

Turkish Anarchists on the Fight for Kobanê

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Contents

Interview with a member of DAF on the Slovenian anarchist radio show Črna luknja in early January, 2015	3
Interview with a member of DAF, conducted by CrimethInc. operatives between October and December 2014	6
Further Reading	9

In summer 2013, we interviewed the Turkish group Revolutionary Anarchist Action (Devrimci Anarşist Faaliyet, or DAF) about the uprising that began in Gezi Park. At the end of summer 2014, we learned that DAF was supporting the fierce resistance that residents of the town of Kobanê in northern Syria were putting up to the incursion of the fundamentalist Islamic State.

During the civil war in Syria that began with the Arab Spring, the Kurdish region of northern Syria, known as Rojava, asserted its autonomy and began carrying out experiments in horizontal organization. Rojava is surrounded on all sides by hostile forces: Assad's beleaguered Syrian government, which lost control of the region a couple years ago; the Turkish government, known for oppressing its Kurdish minority; other revolutionary Syrian forces, including Islamic fundamentalists and the US-backed coalition known as the Free Syrian Army; the Kurdish regional government in Iraq, a longtime rival of Syrian Kurdish organizations; and, most pressingly, the Islamic State, also known as ISIS—an unrecognized state entity that has gained control of much of Iraq and Syria over the past two years using captured armaments originally brought into the region during the US military occupation.

In the United States, we read corporate media accounts of refugees from Kobanê shouting "Long live America!" from across the Turkish border as US airstrikes aimed at Islamic State militants destroyed their city—a chilling re-legitimization of US military intervention in the Middle East, after the colossal failure of the occupation of Iraq. US Secretary of State John Kerry hinted that Kobanê would inevitably fall to the Islamic State, and maintained that rescuing the city was "not a strategic objective." Yet in the end, it was not the US military, but the courage of a few ill-equipped autonomous fighters from Rojava that halted the advance of the Islamic State across the Middle East.

With firsthand reports from the region in short supply, there were bitter polemics between English-speaking anarchists about whether to doubt the allegedly libertarian character of the resistance or extend critical support. In hopes of gaining more insight into the situation, we contacted our comrades of DAF once more. After months of waiting, we are finally able to present these two interviews—one offering general background on the struggle in Kobanê, the other delving into analytical detail about the geopolitical implications.

Interview with a member of DAF on the Slovenian anarchist radio show Črna luknja in early January, 2015

Can you give us an overview of the situation in the border region of Turkey and Syria, describing the militias and other key actors that are operating there?

The people living in the region are mostly Kurds, who have been living there for hundreds of years. This region has never been represented by a state. Because of that, the people of the region have been in struggle for a very long time. The people are very diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion: there are Kurdish people, Arabic people, Yazidi people, and more. One of the major Kurdish people's organizations in Turkey and Iraq is the PKK, and the PYD in Syria is in the same line with the PKK. As for military organizations, there are the YPJ and YPG, the men's and women's organizations.

Against these organizations stand ISIS, the Islamic gangs, in which Al Nusra is involved. These are the radical Islamists. There is also the Free Syrian Army, a coalition of many different groups; they are supported by the capitalist system, but they are not as radical as ISIS. And there is the

Turkish state, and Assad's Syrian state, who are on the attack. In northern Iraq, there is also a Kurdish state, under the KDP of Barzani, which is ideologically the same as the Turkish state, but ethnically a bit different.

What is the role of the PKK in the region, and the meaning of their supposed libertarian turn?

The PKK has a bad reputation in the West because of their past. Twenty years ago, when it was founded, it was a Marxist-Leninist group. But a few years ago, it has changed this completely and denounced these ideas, because the ideas of their leader changed and so did the people. They went towards a more libertarian ideology after reading the works of Murray Bookchin and on account of some other factors in the region. To understand the situation today, it is also important that in the beginning, the PKK was not so ideological. It did not grow up as an ideological movement, but as a people's movement. This is another factor explaining how it has developed in this direction.

What do you mean when you say Rojava revolution? What kind of social experiment is it, and why is it relevant for anti-authoritarian social movements around the world?

The Rojava revolution was proclaimed two years ago. Three cantons declared their independence from the state, from Assad's regime. They didn't want any kind of involvement with any of the internationally supported capitalist powers. This successfully opened up a third front in the region. It was a moment when the states in the region lost power.

This began as a project of the Kurdish struggle. It involves directly democratic practices like people's assemblies, and it is focused on ethnic diversity, power to the people, and women's liberation, which is a big focus of the Kurdish movement in general, not just in Rojava. They formed their own defense units, which are voluntary organizations just made up of the people who are living there.

You are part of the anarchist group DAF (Revolutionary Anarchist Action) in Turkey. One of your main activities over the last years has been building solidarity and mutual aid with the people in Kurdistan. Tell us about your group and what your involvement is in the Rojava revolution?

