “A friend of mine once put it nicely: We are not the Catholic church. You don't say “sorry I am an asshole”, do your 10 Ave Marias and then go back to being an asshole.

continuing to function within a parliamentary system that dilutes the autonomy of the nominally democratic local councils and municipalities in Rojava, while suppressing political dissent and opposition parties.

However, the IRPGF admonished those who don't lend their support to their struggle.

"I think the better question probably should be why all the people still living in non-liberated areas such as the USA, UK, China etc have not come," said Heval Sores.

"Especially all the anarchists... I see many 'revolutionaries' that don't actually believe that they could even bring about a revolution."

Nevertheless, Black October acknowledged there were "contradictions" that he disagreed with.

"But that is why I am here. To learn and provide critical solidarity and support."

American air support

Another major point of contention, especially for American anarchists, is the YPG/J's ongoing partnership with the US military.

From the American side, the relationship is relatively simple – if the YPG/J is challenging IS, they are an asset to the US.

A representative from US Central Command reiterated that it is currently legal for American citizens to join any group of the anti-IS coalition in Syria, and the Department of Defence only interacts directly with American YPG/J volunteers in the event of extreme medical emergencies.

The members of IRPGF affirmed that international fighters had relatively no interaction with the several hundred US advisors and special forces in northern Syria. However they coordinate with US coalition air support, meaning that anarchist fighters are working in tandem with a military power that they consider an ideological

International volunteers form anarchist brigade with long-term plan to create democratic confederation across Turkey and Syria

International volunteers have called for a "revolution" across southern Turkey and northern Syria, after forming what they claim to be the first strictly "anarchist" contingent inside the Syrian Kurd YPG militia.

The International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), created in April, is a cell within the International Freedom Battalion, the grouping of foreigners who travelled to support the YPG in their fight against the Islamic State group.

While they are by no means the first international volunteers to travel to northern Syria, their goals of a revolution within Syrian-Kurd area of "Rojava", and the Kurd-dominated southern areas of Turkey, will alarm Ankara.

Many within the IRPGF have committed to fight against the Turkish military and their allies, who entered Syria in August partly to neutralise the YPG as a threat on their southern border.

Turkey views the YPG as an extension of the Turkish PKK, which has fought a decades-long war with the Turkish state. On Wednesday, the Turkish government said it could not accept a US decision to arm the YPG with heavy weapons to fight the Islamic State group.

For anarchists, as well as other ideological volunteers in Rojava, this war is one front of an internationalist revolution, not merely resistance against IS. Whether or not the IRPGF will ever eventually fight in Greece, Brazil, Belarus or China remains to be seen, but they are definitely more than happy to find themselves on the front lines in Syria.

Two members of the IRPGF, who go by the pseudonyms Heval Sores and Black October, agreed to speak with Middle East Eye

about their experiences, and the role of international anarchists in Syria.

“The IRPGF is the first major strictly anarchist formation in Rojava whose intentions are not only to fight in Rojava (which is at this point easy to do and legally not a big problem for Westerners) but to defend social revolutions around the world, to fight against the state and capital and advance the cause of anarchism around the world,” said Black October.

“That means world revolution...while we are under the YPG’s authority and therefore legally in alliance with every group in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) we want to make it clear that our politics and the revolutionary struggle are not simply confined to Rojava.”

The US on Tuesday announced it was arming the YPG in its push for Raqqa. Turkey says every weapons delivered is a threat and according to IRPGF members, they are bracing for an eventual war with Turkey, in the hopes of uniting parts of Syria and Turkey into a confederalist entity.

“We cannot declare war on everyone at once but we need to be smart in how we play our enemies while still sticking to our values,” said Heval Sores.

Despite their internationalist viewpoint, both men felt drawn to Rojava, the YPG and its all-female counterpart, the YPJ as one of the most revolutionary political groups in the world. They had each spent time in anarchist and socialist organisations, but felt that life in YPG/J units was unique in its near total egalitarianism, ecological awareness and feminism.

All the armed groups in Syria, including the IRPGF, are turning their focus towards the battle for Raqqa, the de facto capital of IS. Once that is over, however, priorities will change.

According to IRPGF members, they are bracing for an eventual war with Turkey, in the hopes of uniting parts of Syria and Turkey into a confederalist entity. Until that war is over, IRPGF and the

international Freedom Battalion are actively encouraging international volunteers to join them.

“This is not the place to come to kill Arabs, Muslims or fight because Jesus told you so,” said Black October.

“This is a revolution and we have no need for people like that. Not to mention the Arabs are our comrades and fellow revolutionaries here in Rojava and most Kurds are Muslims.

“I would also like to emphasise that people with right-wing tendencies and/or religious motivations for coming to this conflict should refrain from doing so.”

Ocalan and Bookchin

Both said that their decision to fight in Rojava was influenced by the political ideology of Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), whom the YPG also hold up as their ideological guide.

Ocalan, originally a Marxist-Leninist and Kurdish nationalist, underwent an ideological transformation during his ongoing imprisonment in Turkey.

This has often been attributed to his correspondence with the late Murray Bookchin, an American ecologist and socialist thinker who, after spending many decades in anarchist circles, developed a new ideology called Libertarian Municipalism based on decentralised democratic self-governance.

Today, the PKK and YPG claim they no longer seek an independent Kurdish state, but rather the Bookchin-inspired global model of grassroots governance based on community assemblies, which Ocalan termed democratic confederalism.

While anarchist theory heavily influenced Ocalan, anarchists worldwide are split over whether or not they agree with his model, with the British Anarchist Federation, for example, criticising the YPG and its political wing the Democratic Union Party (PYD) for