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Interview with Tekoşîna Anarşîst – An Armed Collective in Rojava

Interviewed by the Federación Anarquista
Uruguaya

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To this day Rojava remains an inspiring model for revolutionary movements around the world, a space for debate and political practice demonstrating that another world is possible. Rojava is not an anarchist society, but it is a society where anarchists from all over the world can nurture our ideas through praxis. We cannot allow this beacon of hope to be extinguished, and even though it is a struggle we will continue to build, defend and develop the world we dream of living in. The attacks to come will cause more pain and destruction, but we are not afraid of the ruins because we carry a new world in our hearts.

Tekoşîna Anarşîst
July 2020
Rojava

1) From Latin America we have been following with attention and special interest what is happening in Rojava and Syria. First of all, could you explain the formation of the Battalion of libertarian comrades and their links with the Kurdish resistance?

Since the beginning of the Rojava revolution, especially following the resistance in Kobanê in 2015, international volunteers have come to confront the Daesh (ISIS) and defend the revolution. In the early years most of the international volunteers came in coordination with YPG and YPJ, the Kurdish self-defense militias. Given the anti-state character of the political project of Rojava, anarchists from different continents joined the struggle in defense of the revolution, often arriving in a disparate and disorganized way. In 2015, in addition to internationalists in YPG and YPJ, the IFB (International Freedom Battalion) was organized, uniting international militants and Turkish revolutionary organizations in a common organization. Within the IFB the first anarchist brigade was formed under the name of IRPGF (International Revolutionary People's Guerilla Forces), which operated for approximately one year during the Tabqa and Raqqa operations.

Têkoşîna Anarşîst (Anarchist Struggle) was created at the end of 2017 after the liberation of Raqqa. We seek to not only participate in the struggle against the Daesh, but to learn from the Kurdistan freedom movement while building bridges with libertarian movements around the world. As anarchists, we see the importance of taking up arms against the theocratic despotism of the Islamic State, but also against the fascistic oppression of the Turkish State, the Syrian State, the various imperialist powers and the myriad Islamic fundamentalist groups fighting in Syria. The reality of the war is very complex, and sometimes it plunges us into a sea of contradictions about our role here. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts converge with a proxy war of regional and geopolitical powers, where imperialist and colonial influences set the pace of a Middle East

bathed in blood and oil. But the Kurdish resistance is an emblematic example of revolutionary organization, and Rojava's social and political project is certainly inspiring. After some years working here we saw good sides and also bad sides of the revolution, and our commitment with it is based in a frame of internationalism and critical solidarity.

The implementation of democratic confederalism, a stateless society based on women's liberation, ecology and direct democracy, is an example for those of us who believe in a world free from capitalism and patriarchy. This is what led us to Rojava, but what now? A large number of internationalists who come to Rojava participate in defending the revolution for a few months and then return home to their previous lives. Is that what we want? Is this our idea of internationalist solidarity? No, we want something else. To better understand what we are looking for we studied about the history of internationalism, but instead of looking at the centralized structure of the third international we choose to find inspiration in the anti-colonial struggle of the Tricontinental Conference. Revolutionaries like Almícar Cabral from Guinea-Bissau, Ben Barka from Morocco or Che Guevara from Argentina, came together to, in the words of Franz Fanon "stand with the wretched of the earth to create a world of human beings". Their perspectives on international solidarity were very clear: «It is not a question of wishing success to the attacked, but of running his own luck; accompanying them to death or victory". They were talking about creating 2, 3, many Vietnams, we talk about creating 2, 3, many Rojavas, many Barbachas, many Chiapas.

Tekoşîna Anarşîst is not only an anarchist group in Syria or Kurdistan, our existence is conditioned by the struggle and the revolutionary process of Rojava. The oppression suffered by the Kurdish people is another example of the colonial dynamics suffered by indigenous peoples, peoples with ancestral cultures and roots who are threatened by capitalist hegemony. As internationalists, it is also our duty to study and understand the ways imperial powers

now, Egypt is off the Syrian board, but al-Sisi's government sees Erdogan as a threat, given his neo-Ottomanist rhetoric and his strong relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, the main opposition to al-Sisi's government.

