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# Dispatches from Rojava

number one through final journey home

Paul Z. Simons

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2015

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compañera appears up ahead. She smiles and we walk quickly to each other. I touch her hand, it is cool and warm, it feels like love. We embrace, I smell her hair, and I whisper, “I made it.”

“Home,” is all she replies. The sound of her voice—dusky, low, familiar— tells me the rest.

(My name is El Errante. My name is Paul Z. Simons. Thanks for reading—hope you enjoyed the Dispatches.)

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excitement, the lack of fear, the infectious hope in everything these folks do and believe. The. Damned. Hope.

The Border Patrol officer eyeballs me up and down and asks if I have any cigarettes in my bag. I grin and say, "Yup, 15 packs of Gitanes and Gauloises, can't buy 'em in the US anymore, y'know."

A slight smile crosses his face and he asks about money, gold, anything else I might try to be getting across the border. I answer that I have a few Euros, a few dollars—maybe a total of \$100 altogether. No gold, no cheese, nada. He tells me to have a seat while they x-ray my bag. I return to my seat. Only one thought crosses my mind now, did the YPG/J use any paint on those flags that might show up on an x-ray? Oh well, what the hell. I'll find out soon enough.

As I leave the rally one last sign catches my eye, white on black, and bold, cutting statements in French—demanding victory for the YPG. Well, it's the folks from the Fédération Anarchiste (FA), come to voice an opinion. I saunter over and introduce myself, they know me a bit, I know them a bit. I am invited back to their infoshop just off the Place de la République. I sit for a while, tell them what I'd seen in Rojava. They ask questions. I have some answers—not many. I walk around their space, buy a few posters, thank them and leave. Now, a short night's sleep, a long day's flight, and home.

The Border Patrol officer calls me to his window. I am now frustrated and angry and hope I can hold my tongue. He looks me up and down one last time and says, "Mr. Errante, you can proceed. Your bags will be put back on the plane. Sorry for any inconvenience."

"No inconvenience at all, really," I respond. And with that final lie I leave Preclearance, feeling very much, sodomized.

At the San Francisco airport I debark the plane and walk slowly toward the bag claim. It's taken me 26 hours to travel what should have taken 13. My back and legs ache and my head feels like a tree is growing in it. As I round the final corner my

My mind begins to play smuggler's games. I go through all the potential contraband in my bags, numerous YPG/J flags, buttons, and patches. A book called Stateless Democracy, TEV-DEM flags, HPC flags and an HPC emblazoned brown uniform vest including two Velcro pockets that exactly fit a Kalashnikov banana clip for 7.62mm X 39 mm bullets. Additionally, several pro-YPG/J, TEV-DEM magazines in scary Daesh-looking Arabic and latinized Kurmanji. Welp, enough there for a few hours of interrogation, maybe even a day or two of detention. One of the Border Patrol officers calls me to his window. I stand, turn, and walk with measured steps to where he motioned me.

After the stroll through Père Lachaise I hail a taxi and head to the hotel. The taxi driver swerves through the Place de la République on our way back to the Left Bank when it catches my eye. A flag; the yellow/red/green flag of the Kurdish Autonomous Region, then two, and then three of them. Finally I see a huge YPG pennant, yellow with red star, as it lazies and hops in the mid-afternoon swirl. I yell at the taxi driver to stop and pay the fare frantically. I hop into traffic on the Rue du Temple and quickly read the sign over the bandstand, "International March against Daesh, For Kobane, For Humanity." Whoomp, there it is, it's November 1st–International Kobane Day, and one more time, I am enmeshed in the Revolution.

I walk through the crowd, smelling the food, seeing the colors, transported back to Kobane and Cizere by the sound of spoken Kurmanji, and the feeling of rebirth, of making a new world. There is a tent where representatives of the Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Turkish, HDP) sit, drink tea, and converse. I walk over and introduce myself. I show them some of my photos and posts about Rojava. They speak together, then someone is sent to find a translator fluent in Turkish, French, Kurmanji, and English. After what might be my last glass of Kurdish style tea for a very long time, the translator arrives and we begin to talk about how HDP integrates activities with events in Rojava. As the conversation runs I once again feel it. The openness, the

