# A Mountain River Has Many Bends

**The History and Context of the Rojava Revolution**

Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness

December 2014

# Contents

*In Northern Syria, 2.5 million people are living in a stateless, feminist, religiously tolerant, anti-capitalist society of their own creation. They call their territory Rojava, and they defend it fiercely. They're at war with the extremist group ISIS, and they're doing better than anyone in the world expected — least of all the Western powers who seek to treat them as pawns.*

*It's a complicated situation, but we in the rest of the world have much to learn from the Rojava revolution. To that end, we offer this long-form introduction to the history and the present struggle of the Kurdish people.*

*Long live the Rojava revolution!*

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# Rojava: Facts at a Glance

**Name:** "Rojava" is a word that means both "West" and "Sunset" in Kurdish. Each canton has its own anthem and flag.

**Geography:** Rojava lies in the northern part of Syria and the western part of Kurdistan.The area stretches over 1,437 square miles (making it a bit bigger than Rhode Island), and it is home to a total of 380 cities, towns, and villages.

**Population:** At the start of the Syrian civil war, Rojava was home to nearly 3.5 million people. Now, it is home to a little over 2.5 million (roughly twice the population of Rhode Island). Nearly a million people have fled, many to refugee camps in Turkey and Iraq. The most populous city in Rojava is Qamişlo (Cizîrê Canton), with more than 400,000 people.

**Economics:** Rojava's major economic resource is oil. The region produces about 40,000 barrels of crude oil a day. All Syrian refineries were located in the south of the country, so Rojava has had to build its own DIY refinery. Before the war there were some industries, namely concrete production sites and metal foundries, but the production from these industries has been disrupted by the civil war. Rojava is considered the breadbasket of Syria, cradled where it is between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The region's major agricultural products are sheep, grain, and cotton. It was the only agricultural region in Syria to have a thriving export business prior to the war and the resulting embargo.

**Military:** The main fighting forces of Rojava are volunteer militias (namely the YPG and YPJ). The YPG/YPJ have a combined forced of 40,000 lightly-armed fighters. Most of the weapons are light firearms combined with Russian-made lightweight rocket launchers. They have also repurposed about 40 garbage trucks and other heavy trucks into armored personnel carriers. They have no aircraft.

**Political Structure:** Rojava is made up of three autonomous but confederated "cantons." These cantons are not geographically contiguous. The decisionmaking structure is composed of various councils. The average size of neighborhood councils is

30–150 families. A city district / village council is made up of 5–17 neighborhood councils (along with worker, non-profit, and religious councils). City district councils elect two representatives to the city council (one man and one woman). They also elect security and YPG/YPJ militias.

# The History and Context of the Rojava Revolution

> A mountain river has many bends.
>
> —From a Kurdish folk song

It is nearly an impossible task to chart the bends and tributaries of one of the world's longest running contemporary resistance movements — a one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old struggle that stretches from the opulence of the Ottoman Empire to today's bloody civil wars in Syria and Iraq. Books could be and have been written about the history, resistance, and hope for freedom of more than twenty-five million Kurds scattered across four belligerent and oppressive nation states. This slim volume is not a comprehensive history of this complex people and their enduring struggle, nor is it an essay on the Machiavellian geopolitics that have kept tens of millions of people oppressed for generations. This book is a bridge — between us radicals in the West, who have become cynical to the idea that anything can really change, and those who have dared an experiment in freedom in one of the most dangerous parts of the world against enemies so absurdly repressive and savage they seem to have come from a Hollywood script. We need some context to truly understand the words and ideas of the rebels of Rojava, else we can be easily seduced by over-simplifications and distortions — like the claims that the struggle in Rojava is a replay of the Spanish Revolution, or that it is a sophisticated public relations makeover for a Maoist national liberation struggle. These misunderstandings are not uniquely held by radicals — even the US government seems confused, the state department has various Rojavan groups on the terrorist watch list while at the same time the pentagon calls Kurdish fighters dangerous and illegal terrorists.

With so much misinformation and confusion about this little understood struggle, it is too easy for radicals to simply look the other way, admitting there is so much we don't know and understand. In today's world of stifling state and corporate control it would be a mistake and a betrayal of solidarity to ignore the struggles of this obscure region of northern Syria now called Rojava. To inspire our own work at home, we need to hear from those creating fragile and imperfect oases of freedom. The people risking their lives in the rubble of Kobanî need our support not only to resist the reactionary fanatic butchers that seek to kill every one of them but also as they try to create a stateless society based on ideals of freedom and equality.

