

# **The Roots of Turkish Fascism**

**And the Threat It Poses**

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Like the United States and many other countries, Turkey has been on a trajectory towards escalating authoritarianism for a long time; it is arguably further along this trajectory than most. How did an autocratic government gain control in Turkey, forging an alliance between a once-secular nationalism and fundamentalist Islam? Studying the roots of present-day fascism in Turkey will help us to understand the origins of the Turkish invasion of Rojava, identify potential comrades and fault lines within Turkish society, and catch a glimpse of what the future may look like *everywhere* if we don't succeed in halting the rise of autocracy.

The appendix includes an interview with a member of Revolutionary Anarchist Action, an anarchist organization active in Turkey for ten years.

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Not long ago, Turkey was a darling of the Western world. A favorite tourist destination of Europeans and Russians, home to the one of the longest-standing US foreign military bases, and a top recipient of IMF/World Bank loans, the country bridging Asia and Europe once had a generally a favorable reputation among all from US military brass to financial speculators. This image has been severely tarnished by the Turkish military's latest incursion into northern Syria, which elicited widespread disapproval from various politicians as well as international social movements.

Yet although the invasion took many people by surprise, Turkey itself has always been shaped by a mix of fascisms—an ethno-state built upon the slaughter of Armenians and the expulsion of Greeks as well as the colonial assimilation of the local Kurdish population. At its foundation, the national Turkish identity was conceived for the benefit of the Muslim population, borrowed from the “nation system” by which the Ottoman Empire divided the population according to religion.

For its first 27 years, starting in 1923, the Turkish State was run by a one-party corporatist system that can properly be described as fascist. After 1950, additional political parties were permitted to enter the parliamentary system—at least until the military coup in 1960.

In the ensuing years, Turkey was influenced by the global revolutionary leftist wave. This relatively inclusive period ended with the military coup in 1980; the fascist neoliberal regime that followed was very similar to Pinochet's Chile. The war against Kurdish movements intensified during the 1990s alongside political instability, with one coalition government disintegrating after another. The early 2000s, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took the stage, appeared to represent a break with classical Turkish politics, a liberal democratic turn—but the honeymoon gradually ended as authoritarian neoliberalism blended with traditional Turkish fascism. The latest iteration of Turkish fascism, embodied by President Erdoğan, represents the melding of a deep-rooted nationalism with more recent political Islam.

On the surface, this ideological merger is surprising, as the two currents used to be at odds. The founding principles of the Turkish state as articulated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk emphasized that it was to be a secular state. This secularism, while repressive in some ways—for example, prohibiting the public display of religious garb—was also far from complete. Since the founding of the state, its ministry of religious affairs has repeatedly attempted to regulate and instill Sunni Islam throughout Turkey. More importantly, amalgamations of state forces, Sunni nationalist militias, and mobs have carried out periodic massacres against Turkey's Alevi population<sup>1</sup>— in

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<sup>1</sup> The Alevi sect, in the Shia branch of Islam, is associated with the leftist revolutionary tradition in Turkey. While many are practicing Muslims, the ritual of singing and circular collective dancing (semah) during a commu-

1938 in Dersim against Alevi Kurds, 1978 in the cities of Maraş and Malatya, in Çorum in 1980, in Sivas in 1993.

Despite the nationalist underpinnings of the state and the periodic mobilization of Islam at the service of Turkish nationalism, this form of hegemonic fascism chiefly emphasized the Turkic roots of the Central Asian steppe, rather than the blend of the Ottoman imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism Erdoğan peddles today. This form of fascism was weaponized against the leftist student movement of the late 1960s and '70s, in which the initial founders and cadres of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) also cut their teeth, including the well-known leader Abdullah Öcalan himself. Both the state and related fascist paramilitary formations committed massacres, such as the infamous 1978 raid in Ankara in which seven young members of the Turkish Workers Party were murdered. Some of the perpetrators of that particular massacre later became agents in Operation Gladio, the CIA- and NATO-directed international paramilitary organization that was responsible for carrying out the Italian "strategy of tension" (*strategia della tensione*) against the Autonomist movement of the 1970s. Their exploits stretched over decades. These state operatives also organized the counter-insurgency forces that targeted PKK members and their Kurdish financiers across Turkey in the 1990s.

