Why the Turkish Invasion Matters

Addressing the Hard Questions about Imperialism and Solidarity

CrimethInc.

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In the following overview, we address some common questions about why it is important to oppose the Turkish invasion of Rojava and suggest an analysis of what it means for world politics.

For those who have not followed the intricacies of the situation in Syria, Turkey, and throughout Kurdistan, it can be difficult to understand what's at stake here. We are fortunate that some of us have spent time in Rojava and the surrounding regions. We are writing from relative comfort, far from the massacres the Turkish military is enacting, but with our loved ones in Rojava at the forefront of our thoughts—along with everyone else who has suffered grievously throughout the Syrian civil war.

War doesn't just involve bombs and bullets. It is also a contest of narrative involving propaganda and information control. The Turkish government has been censoring news reporting, cutting off internet access, and forcing social media corporations to silence its victims; it has even succeeded in tricking some ostensible leftists into legitimizing its agenda. All that we have to counter this is our own lived experiences, our international connections with other ordinary people like ourselves, and volunteer-driven projects like this publishing platform that reject all state and corporate agendas.

The timing of Turkey's invasion may have been determined in part by Donald Trump's response to the impeachment inquiry. US Presidents have a longstanding tradition of initiating military interventions to distract from domestic issues. The Trump version of this tradition is to intentionally *reignite* a civil war by pretending to "end" it. Worldwide, the far right seems to be trying to co-opt "anti-war" rhetoric the same way they appropriated "anti-globalization" slogans, while actually intensifying military aggression and capitalism. This is the same looking-glass-world right-wing "isolationism" that we saw when Hitler was annexing territory in Europe. We seem to have progressed very rapidly from repeating the early 1930s to re-enacting the later 1930s.

The betrayal of the people of Rojava is so shocking that it has even humiliated many otherwise shameless US politicians. Unless we create significant pressure via disruptive direct action, however, we expect that the US government will wait until the ethnic cleansing of Rojava is a *fait accompli* before doing anything to respond. Whatever happens, the Turkish invasion has reignited a civil war that was drawing to a close, ensuring many more years of bloodshed throughout the Middle East. No compassionate human being could support this.

"Shouldn't anti-imperialists *want* the US to withdraw from Syria?"

Supporting Trump's *apparent* troop withdrawal from Syria in the name of anti-imperialism is foolish, if not downright disingenuous.

US involvement in Syria looks much different than it has in Iraq and Afghanistan. Well over 100,000 US soldiers occupied Iraq for over half a decade. By contrast, at the very most, there have only been a couple thousand US troops in Syria—less than 2% the number deployed to Iraq. US soldiers in Syria serve an advisory role, carrying out airstrikes but never taking on frontline combat duty.

Even after Trump's announcement that he is pulling the US military out of Syria, 1000 US soldiers will remain in the country. Opening the way for the Turkish invasion apparently required moving only 50 special forces personnel—it was just a question of shuffling them out of the way

of Turkish bombs. In fact, the US military has sent 14,000 *more* troops to the Middle East since May, specifically bolstering deployments in Saudi Arabia. We are not seeing a troop withdrawal—we are seeing a policy shift towards permitting the extermination of comparatively egalitarian projects while supporting more authoritarian regimes with a troop *buildup.*

So anti-imperialists who see this as a win against US militarism are suckers, plain and simple. Trump has done nothing to downsize the US empire. He's simply given Erdoğan go-ahead to build the Turkish empire, to carry out ethnic cleansing while US troops look on. This is hardly unprecedented in the history of US imperialism.

On another occasion, it would be worthwhile to consider the word "anti-imperialist" in greater detail. We often see this word employed by the partisans of some *rival* empire—typically Russia or China, but not only those. We may need to use a different word for those who are consistent in opposing *all* empires, state interventions, and forms of hierarchical power. *Anti-colonial,* for example. Or, clearer still, *anarchist.*

For years, we have heard statists from various corners of the left accusing anarchists of being tools for neoliberalism on account of the fact that we oppose the Russian, Chinese, and Nicaraguan governments as well as the United States government. This is bad-faith name-calling from people who may have a guilty conscience about their own outright support for authoritarian governments—the same way that Trump supporters like to allege that George Soros, a Jewish billionaire, is behind anti-Trump activity while they toady to a billionaire for free. It is absurd to accuse anarchists of being tools of neoliberalism for identifying the ways that China and Russia participate in neoliberalism; it is doubly absurd to accuse anarchists of being tools of imperialism for criticizing the US for giving Erdoğan permission to invade Rojava.