## **Rojava Dispatch One**

### **Greetings from the Revolution**

The young Kurdish woman, a border worker, walks me down to the launch on the Tigris River, I look out over the water and shallow canyon that 10,000 years ago gave birth to animal domestication, agriculture, complex hierarchical societies, in a word–civilization. She hands me my passport, says good luck and I step into the launch. It slowly glides across the river, the two or three other men in the boat talk in Kurmanji and generally ignore the clueless American, rendered in their native tongue, merikik. As we draw to the far shore the difference between the border sites operated by the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Autonomous Kurdish Region is obvious, the former is huge with multiple buildings, paved roads and two restaurants, the latter is several card tables set on the pebbled beach of the Tigris. Two young members of the internal Rojava security force (Asayîş) search through suspect bags, they look at me, smile and return to their work. Oddly, at a border crossing, I feel, for the first time ever, welcome. There are a few large tents set on the beach to cover the overheated who are waiting to cross, and that's it. I had been given a contact name and when I mentioned it to one of the Asayîş she waved me over to a man who arranged passage for me up the hill to the original Syrian border facility by car. There I met my contact and was served the ubiquitous sugared glass of tea. A beverage that by this time I had drunk enough of to not just stretch my bladder, but to break it. I sip the tea and he calls a translator to help with our discussion. I introduce myself and what I hope to accomplish in Rojava—some sense of the institutions that the Kurds have implemented since the stabilization of the battlefield; including the local assemblies, how they interact with the militias, the executive councils, and some of the new institutions– schools, universities and

infrastructure that the PYD and their allies have built. He abruptly asked what I needed, after which I just about dropped my tea, and then mumbled sheepishly, “A car? A translator?”

He nodded and indicated that the PYD could provide that. He did want to make clear several things, first the PKK and the PYD are two separate and non-contiguous entities. Next that what is happening in Rojava is a direct reflection of the ideas and philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan (pronounced in Kurmanji, Ojalan, you fucking heathens). I nodded, noting the twingy feeling in my gut of hero worship, then reminded myself that this hero is buried so deep in a Turkish prison that they probably won't let him out after he dies. I was given a car and driver and sent to Amuda, to make contact with folks at the cantonal PYD media center. The next three hours were spent driving across Rojava, a really unique mix of mountains, plains, agriculture, oil wells, villages and people. The Asayîş check points were entertaining, the soldiers would look at the driver, then at me and say, “Thank you,” or nod. My tattoos raised an occasional Kurdish eyebrow. The folks on the street were wide-eyed, and silently kind.

In Amuda I met with the media folks and they asked me what I wanted to do, I set out my ideas and goals (once again) and they decided to send me to Kobani first thing as the weather looks it will rain by the end of this week or the beginning of next. The roads are a *mélange* of asphalt, dirt, and in one or two places gaping pits left by ISIS car bombs. Therefore a good solid rain can really stop movement on the roads. Finally, the media people sent me to a house for journalists run by the YPG—communal living—but not a problem. At the house there was a smattering of journalists, some folks from the Netherlands helping to revamp a local hospital. There is a CNN crew here trying to make some kind of story out of Rojava, and since there is currently no huge amount of bloodshed here— it's obviously not a great way to sell advertising. I have been listening to them prepare a video report for the past half hour in which—

“Me? Syria? No. No way... too dangerous,” I say. Praying the lie doesn't show on my face. I'm in Dublin, at US Pre-clearance, almost back to the States and now, it seems, I may have some explaining to do.

He scoops up my passport and customs declaration in his right hand and says, “Come this way Mr. Errante. We're going to search your luggage.” For the first time, during the entire trip, that sickening feeling of real fear rises inside me.

Two days earlier—Paris. A singular morning, fresh sun and breeze, the kind of daybreak that only the Mother of the Revolutions can serve for breakfast. I walk through Père Lachaise Cemetery my head and shoulders hunched forward. I know this old boneyard like a good friend, and there's one memorial that calls me now. The *Mur des Fédérés* (the Wall of the Federals). A place on the enclosing wall of the old cemetery where several hundred Communards were taken to be slaughtered by the forces of law and order. The memorial comes into view, a simple plaque on a wall of stone. Nothing more. I pull a YPG flag from my bag and drape it over the memorial. I take a photo. A German man and his daughter walk around the corner. I ask him to take a photo of me and the wall and the flag. As he preps, my hand once again rises, almost unconsciously in the V salute and he snaps a few photos. I am not done. There are two more photos to be taken. One photo with the flag draped over Oscar Wilde's tomb, and one photo at the sculpted bronze cap that seals Nestor Makhno's ashes into the Columbarium. Taking the final picture I notice an odd thing, did the likeness of Makhno smile a bit when I placed the YPG flag? Or is it me?