DAF advocates a revolutionary perspective; we call ourselves revolutionary anarchists because we want anarchism to be socially understood in our region, because in this region anarchism doesn't have any tradition or history. Our first aim is to spread the ideals of anarchism into the social fabric of our society, and for us the practice is more important than theory. Or rather, we build our theory on our practice as revolutionary anarchists.

We are against all forms of oppression. We focus on workers' movements and people's movements that are oppressed due to ethnicity, we stand in solidarity against women's oppression, and we are active in all of those movements. In Rojava, we were in touch with participants in the revolution since it started; when the resistance began in Kobanê, we immediately went to the region; our comrades organized solidarity actions on both sides of the border. We still have people there on a rotating basis, and we are still organizing actions. For example, recently, our women's group organized an action in which they called for conscientious objection in support of the Kobanê resistance.

DAF has organized on the Turkish-Syrian border, in a "human chain" intended to prevent fighters of the Islamic State from passing over the border from the Turkish side to join in fighting against the Kurdish resistance. Tell us about this form of direct action?

The Turkish state has been attacking Kobanê from the west. In their discourse, the Turkish state sounds like they are against ISIS, but in practice it permits material resources, arms, and people to pass through the border, and it has been attacking the villages on the border. These villages are not very separate from Kobanê; it's the same families and a lot of people from Kobanê pass through there when they are injured or if they want to join the struggle from the Turkish side of the border. So our comrades are staying in the villages and participating in all the actions in the communes, doing logistical support for the refugees and for injured people.

“We cut the wires. The moment we passed the border, we were greeted with huge enthusiasm. In the border villages of Kobanê, everyone, young and old, were on the streets. YPG and YPJ guerrillas saluted our elimination of borders by firing into air. We rallied in the streets of Kobanê.” –*DAF report from a solidarity mission*

Throughout the armed conflict, the mainstream media said that Kobanê would fall, despite the fact that the resistance on the ground never gave up. Why do you think they reported it that way?

This was a psychological war from the beginning. The media did not want the Kobanê resistance to be heard. The coverage was part of the psychological war, because there was a lot of international support for the resistance. And when it became evident that Kobanê would not fall, they changed tactics: all the international powers tried to give the impression that they were helping with air strikes, and the Kurdish states by sending fighters. This was done right before it was evident that Kobanê would not fall, only in order to give the impression that they are not against this struggle.

It is obvious that the people's struggle in Kobanê is not in the interest of the prevailing world powers. What do you think the prospects are for the Rojava revolution? What is the situation on the ground now? How can people from other countries support the revolution there?

Lately, other parts of Rojava have been attacked. If you remember months ago when ISIS first attacked the Yazid people, the Yazids were forced to flee from their cities, and they were saved by the YPD fighters. Afterwards, ISIS was repelled. Last week, the Yazid people have formed their own defense units, similar to those in Rojava. So the struggle is growing in the region, with self-defense and the idea of direct democracy gaining more support.

Also, on the Turkish side of the border, the war is getting harsher. The government is using more violence against the Kurdish resistance. Again, last week, the police attacked and murdered a 14-year-old kid. This shows that the struggle will continue in a more violent way. This matter is not just limited to this region; you can see from the recent attacks on the journalists in France that this has to be taken very seriously on the international level, especially by revolutionaries.

This also shows the importance of the Rojava revolution against ISIS and radical Islamism. I think that international support would mean taking more actions locally against the real powers that are supporting ISIS.

Interview with a member of DAF, conducted by CrimethInc. operatives between October and December 2014

How successful do you feel the intervention of the DAF has been in providing solidarity to those in Rojava struggling against the Islamic State? What resources or skills are important for anarchist groups to develop in order to be better prepared for situations like this?

DAF has been in solidarity with the Rojava Revolution since it was declared over two years ago. Our comrades have been there since the first day of the Kobanê resistance, in solidarity, to the best of our ability, with the peoples' struggle for freedom.

We always knew that Kobanê would not fall and it didn't fall, contrary to what mainstream media reported a hundred times since the resistance began. One month ago, ISIS controlled 40% of Kobanê, now it's 20% and they are backing off. [Since this interview was conducted, ISIS has been completely driven out of Kobanê.] Given that ISIS is losing their battles with other forces in the region and getting weaker, we can say that the Kobanê resistance was successful.

The resources and skills would be different for every specific struggle. The level of oppression and violence are different in every region and the skills for resistance are best built on direct experience. However, the skills of organization and the culture of sharing and solidarity are at least as important as any particular skills for resistance. These are almost universal. DAF has built its own experience on the culture of the commune and struggle against oppression as well as a long-term relationship of mutual solidarity with the Kurdish people and other struggles for freedom in Anatolia and Kurdistan.