The fact that some people who oppose US interventionism can be suckered into cheerleading when the US government gives another authoritarian government the green light to kill thousands of people illustrates the consequences of founding one's politics opportunistically on incidental factors, such as opposition to a particular prevailing empire, rather than on ethical principles such as opposition to all forms of domination.

"Are the Kurds just shills for the US?"

The fact that the US government so readily betrayed the people of Rojava undercuts the allegation that they are just pawns in a US strategy. Organizers in Rojava were pursuing the same agenda of multi-ethnic self-determination for many years before the US found it convenient to support their struggle against the Islamic State.

Should we blame groups like the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Rojava for coordinating with the US? Anarchists in Rojava have argued that the people there were forced to choose between being slaughtered by the Islamic State and working with the US government. Considering that they were nearly conquered by the Islamic State in 2014, it's hard to argue with this.

When we look at the issue on an individual scale, we're hesitant to blame a woman who, not being connected to a supportive community, calls the police when she is attacked. The police are unlikely to help her, of course—and relying on them only reproduces the structural factors that cause poverty and violence. But if we want people to adopt our total opposition to policing, we have to give them better options.

Similarly, if we want to live in a world in which people in places like Rojava will not welcome the support of the US government, we will have to offer credible alternatives via social movements and international solidarity campaigns. Anarchists have been seeking ways to do this for years. Right now, that means doing everything we can to impose consequences on Turkey and the US for this invasion.

"Do the Kurds support Zionism and Islamophobia?"

One of the chief hallmarks of the social experiment that has emerged in Rojava over the past several years is that, in contrast to the various forms of ethnic and religious nationalism so prevalent in the region, it is multi-ethnic and inclusive. A significant part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Rojava is Muslim. It may have been attractive for some Islamophobes in the US to support Kurdish resistance to the Islamic State while the US was endorsing it, but we should not blame the people in Rojava for this.

The Barzani Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq has historically maintained good relations with both Turkey and Israel, but different Kurdish parties have very different agendas. There are many fair criticisms to be made of the PYD, SDF, and other structures in Rojava, but it's a real stretch to accuse them of being Zionists. On the contrary, by and large, they deserve credit for being neither pro-Zionist nor anti-Jewish in a region where so many actors are one or the other.

Though there are nationalistic elements in some of the Kurdish movements and structures in Rojava, they are hardly as ethnocentric as many of the other nationalist currents in the region. In any case, we don't have to endorse them to oppose the Turkish invasion.

"Did the Kurds betray the Syrian Revolution?"

As anarchists, we consider apologists for Assad beneath contempt. Those who explain away the original uprising against the Assad regime as a CIA operation are conspiracy theorists who deny the agency of grassroots participants. Blessing tyranny with the name "socialism" and justifying state violence on the grounds of legitimate sovereignty is bootlicking, pure and simple. The original revolt in Syria was a response to state oppression, just like the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt. We affirm the right of the oppressed to revolt even when there seems to be no hope of success. If not for this sort of courage, humanity would still be living under hereditary monarchs. For want of more such courage, our societies are descending deeper into tyranny once again.

Guided by the experiences of those who participated in the original uprising in Syria, we can learn a lot about the hazards of militarism in revolutionary struggle. Once the conflict with Assad's government shifted from strikes and subversion to militarized violence, those who were backed by state or institutional actors were able to centralize themselves as the protagonists; power collected in the hands of Islamists and other reactionaries. As Italian insurrectionist anarchists famously argued, "the force of insurrection is social, not military." The uprising didn't spread far enough fast enough to become a revolution. Instead, it turned into a gruesome civil war, bringing the so-called "Arab Spring" to a close and with it the worldwide wave of revolts.

The fact that the uprising in Syria ended in an ugly civil war is not the fault of those who dared everything to resist the Assad regime. Rather, once again, it shows that *we* were not courageous

or organized enough to support them properly. The unfortunate outcome of the Syrian uprising illustrates the disastrous consequences of relying on state governments like the US to support those who stand up for themselves against oppressors and aggressors. The current Turkish invasion confirms the same thing.

Some people outside Syria also blame the Kurds for this failure. It strikes us as hypocritical that anyone who did not go to Syria to participate in the struggle would accuse the Kurds of sitting out the first phase of fighting. The only people from whom this charge carries any weight are the ones who participated in the first phase of the Syrian uprising themselves.