Another possible scenario in the near future is a full-scale attack by the Turkish state on Qandil in Iraqi Kurdistan, where PKK bases are located. Erdogan has been besieging the mountains, the heart of the Kurdish insurgent movement, for years and hopes to have the support of NATO and its media and technological network to carry out such an operation. But to lay siege to the mountains, Erdogan needs the collaboration not only of the Iraqi state, but also Iran, since Qandil is on the border between them. It would be a very costly operation and given Turkey's unstable economic situation and its many fronts, it is not very clear whether Erdogan will be able to launch a large-scale campaign. Such an attack would be highly provocative across all parts of Kurdistan and revolutionary Rojava would not stand idly by in the face of this aggression.

In all, Rojava is a small player in a game of powers full of resentment and strife. It's brief history has always been threatened by the war and conflict that surrounds it, as its very existence challenges the plans and agendas of the powers that battle in Syria. Despite tactical alliances it is clear that no state has an interest in allowing this revolutionary project to prosper and expand. Now that the Daesh Caliphate has been defeated, other forces and powers continue to harass Rojava, mainly through the Turkish state and its proxies. Rojava exists thanks to the commitment and collective effort of thousands of militants, and we must always bear in mind that, without their sacrifice, nothing that we are experiencing here today would be possible. The attacks we have suffered have led to painful losses, and we have had to move forward and rebuild the ruins that the war has left behind. As militants, these experiences have forced us to appreciate the fundamental need for self-defense and to appreciate life and moments of happiness with more gratitude than we have ever experienced before.

With all this, it is difficult to foresee what will happen. The situation is highly unstable, there are so many variables and so many interests at stake that things change quickly from one day to the next. Without a doubt the biggest threat is a new invasion by the Turkish state, probably in Kobanê, as it is their resistance against Daesh that captivated international attention. The symbolic power of this city is very important, and that is why the Turkish state wants to occupy it, because it knows that it will be very difficult to sustain faith in the revolution without the city that managed to break the advance of Daesh. It is possible that Ain Issa and Manbij would be attacked first, since they are nearby cities and essential when it comes to providing logistical support in case Kobanê is besieged again. To launch such an attack, Erdogan knows he needs a green light from the international and regional powers. The war of influence between Russia and the U.S. in the Middle East can play a significant role, and depending on how the balance of power and objectives of both imperialist powers change, the effects will be felt, not only in Syria, but across the Middle East and the world. In the last few months we have seen a steady withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, though never a definitive one, as one of its priorities remains preventing other powers from gaining influence, especially Russia and Iran. Putin is racing to fill this vacuum, reinforcing his hegemony on Syrian soil and ensuring his access to the Mediterranean Sea.

Other regional powers may also influence Syria's future, such as the State of Israel, which continues to maintain its occupation of the Golan Heights, and carry out attacks and bombings against different targets on Syrian soil. Iran's presence in Syria is no secret, in fact most of Israel's attacks are usually against Hezbollah targets or other forces close to Iran's theocratic regime. The Zionist government of Netanyahu takes advantage of Iran's enmity with the U.S. to attack with impunity and thus weaken the powers that surround Israel. The Egyptian state now makes threats to intervene in the conflict in Libya to stop the spread of Turkish influence. For

exert oppression over countries of the Global South. We struggled against oppression at home and now we continue the struggle here. We came to Rojava responding to the call for international solidarity, and so our priority is to understand the needs of the people and the dynamics of the local revolutionary movement. In the past we had been working in coordination with the IFB (International Freedom Batalion), but today we are an autonomous organization integrated in the Syrian Democratic Forces, alongside Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians and other internationals, fighting for a democratic and ecological Syria free of patriarchal oppression.

2) What are the main differences between TA and the PKK and its armed groups?

The PKK is a revolutionary party created in response to the oppression suffered by the Kurdish people. Tekoşîna Anarşîst is a collective created to support and learn from the revolution of Rojava. This reality engenders a great number of differences in relation to the size of the organization, objectives, internal dynamics, future projection, tactics and strategies.

