

Decolonising Syria's so-called 'queer liberation'

On Rojava's new international LGBTQI brigade, the "war on terror" and the Western left's erasure of local struggles

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On July 24 the International Revolutionary People's Guerrilla Forces (IRPGF), a group of international fighters and volunteers fighting alongside the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), announced on their Twitter page the creation of a "subgroup comprised of LGBTQI comrades and others who seek to smash the gender binary".

The group, called TQILA, was to join the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria. The Twitter announcement was soon picked up by a few Western media outlets amid gleeful reactions by leftists, progressives and gay celebrities on their social media accounts.

On July 25, Mustafa Bali, the media relations director of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF — which includes YPG in its ranks), denied the "formation of such a battalion within the framework" of SDF. The following day, the IRPGF spokesperson, Heval Rojhilat, told Newsweek that SDF did not know the announcement was coming and that IRPGF does not need SDF's "permission for that since it is within our own autonomous organization".

Responses and reactions to this announcement varied; some questioned the group's authenticity and asked whether the story was just another orientalist exotica concocted by the Western media. Others questioned the group's efficiency as "proper" fighters. Some even wondered whether this was a clever attempt by the YPG to gain favourable coverage in the Western media. And many among the Western leftists and progressives celebrated the news as "queer vengeance against ISIL".

What has so far been missing in the debate, however, is how this announcement, its discourse and the logic behind it, situate "violence" and "war on terror" as a "revolutionary" method in achieving universal social justice on the Syrian front lines.

We learn, from the founding statements of TQILA and its umbrella group, IRPGF, that their causes of "anarchism", "smashing gender binary", and "sexual revolution" are all connected to the most selling hegemonic narrative of the 21st century: the "war on terror".

Queer liberators or imperial queers?

Much decolonial and queer feminist literature has been written on the imperial project of the "war on terror" and its whiteness, its propagation of "rescue narratives" towards Muslim women, its destruction of the homes and resources of local communities in the global south and its "civilising mission" to bring "democracy" and "human rights" to these communities — and now "smash gender binary" and "queerphobia" for them.

Grassroots activists and community organisers from the Middle East know very well how the "war on terror" narrative is not a tool exclusive to the white Western state. It has also become the tool of self-identified anti-imperialist states, resistance bodies and authoritarian regimes in their crackdown on dissidents, popular uprisings and minority rights. Under the guise of participating in the so-called "war on terror", these regimes and groups invade, bomb, torture, incarcerate and evacuate local civilian communities amid the cheerful endorsement of the international progressive left.

In this regard, Syrian queer academic-activist Fadi Saleh told me:

"[Why] 'anarchists' go to a country devastated by war and chaos for years now and say they want to spread anarchism is a bit beyond me. It is not only ridiculous, but also unethical and quite arrogant, because in a country that has been fighting for some sense of stability, peace, and belonging for years, their mission is nothing short of abhorrent.

This global obsession with Daesh [ISIL] and the gays is another exhausted trope that this and other groups need to stop using and building their entire political agendas upon. Daesh has invariably and indiscriminately targeted all kinds of populations, that is first. Second, reducing sexual and gender-based violence to Daesh does not only wash all the violence the other parties committed and continue to commit against sexual and gender minorities as irrelevant, but also confers a twisted sense of legitimacy upon TQILA: if you oppose Daesh, your politics and entire being as a unit becomes unquestionable, ultimately good and probably beyond criticism. I still want to know who these people are if they continue to speak in my name. I want to be able to hold them accountable if they make mistakes.”

TQILA tells us that it was formed to fight “authority, patriarchy and oppressive heteronormativity, queer/homophobia and transphobia” and explains how “the images of gay men being thrown off roofs and stoned to death” by ISIL was something they “could not idly watch”. Their umbrella group, IRPGF, tells us that their role is “to be an armed force capable of defending liberatory social revolutions around the world while simultaneously being a force capable of insurrection and struggle against all kyriarchal forms of power wherever they exist ... [and] to fight alongside other armed groups in solidarity with those who are oppressed, exploited and facing annihilation.”

This romantic sketching of a revolutionary path to utopia in a conflict that has been termed the “worst man-made disaster since World War II”, where almost half a million were killed and half of the population is displaced, render other perpetrators of the suffering of the Syrian people invisible.

By positioning the “war on terror” as context for such a “laboratory” and “emancipating” narrative, the IRPGF and TQILA end up providing a glossing template for the erasure of local communities’ inclusive struggles, including the ones they claim to rescue.