We are sympathetic to this frustration we have heard from Syrian refugees. We have learned a great deal from Syrians who took courageous risks in the revolution only to be forced to flee along the Balkan Route, ending up trapped in places like Greece and Slovenia. Many Syrian refugees have contributed admirably to social struggles in these countries—despite not being there by choice, despite the daily xenophobia and oppression they have confronted. Many of them have since been incarcerated or deported by racist border regimes.

From where we are situated, it is not easy to judge the decisions of the members of an oppressed minority in Syria, far from most of the fighting at the onset of the revolt, that has historically been betrayed again and again by other groups in the region. Perhaps, had Kurds and others in Rojava immediately risked everything in the struggle against Assad, it could have turned out differently. If that is true, then the lesson of this tragedy is that it is crucial to build trust and solidarity across ethnic and religious lines *before* revolt breaks out. This is yet another reason to concern ourselves with the fate of the various ethnic groups on the receiving end of the Turkish invasion right now.

Sadly, it is possible that even if the uprising *had* toppled Assad, Syria would be little better off today—look at Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Rather than simply replacing one government with another, the most important thing we can hope to accomplish in struggle is to open up autonomous spaces of self-determination and solidarity in which people can explore different ways of relating. To some extent, the experiment in Rojava accomplished this.

But even if the people in Rojava today were somehow responsible for the failure of the Syrian uprising, would they deserve to be slaughtered for this?

No, they would not.

"But I saw somewhere on the Internet that 'the Kurds' are involved in ethnic cleansing? Aren't they holding people in detainment camps?"

Anywhere there are prisons—anywhere there is a penal system—there is oppression. We are prison abolitionists; we don't endorse incarceration of any kind. At the same time, there are thousands of mass murderers among the ISIS captives who are surely determined to resume killing as soon as they are free. This presents a difficult situation for everyone who hopes to see multi-ethnic reconciliation and peaceful co-existence in the region.

In any case, there were jails in Iraq in 2003—and that didn't keep us from trying to stop Bush from invading Iraq. We don't have to endorse everything the SDF or PYD is doing to oppose the military aggression of Turkey—a *more* carceral state.

Likewise, we have seen reports of violence in Rojava under the current "self-administration." We don't consider Rojava a utopia; as anarchists, we have criticisms to make about the political structures there, as well. But we have to see things in proper proportion. Relative to the brutality carried out by most of the other actors in the region—especially ISIS, Turkey, and Assad—the SDF and related groups in Rojava have been comparatively restrained.

The detainment of ISIS fighters along with women and children from the Islamic State is hardly the worst thing that could have happened. From what some of us heard in Rojava during the final phase of the struggle against Islamic State territory, the only people anywhere in the world who wanted to take ISIS prisoners off the hands of the SDF were Iraqi Shia militias. Around the time of the capture of Baghouz, they were reportedly offering the SDF money and weapons in exchange for captured Iraqi ISIS fighters in hopes of taking violent revenge on them. To their credit, SDF declined to turn the captives over.

This is not to legitimize detainment, but to emphasize the intensity of strife and hatred in Syria and Iraq after so much war. Many of these captives would probably have been executed in short order by the Syrian or Iraqi governments, or tortured slowly and methodically by the Shia militias, rather than given food and medical care as they are in Rojava. Indeed, some in the region have criticized the SDF for being too soft on these prisoners. If Turkey or its Syrian mercenary proxies enable the ISIS detainees to escape and resume their former activities, everyone who argued in favor of executing the captives will claim to have been vindicated.

For prison abolitionists and anyone else who wants to see peace in the Middle East, the top priority now is to halt the Turkish invasion. We don't have to legitimize any particular SDF policy to undertake that.

"But Turkey says the organizations in Rojava are terrorists and claims to be threatened by them."

It is absurd to argue that ordinary people in Turkey were really threatened by the experiment in Rojava. The US military had already agreed to oversee patrols all along the border—and many of those on the other side of that border are Kurdish people who have a lot in common with the people in Rojava. A free Rojava doesn't threaten the Turkish people; it threatens Erdoğan's regime and the oppression that Kurdish people face in Turkey. This is an ethno-nationalist war, pure and simple.

There has been violent struggle in Turkey between the Turkish state and Kurdish movements and armed groups for decades. Erdoğan believes that he can keep maintaining supremacy by force of arms, both inside Turkey and against the surrounding countries, continuing a legacy that includes the systematic genocide of over one million Armenians just a century ago.