The Border Patrol officer walks me to a holding room in the Pre-Clearance area. I am told to sit on a row of benches. As I sit I see that I am facing a wall of waist high one-way mirrors. In the reflection I can see several officers directly behind me looking at my passport and paper work. They talk quietly and nod.

the HPC guarantees that this will not happen. The HPC are one more guarantee for the success of the Revolution. So when we say protect the people we mean not just against Daesh, but anyone.”

I am floored by his statement and say, “You know your history, Durruti and Bakunin.”

He smiles and that was just enough.

The driver is finishing tending to his uncle’s graves. Mohammed and I stand by the minivan. I smoke and watch the families as they walk through the cemetery. The driver rises and walks towards us. I want to tell him I’m sorry, express sympathy, say something.

“I hope this never happens again,” is all I can manage. He is silent. We climb back in the minivan drive and he kicks over the engine. The three of us look off at the graves of the old, the young, the newlyweds. The minivan then groans onto the 712, and is gone.

(Note: In my drive from Semelka at the border to Amuda all the checkpoints were Asayîş, by my return some week or so later three of the checkpoints were run by men and women wearing the brown vest of the HPC. Perhaps coincidence, perhaps not. My guess is the HPC will have a very important role as the Revolution matures and expands. In one stroke TEV-DEM may have addressed an issue that has plagued anarchist insurrections since the Paris Commune, how to maintain power, in the form of a militia, at the block and neighborhood level. Time will tell...)

## **Rojava Dispatch Final: Journey Home**

### **Journey Home**

“Mr. Errante...did you visit Syria?” The US Border Patrol officer stares at me through the bulletproof plastic that separates us. He shifts in his seat. The man wants an answer.

basically nothing happens—oh, and a YPJ militiawoman gets asked pointed, burning questions like, “Do you want kids, or to stay in the militia?” Devastating. I always wanted to listen to a CNN report being prepped. One off the bucket list.

So tomorrow it’s off to Kobani for several days. I am in one of the sketchiest places on earth, surrounded by friends—I am not afraid. More later...

## **Rojava Dispatch Two**

### **The Road to Kobane/The Skeletal City**

It is dark in Kobane, far darker than what you’d expect for a city of 150,000 souls. A few lights wink and crackle out of the encroaching dust and night, and the stillness is broken by the noise of grinding electrical generators and the sound of dumptrucks being filled with rubble and then driving off to one of the dumps outside the city center. It’s almost a year since the siege and there is still no electricity. I am sitting on a porch of the only real hotel in Kobane sipping (yet one more) sweetened tea in a glass. I’m glad I made it from Amuda to here, the road was long, the road was creepy, but now, the road is over.

My driver picked me up at 6am in the morning after a sleepless night at a YPG outpost in Amuda. As I walked out the door a YPG soldier threw me a warm pita. I folded it into quarters and put it into my shoulder bag—something to eat on the way. I left way too early to have breakfast. The guy who picked me up, Salah, was driving one of the ever-present white Hyundai (or Toyota) vans, I crawled in the front and we sped off. It takes four hours to get from Amuda to Kobane, assuming the road’s not closed for any reason.

The scenery was pretty much the same between Amuda and Serekaniye, more villages, hundreds of villages, and fields that were not fallow were filled with cotton and melon.

Between the border with the KRG and Serekaniye there's very little to indicate that the Kurdish Autonomous Region is at war with anyone. Once into Serekaniye that impression dissolves rapidly. Large buildings are studded with pockmarks from small arms fire, and here and there one shows signs of being hit by larger ordnance. In fact Serekaniye was one of the side battles fought prior to the Siege of Kobane in November of 2012. It lies directly on the road to Kobane, sits right on the Turkish border, and if it had been taken by al-Nusra (the Islamist terrorists de jour at that point) Kurdish supply lines to Kobane would have been severed. The YPG responded rapidly to the threat and fought viciously, eventually routing the jihadis. The area around Serekaniye is still somewhat contested though final mop up conducted during the spring seems to have ended any military threat of losing the city.