The Kurds are an ethnically non-Arab group in the Middle East. Twenty-eight million of them inhabit a region known as Kurdistan, which spans adjacent areas of Syria,

Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. By ethnicity and language, the Kurdish people are closer to Persians than they are to other peoples in the region. In ancient times Kurdish city-states were conquered and subjugated by Persians, Romans, and Arab invaders. All of these conquerors struggled to subdue the Kurds, often remarking on the Kurd's "stubborn demand of autonomy." By the time of the rise of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s, the Kurds had secured some autonomy through a string of independent principalities stretching from Syria to Iraq. The Ottomans left them alone for the most part until the beginning of the 19th century, when a number of bloody battles were fought to bring the independent areas under the control of Constantinople. The first major 19th century Kurdish uprising, Badr Khan Beg, took place in 1847. The Ottomans crushed this and subsequent uprisings, but the demand for Kurdish independence continued throughout the rest of the century.

At the end of World War I, the constitutional monarchist party of Turkey, the "Young Turks," began a systematic ethnic cleansing of the Kurds and, more infamously, the Armenians. From 1916 to 1918 the Young Turks forcibly deported 700,000 Kurds, more than half of them dying during the brutal process. On August 10, 1920, after the conclusion of World War I, the defeated Ottomans were compelled to sign the Treaty of Sèvres. The treaty split up the Ottoman empire, at the time dubbed "the sick man of the Bosphorus," into a number of independent non-Turkish states, which were to include an independent Kurdistan. But in 1922 the Turkish national movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, a vehement Turkish nationalist and military officer, won the War of Independence and abolished the sultanate. This violent change of regimes forced England and the other allied powers to renegotiate the terms of the treaty with the fledgling nationalist state of Turkey. The Treaty of Sèvres was scrapped, and a new treaty, the Treaty of Lausanne, was signed by Ataturk and his nationalist congress July 24, 1923. The Treaty of Lausanne gave Kurdistan back to Turkey, failing to even recognize that the Kurds existed. That same year, Ataturk decreed some 65 laws aimed at destroying Kurdish identity: renaming them "Mountain Turks;" outlawing public use of the Kurdish language; making Kurdish celebrations illegal; forcibly changing Kurdish names of streets, villages, businesses, etc. to "proper Turkish" names; confiscating huge tracts of Kurdish communal lands; seizing Kurdish community funds; eliminating all Kurdish or Kurd-sympathetic organizations or political parties; and so on. The few years of hope following the Treaty of Sèvres slipped into many decades of brutal state repression.

Iraq, Iran, and Syria, in which there were sizable Kurdish populations, also sought to keep the Kurds subjugated. The end of World War I simply switched Ottoman imperial oppression of the Kurds to the more systematic oppression of four authoritarian nation states, all of which had been either created or militarily propped up by the major allied victors of WWI as their protectorates.

Today's Syria was established as a French Colonial Mandate after the dismembering of the Ottoman Empire. At the time of the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, 18% of people living in the French Mandate identified as Kurdish, making them the largest

minority in the colony. After a number of failed uprisings by Syrian Arabs, the French adopted a divide-and-conquer strategy. They filled their colonial armies with Kurds, Christians, Druze, and other ethnic minorities and gave significant governing powers to Kurdish regional tribal leaders. When Syria gained independence from France in 1946 it quickly attacked its "internal enemies." Close to 200,000 Kurds had their identity papers taken away and were declared stateless, allowing the new Syrian Republic to seize their land and property and to conscript them into forced labor. The new Arab-controlled republic changed all the names of Kurdish towns and resettled Arab Bedouins into most of the Kurd villages and towns to serve as police. In the first decades after independence, Kurdish organizations and customs were prohibited, and thousands of Kurdish political and tribal leaders were arrested. In 1973, Syrian officials decided to create an Arab corridor along the Turkish border and displaced about 150,000 Kurds without compensation. The 1980s and 90s saw periodic flare-ups of Kurdish demands for recognition of their culture and civil rights, which were often met with deadly interventions by the Syrian police or, in some cases, the army. Despite the systematic neglect and abuse of the Kurds within its own borders, Syria became an important training base and refuge for the Turkish PKK — a Marxist-Leninist organization dedicated to securing rights for the Kurds in Turkey — until the 1990s. Syria was playing a game of "my enemy's enemy is my friend" against Turkey, a policy that set the stage for the current events in Rojava.