Surely, now that Turkey has reignited the Syrian civil war, far more Turkish civilians are going to be killed than would have died otherwise. Hopefully, that will clarify for some people in Turkey that state militarism does not make them safer, but endangers them as well as those on the other side of the shells and bombs.

"But Turkey says it has to seize Rojava to resettle Syrian refugees there."

It's not clear exactly what Turkey's plans are for the region, nor whom they hope to settle there; the majority of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are not from Rojava. Chiefly, Turkey would like to get defiant Kurdish people away from its borders in order to stifle Kurdish independence movements.

In any case, for Turkey to use military force to murder or displace millions of people and replace them with an entirely different population is the very definition of ethnic cleansing. The fact that they are announcing *ahead of time* that they intend to commit war crimes is shocking.

"Does opposing the Turkish invasion legitimize the US military?"

As anarchists, we don't believe the US military can do any good in the world. But no one has to legitimize the US military to oppose a Turkish invasion. We are not calling for the US military to resolve the situation; we are calling out the parties responsible for this tragedy—the US and Turkish governments and all the corporations that help set their agendas—and pressuring them to put a stop to it.

When Hitler seized Czechoslovakia in 1938, when Bush invaded Iraq in 2003, no one had to affirm or legitimize any state, government, or army to oppose those invasions. Rather, by making it as inconvenient as possible for *anyone* to stand by while such tragedies take place, we enact our principled opposition to injustice.

Likewise, the betrayal of the Kurds should make it clear to anyone who still puts their faith in the US government—or any government—that we will only get as much peace in the world as we can create by our own efforts, doing all we can to resolve conflicts horizontally while defending ourselves against the vertical power structures of those who aspire to rule.

Fallacies such as "If you're against the Turkish invasion, you must be in favor of US imperialism" illustrate the pitfalls of binary thinking. It's easier to understand what is at stake in this situation if we recognize that there are at least three basic sides to today's global conflicts, each representing a different vision of the future:

- **Neoliberals** of all stripes, from Lindsay Graham and Hillary Clinton to supposedly leftist parties like SYRIZA in Greece and the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil. Though they disagree about the details, they share a common aim of using networked global state governance to stabilize the world for capitalism.

- **Nationalists** like Trump, Erdogan, and ISIS, who have made their complicity clear enough in the course of this affair. This category also includes Assad, Putin, and other demagogues who—like the neoliberals—are often at odds with each other, but all pursue the same vision of a post-neoliberal world of competing ethno-states.

- **Social movements for liberation** that seek to foster pluralistic and egalitarian self-determination based in autonomy and solidarity. Much of what we have seen in Rojava fits this category, even if much of it has a nationalistic character as well.

When nationalists collaborate against a social experiment like the one in Rojava, calling for resistance should not mean endorsing the neoliberals who previously administered peace and war. On the contrary, we have to build up our social movements while breaking with both nationalist/militarist and neoliberal/reformist agendas. Otherwise, we will forever be instrumentalized by one side or the other, either via direct manipulation or out of fear of the other group achieving supremacy.

"How can we hope to stop Turkey, one of the world's most powerful militaries?"

We may not succeed in forcing the US and Turkish governments to halt the invasion of Rojava. But even if we don't, there are important things we can accomplish by taking action and valuable opportunities we will miss if we do not.

The invasion of Rojava is taking place against a global backdrop of intensifying nationalism, strife, and authoritarianism. We have to understand this as a single battle in a much larger conflict. Situating it in the context of the larger worldwide struggles taking place right now, we can identify several objectives that are absolutely within our reach:

- We can show the complicity between nationalists like Trump and Erdogan and ISIS, and delegitimize them in the public eye by associating them with each other.
- We can advance an anti-state position as the only reliable form of solidarity with targeted peoples against state oppression and colonialism—not just US imperialism, but also Turkish, Russian, and Chinese imperialism, among others.
- We can legitimize and popularize forms of direct action as the only way to effectively pressure the authorities. When electoral politics has failed to offer any meaningful progress towards social change, we have to accustom people to other approaches.

If ISIS is able to escalate its activity again—if there is no peace or positive prospect in the Middle East for another decade—we want everyone in the world to know whose fault it is and that we did everything we possibly could to stop it.

The stakes are high, but if we fight hard, we can come out of this nightmare one step closer to a world without wars. Or, failing that, a world in which we are at least fighting in conflicts of our own choosing, not senseless tragedies like this.

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