Ethno-orientalist constructions of Rojava

The Rojava administration in northern Syria, which was founded by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) — YPG’s political arm — in 2013, has been portrayed as a success story of the “struggle against borders and for autonomy” by the international media and self-identified leftists and progressives.

Others applaud “the Kurds” — a common synonym used by leftists to refer to PYD — as “the best hope for left politics in the region”. PYD is also presented as a big champion for “gender equality” as a result of its inclusion of women in its armed forces.

Nevertheless, the PYD, like the rest of the conflicting parties in the region, commits human rights violations, targets its dissidents, including peaceful protesters and forcibly evacuates Arab and Turkman civilians — and some Kurds — from their villages.

To suggest that ‘gender and sexual revolutions’ are being accomplished by joining an authoritarian party participating in the imperial ‘war on terror’ not only functions as an erasure of other struggles, but also as a colonial rewriting of what the struggle is in Syria.

As a result of the Western leftist ethno-orientalist fascination with Kurdish Rojava’s “feminist” militarisation model which supposedly leads to “women’s emancipation”, feminism and broader

social justice movements replace and silence local communities' struggles, including women's and queers'.

Indeed, the PYD has been repeatedly criticised by Syrian Kurds living under the Rojava administration, including activists, members of the political opposition, journalists, civil society groups, women and queers.

For example, a Syrian Kurdish queer transwoman, Ziya Gorani, who lived under the Rojava administration, has a different perception of Rojava than the international left and TQILA. She told me:

"I am angry about the image PYD is trying to sell to the outside world. They say they're 'anarchists' adopting feminism and now they are being celebrated for their inclusion of LGBTQ individuals. But at the same time, they do nothing to provide protection to marginalised groups. Just because there are no laws against LGBTQ in Rojava, this doesn't mean there are rights. There have been cases of discrimination against LGBTQ people, and the PYD watched and did nothing about it, because they don't care — it is not one of their priorities. As a LGBTQ person in Rojava you are faced with two options: Either you choose to come out and [be] killed, or live your life afraid of being outed.

I was attacked for these views and accused of supporting rival groups. As a queer woman, I know for a fact that I cannot go back to Rojava without being attacked, and I know there is no protection for me there. So I am most certainly not defending anyone in this war. As a Kurdish Syrian queer woman, I have the right to criticise the PYD without being accused of defending other sides. The world has to stop seeing Rojava as a utopia.

We do not know who are the members of this subgroup [TQILA], we do not know if they're Kurds themselves, or Syrian. They're a bunch of international fighters with YPG, trying to sell an image that LGBTQ people can wander the streets of Rojava without being discriminated against — that's a lie. That's not how things are in Rojava."

None of what Gorani said has been echoed among the international left celebrating the formation of TQILA.

The militarised liberation mission of this group of international self-identified anarchists to save Syrian queers from "religiously motivated hatred and attacks" is not only reminiscent of imperial and colonial legacies in the region, but also in the Syrian context, it obscures the ways in which the "war on terror" has provided the authoritarian Syrian state a legal platform to systematically eliminate the 2011 popular uprising by simply constructing itself as a "secular", "anti-imperialist" and "pan-Arabist" state, with support of the global left.

Because of the "war on terror" narrative, "secular" and "sovereign" Bashar al-Assad legally killed peaceful protesters, media and aid workers, besieged civilian populations and built "extermination camps".

Predominance of oppositional dichotomies such as "terrorists" versus "seculars", or "Kurds" versus "Sunni Arabs", "queer anarchists" versus "Islamist terrorists" and "international leftists" versus "international terrorists" in the narratives about Syria's six-year-old war expose how the war on local communities in Syria has been perpetuated by claims of modernity and civilisational superiority.

To suggest that "gender and sexual revolutions" are being accomplished by joining an authoritarian party participating in the imperial "war on terror" not only functions as an erasure of other

struggles, but also as a colonial rewriting of what the struggle is in Syria. The struggle is, and has always been, according to these international fighters and their leftist supporters: a war on ISIL. The populations in Syria, however, have been saying that their struggle is for self-determination, and they can only achieve this goal by ousting Assad, takfiris and warlords by strengthening grassroots community organising.

Razan Ghazzawi is a Syrian Palestinian scholar and activist. She was a protestor and a grassroots activist in the 2011 uprising. She was detained twice by the Syrian State and was forced to get smuggled out of the country under threats of a third detention. In 2013 Ghazzawi returned to Syria to live in Kafranbel, a town in the north of Syria which was not under the control of the regime. She is currently a first year PhD candidate at the University of Sussex. Her thesis focuses on the intersections of sexuality, exceptional violence and sovereignty of the Syrian state.

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