In Iraq, the Kurdish situation was similarly cruel, though there it was the British who were the primary architects of their suffering, modern Iraq having been created as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of WWI. The treaty of Lausanne effectively torpedoed Kurdish hopes for independence in Northern Iraq, and so the Kurds began a protracted campaign of armed struggle against their new British overseers. The British used aerial bombardments and punitive village burnings in order to crush the ongoing Kurdish revolts in the Northeast of Iraq. After putting down three unsuccessful but very bloody revolts, the British formally transferred control of Iraqi Kurdistan to the newly formed Kingdom of Iraq, which functioned as a British puppet state until a series of military coups eventually elevated the Ba'ath party to power in 1968. The Kurds continued to struggle against the various Iraqi military regimes, both militarily and politically. In 1946 they formed first the Kurdish Democratic Party and later, in 1975, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Eventually finding themselves in an uneasy truce with the Ba'ath party in the early 70s, Iraqi Kurds experienced a few brief years of relative calm before Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979. Almost immediately, Saddam entered into the decade-long Iran-Iraq war, during which he brought particular brutality down onto the Iraqi Kurds because he believed they were not sufficiently Iraqi and thus implicitly supported Iran. In the al-Anfal Campaign of 1986–89 alone, between 100,000 and 200,000 Kurdish civilians were massacred with chemical weapons and in concentration camps. The war would end in a draw, but Iraq would not stay out of conflict for long; it was invaded by the United States and its NATO allies first in 1990 and then again in 2003. The Kurds would use both of these conflicts to

leverage as much advantage as possible, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1991 and its de jure independence in 2005.

In Iran, Kurdish dreams of autonomy after generations of Persian and Ottoman oppression started before World War I during Iran's 1906 Constitutional Revolution. The new constitution guaranteed many rights but did not explicitly mention ethnicity, so there were no specific rights protecting the Kurds and their culture. Between 1906 and 1925, Kurds created a number of powerful political and civic organizations to support Kurdish rights and development in Iran. By 1924, there were dozens of Kurdish newspapers, three radio stations, and half a dozen political parties. In 1925, after oil was discovered in the country, the Shah seized power with backing of the West (namely the UK and US). Though the Shah gave lip service to the constitution of 1906, he started a Persianification campaign against the numerous minorities inside Iran, including the Kurds. This resulted in all-too-familiar Kurdish mass displacements, disappearances of civic and political leaders, prohibition of Kurdish language and culture, and military occupation of Kurdish regions. The 1979 Khomeini Revolution overthrew the despotic Shah regime but did not improve the life of Kurds. The new fundamentalist regime accelerated the nationalization process with laws and actions targeted against the Kurds and their culture. One of the first acts of the new regime was to launch a series of punishing military assaults to wrest away Kurdish control of the north. For six long bloody years, Iran put down Kurdish autonomy and resistance. In the early 2000s a new resistance group, J-Pak, strongly associated with the PKK, started a military campaign against the Iranian state, resulting in a new round of state assaults on Kurdish villages. This time Iran added assassinations of Kurds in exile to their tools of repression. The US and Europe remained mostly silent on the repression of the Kurds, focusing their support on reform-minded Iranians instead of independence-minded Kurds, mostly in deference to Turkey. At the same time, Turkey has shared intelligence (and perhaps joint military interventions) with Iran and vice-versa to stop Kurdish resistance.

The repression of the Kurdish people in the four nation states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran follow a nearly identical pattern involving mass deportations, outlawing of cultural expressions and practices, forbidding the Kurdish language, and repressing civic and political organizations, eventually escalating to massive military assaults killing tens of thousands of Kurds and to the burning or bombing of villages into oblivion. The Western response to these atrocities has also followed a familiar pattern of diplomatic silence and overall indifference complemented by periodic alliances with Kurdish groups lacking any follow-through and ending with the branding of any armed Kurdish resistance as terrorism. The West has a vested interest in allowing this same process to continue, using the Kurds time and time again as a scapegoat in regional alliances and manipulations of an ever-expanding web of complexity.