And on the road one can see just how serious the YPG/J and Asayis take the threat—multiple roadblocks and traps are set between Serekaniye and Kobane. The militias have no intention of paying twice for the city of Kobane. At one point we passed a mine that had blown out half the road and eventually were brought to a stop by heavy construction equipment. A rocket had hit the road in the night and it was closed definitely. My driver shrugged, and we set out across a dirt road to go around the obstruction. We had gone about five miles when we encountered an Arab militia checkpoint. Salah pulled up spoke a few words in Arabic and then asked quite clearly, "YPG?"

To which the response was a headshake and the mumbled acronym in Arabic of some other militia. My driver winced, and we drove on. This is where my nerves started get the best of me and I had him stop and reassure me that it was okay. He shrugged and said, "Syria." I then knew where we were. In some of the areas of Rojava small enclaves have declared for Syria, this includes the section of Qamishli next to the Turkish border, and evidently the tiny village we were driving through—as

dry mounds of paper and rubbish. The graves are a sphinx. All of the headstones are in Arabic, which I can't read. Even the dates are undecipherable. I continue walking, grave to grave, row to row, then one catches my eye. The dates and name are in Latinized script. This person was named Nujiyan Gever and s/he was born on October 14, 2014 and died on July 2, 2015. I count the months in my head quickly—a baby. Nine months old. Mohammed reaches out and takes my arm as I crouch to my knees. In my mind the simple phrase—a baby, Nujiyan Gever, nine months old—repeats over and over. I begin to feel unwell.

The HPC, like the YPG/J has developed innovative protocols for recruitment, training, and deployment. Some facts...

1) Each commune elects two persons to participate in the HPC. In practice there are far more volunteers for the HPC than it could possibly train and supply.

2) HPC recruit training lasts 17 days.

3) TEV-DEM and YPG/J take equal responsibility for training the HPC volunteers. The militias train on weapons and tactics and TEV-DEM train on the ideas of Democratic Confederalism. Both are considered essential for the HPC recruit to accomplish the mission of self defense.

4) As an example of HPC density, the city of Qamishli has a population of about 230,000 and an HPC contingent of 500.

5) Kobane, after the massacre, set out to arm and train HPC volunteers as quickly as possible. Due to the damage of the siege and lack of resources the HPC implementation had lagged behind other priorities. No more. In discussion with my TEV-DEM contact, Mr. Shaif was certain that they would have a full contingent for the city by mid-November of 2015.

As Aram and I sit and chat I ask what he sees as the most important work the HPC will do. He begins slowly, "In Marxism the people were always betrayed by the party, by the army, and what was left was dictatorship, war. In our system the arming of the people, through the YPG, through the Asayis, through

their lives during the massacre of June 25, 2015. On that night some 100 Daesh, disguised as Asayîş, infiltrated the Turkish border, exploded several car bombs and then began to systematically massacre anyone they could lay their hands on. An estimated 233 civilians were killed over the ensuing three days, including two of the driver's uncles. Which is how I found this place; he had asked for a moment to stop by and tend the graves. I told him of course and asked if he came to the cemetery often.

"Every week," was his response.

I finally found and met Aram Qamishlo, the HPC Director for Qamishli. The HPC compound where he works sits right behind the YPG barracks described in Dispatch Five. The HPC headquarters is yet another enclosed compound, a former storage area for the moribund Chemins de Fer Syriens railway system. According to Aram, the idea of formal defense units directly responsible to, and for the defense of, the communes had long been part of TEV-DEM discussions. The policy to further decentralize militia and security responsibilities with the concomitant devolution of power into the communes being the overarching priority. Significantly however, Aram states that the final push for the HPC came not from above, but from the communes. Prior to the HPC, each commune had implemented some level of security force, comprised of their own members and responsible to the commune council. This proved insufficient so the Qamishli communes requested that the Cizere Executive Council designate a name for the units, provide weapons training, a uniform, and outline specific duties for the militia. In March of 2015, and as a result of the relative stability of the region, the first units of the Hêza Parastina Cewherî (HPC, Self Defense Forces) began training and deploying in Cizere Canton, specifically Qamishli.

The driver, Mohammed the translator, and me wander among the graves. There are others here too, family, friends. They tend the graves of their loved ones. Hands, earth, sadness. One or two small boys play at tag while their parents clean the

evidenced by a Syrian flag floating proudly from a telephone pole. A few more turns and we were back on the road headed to Kobane, passing an Asayis or YPG checkpoint every ten miles. Landmarks I had come to appreciate and look forward to for a variety of reasons.