## The Rise of Political Islam

Meanwhile, amid the violent turmoil between leftist students and state-backed fascist paramilitaries, the founders of modern Turkish political Islam were quietly organizing. Among them was Fetullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic cleric currently in exile in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. Gülen's long relationship with the AKP and with Erdoğan himself has been tumultuous to say the least. Starting out in the eastern Turkish city of Erzurum as a member of a congregation following the teachings of Said Nursi, Gülen became the cleric of a small number of followers in the western city of Izmir in the late 1960s and '70s. (Said Nursi, an avid anti-communist, was also prosecuted by the Turkish state until his death in 1960; his particular variant of Islam was deemed a threat to the Kemalists because it incorporated capitalism and modernity.)

Erdoğan's roots can be traced to a rival Islamist movement, the National Perspective Movement (*Milli Görüş*, a reference to the Ottoman link between the Turkish Nation and Islam) founded by Necmettin Erbakan. Gülen and Erbakan differed in strategy. Erbakan advocated for a political movement to capture parliamentary seats and ultimately the government, while Gülen pursued a more insidious approach that combined business-building and the cadreification of various organs of the state, primarily the military and judicial ones, including the police forces.

Often competing, these two strands of Turkish political Islam rose to prominence in the early 1980s following the military coup of September 12, 1980. The coup put the military government of Kenan Evren in power, which arrested nearly 650,000 people—mostly leftist revolutionaries. Behind cell doors, 171 were killed during torture and interrogation; 49 were executed outright. This brutal wave of repression paved the way for the rise of political Islam, mostly as a counterforce to the leftist wave sweeping through the Turkish youth and unionized workers. The process was accelerated by President Turgut Özal, who folded the Turkish economy into the global neoliberal

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nity ceremony (*cem*) at the house of *cem* (*cem evi*) is more important than praying at the mosque. They have been persecuted and massacred since the Ottoman Empire.

eral system by limiting public investment, taking measures to attract foreign capital, enacting sweeping privatizations of public institutions, and transitioning to an export-driven economy.

Öcalan had fled the country prior to the 1980 military coup. In the 1980s, from Syria, he started to organize the PKK more seriously, organizing formal guerilla trainings and introducing his ideas into Kurdish society in the villages and cities of southeastern Turkey.

Ultimately, both strands of political Islam—the Gülenist “Congregation” and Erbakan’s “National Perspective Movement”—succeeded in their respective strategies. The Congregation deeply infiltrated the military and the judiciary, while Erbakan’s Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*) became a coalition partner in the 1996 general elections with its founder serving as prime minister. Erdoğan’s initial rise in Turkish politics, as mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998, came about by way of his membership in Erbakan’s Welfare Party. Following the suppression of the Welfare Party by Turkey’s National Security Council and Erdoğan’s brief fourth-month imprisonment for reciting an Islamist poem, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was formed in 2001.

The AKP came to power in the 2002 general elections with a sweeping victory, forming a single-party government for the first time since Özal’s reign in the 1980s. They succeeded in harnessing voter frustration about the neoliberal response to the 2001 Turkish economic crisis. An alliance with the Gülenist movement also contributed to their rapid rise to power. The Congregation cadre played an essential role, since until then Islamist parties and governments had always been shut down by the courts or military. Supporting each other, the two previously divergent currents within political Islam even took on the longstanding nationalist military cadres of Turkey via various conspiratorial operations and investigations.

However, this tenuous alliance broke apart around 2011. The causes of the split were complex. On the surface, the catalyst was the peace negotiations between the AKP and the PKK taking place in Norway. The temporary rapprochement was a thorn in the side of the staunchly anti-PKK Gülenists. The breakup was also precipitated by the divergence between Turkish and US policy towards the Syrian conflict, as Gulen was becoming a client of the US. More fundamentally, the rise of Erdoğan and the AKP became an existential threat to the Gülenists, as the former were able to hoard an increasingly large slice of the crony capitalist pie for themselves. During the AKP years, the volume of privatization—i.e., wealth transfer from the public sector to private individuals—reached \$60 billion, almost ten times as much as during the prior administrations. The conflict between the two sides raged for five years, ultimately culminating with the failed July 15, 2016 coup attempt by Gülenist cadres in the military.