In 1978, in a tea house in Istanbul, a new chapter in Kurdish resistance began with the founding of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK was the first mili-

tant Kurdish resistance group to espouse explicitly Marxist ideology. It called for a communist Kurdistan and was a reflection of Turkey's radical left student and worker uprisings that had started that year. Immediately after its founding, the PKK conducted a string of high-profile assassinations and bombings in southern Turkey along with a highly successful recruitment drive. Part of the secret to the PKK's success in recruiting was its charismatic leader, Abdullah Öcalan — also known as Apo — and the party's emphasis on recruiting not only men but women. In 1980, there was another Turkish military coup, aimed to restore order in the state. That year saw the arrest of some of the PKK top leadership and the exile of most of the central committee to Syria and Western Europe. The Turkish military was able to thwart many PKK operations and put pressure on PKK strongholds and training bases in the southeast. The PKK found its ability to act inside Turkey limited and began its first bombing operations in Europe. The PKK also found partners in other radical Marxist groups like the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Communist League of Iran, and the ASALA, a Marxist Armenian guerrilla group. These groups had more connections and better access to resources than the relatively new PKK did in exile.

With the PKK central committee scattered and its training bases and offices in Turkey shut down, a more decentralized structure began to appear. Training bases were setup and operations were conducted in a variety of European (Belgium and Germany) and Middle Eastern countries (notably Iraq and Syria). In 1984, after civilian rule was restored in Turkey and a number of political prisoners were released, the PKK was again able to rebuild its militant presence in Turkey. The PKK launched a full-scale guerrilla war, mostly in the south of Turkey bust occasionally reaching as far north as Istanbul. They employed a variety of tactics including kidnappings, industrial sabotage, assassinations of police and military officers, and bombings while also providing social services and cultural events for the repressed Kurdish communities in the south. The new Turkish civilian government responded with the collective punishments of entire villages, military occupation of the Kurdish regions, and a series of draconian laws targeted at the PKK and their alleged Kurdish supporters. Tens of thousands of people in Turkey, including a great many civilians (90% of them Kurdish), lost their lives in this conflict, which lasted until a ceasefire was declared in 2013.

Turkey has always considered the PKK a terrorist organization, making it official in 1979. NATO, of which Turkey has been a key member since 1952, was lobbied heavily by Turkey in the 1990s to add the PKK and its sister organizations to the official terrorist watch-list, and in 2003 NATO conceded. The year before, both the EU and the US added the PKK to their terrorist lists, where they remain to this day. A number of Western countries with strong economic and political links to Turkey have used the "terrorist" designation to hound the PKK by seizing assets, deporting PKK supporters, shutting down satellite and radio stations sympathetic to the PKK, and providing billions in aid to Turkey for "its war on terrorism." Turkey has also used the PKK's terrorist label to avoid criticisms of human rights abuses and to ignore over a dozen international courts' rulings against their treatment of Kurds. Today Turkey has over

a hundred Kurdish organizations on its terrorist list, yet it refuses to place ISIS on that same list. It is clear that Turkey is less interested in waging a war on terrorism than it is in waging a war against the Kurdish people.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) declared itself to be the only legitimate Islamic Caliphate in mid-2014, going so far as to rename itself simply the Islamic State (IS). ISIS has seized large swathes of territory across Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, and it is now the most well-funded and well-armed jihadist group in the world. ISIS operates with a daily hunger for atrocity previously unknown in the region, resurrecting practices of mass rape, sex slavery, and crucifixion, and it happily announces policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Turkey and other major regional powers have been wary of directly confronting ISIS, instead seeking to transform the threat of such a group into political capital and concessions from world powers.

Despite its current meteoric rise, ISIS did not burst recently onto the scene in a simplistic blitzkrieg of hardline puritanical Sunni ideology — it has been building its forces since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Formerly an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS gained valuable military experience fighting NATO forces in Fallujah during the initial years of the Coalition Occupation of Iraq, eventually rebranding itself the Islamic State of Iraq. Prophetic rebranding aside, the Islamic State of Iraq built its formidable force in Iraq during the mid and late 2000s before shifting focus to the growing unrest and chaos of the Syrian civil war. ISIS considers practitioners of anything besides their own brand of Sunni Islam to be infidels deserving death, and takes special pleasure in annihilating Shia Muslims and minorities such as the Yazidis and the Kurds — both of whom would be among the few groups to stand up to their orgy of violence and slaughter.