On the last approach into Kobane from the east you are finally aware that, yes, you are in a war zone. A large ridge of earth has been erected effectively screening the city from approach and every here and there tank traps can be seen jutting out from the sand. Passing this earth wall the city rises up and shows its wounds. Large areas of the outer city have been turned into great dumps of concrete, twisted steel and burned out cars. Then a building catches your eye, it is only half standing and leans oddly against its neighbor; its floors in various states of anti-Euclidean geometry. By the time you come to the city center you encounter whole blocks razed, pounded to rubble, and here and there one sees a building untouched by even small arms fire surrounded by the hulking wrecks of its former neighbors. Luck counts. The streets are dusty, and an occasional water tanker passes in a vain attempt to keep the air breathable. This in combination with the backhoes digging out the wreckage one scoop at a time and the constant movement of heavy trucks as they take the detritus to the growing concrete and steel fields ensures that Kobane is almost always drowning in dust. In fact my first night I walked out at twilight and the city looked more like an impressionist painting by Monet than anything else. Buildings melded into each other in the dust, colors and shapes softened and were lost. A blurred x-ray of a city.

In spite of this people move to Kobane daily, in fact with the cheap real estate—you pay what you can afford—there something of a run on property. As an example an Arab man I spoke to bought a house, complete, for around 15,000 Syrian Pounds (\$80 at today's exchange rate). Not bad.

It's late, I'm tired and have developed a serious negative attitude towards the Syrian squat toilet. Tomorrow it's time to look into the issue of revolution, and speak to the residents of this city in the process of slow rebirth.

## **Rojava Dispatch Three**

### **Members of Commune Sehid Kawa C Decide on New Boundaries**

The two Hyundai minivans cruise caravan style through the backstreets of Kobane. In the first van are two representatives of the Kobane Canton's TEV-DEM, the body charged with implementing Democratic Confederalism. In the trailing minivan I ride with the translator and driver. Tiny children play on either side of the street and seem ambivalent to the passing cars, if they can survive a month long siege by ISIS, a few stray cars are nothing.

I had met Ahmad Shaif at the Kobane Canton Center, a bullet-pocked building set on a hill in Kobane. In previous years it had been the government center for the Syrian state and was subsequently expropriated by the Kurds after the representatives of Assad's regime exited the canton post-haste. Ahmad is one of several TEV-DEM administrators, and his office bare of paperwork, computers or any other item one would associate with a workspace in the West, is the place where Kobane residents come to for assistance in maintaining their communal councils. We had met and he had invited me to a council commune meeting he was helping to facilitate. I was in, definitely in.

Our vehicle stopped on a side street and an older man greeted us, hands shook all around, I was introduced and welcomed. We went through a rubble courtyard and up a flight of steps. Shoes were kicked off, and we entered into a room

with each of them. As I pass down the row it feels like a chunk of steel has settled in my heart. The first older soldier we met has been by my side the entire time. He follows us to the taxi. I extend a hand and to show our mutual respect, we kiss each other on the right cheek, the left cheek and then the left shoulder.

Back in the car I start thinking about the HCP interview up ahead, and then my eye catches the yellow YPG flag, still dancing in the morning breeze. There is a popular song in Arabic which include the lyrics, "God save the YPG; they protect the people; Arab, Kurd and Christian are brothers, they protect the land and grow hope." And I think to myself: yes. Protect this militia of individuals who fight with their whole heart, who are fearless, who are kind, who grow hope, and who I have known for a short time as brothers. May their desires, for peace, for freedom, to be with their families and friends, become reality.

I looked at the taxi driver motioning forward with my hand and said, "So?"

He fired off some rapid Kurmanji to Mohammed who translated, "He said you forgot to ask about the HPC address..."

## **Rojava Dispatch Six**

### **Innovations, the Formation of the Hêza Parastina Cewherî (HPC)**

There is a small cemetery on the side of the 712 highway as it crawls its way westward out of Kobane. There are roughly 100 graves there, they are well-kept, some sprout plastic flowers, and small mementoes can be seen that have been placed atop others. The cemetery is marked by a sign and a large poster of the martyrs buried there. This poster, however, is markedly different than most YPG/J martyr remembrances; this one includes pictures of old folks, newlyweds, teenagers and the very young. For this cemetery is dedicated solely to those who lost

mander and I sit and drink while the fighters stand and look on. I ask some questions. Most are from Cizere, many from the city of Qamishli. They tell me that their fight isn't just for the Kurds, but for the whole world. And not just to defeat Daesh, but to win a Revolution. They want me to understand this. That it is important. I tell them I do understand. I tell them I believe it also.