## The Failed Coup

The coup attempt provided the perfect pretext for Erdoğan to consolidate his power. He was able to purge his old Gülenist allies, who had become a threat to his reign, and to unleash a storm of repression against all opposition, including the Kurdish movement and various leftist groups and activists. Erdoğan had once referred to Gülen respectfully as his *Hodja*, or teacher; now he disparagingly refers to him by the location in the US where Gülen lives in exile, “Pennsylvania.” Alongside his practice of referring to the YPG by pronouncing the acronym in English, this shows how Erdoğan intentionally presents himself to the Turkish population and to the Muslim *umma* in general (all Muslims imagined as a singular community bound by religion) as some sort of anti-imperialist.

The declaration of a state of emergency following the coup attempt gave Erdoğan the power to issue emergency decrees. This led to the jailing of more than 8000 members of the Kurdish-led Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), the dismissal of more than 6000 academics from their universities for opposition views, and a policy of zero tolerance for any public demonstration critical of the AKP—even though none of these groups had anything to do with the coup. In its scope, if not in its brutality, the repression Erdoğan unleashed after the coup attempt compares with what occurred after the successful military coup of 1980.

The failed coup also provided a renewed “origin story” for the AKP, which had been on the ropes since the Gezi Uprising of 2013.

At the end of May 2013, riot police brutally evicted an occupation defending Gezi Park in Taksim Square at the center of Istanbul. People from many different struggles and demographics responded, forcing the police out of the area and building barricades around the neighborhood. For ten days, the subsequent occupation maintained a liberated police-free zone in the heart of Istanbul, while hundreds of thousands of people—including rival football clubs, various left groups, and anarchists demonstrated against the government all around Turkey. In retrospect, this was one of the last outbreaks of revolt in the wave of movements that began with the Greek insurrection of December 2008 and concluded with fascists gaining a foothold in the Ukrainian revolution of 2014.

The Gezi uprising was the longest lasting, most widespread, and most participatory street-level insurrection to date in Western (i.e., non-Kurdish) Turkey. The communal structures that emerged in the encampment offered a glimpse of future revolutionary social relations. After the occupation was evicted, the momentum of the movement continued, albeit losing steam, for another year.

Yet in the end, the movement failed to reconstitute itself after the police regained control of the streets. This was partly a matter of fatigue. Likewise, the spontaneity of the movement—unquestionably one of its greatest strengths—ultimately failed to offer a clear way to bring the participants back together after they were dispersed from Taksim Square; the various political factions once again withdrew into their respective ideological ghettos. Still, the Gezi uprising remains alive in many people’s memories, even if the constriction of public politics following the coup attempt has made it difficult to speak about it publicly.

After the failed coup, Erdoğan went so far as to paint the Gezi uprising as another unsuccessful putsch. While it became impossible to organize according to the ideals of the Gezi uprising, the coup attempt enabled Erdoğan to fashion a new narrative in which he and his government were protecting Turkey from threats, both internal and external. The public displays glorifying citizen “martyrs” who died opposing the military and the renaming of bridges, parks, avenues and many other public spaces to reflect the events of July 15, 2016 keep the failed coup alive in the psyche of Turks, creating a sense of national unity in the face of “foreign enemies.”

The years since the coup attempt have seen Erdoğan tighten his political stranglehold on the country. At the same time, this has made him more isolated and vulnerable, compelling him to search for new political allies—principally in the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which now maintains a tenuous coalition with the AKP. This coalition has come to embody the long-term effort to bring together a synthesis of Turkish nationalism and Islam. This is the dominant political ideology of the Erdoğan regime today; it is best exemplified by the hand-sign insignias seen both at AKP rallies and amid the jihadist proxies of Turkey operating in Rojava. On one side is the grey wolf symbol of the fascist MHP; on the other, the four fingers of

Rabia, which was popularized by Erdoğan in solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. It represents the four pillars of AKP fascism: one nation, one flag, one homeland, one state.