The PKK was founded more than 40 years ago as a national liberation movement with an internationalist outlook, forming an anti-colonial movement in the Middle East. Through its struggle for national liberation, the PKK, which started with a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist orientation, evaluated its achievements and shortcomings. Abdullah Öcalan proposed a new paradigm, nourished by libertarian perspectives, positioning itself against the nation-state model, patriarchy and the ecocide produced by capitalism and the techno-industrial system. Instead, the new paradigm creates models of direct democracy, with communes and cooperatives as the social base. It prioritizes women's liberation as the basis of social transformation through women organizing themselves autonomously. It is committed to an ecological perspective and a reconnection with

nature, reconstructing a model of life in accordance with the other living beings on this planet.

Its perspectives on violence also differ from those of its Maoist origins, where revolutionary violence was conceived of as an objective in itself. The change of paradigm, largely motivated by the Kurdish women's movement, refocused the analysis around the concept of self-defence. The patriarchal and colonial dynamics of states, which base their existence on domination through war, genocide and slavery, have always met with resistance from those they seek to subdue. Societies that have lived a free life cannot accept the domination of centralized systems, and that is why every society, every living being, needs to ensure its systems of self-defense.

As anarchists, as revolutionaries, we agree with this political and social vision. Ecology, feminism, communalism or confederalism are not unknown to anarchism, quite the contrary. In Rojava we have had to defend ourselves with all the means at our disposal against the theocratic despotism of the Islamic state and the invasion of the Turkish fascist state. In times of war, we have fought side by side with YPG, YPJ, guerrillas of the PKK, members of other Turkish revolutionary parties, other internationalists of different ideologies, Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians. When the enemy fires, when the bombs fall, the one on our side of the trench is compa, is heval, and the ideological differences do not weigh as much as the passion to defend the revolution, the passion to build a free society. But there are certainly ideological differences that, when bullets and mortars do not rain down, lead to debates and reflections that influence our way of thinking about revolution and understanding anarchism. The differences that Marx and Bakunin, among many others, discussed at the congresses of the first workers' international are still a source of conflict today. But it is precisely this conflict that helps us to reflect, to learn, to continue to grow.

In response to the question, the main differences we have found are, on the one hand, organizational, and on the other, ideological.

population that is suffering from these genocidal policies, and no doubt Rojava is in Turkey's sights.

The economic situation in Rojava is also very complex, with enormous difficulties ahead. The Syrian pound has fallen to historical lows, in recent months it has lost more than 300% of its value on the domestic market. To this we must add the new sanctions against Syria imposed by the Trump administration, a form of economic warfare which, despite being directed against the government of al-Assad, has a profound effect on all of Syria. Trump promised that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria would be exempt from these sanctions, but so far this promise has not materialized, and they must be added to the embargo that Rojava has suffered since the beginning of the revolution. In terms of resources, Rojava has an abundance of only wheat and oil, which are suffering from economic turmoil. The COVID-19 crisis has caused a fall in the price of crude oil, which has had a huge impact on the income of Autonomous Administration. In addition, the sanctions mentioned against the Assad government make it difficult to sell the oil, which needs the refineries in the areas under the control of the Syrian state to be able to process it. As for the wheat, the Autonomous Administration has decided to begin the harvest earlier to avoid what happened last year, when insurgent groups burned large swathes of cultivated land. Advancing the harvest has ensured that the wheat is not burnt, but at the same time it has been harvested still green and the price at which it can be sold is lower. In addition, wheat was stolen from silos in the Turkish-occupied area, such as the important silos in Tel Abyad.

A last point we want to mention is also related to the global effects of the pandemic, and is the closing of borders that has limited the mobility of internationalists. During the last 4 months no internationalist has been able to enter or leave Rojava, this limits the number of new people who want to travel to Rojava but have no way of doing so.

ticular risk to Tal Rifaat and the Şehba camps, as well as Manbij and Kobanê. As we have seen with other operations, it is not a question of whether Turkey will attack again, but when it will do so. Recently Erdogan announced a new operation in Başûr, Iraqi Kurdistan, which began with over 80 bombings by the Turkish Air Force. Among the targets were the Mexmûr camp, a hospital in Şengal, guerrilla positions and civilian villages in the mountains bordering Turkey and Iran, where the PKK has its bases. In late June a drone bombed a village outside Kobanê, where a meeting of the Kongreya Star (the women's movement in Rojava) was being held, killing 4 women, including the head of the Kobanê area. All these attacks are carried out while Turkey maintains its front in Idlib, supporting HTS (the Islamist coalition led by the Syrian branch of al-Qaida), its military operations in Libya, its aggressive international policy in the Mediterranean and a brutal internal repression against the Kurdish population in Turkey's own borders.