The YPG/J have developed some unique protocols regarding training, deployment, and morale. Some more facts...

1) Training for a YPG/J fighter lasts 45 days.

2) After training, the fighter is asked where and what type of duty s/he would like to do. They can opt for front-line service, tactical reserves, Turkish border patrol, internal checkpoints, or logistics and communication. The choice of duty, where to serve, and how long to serve, is solely the individual fighter's.

3) Leave in the YPG/J varies with commando and combat situation. When idle, single men, and most YPJ fighters (who are usually unmarried) go on leave 4 days a month. Married men serve one week, and week off. When engaged in battle, leave is still offered to the fighters, but is rarely taken. One Kobane Commander joked that the seige lasted only a month because the married fighters realized that the more Daesh they killed, the sooner they would see their wives and children.

4) Food, clothing and shelter are provided to all YPG fighters, they also receive compensation amounting to about \$100/month—for odds and ends, cigarettes, candy, amusement, travel, what have you. This seems small by US standards, but in Rojava it can go a long way. I pay about one dollar for a pack of Gauloises Blondes, and a kilo (2.2 pounds) of candy will set you back \$0.75.

The cups are drained, time to go. I rise and thank the Commander again. He thanks me, and walks off to his duties. I begin shaking hands with the militiamen, saying thank you to each one, holding eye contact. Now, I need them to understand. The fighters form a line as I move so I can spend a moment of time

fully carpeted with cushions spread sofa like around the walls. A window opened onto the room and several bullet holes impinged the glass, these projectiles had traced a neat line of holes into the concrete of the far wall. Above this damage, a picture of Ocalan was hung, draped on either side by YPG and YPJ flags. The room started to fill with men, most older and Kurdish, and one or two Arabs. Women slowly joined the group as well, the older women, their heads swathed in scarves, would take turns shaking hands around the room and then sit. Men and women sat apart, the empowerment of women not yet extending to the predefined Middle East cultural space.

Mr Shaif began saying that it was a pleasure to be welcomed by the council, and that he was happy with the number of people attending (18 total, 10 men, 7 women—and me). He then drew out a map and laid it on the carpet, pointing to a block in a tangle of lines and circles meant to represent the *Sehid Kawa* (Martyr Kawa) neighborhood of the city. He continued that with the recent influx of immigrants into the city they were expecting the commune to expand, and that if it grows larger than 100 families it may be too unwieldy to be responsive. Possible geographic divisions were discussed with the council; a few questions, a few answers, some leaning over the map and nodding. He finished by saying that the division of the commune, if any, was up to them. He wanted to present the issue and whatever they decided was fine. Just call with an answer.

I was introduced and got a chance to ask a few questions. I asked about what they do, on a regular basis, as a council and got a wild range of responses, from dealing with marital issues, helping get gas and rides to and from clinics, shopping, whatever was needed, whatever was urgent. Finally a man said that during the siege it was the council that had kept the commune fed and clothed, that helped with YPG intelligence gathering and that when the fighting became desperate commune members were issued Kalashnikovs and fought with the YPG to save

their neighborhood. I asked if all were given weapons, including the women. He nodded and said everyone willing to fight, fought.

My curiosity got the better of me and I asked about the line of bullet holes in the wall. The man who had initially welcomed us stood and pointed out the window to a two story building some 200 feet away. Pointing, he indicated the line of sight between the buildings top floor and the damaged wall in his house. Then holding an invisible Kalashnikov he sighted the building and pretended to shoot back. Saying that he had returned fire and that the gunman had eventually left.

With my questions done they asked me what the Americans thought of Kobane. I said many supported their Revolution, many wanted to hear more, and those ignorant enough to have an opinion without information didn't matter. There were some smiles and nods—especially the women, a few seemed surprised at my directness. Finally a young women of fifteen asked me what I thought. I closed my eyes for a moment and said, "What's happening here may be part of the future, not just for the Kurds, but for everyone. I know I feel welcome here, and safe. And as small as that is, it's a big change from much of my experience."

Ahmad then rose and thanked the group, we all shook hands again—there were some touching of hands to the chest, and we left.