Prior to the invasion, Erdoğan's grip on power was slipping. It was a blow to the AKP that despite Erdoğan forcing a re-vote, the center-left nationalist Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate won the Istanbul mayoral election—twice, and by a much higher margin the second time—thanks in part to support from the hard nationalist Good Party (IYI) and implicit support from the HDP. Meanwhile, some longtime AKP members, including some of its founders, have split from Erdoğan and are considering forming a new party or parties. The same kind of internal fracture has been initiated by former members of the Nationalist People's Party (MHP).

Looking at all the autocrats around the world—Bolsonaro, Duterte, Trump, Putin, Xi, Sisi, and Orban, not to mention the aspiring demagogues not yet in power—one could say that Erdoğan was the original strongman, save Putin. Erdoğan and the other despots make a point of glorifying each other: Orban crows about how “Turkey has a leader with a strong legitimacy,” while Trump remarks, in reference to Xi Jinping's lifetime appointment, “Maybe we'll have to give it a shot one day.”

In the same way, revolutionaries from the US to the Philippines must learn from what has happened in Turkey. We should analyze the alliances, even if they are apparently fragile, within the nation's right-wing groups; we should examine the political ideologies of the various factions that make up the state; most importantly, we must discover how to drive wedges in the cracks between them in order to topple the structure they comprise together. On the one hand, we have to understand how nationalism and religious fundamentalism are mobilized to reciprocally reinforce one another, so we can undermine those alliances before they make it impossible for us to organize and act. On the other hand, we have to communicate an alternative vision for society to the segments of the population that are most susceptible to this blend of nationalism and fundamentalism.

## **The Kurdish Struggle Perseveres**

The Kurdish movement in Turkey and across the border in Syria has repeatedly proven capable of reinventing itself in order to outmaneuver its enemies. The most recent iteration of the movement's legal political party, the People's Democracy Party (HDP), captured the imagination of large swathes of the left throughout western Turkey, forging something of a united front with progressive forces beyond traditionally Kurdish regions of the country for the first time. Although limited, the relative political success of the party presented serious challenges to the AKP's dominance. But the greatest gain made recently by the Kurdish freedom movement has occurred amid the northern fronts of the Syrian civil war in Rojava.

When the AKP first assumed power, there was initially a level of misplaced hope from segments of the Kurdish movement as well as the liberal left that it might finally chip away at the nationalist legacy of the Turkish State. Erdoğan's rise marked a departure from classical Turkish politics; it was understandable that a historically oppressed group like the Kurds, long denied basic freedoms under an official policy of brutal nationalist assimilation, would be cautiously optimistic. In addition, a peace process got underway that recognized Abdullah Öcalan as a party to the process from the island prison where he is held in complete isolation. These glimmers of optimism quickly vanished as the AKP deemed the HDP a political threat to its hegemony fol-

lowing their defeat in the June 2015 general election. In response to this development, Erdoğan deployed combatants through a well-known jihadi pipeline from Northern Syria to counteract the Kurdish movement in Turkey.

The social revolution carried out by the Kurdish movement in Rojava has been widely celebrated on various radical media outlets; more mainstream and corporate outlets have commended its military prowess to such an extent that it is not necessary to reexamine it here. The important thing to understand is that Turkish politics are tightly linked with the crisis in Syria. Not only did the revolution in Rojava inject lifeblood into the Kurdish movement in Turkey, it also compelled the Turkish state to intensify its repression. On one side of the border with Syria, the Turkish state facilitated the flow of arms and recruits to ISIS. On the other side, the dream of Kurdish autonomy in Turkey was reinvigorated; the ideas given life in Rojava continue to inspire revolutionaries across the world. This enthusiasm is best exemplified by the international volunteers fighting alongside the YPG and YPJ and the outpouring of international solidarity in response to the invasion of Rojava.

Islamist ideology, first introduced into the Turkish military structure via the Gülenist cadres, has further penetrated through newly forged relationships with groups active in the Syrian war. The presence of these groups was displayed for all to see during the months-long incursions into Kurdish strongholds during the summer of 2015. The Islamist graffiti left by the Turkish military should persuade anyone who has doubts about this.