The authoritarian drift of the Turkish state in recent decades has been accompanied by a purge of military commanders, especially after the so-called attempted coup in 2016, as well as heavy investment in military spending. Erdogan recently acquired a second shipment of S-400 anti-aircraft systems from Russia, while closing a deal to acquire Patriot missiles from the United States. We see him arming himself to the teeth, seeking to maintain his position in NATO while leaning into a pact with Russia, trying to reorganize the geopolitical chessboard of the Middle East by evoking an Imperial Ottoman past. These expansionist dreams, the usual narrative of fascism, always need an internal enemy to blame. In 1915, the world witnessed the Armenian genocide on which the Turkish state was founded, where not only Armenians and other Christian minorities were massacred and forced to leave their homes, but an example was set that would later be referenced in perpetrating the holocaust («After all, who today speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?», said Hitler, invading Poland). Now it is the Kurdish

At the organizational level, we prioritize decentralization and the distribution of tasks, responsibilities and leadership, deliberately avoiding the creation of a central committee or an authoritarian institution. We know that military structures are always conditioned by hierarchical organization and a chain of command, and in some aspects we have had to adapt our structure to military needs. But unlike other forces, we pay special attention to operating in an inclusive and horizontal manner, encouraging rotating responsibilities and leadership. Collective learning, trust and mutual support, but above all the desire for a free life, are the basis of our work and political project.

At the ideological level, the differences may be more complex. The most relevant is perhaps our strong support for LGBT+ struggles, which in the Kurdish liberation movement do not have such determined support. There is, however, a current in the Kurdish women's movement and in jineolojî in particular, with whom we share a perspective on these issues. They themselves are questioning and reflecting on the apparent essentialism of this movement, opening the door to a more extended understanding of woman closer to queer theories, although still in a minority. Also the pragmatism of this movement sometimes leads to ideological contradictions, especially in aspects related to property. In Rojava there are communal initiatives and incentives for collective ownership, but private property is still the norm in society, without much effort to change this reality. Within revolutionary movements, property is largely collective, and the communal life has a clear socialist orientation, but it is sometimes difficult for these ideas to reach the majority of the population.

To bring a wider perspective, if we think not only of our organization but of anarchism more broadly, we see great contradictions with the individualistic tendency of anti-authoritarian movements in recent decades. Têkoşîna Anarşîst is committed to a collective struggle that transcends individual logic and liberal thinking, in tune with the values of social anarchism, but without ceasing to

reflect on the role of the individual in society. We very aware that with orders imposed from the top down, without respecting collective decisions or listening to minority voices, coercion is imposed on the individual. In turn, when the individual does not act in accordance with the common aims of a movement, he or she delegitimizes the organization and the collective struggle. Another important debate between traditional anarchism and the ideas of democratic confederalism is the approach to society and the relation with positivism and rationalism. Anarchism has often seen science and reason, which were resignified by the so-called «enlightenment», as the only way to achieve a free society. In the new paradigm this premise is questioned, with special attention to other ways of understanding the world and society that elude European colonial thought, especially looking at mythology and ancestral knowledge. These perspectives are important when it comes to learning from indigenous movements, rethinking our relationship with nature, with civilization and with life itself.