Back out on the street the children were busy playing, somewhere a dog barked and the drivers were cranking over the vans engines. I stopped Ahmad and asked about how the communes had formed, did TEV-DEM have responsibility for that task. He shook his head, "Some formed spontaneously, some we helped get started, many have yet to become stable, with strong council members. It's a process, and in Kobane the siege speeded up the formation of the communes, but the rebuilding and lack of resources has now slowed it. We can't stop though, these communes are at the center of society."

3) Block (Kurmanji—garug), 2 suites, 24 – 40 fighters.

4) Company, 2 Blocks, 48 – 80 fighters.

5) Estimated Total YPG/J Census, 50,000 fighters

6) There are no officers. When engaged in operations, the fighters choose (by vote or consensus) Team/Suite/Block/Company Leaders. When idle, there is no leadership structure at any level, save Regional Commands. Commanders are chosen (vote or consensus) for regions and Cantons (Kobane, Qamishli) and can only serve six months in any given commando. They are then replaced. There is no re-election.

The Commander and I talk as we set off to the barracks. He tells me the men are rested, ready to fight, though the area has been quiet for months. The commando deploys, on a revolving basis, 15 fighters per week to the front. He has only one new recruit, a boy of 16, who left Aleppo and crossed Daesh lines to join the YPG. Breakfast is over and the fighters are lounging near the barracks. They see the Commander and me moving towards them and a few start walking over, then more follow. I introduce myself through Mohammed, they seem surprised that an American would visit; one or two look down, boots shuffle in the mud. I move closer and start shaking hands, I look in their eyes, I mumble thank you in English. The fighters nod, they smile, they get it. One or two say in Kurmanji, "You are welcome."

I ask if I can take some pictures, the Commander maneuvers the fighters onto the tarmac to a spot in front of a large YPG flag snapping in the wind. A few photos, and as we walk off for coffee several of the less shy militiamen grab my arm and ask for individual or group photos. I stand with the men, arms on each other's shoulders, we smile at the camera. In that moment one word flashes into my mind like summer lightning; a Spanish word, from a different insurrection and a different time, Hermanos.

A table is brought out and several cups of steaming, brackish Turkish coffee are set. Mohammed, the taxi driver, the Com-

(YPG marches, earth and heavens tremble)

—YPG motto

“Wait....what....we’re lost?” Mohammed the translator nods and I turn to the driver. He shrugs. I had headed out in Qamishli to do an interview about the Hêza Parastina Cewherî (HPC, Self Defense Forces), the new citizen’s militia formations in Rojava. The driver—per every other taxi driver on earth—knew a short cut that would get us there on time, guaranteed. Problem was he knew where we were, but couldn’t find the address of the HPC. So as we sat on a corner deciding what to do, I noticed several yellow YPG flags floating over an old fence. The driver pointed and shrugged, indicating maybe they know. Couldn’t hurt.

We all hop out of the taxi and approach the YPG outpost through a tangle of tank traps, concrete barriers and mud. The fighters at the gate are older than most I’ve met before, with graying beards, dark, tanned skin, and wrinkles. First thought, these guys look tough, real tough. We shake hands and when they find out I’m an American, one goes to tell the Commander. He returns with a tall well-built balding man, with clear grey eyes. We shake hands and he introduces himself. He is the Commander of the Qamishli Cizere Canton T.S. Cemal (Martyr Cemal) commando with approximately 400 fighters (4 Companies). He invites us in for coffee or tea, and to meet the fighters. What the hell. I’m late for my interview, it’s chilly—a coffee would be nice, I want to meet the fighters; and I like this man.

The Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG, People’s Defense Units) and the Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê (YPJ, Women’s Defense Units) are the armed backbone of the Revolution. The YPG, formed in 2004 (YPJ in 2012), is no army. It is a militia, a people armed, in the best sense of the word. Some facts...

YPG/J Organization (Unit Name and Size)

- 1) Team, 6 – 10 fighters.
- 2) Suite, 2 Teams, 12 – 20 fighters.

He nodded and left. I climbed into the van and set out for my hotel, some coffee and to think through this thing. This new thing.

(The name of the commune, *Sehid Kawa C* (Martyr Kawa C) is derived from the name of the neighborhood in Kobane—*Sehid Kawa* and *C* designates it as the third commune formed. Many of the city’s areas are being renamed for the YPJ/G fighters who were killed in those respective neighborhoods. Martyrs, their lives and deaths form a large part of Kurdish resistance consciousness and symbolism. More later...)