Suicide bombers specifically targeted those attempting to build solidarity between Turks and Kurds experiencing Turkish military occupation. The first such suicide bombing attack took place in July 2015 targeting a delegation of leftist youth in the city of Suruç who were attempting to travel to Kobanê to take toys to the children of the war-torn city. That attack killed 33 people. Despicably, the state used it as an excuse to launch the previously mentioned full-scale assault of summer 2015. Even more deadly was the bombing of a march protesting the war in the Kurdish territories; this took place in the Turkish capital, Ankara, on October 10, 2015, killing 109 people. In both cases, the attackers were ISIS-affiliated Turkish cells well known to and at times facilitated by the state. The police department of the city that the bombers were from, Adıyaman, and the National Intelligence Agency (MIT), maintained continuous surveillance on them—and didn't arrest or detain them despite there being warrants out for their arrest.

The AKP has tossed a few minor concessions to the Kurdish population, such as a state-run Kurdish television station and a partial easing of the restrictions on speaking and singing in Kurdish. But these crumbs are scattered over the ashes of whatever political autonomy the Kurds had been able to carve out for themselves. Even participation in standard parliamentary or municipal politics has become practically impossible. At least a dozen elected members of the parliament have been imprisoned alongside dozens of co-chair mayors of municipalities. Since the latest municipal elections in spring 2019, HDP co-chairs have been forced out of office in 15 municipalities, replaced with new mayors appointed from Ankara.

Turkish nationalists are quick to point to prominent Kurds who have enjoyed privileged positions in Turkish society, just as their US equivalents claimed that Obama's presidency heralded the arrival of a post-racial America. The prominence of a few individuals does not diminish the fact that Kurds, as a people, have historically been an internal colony of Turkey. In the Turkish economy, Kurdish people serve as a cheap, hyper-exploited labor force for dangerous "unskilled" jobs—for example, as precarious, seasonal agricultural workers in the lowest rungs of the service sector and as expendable manual day-laborers in industries such as construction. Environmen-



tally and culturally destructive large-scale development projects such as mega-dams have been built in the Kurdish territories in the east to supply power and other commodities to western Turkey. Public services and investment are minimal in Kurdish areas. The Kurds have fought back fiercely over the past several decades, but today, at least in Turkey, any autonomy they have gained is eroding, coinciding with a recent spike in racist attacks against Kurdish people across the country.

It should go without saying that Kurds have no hegemonic belief system: some are more political than others, some more left-leaning, and, in terms of religion, some are staunchly pious, while others are not. One factor contributing to the electoral successes of the HDP is that they have set aside some of the PKK's national liberation and Marxist rhetoric in order to attract a wider range of Kurdish voters. There are Kurds who support the AKP, but a larger existential threat to the Kurdish freedom movement is the growing segment of the Kurdish population that is exhausted from what feels like a never-ending conflict. Even if they do not support the AKP, they are weary of war and, in some cases, heartbroken by or fed up with the PKK on account of its strategic blunders.

The restructuring of the Turkish military following the coup attempt has also contributed to the crisis besetting the Kurds. In fact, many of the high-ranking commanders involved in the coup were also behind the brutal military invasions and curfews imposed throughout the Kurdish regions of Turkey in the summer and fall of 2015, which resulted in the slaughter of more than 4000 people. The implication of these officials in the coup allowed Erdoğan to wash his hands of responsibility for the massacres, ironically placing the same Gülenist prosecutors and judges that had just led the crackdowns against Kurdish and leftist activists on the receiving end of state repression alongside their former opponents. For all intents and purposes, the whole judicial and law enforcement apparatus, which had been populated by Gülenist cadres, has been thrown into disarray in the aftermath of the failed coup.

The military leadership roles occupied by Gülenists until 2015 are once again in the hands of the old-school Turkish nationalist cadres that the Gülenists had purged with the help of the AKP. These cadres are at least as hostile to the Kurdish movement as their predecessors. In this regard, it is highly plausible that the same Turkish nationalists who just acceded to these military posts played a role in encouraging the most recent invasion of Rojava.