## The Great Game: World Powers and the Kurds

The Kurdish Question has never been a strictly regional affair. Since before World War I until today, powers stretched over the entire globe — from Australia to America — have been involved in this issue. From Iraq to Egypt, the Kurds have been used as pawns to leverage the players of the region. Just like in a game of chess, the Kurdish pawn is often sacrificed to gain a better position on the board. Over and over again, foreign powers intervene for a brief period of time, encouraging Kurdish rebellion just to withdraw support at crucial points and sacrificing the Kurds when they are no longer needed. Sometimes world powers support one Kurdish rebellion while simultaneously backing another regime's crackdown on Kurdish villages only a few hundred miles away across the border. Kurdish autonomy has been used as a functional and disposable tool for achieving other countries' agendas from the realignment of the region after WWI, the rise of Soviet power, through the Cold War and the spread of Nasserism, to George Bush Sr.'s New World Order. Kurdish autonomy has always been a means to end, never an end to itself, for the many states that have gotten involved over the years. Owing to their precarious position, the Kurds have been led to naively believe, decade after

decade, that the world powers actually cared about their cause while they were being manipulated for someone else's momentary geopolitical advantage.

The Soviet Union's relationship to both its own 450,000 Kurds and the Kurds in Kurdistan was also marked mostly by state suspicion and repression. In the first years of the Soviet Union, Kurds, like many other minority groups, were forcibly displaced and a special regional government unit was set up to monitor them. This regional unit was reorganized several times and ultimately disbanded in 1930 when the Stalinist central government feared it had become too sympathetic to the Kurds. Under Stalin, tens of thousands of Kurds were deported from Azerbaijan and Armenia to Kazakhstan, while Kurds in Georgia became victims of the purges that followed the end of WWII. Through the 1960s, various measures were taken by the Soviet Regime to marginalize and oppress its Kurdish population. In the 1980s the PKK, the only Kurdish political party to partner with Kurds in the USSR, began collaboration with Kurds living in the Transcaucasia region and made serious inroads with the population there. By 1986, non-armed PKK support organizations had formed in the USSR, though they were technically illegal. According to Turkish press, there was even a PKK organization in Kazakhstan in 2004.

For the most part the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation, has not been involved directly with Kurdish Independence since the 1940s, when it supported an autonomous Kurdish state in Iran. Despite the PKK's early communist roots, the Soviet Union never supported it because of the USSR's ties with Syria and Turkey. Today the Russian Federation is reluctant to actively support Kurdish independence in Kurdistan because of its own restive minorities, including the Russian Kurds. At various times the PKK has sought support for training bases, weapons, resources, and a place for exiles from other communist regimes, including Cuba, Angola, Vietnam and others, but not a one of those countries was interested in supporting their communist cousins in such a complicated geopolitical area without backing from the USSR. Some socialist countries did bring up UN resolutions, and most of the Soviet sphere voted for measures in support of Kurdish autonomy in Kurdistan. Russia, along with UN Security Council member China, has also refused to designate the PKK or any other Kurdish political groups as terrorist organizations.

Western governments and organizations such as NATO have been involved in one side or another of the Kurdish questions since the early 19$^{th}$ century at the dawn of the Kurdish autonomy movement. The French and the British foreign offices have used various regional Kurds and their dreams of autonomy as proxies to secure their mandates in the Middle East and to thwart each other. During particular crises, for example immediately following World War I and World War II, shadowy diplomats were shuttling between Paris or London to Kurdish shepherd villages, bringing a little aid and vague promises of support if the Kurds supported their particular political machinations. European powers did not limit their role to just the territory of Kurdistan either, and also used their home countries to get involved in the Kurdish Question. Countries like Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands for a while allowed militant

Kurdish training bases to operate on their soil but would raid and shut them down depending on the geopolitical winds of the time. Greece supplied Kurds in Turkey and housed exiled PKK officials in order to punish Turkey for their 1974 invasion of Cyprus, but after coming to agreement on trade with Turkey they kicked the PKK out and stopped all aid. France even tried to use Kurds to slow Algerian independence, despite the fact that there were no Kurds in Algeria, by implying they may give them territory in a French-owned Algeria.

The US was late to the show of manipulating the Kurds' desire for freedom. During the Cold War the US mostly found itself siding with the Shah of Iran and using CIA personnel and resources to help both repress the Kurds in Iran and foment Kurdish rebellions in Iraq. The US stuck to covert operations, and thus little was known until recently about US involvement in the Kurdish Question. During the first Gulf War, when Iraq occupied the oil-rich emirate of Kuwait in August 1990, Saddam Hussein became America's enemy number one. Yet from 1987 until the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US said nothing. At times, the US even supported Iraq in the UN, when Saddam Hussein was gassing tens of thousands of Kurds and bombing whole Kurdish towns and villages. But at the beginning of the First Gulf War, George Bush Sr. publicly declared Kurds are the US's "natural allies" and suggested they should revolt against the Baghdad regime. Of course, Bush Sr. knew that the Kurds had already been fighting the Ba'athist regime in a bloody, fifteen-year, on-again off-again civil war.

