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And Against Them, Only Autonomous Resistance
7th October 2019

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Trump's betrayal of Rojava shows the symbiotic relationship between far-right nationalist tyrants like Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Jihadist groups like ISIS. It also drives home that we cannot depend on any state, party, or military to maintain peace—we have to get organized on a horizontal basis.

The people of Rojava in northern Syria—both Kurdish and Muslim—were at the front of the struggle to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), sustaining thousands and thousands of casualties in the course of years of warfare. As soon as ISIS was beaten, the US government tricked the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into dismantling their defenses along the Syrian border, promising to secure peace in the region and discouraging them from seeking other international allies. Once they were defenseless, Trump gave Turkey permission to invade.

For all his talk about borders, Trump obviously doesn't care about respecting them—any more than he actually cares about

fighting terrorism. With ISIS having lost all of its territory and tens of thousands of its fighters in SDF detainment camps, Turkey's invasion of Syria is the only thing that could enable ISIS to resume its activities.

During the reign of ISIS, it was widely reported that Turkey tacitly permitted volunteers, weapons, and resources to reach the Islamic State across its territory. Even Trump's own former Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Brett H. McGurk, has argued that Turkey's invasion will likely enable ISIS to regroup and reemerge. One of Trump's stated justifications for permitting Turkey to invade Syria is that US taxpayers should not have to pay to keep ISIS fighters detained. In fact, the US has not paid a cent to detain captured ISIS fighters; that has been completely organized by the SDF. Trump's real agenda is to permit Erdoğan to carry out ethnic cleansing against the Kurds and to further destabilize the Middle East. Turkish officials consistently describe Kurdish organizations like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as higher-priority adversaries than ISIS.

Demagogues like Trump and Erdoğan benefit from the terror spread by groups like ISIS; such groups are the only thing that can make their own authoritarian agendas look good by comparison. This latest tragedy fits into a long pattern. CIA funding helped equip al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan; George Bush's invasion and occupation of Iraq created the conditions for ISIS to arise, embittering the population and leaving a tremendous amount of military equipment available to insurgents.

As we argued in 2015, following ISIS attacks in Paris,

There is a chilling symmetry between the agendas of the nationalists of Europe and the fundamentalists of the Islamic State. The nationalists wish to see the world divided into gated communities in which citizenship serves as a sort of caste system; European history shows that in a world thus

All people of good conscience should mobilize immediately to impose consequences on Turkey for this hateful attack and to spread a vision of a future without tyranny or war. If we don't, the consequences will be horrifying.

divided, the ultimate solution to every problem is war. The fundamentalists, for their part, hope to assert Islamic identity as the basis of a global jihad.

In this regard, the only real difference between ISIS and the European nationalists is over whether the criteria for inclusion in the new world order should be citizenship or religion. Both ISIS and the nationalists want to see the conflicts of the 21st century play out between clearly defined peoples governed by rival powers, not between the rulers and the ruled as a whole.

Turkey's invasion of Rojava will set a new precedent for senseless military invasions, ethnic cleansing, and the destruction of comparatively egalitarian social experiments like the one in Rojava. It sets the stage for more massacres and oppression everywhere around the world. It implies a future in which ethno-nationalist autocrats like Trump, Erdoğan, Bashar al-Assad, Jair Bolsonaro, and Vladimir Putin will be in the driver's seat worldwide, conniving with each other to maintain power over their private domains, counting on groups like ISIS to scare ignorant people into running to them for safety.

Turkey's invasion also shows that we cannot count on the United States, the United Nations, or any other government or transnational institution to maintain peace, let alone to protect us. We need to invest everything in grassroots organizing and international solidarity. No politician, party, or military has our best interests at heart.

This morning, neoliberal Republican senators like Lindsay Graham who have served Trump faithfully as obsequious bootlickers are arguing some of the same points we have made above. This does not show that anarchists and neoliberals have the same agenda—rather, it confirms that we have entered an era of three-sided conflicts pitting nationalists, neoliberals,

and anti-authoritarian social movements all against each other, and grievous misfortune awaits those who make the mistake of counting on neoliberals for security. Protesters in Hong Kong who have petitioned Donald Trump and the United States government for support should see how foolish this is today.

In order to defeat an Islamist army equipped with all the weaponry the US abandoned in Iraq, the SDF concluded that they had no choice other than to depend on the United States military for air support. It was inevitable that once they had served their purpose, the US would betray them—but they felt that they had no other choice. If we don't want future popular movements against fascist and fundamentalist insurgencies to end the same way, what do we have to do? How should we be organizing today?

There are no state solutions to this problem. Today, from the United States and France to China and Nicaragua, all governments are focused chiefly on maintaining their own power, not addressing the root causes of desperation and social unrest. Again, as we wrote in 2015,

From Washington, DC and Istanbul to Raqqa and Mosul, those who hold power have no real solutions for the economic, ecological, and social crises of our time; they are more focused on suppressing the social movements that threaten them. But wherever such movements are crushed, discontent will be channeled into organizations like ISIS that seek to solve their problems through sectarian war rather than collective revolutionary change.

And to quote an anarchist in Syria, writing last December, when it first became clear that Trump hoped to betray the Syrian Kurds:

No one should forget that ISIS was only reduced to their current relative weakness by a multi-ethnic, radically democratic grassroots resistance movement involving international volunteers from around the globe. In view of Trump's decision to betray the struggle against ISIS, every sincere person who earnestly wants to put a stop to the spread of apocalyptic fundamentalist terror groups like ISIS or their imminent successors should stop counting on the state and put all their resources into directly supporting decentralized multi-ethnic egalitarian movements. It is becoming ever clearer that those are our only hope.

If Trump manages to go through with this, the author warned last December,

the entire post-cold war era of US military hegemony is over, and we are entering a multipolar age in which tyrants will rule balkanized authoritarian ethno-states: think Europe before World War I. The liberals and neoconservatives who preferred US hegemony are mourning the passing of an era that was a blood-soaked nightmare for millions. The leftists (and anarchists?) who imagine that this transition could be good news are fools fighting yesterday's enemy and yesterday's war, not recognizing the new nightmares springing up around them. The de facto red/brown coalition of authoritarian socialists and fascists who are celebrating the arrival of this new age are hurrying us all helter-skelter into a brave new world in which more and more of the globe will look like the worst parts of the Syrian civil war.