The invasion of Rojava and the ensuing wartime mobilization has effectively silenced any semblance of mainstream political opposition. A recent parliamentary decision to green-light the invasion was approved by all political parties except for the Kurdish led HDP. Lone politicians from the CHP or other political figures who voice their opposition to Erdoğan's colonial ambitions are subject to a barrage of attacks from the media and the judicial apparatus.

In his megalomania, Erdoğan often likens himself to some kind of neo-Ottoman sultan with imperial ambitions for the region. This calls for a certain degree of muscle flexing even if there is no long-term strategy at play. But the strategy of transforming Northern Syria into a kind of proxy dependent on Turkey provides certain advantages to Erdoğan. For a long time, the Turkish economy and currency have been on the brink of collapse. The war economy and construction and development projects in Northern Syria might stave off the inevitable, at least temporarily.

At the same time, Turkey is home to more than three million Syrian refugees and unknown thousands of jihadists who are sheltered and formally trained in camps run by the Turkish state in both Turkey and Syria. All the mainstream political parties have been stoking racism against Syrian refugees to solicit votes. The AKP has also been scapegoating Syrian refugees for the

declining economy—the latest numbers show near 14% unemployment in Turkey. Repopulating Rojava with refugees from other parts of Syria would not only displace the Kurdish population, it would also pander to the racism against Syrians mounting in the western cities of Turkey like Istanbul, a racism that the opposition is also implicated in.

The fundamental cause of the invasion is the ingrained enmity between the Turkish State—at its foundation, regardless of the ruling party—and the Kurdish people fighting for autonomy and recognition as an ethnic group. Having recently more or less neutralized the PKK within the borders of Turkey, the time has come for Erdoğan to take the war where the Kurdish freedom movement is the strongest, the liberated territories of Rojava.

## **Opposition Politics in Turkey and Solidarity Today**

The abrupt yet drawn-out withdrawal of the US has opened up space for Russia to take almost full control of the situation in Syria on the ground. If Turkey still wants to have a say, it is now beholden to Russian imperialism. Erdoğan has already found himself trying to juggle a contract for F-35 fighter jets from the US—now cancelled—with a surface-to-air S-400 Russian missile defense system—in place but not operational. Given that Turkey is still a NATO country, it finds itself obliged to perform an ever-more precarious balancing act with its Russian counterpart. The current shift of powers on the ground in Syria only further complicates the matter.

Eventually, Turkey will have to re-recognize the Assad regime without the Russian mediation currently allowing it to save face. On the other side of the lines of conflict, the survival of the past five years of revolutionary gains in Rojava will depend on how the Kurdish movement manages to navigate a treacherous geopolitical terrain and at the same time generate international solidarity. Up to this point, Kurdish groups have demonstrated a shrewd understanding of the constantly shifting geopolitical dynamics, surviving the ups and downs and gradually rising to prominence on the international stage. In the short-term, the situation is desperate, but perhaps the long game will not be as catastrophic. Nevertheless, it is hard to make such predications with our vision obscured by the fog of war.

How much potential is there for domestic opposition to Erdoğan? Combined with the extraordinary powers concentrated in his presidency, the post-coup political, social, and psychological environment has enabled repression to reign supreme throughout Turkey. Even describing what is happening in Syria as an “invasion” or a “war” can get you in trouble with the authorities. Saying that you are *against* the latest invasion of Rojava and for peace is sufficient to get you arrested. Freedom of speech is non-existent; the internet is censored to a great degree. Journalists with opposition viewpoints collect court cases by the dozen—if they’re lucky. Just as often, they are imprisoned, sometime even without charges.

Anarchists and radicals had recently been able to carve out some space in Turkey, even organizing successful marches—for example, against recent gold-mining projects. The women’s movement has remained steadfast in organizing its mass annual March 8 demonstrations. There is still a small degree of labor militancy. But any perceived “tolerance” from the state goes out the window when it comes to expressing solidarity with the Kurds. In fact, the state has recently released some bourgeois journalists and intellectuals with opposition views from prison and seemingly accepted the constitutional court’s decision to drop the cases against nearly 1000 mostly non-Kurdish academics who had signed a petition for peace during the 2015 occupation

and military operations against Kurdish cities. This “forgiveness” from the patriarch functions as a warning to any potential opposition as he focuses on the Kurdish threat.