Unfortunately, it's not possible to give a more detailed answer here on account of security issues and other concerns.

How is the struggle in Kobanê changing the political context in Turkey, both for Erdogan and for social movements for liberation?

The Turkish state has had to take steps backward in relation to the resistance in Kobanê. It has stopped openly supporting ISIS, although it is still supporting ISIS behind the scenes. It had occupying plans in the name of creating a "security region," which included military intervention to weaken the Kurdish struggle and also attacking Assad's forces in alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria. These plans have failed.

The solidarity actions carried out by social movements for liberation spread around the world to an extent that was unseen in recent years. This international solidarity was an important factor in the success of the Kobanê resistance. Rojava is another example proving that people can make a revolution without a vanguard party or a group of the elite, even where there is no industry. And this can happen in a place like the Middle East, where struggling for freedom means fighting against all kinds of oppression, including patriarchy as well as massacres based on ethnicity and religion.

DAF texts have described the Islamic State as "the violent mob produced by global capitalism" and "the subcontractor of the States that pursue income strategies on the region." Can you explain precisely what your analysis of the Islamic State is—why it appeared, and whose interests it serves?

It is obvious that the actions of Islamic State benefit the powers (economic and political) that have goals in the region. These could be direct or indirect benefits that strengthen the hand of

these powers. For example, a radical Islamist group is useful for Western economic or political powers to make propaganda about defending Western values. Islamic terror is one of the biggest issues that Western countries make propaganda about. Moreover, it is also a political reality that some countries, including the US, have agreements with these fundamentalists. This is the 50-year-running Middle East policy of Western countries.

The Turkish state expressed a negative view of the Islamic State in every speech of its bureaucrats. But we have witnessed real political cooperation of the Turkish state with the Islamic State in relation to the resistance in Kobanê. So in this situation, it appears that they are supporting Islamic State but they are claiming that they are not supporting it.

It seems clear that the Turkish government is hoping for the Islamic State to weaken Kurdish power in the region. But what do you think the Turkish state's long-term goals are in reference to the Islamic State itself?

The Turkish state has been providing large amounts of arms, supplies, and recruits to ISIS ever since the time when it was part of the globally supported Free Syrian Army. This support continues surreptitiously, since politically the Turkish state had to seem to be against ISIS after the resistance in Kobanê succeeded. Our comrades at the Turkish border with Syria are still reporting suspiciously large transports crossing it.

The Turkish state has strong relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, and their joint long-term goal is to gain more power in the region by eliminating Assad's authority. ISIS is their ally in this respect also.

Arguably, the Islamic State could never have come to power without the weapons and instability that the United States imported to Iraq. At the same time, it appears that US airstrikes and coordination with fighters in Kobanê have played a significant role in preventing the Islamic State from gaining control of the city. Has this enabled the United States to legitimize itself among those defending Rojava? What challenges does this create there for anarchists who oppose state power?

This false impression is a product of the mainstream media. US airstrikes began very late, after it was evident that Kobanê would not fall, and they were not critical. The bombings also hit the areas in YPG control "by mistake." And some ammunition landed in the hands of ISIS also "by mistake."

The success of the Kobanê Resistance can only be attributed to the self-organized power of the people's armed forces. Because of this strong resistance, as well as extensive international solidarity, the US and its allies had to take steps backward.

The bombings and media coverage are part of the political maneuvers against the revolution that will try to destroy it by including it. However, the Rojava Revolution is part of a long history of Kurdish people's struggle for freedom. Its insistence on being stateless, its gains in the liberation of women, etc. are not coincidences.

The challenge is to communicate the values created in the Rojava Revolution and the political reality of wartime conditions.

Can you say anything on the relationship between armed struggle and vanguardism? Does armed warfare inevitably compromise anti-authoritarian struggles, or are there ways to engage in warfare that do not inevitably produce hierarchies and specialization? This has been an important conversation in the US after the protests in Ferguson, which involved gunfire from both sides. Some comrades in Thessaloniki were debating this

issue with us, arguing that when guns are introduced to social conflict, it is always a step away from anarchy. But perhaps in some cases there is no other option?

When all the people (who are able) are armed, who is the vanguard? The people's self-defense forces in Rojava include all ages, both men and women (who are already legendary fighters) from all ethnic and religious backgrounds in the region.

The hierarchy created in the armed struggle of the guerrilla does not necessarily mean an exclusive authority in the social structures created by the revolution. This awareness is a part of the Rojava peoples' struggle for freedom.