Evaluating these ideas, the similarities and differences that we have found with our movements and the reality of Rojava, have led us to prioritize two objectives. First, the development of militant personalities, working to deconstruct the patriarchal and capitalist influence that we have internalized. Second, the need to agree on organizational standards based on commitment and responsibility, according to our will as revolutionaries but also to the needs of our organization. And even though these objectives are developed in a different way from the PKK, the methods that we learn here are of great help to us. The practice of tekmlil, platform, criticism and self-criticism, guide us in our growth and development as revolutionaries, but we also recognize the need to study and learn from the history of anarchist and revolutionary movements around the world.

from the Turkish bombs. The al-Hol camp is also difficult to run, where tens of thousands of women and children who lived under the Islamic caliphate are held. This includes some women who maintain their Islamic fundamentalist ideas, often organizing riots and statements in support of Daesh, attacking the security forces of the camp and also other women, stabbing, throwing acid or setting tents in fire. The special prisons for Daesh fighters add to the difficulties faced by the Autonomous Administration in stabilising the region, needing an international tribunal to find solutions and bring Daesh members to justice. But the international community does not seem very interested in supporting this kind of judicial process, and few countries have repatriated the international fighters who left to join the ranks of the Islamic State. In these prisons too, there are often riots and escape attempts.

The refugee camps are also hotbeds of health emergencies, with outbreaks of salmonella or other diseases, such as leishmaniasis in the Şehba camps. So far, Rojava didn't suffer an outbreak of COVID-19, but the self administration had been working in preparations to prevent future risks. Our work on health issues has also allowed us to learn and support in these fields and to better understand the situation, as well as to collaborate in the development of training and preparations for preventive measures in case the pandemic begins to spread here. The hospital in Serêkaniyê – now occupied by Turkey and its proxies – was the only one equipped to carry out PCR tests, and it is known that Turkey is sending a large number of COVID-19 infected people there. In Efrin the epidemic is spreading, given the direct connection of the Turkish army with the Islamist groups occupying the area, possibly in an attempt by the Erdogan administration to spread the virus to Rojava. In the parts of Syria still under the control of the Syrian regime the virus has spread, so we do not know how long Rojava will be free from the effects of the pandemic.

The military situation is not easy either. On the one hand Erdogan continues to threaten the occupation of the region, with par-

among us, as we are an international group of anarchists from various countries, often with different perspectives and backgrounds. This work has given us a better understanding of the libertarian movements in different parts of the world and how to put them in context with the revolutionary process we are going through.

In the practical field, our work has focused on defending the revolution. After taking part in different military campaigns against the Islamic State, we pushed to develop our capacities as combat medics, since health care in the first minutes can be crucial for survival. Tekoşîna Anarşîst worked as a combat medical team in the Baghouz campaign, the last bastion of the Islamic State, and has since been our main task whenever there has been an active front in Rojava. Operating as a combat medical team also means being able to train new members in these disciplines, so we have put a lot of effort into compiling what we have learned to share with new comrades who came to join the revolution.

4) How do you analyze the current situation of the conflict in Syria and what perspectives do you foresee?

Today, in July 2020, the war continues in Syria. We celebrated recently the eighth anniversary of the revolution, remembering the 19th of July 2012 when autonomy was declared in the city of Kobanê. The Islamic State has been defeated after the battle of Baghouz in 2019, but there are still cells and operational groups that continue to carry out attacks. Many of its former members have also joined the Turkish backed Islamist groups, which have occupied the canton of Efrîn since early 2018. It is less than a year since Turkey and its Islamist mercenaries occupied the cities and villages alongside the border in between the cities of Tel Abyad and Serêkaniyê.

The population fleeing these conflicts are found in refugee camps, such as the Şehba camps where from Efrîn fled, or the Waşokani camp where the population of Serêkaniyê fled for refuge

3) How do you analyze the process of building Democratic Confederalism? What is your participation in this construction?

The construction of democratic confederalism is certainly more visible in Rojava, but it cannot be disconnected from the rest of Kurdistan. In recent years the ideas of this political paradigm have been put into practice on a large scale in Rojava, but we must also take into account other territories such as Mexmûr camp or the more recently autonomous zone of Şengal in Başûr (Iraqi Kurdistan). There are also political developments in Rojhilat (Iranian Kurdistan), but above all in Bakûr, within the borders of the Turkish State. It is necessary to take into account the four parts into which Kurdistan is divided today to understand why the Kurdish movement is oriented towards an anti-state solution.