Unfortunately, for now, all that is being done to oppose this war, and still with great risk, is to express disapproval of the invasion of Rojava. Direct actions and demonstrations have hardly taken place except for at a small scale in mainly Kurdish provinces and in the rebellious popular neighborhoods of the cities of western Turkey. These heroic acts of resistance have been brutally repressed, almost instantaneously, by the Turkish State.

According to one poll, 75% of the population supports the invasion of Rojava—but that still leaves at least a quarter of the population opposing it, many of whom remain in solidarity with the Kurdish struggle and continue to participate in various other radical and revolutionary projects however they can. Some segments of the Turkish left have joined the SDF with their own fighting units. Still, most of those who oppose the war are currently unable to act effectively within the borders of Turkey due to overwhelming state repression. This creates the impression that all of Turkey supports the war and opposes Kurdish autonomy.

The HDP was conceived partly as a means to bolster the Kurdish movement by forging a common struggle with Turkish progressives concentrated in western Turkey. As described above, this project has made some headway towards achieving its goals, but the current situation illustrates why the liberation of the Kurdish people depends above all on their own organization and power.

Actions that target the organs of the Turkish state, such as their embassies and state owned-businesses like Turkish Airlines, will keep the pressure on while expressing vital solidarity with both the Kurds and the other radical formations under attack in Turkey. Political cronyism has filled the pockets of AKP politicians and their families in the past decade and a half, and a large chunk of this money has been harvested overseas due to the instability of the Turkish economy. Research about where the personal wealth of AKP leaders and top cadres is being invested could provide new targets for solidarity actions.

Some in the old left cling to their supposed anti-imperialism, effectively supporting Turkish colonialism and Russian imperialism in the name of opposing US imperialism. This position is increasingly absurd in view of the desperate struggle for survival the Kurdish movement is waging in one of the most difficult political terrains in the world, in the face of multiple imperial powers’ ambitions, despite being double-crossed by the US government and many others. Anarchists should show serious yet critical solidarity, without becoming confused by the tenuous alliances that Kurdish organized forces have had to make with the enemies of their enemies, the friends of their enemies, and even their actual enemies in hopes of staving off jihadist massacres and averting Turkish-backed genocide. Solidarity with the Kurdish freedom movement does not mean supporting the US military or US imperialism, it means respecting the difficult decisions people make when they are threatened with annihilation.

Lastly, many Turkish and Kurdish comrades have been exiled from Turkey, but remain politically active. It is difficult to estimate how many political refugees have fled Turkey, but migration trends in Germany, the chief destination for such exiles, offer a good indication. Since the 2015 coup attempt, Germany has seen a tenfold increase in annual asylum applications from Turkish citizens, culminating in nearly 11,000 requests in 2018. Outside of countries such as Germany and the UK where Turkish and Kurdish movements have historically been organized, dissidents may find themselves isolated or unsure how to carry on the struggle. Anarchists everywhere should take the initiative to create space for those in exile. In working together on common projects,

international supporters will learn more about ideas and developments from the region, while those in exile will gain new networks and means by which to continue their struggles. Learning from the Kurdish proposals of democratic confederalism, autonomy, and *jineoloji* (women's science) and implementing whatever lessons are applicable locally is an effective form of solidarity that goes beyond the current—albeit necessary—emergency response to the Turkish aggression.

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## **Appendix: A Brief Interview with Revolutionary Anarchist Action in Turkey**

*In summer 2013, we interviewed the Turkish group Revolutionary Anarchist Action (Devrimci Anarşist Faaliyet, or DAF) about the uprising that began in Gezi Park. We spoke with them again in 2014 about the defense of Kobanê and solidarity organizing between DAF and the autonomous experiment then unfolding in Rojava. A great deal has transpired since then. Following the Turkish invasion of Rojava, which is still in progress despite a fake ceasefire, we interviewed a participant in DAF once again to hear about what the conditions in Turkey are like for anarchists today.*

### **Historically, what has been the relationship between Turkish anarchists and Kurdish organizations in Turkey?**

First of all, “Turkish anarchist” is not a useful term to describe the people living here who call themselves anarchists. In these lands—and also in the organizations—there are people from different ethnicities. Kurdish people have been struggling against the various tyrannies in this region for decades, so the solidarity relation of DAF is the solidarity relation with the liberation struggle of the people.