After the war, the US put in place an ineffective no fly zone, which apparently did not include helicopters, to "protect the Kurds." Thousands of Kurds and other civilians in northern Iraq were killed by Saddam's military while US planes flew overhead doing nothing. During the second Gulf War, the US asked again for the peshmerga (the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan) to help rid the country of the Ba'athist regime. This time, the Kurds decided to focus on securing the north for themselves and on creating an army that could defend itself — they'd learned their lesson from the first Gulf War. Today the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) exists not because the US protected the Kurds, but because they took US and coalition aid and resources to prepare their own defense. The KRG also pursued its own diplomatic strategy with the fledgling and factious National Iraqi Congress.

Many other countries, from China to Australia, have interfered in the Kurdish Question, ultimately thwarting the Kurdish dream of freedom across a unified Kurdistan. Today almost all countries in the West have designated Kurdish militant groups as terrorists while at the same time trying to enlist their help in the war against ISIS and other Jihadist groups. It seems the Kurds have lost some of their naivete and have learned that being temporary sacrificial pawns for the West will not aid their cause in the long run. The lesson of the second Gulf War and the recent Syrian civil war is that the Kurds must rely on their own forces to have any hope of securing autonomy and justice for their people.

## From Red Star to Ishtar's Star: Departing from authoritarian communism

While the PKK was not founded by die-hard communists, it soon became a classic Maoist national liberation struggle party complete with an unquestioned charismatic "father of the people", Abdullah Öcalan, a.k.a Apo. There was little to differentiate the PKK from the dozens of Mao-inspired militant liberation groups of the late 1970s and 1980s.

The PKK weren't the only committed Marxists in Kurdistan — a number of other smaller groups existed, some claiming to be Leninists, Trotskyites, or even Titoists. But the peasant-based insurrectionary philosophy of Maoism, as espoused by the politbureau and the leadership of the PKK, was by far the most popular and militarily effective means of resisting oppression.

The PKK's flamboyant embrace of communism garnered some support from the calcified old Left parties of Western Europe, but it failed to produce much in the way of real solidarity. While certain Maoist ideas appealed to Kurds eager to rid themselves of authoritarian state repression, those same ideas alienated a lot of potential, more liberal, supporters. Thus, the PKK's struggles were largely ignored and sometimes condemned by possible sympathizers in and outside the region. The emphasis on centralization in Maoist communism also alienated many of the social leaders inside Kurdistan. The Kurds traditionally have been socially and politically organized by loosely connected tribes and have supported tribal leaders who had distinguished themselves in some way other than heredity. Periodically, Kurds formed large, temporary confederations of tribes to mount uprisings and military actions. Political parties have never gained the monopoly on political organizing that they have in many other parts of the world — it wasn't uncommon for a Kurd to be part of a few political parties and switch between them based on how successful they were. Despite these cultural obstacles, the PKK championed hardline communism until well after the fall of the Soviet regime.

For the PKK, the crisis in their communist faith didn't occur until 1999 when their leader Öcalan was arrested in Nairobi by the MIT (Turkish military intelligence), flown back to Turkey, and incarcerated on a prison island upon which he was the only inmate. The Turkish media showed a humiliated Öcalan, "the Terrorist of Turkey," harmless and in chains. With their leader captured and no obvious successor, the PKK's central committee was thrown into crisis. The increasingly militant tactics of bombings, roadside ambushes, and suicide bombers were not working, and the rise of Jihadi attacks in the Middle East and the West made the PKK seem just like another Islamic terrorist organization despite its communist ideology. This, combined with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia, led to a period of ideological soul-searching for the PKK and its leader.