Comrades from DAF and the Anarkismo Editors Group have made strong arguments that it is important to act in solidarity with the struggle in Rojava whether or not it is an explicitly "anarchist" struggle. But no society, ethnic group, or struggle is homogenous; each contains internal conflicts and contradictions, and the hardest part of solidarity work is usually figuring out how to take sides (or avoid taking sides). In your efforts to show solidarity with those struggling in Rojava, has DAF encountered tensions between more authoritarian and less authoritarian structures within the defense? How are you engaging with them?

As you have stated, no popular movement is homogenous. The importance of the Rojava Revolution is the revolutionary efforts that are becoming generalized. This is a mutual process in which the people of Rojava are becoming aware about social revolution and at the same time are shaping a social revolution. The YPG and YPJ are self-defense organizations created by the people. The character of both organizations has been criticized in many texts as authoritarian.

Similar discussions took place among comrades in the early 2000s in reference to the Zapatista movement. There were many critiques of the EZLN's authoritarian character in the Zapatista Revolution. Critiques about the character of the popular movements must take into account the political reality. As DAF, we would frame critiques on the process that are based on our experiences, and which are far from being prejudgments about Kurdish movement. So there is no cooperation with any authoritarian structure, nor will any authoritarian structure play a role in social revolution.

In the United States, some anarchists have sometimes spoken of certain ethnic groups such as the people of Chiapas as if they are "culturally anarchist." Now some people here are speaking about the Kurdish people the same way. To us, although we do not want to render the struggles of oppressed peoples and colonized peoples invisible, it also seems simplistic and dangerous to confuse ethnic identity with politics. Likewise, our comrades in former Yugoslavia have expressed concerns over struggles that are based in ethnic or religious identity, on account of their experience of the 1990s civil war. How important is ethnic identity in the struggle in Rojava? Do you see this as a potential problem, or not?

The Rojava Revolution is indeed made by peoples with at least four different ethnic and three different religious backgrounds, who are actively taking part equally in both military and social fronts. Also, the people of Rojava insist on being stateless, when there is already a neighboring Kurdish state in place. Kurdish ethnic identity has been subject to the denial and oppression policies of all the states in the region. Raising oppressed identities is strategically important in peoples' struggle for freedom, but not to the extent that it is a device of discrimination and deception. This balance is of key importance and the Rojava Revolution has already proved itself in this respect.

DAF also finds that the values that the people of Chiapas have created in their struggle for freedom align with anarchism, although “culturally anarchist” would not be a term we would use.

Are there any other regions of the Middle East where social experiments like the one in Rojava are taking place, or where they might emerge? What would it take, internationally, for what is promising in Rojava to spread?

The Rojava Revolution has been developing in a time when many socio-economic crises appeared around the world: Greece, Egypt, Ukraine... During the first period of the Arab Springs, the social opposition supported this “spring wave.” After a while, these waves evolved into clashes between fundamentalists and secular militarist powers. So the revolution in Rojava appeared at a conjuncture when the social opposition had lost their hopes in the Middle East. Its own international character and international solidarity will spread this effort—first in the Middle East, then around the world.

What does the conflict in Kobanê tell us about the kind of struggles ahead in the 21st century? It seems to be an early example of what might happen in “sacrifice zones” in which traditional state forces seal off the area and withdraw, leaving autonomous communities to do battle with new fundamentalist or neo-fascist post-state organizations. Do you see what is happening there as something new, or old? Or both?

As we stated above, this is a part of the process that started with the “spring waves.” It can be understood as a part of this theory of “sacrifice zones.” But this theory gives a great deal of importance to the character of international powers as subjects. We also have to recognize the role of internal political, economic, and social forces. We have to check out the internal capital that has relations with fundamentalists against international capitalist powers.

Moreover, one of the biggest issues to understand the political culture of the Middle East is to recognize its unique character. Religion has a unique effect in the political agenda of the East. Not just for the Rojava Revolution, but across the board, DAF’s perspective on international politics is based in an understanding of relations of domination between social, economic, and political forces which cooperate and clash from time to time according to convenience, all of which are useless for oppressed people.

Further Reading

Resources on the Rojava Revolution—A broad selection of coverage and reference material

An Interview with Revolutionary Anarchist Action (DAF) on Kobanê: “We are Kawa against Dehaks”—Another interview with the DAF

DAF Facebook page

Revolution Will Win in Kobanê!—a DAF report from Boydê Village on the Syrian border during the first month of the struggle in Kobanê

Rojava’s Communes and Councils—An overview of how the structures of direct democracy function in revolutionary Rojava

The Experiment of West Kurdistan Has Proved that People Can Make Changes—A report by a member of the Kurdistan Anarchists Forum who spent two weeks in Syrian Kurdistan

Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy—On the relationship between the former anarchist Murray Bookchin and Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK

The Kurdish Question: Through the lens of Anarchist Resistance in the Heart of the Ottoman Empire 1880–1923—A deep background on anarchism in the region

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