The Rojava Revolution and the defense of Kobanê put the issue of “Kurdish Resistance” on the agenda of anarchists worldwide, but for DAF, our relations of solidarity began much earlier. They date back to 2009, when DAF was established. Moreover, it is not just a question of solidarity. There has been a war in Kurdistan and a state political strategy of assimilation for a long time. So an anarchist who is living in this region needs to develop an analysis and take a side on this matter. Our position has been clear: against the tyrannies of the states, we take the side of the people who are resisting.

With this perspective, we have expressed our solidarity in protests and by participating in clashes alongside the Kurdish Freedom Movement. We have been in streets over and over to observe Newroz [the Kurdish new year] and at the commemorations of the big massacres. Not just to express solidarity, but also because this is part of our responsibility to be and act as anarchists.

We also participate in organizing the Conscientious Objection movement in Turkey. Being a conscientious objector is also important in reference to this issue, because the war is made by militaries. Therefore, we are trying to spread conscientious objection in the region.

### **What are the conditions for anarchists and other dissidents in Turkey right now? What activities are anarchists still undertaking?**

Especially after the coup trial and the State of Emergency, repression of revolutionaries increased. The government has used the State of Emergency politically to strengthen its power.

Right now, it is very easy to get sent to jail. Sharing something via social media is enough to be put in jail. Repression of publications remains a major problem. If the authorities don't like

an article, it is easy to ban a magazine. Many writers and editors are in jail now for things they have published.

Any kind of protest can only take place according to the wishes and management of the police—and therefore, the wishes and management of the state. No protest of any kind having to do with Kurdish issues is permitted. No one can protest, write, or comment on the war.

These are the circumstances under which we are trying to organize and spread the anarchist idea.

Our newspaper has been banned for a while because of charges of “making terrorist propaganda.” Some of our writers and distributors have been sentenced, and some comrades have been sentenced for participating in protests. Two collective cafés, the main economic mainstay of our organization, have faced difficulties because of police repression. Comrades who are conscientious objectors also face difficulties.

**Is there any open opposition to the invasion of Rojava in Turkey?**

In general, the authorities forbid and attack any kind of protest against the war.

**Turkey carries out military conscription. Are there movements against conscription and militarism in general?**

I have described the political perspective of the movement for conscientious objection. DAF is one of the establishers of the Conscientious Objection Association. The anti-militarist movement is really important, since we are acting in such a militaristic state.

Our participation in the anti-militarist movement is as old as our movement. Men are forced to join the army at age 20. The association organizes campaigns for conscientious objection, publicizes and investigates the suspicious murders in the military, and supports conscientious objectors through the judicial process.

From our perspective, there is a fundamental difference between the militarist violence of the state and the people’s struggle for freedom. We cannot compare the violence of states with any resistance struggle. Moreover, unlike some socialist organizations that call themselves a red army, Kurdish organizations call themselves self-defense units rather than a military.

**What is the situation for Kurdish people in Turkey right now?**

It is harder than ever. It is impossible to take any kind of action. The fascist propaganda of the state continues via its own media and also from so-called opposition parties. The pressure towards cultural assimilation and the political repression targeting Kurdish people are intense.

**What do you believe the immediate goals of Erdoğan’s invasion to be? And how do you think he aims to achieve them?**

When we are talking about this region of the Middle East, it is hard to understand or predict strategies. They undertook the invasion against the wishes of the US and other Western allies, but also, it is hard to understand their strategy. It is obvious that the US are not allies to the Kurdish people in Rojava. This is the reality of politics in Middle East.

Concretely, the state is taking the advantage of the war to accomplish interior political goals. So that is part of their strategy. The State of Emergency established by Erdoğan and his government endangered their political power. The only thing that legitimizes their power is the elections, so they are trying to foster a nationalist, militarist wave in order to maintain their “legitimacy.”

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12<sup>th</sup> November 2019

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