## Rojava Dispatch Four

### The Return; 18 Heroes Go Home For The Last Time

“The blood of martyrs never touches the ground.”

—Kurdish Prover

So I had been kicking around Kobane for a day or two and had made some good contacts in the media center and also the YPG. One afternoon the translator and I had stopped by to see what the YPG were up to; it was quiet, mostly. Then a commander came walking through talking rapidly and pointing. I looked at the translator and he said that the YPG are helping to escort the bodies of 18 YPG/J fighters from Kobane Canton to Cizere Canton for final burial. There was some kind of ceremony that was supposed to happen too. So we saddled up the Hyundai minivan and followed the racing YPG cars to wherever it was they were going.

We landed at a building with an enclosed courtyard near Kobane’s *sook*. It looked like it must have been a sports club, likely volleyball as it had changing rooms and a volleyball court sized enclosed area (As soccer is to Brazilians, so volleyball is to the Kurds, an obsession, a crazed, fan-driven juggernaut). The building had been expropriated and given to the Institute for

the Families of the Martyrs, a revolutionary institution to provide support for folks who lost people in the fighting, and to keep the memories of the martyrs alive. Not that the latter task needs much energy, the photos of martyrs are ubiquitous. They are hung in shop windows, on poles, on the walls of offices, in magazines, in Asayis and YPG outposts, in town squares, in schools; in fact, basically, everywhere. And these posters and what they represent resonate deeply with the Kurds. What is interesting in all this is the anonymous nature of the Martyrs, there aren't just one or two, or even dozens, there are literally thousands. Sure, some stand out, like Arwin Mirkhan, a young PYJ fighter who with her team was leading the final assault on Mishtehnur hill above Kobane. They were separated from the main assault body and shot up piece meal by Daesh (terrorists) fighters. With all her comrades dead or gravely wounded she resolved not to be taken alive and sold into slavery or beheaded. In the chaos of the final seconds of her life Arwin Mirkhan doused herself with a Molotov cocktail and lit a match.

At the center a hundred people or so have gathered, women sit in one room and men in the other waiting for the arrival of the Cizere delegation to accept the bodies of the dead. It is quiet, my TEV-DEM contact, Mr. Shaif is there and he thanks me for attending. We wait, we talk, we drink tea. An old bus, with windows missing is eased into the courtyard, we wait some more. Finally the Cizere contingent arrives, older men and women, some TEV-DEM, some of the parents and family of the martyrs, some private folks. They are lead into an open room and the certificates for burial and death are passed ceremoniously to them. They accept. There are no tears.

The Kobane and Cizere contingent board the bus, I wheedle a seat for the translator and me. We drive to the Martyrs cemetery, some words are spoken by people representing Kobane thanking Cizere and the sacrifice that the fighters made for the freedom of Kobane. The Cizere contingent affirms their support and commitment to Kobane and the Revolution. The occa-

sion is brief, solemn. More than one mother of a fallen fighter is in the audience, yet it is quiet. There are no tears.

We are now late and the old bus blasts like a rocket back through the dusty streets. The area around the Institute is alive with activity as cars carrying the flag draped coffins of the fallen pass by the gate and people look on from the surrounding streets. I dash around the corner to see what's happening at the gate to the center. The women have come out of the institute compound and stand chanting on the streets, fingers raised in the V for victory salute. The individual cars carrying the heroes pass the saluting crowd, driven by YPG soldiers who return the V salute. The women chant in both Arabic and Kurmanji, occasionally making the zazi, the uniquely regional feminine ululation, which can be heard piercing the still heavy air.

I look on and without thinking I raise my hand in a V salute, but remain silent. There is no longer seeing or hearing this scene, only feeling it. My throat tightens and I find myself hating and loving in the same moment. Loving these young fighters who died for freedom, real freedom; and hating the fact of their deaths, too young, too brave, too many, and those who killed them—Daesh scum. If I could have killed every Daesh fighter in that moment, I would have. Every. Last. One. I reel in my emotions and look over to the gathered women on my right. Their faces are a blur of sadness, gratitude, and determination. I realize that this wasn't about the Siege of Kobane, it was about the next, inevitable battle. It was about those who will die, as much as those who have. And there are no tears. Except my own.

## **Rojava Dispatch Five**

### **The YPG/YPJ; Militias That Grow Hope**

YPG dimeşe, erd û ezman diheje