When analyzing its construction, it is essential to refer to the ideological work of Abdullah Öcalan and his «Manifesto for a Democratic Society». Unlike other political proposals, democratic confederalism does not limit itself to describing a utopian society free of oppression, but opens a dialogue of questions and answers on how to transform society and realize this utopia. How we want to live, how we want to relate and how we want to fight are important questions in building a revolutionary society. The answers that Öcalan outlines are not easily summarized in a few paragraphs, but it is important to understand some of the concepts he identifies. This democratic modernity, as we have mentioned, is based on the liberation of women, ecology and democracy without the state.

This ideological progression shows similarities with other revolutionary processes such as the Zapatista movement, an insurgent movement in the mountains of southern Mexico. Both movements are born with a Maoist framework but are reoriented towards libertarian socialism, both have grown and found refuge in the mountains, both are heirs to a people with ancient origins, both have a strong autonomous women's movement, both are an example for

anti-capitalist movements worldwide. Democratic confederalism is not a new ideology, it is a way of understanding society and civilization that inspires us to develop as revolutionary movements, to make a commitment to our ideas and to move forward with determined steps towards a more just society.

In bringing these ideas into practice in Rojava, the process has been vastly influenced by the war in Syria. In turn it has been the war what made the revolution possible, enabling the radical social transformation needed to lay the foundations of such political developments. In 2012 the YPG/YPJ, then poorly armed people's militias, expelled the soldiers and bureaucrats of the Syrian state with hardly a few bullets fired. This was followed by bitter fighting against Islamist groups like al-Nusra and later Daesh. After breaking Daesh's seige of Kobanê in 2015, the YPG/YPJ expanded to lead the military coalition of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). By the time Raqqa was liberated in 2017, the SDF had become a regular military force, trained and equipped to a semi-professional level.

These military developments were accompanied by a process of social transformation based on the ideas of democratic confederalism, with the creation of communes, cooperatives, women's centres, justice committees, academies, school programs in Kurdish, cultural centres, etc. Social institutions such as TEV-DEM (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk – Movement for a Democratic Society), together with the PYD (Partiya Yekineyen Democratic – Democratic Unity Party) and other political parties, came together to establish the Autonomous Administration, initially organized in 3 cantons (Efrîn, Kobanê, Cizîre). We see the clear aim to manage the territory on the basis of local organization, based on a municipal model, without seeking the centralization of a State system.

No revolution is an easy process, and despite the criticisms we may have about certain decisions, the process that Rojava is going through in these 8 years of revolution is admirable. Once again, it is difficult to summarize everything in a few paragraphs, but

among the most important steps we want to mention the development of the situation that women are experiencing, and the role that the YPJ is playing in this process. Women in Syria, like women all over the world, suffer from the violence and oppression of patriarchal systems, but from 2014 they were especially threatened by the theocratic despotism of the Islamic state. Daesh is undoubtedly a more brutal and bloody example of patriarchy, with thousands of women captured and sold into sexual slavery. In words of YPJ fighter Amara from Kobane "Our philosophical views made us women conscious of the fact that we can only live by resisting", giving perspectives on why many women choose to take up arms to free themselves from such a threat, why they choose self-defence and direct action against that which threatens their lives. After the military victories against Daesh the enormous courage and sacrifice that women have brought to the revolution was proven beyond doubt. The Kurdish movement says that no society can be free if women are not free, and in Rojava this slogan becomes the heart of the revolutionary process.

Our involvement in this whole process is relatively modest, as we have only been working for three years in Rojava. In the beginning, the most important thing was to understand the local reality, the Kurdish language and culture, the political project and the functioning of the organizations and structures. This brought some ideological contradictions along with new methods of organizing. Despite our ideological similarities and Öcalan's references to different anarchist thinkers, like Bakunin, Kropotkin or Foucault, anarchism remains a great unknown for the Kurdish movement. In the third volume of the «manifesto for a democratic civilization», Öcalan reflects on the importance of anarchism as a key ally in the development of democratic modernity, sharing his critics and perspectives for anarchist movements. In the ideological field, our work has focused on reflecting on these ideas and contradictions, translating them and making them more accessible to a wide audience. We have also spent time debating and sharing our ideas