Thousands of miles away, on January 1, 1994 (five years before Öcalan's capture) a new type of liberation struggle kicked off in the forgotten mountain jungles of Chiapas,

Mexico. The Zapatistas, with their red star flag and their black masks, burst onto the world stage and quickly inspired the progressive Left around the world. A small Mayan liberation struggle had risen from the Lacandon Jungle of Southern Mexico and declared themselves autonomous. These politically savvy revolutionaries created a new type of leftist insurrectionary political configuration they called Zapatismo. Zapatismo situated itself as a mode of liberation and leftist struggle that rejected hierarchy, party control, and aspirations to create a State apparatus. The architects of this new configuration had spent years in hardline Marxist guerrilla organizations in Mexico before rejecting that model of struggle and seeking a new approach.

Öcalan and the other leaders in the central committee of the PKK were familiar with the rapid rise and success of the Zapatistas. A year before his arrest, Öcalan had spoken to PKK party leaders about Zapatismo at a two-day conference. And in his first months of imprisonment, Apo had a "crisis of faith" regarding doctrinaire Marxist ideology and its ability to free the Kurds. Öcalan, who spent much of his life espousing a hardline Stalinist doctrine, started to reject Marxism-Leninism in favor of direct democracy. He had concluded that Marxism was authoritarian, dogmatic, and unable to creatively reflect the real problems facing the Kurdish resistance. In prison, Apo started reading anarchist and post-Marxist works including Emma Goldman, Foucault, Wallerstein, Braudel, and Murray Bookchin. Öcalan was particularly impressed with Bookchin's anarchist philosophy of ecological municipalism, going so far as to demand that all PKK leaders read Bookchin. From inside prison, Öcalan absorbed Bookchin's ideas (most notably Bookchin's Civilization Narratives: *The Ecology of Freedom* and *Urbanization Against Cities*) and wrote his own book based on these ideas, *The Roots of Civilization* (2001). It was Bookchin's *Ecology of Freedom* (1985), however, which Öcalan made required reading for all PKK militants. It went on to influence the ideas found in Rojava.

In 2004, Öcalan tried to arrange a meeting with Bookchin through his lawyers, describing himself as Bookchin's "student" and eager to adapt Bookchin's ideas to the Kurdish question. In particular, Öcalan wanted to discuss his newest manuscript, *In Defense of People* (2004), which he had hoped would change the discourse of the Kurdish struggle. Unfortunately for Öcalan, the 83-year-old Bookchin was too ill to accept the request and sent back a message of support instead. Murray Bookchin died of congested heart failure two years later, in 2006. A PKK congress held later that year hailed the American thinker as "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20$^{th}$ century," and vowed that "Bookchin's thesis on the state, power, and hierarchy will be implemented and realized through our struggle.... We will put this promise into practice, this as the first society that establishes a tangible democratic confederalism." Five years later, in 2011, the Syrian civil war gave the Kurds a chance to try to make good on their promise.

The Syrian civil war began as part of the general uprisings in spring 2011 in North Africa and the Middle East that the West dubbed the "Arab Spring." Kurds from a variety of political backgrounds joined students, Islamists, workers, political dissenters,

and others in calling for the end of the repression of the Assad dictatorship. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, however, had learned the lessons of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt and quickly sent in troops to crush the growing democratic movement. By autumn, the mostly peaceful protests that had taken place in the spring had morphed into a full-on armed insurrection against the Assad regime.

When the protests first began, Assad's government finally granted citizenship to an estimated 200,000 stateless Kurds in an effort to neutralize potential Kurdish opposition. By the beginning of 2012, when over 50% of the country was controlled by rebel groups and Islamic militias, and Assad's forces were spread thin, the regime decided to pull all military and government officials out of the Kurdish regions in the north, in effect handing the region over to the Kurds and Yezedis living there. Opposition groups, most prominently the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD), created a number of coalition superstructures to administer the region. There was tension between PYD and parties aligned with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, however, and at one time there were even two competing coalitions: the PYD-backed National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCC) and the KRG-aligned Kurdish National Council (KNC). In early 2012, when it looked like the tension between the two groups might result in armed conflict, the President of the KRG Massoud Barzani and leaders of the PKK brought the two groups together to form a new coalition called the Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC) made up of over fifteen political parties and hundreds of community councils. Within months of forming, the SKC changed its name to the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM) and added non-Kurdish groups, political parties, and organizations to the coalition. The TEV-DEM created an interim governing body for the Rojava region.

The TEV-DEM's program was heavily influenced by the PYD's ideas of "democratic confederalism," which the PKK had adopted as their official platform in a people's congress on May 17$^{th}$, 2005. According to the platform, and subsequent documents and proclamations from Rojava, "democratic confederalism of Rojava is not a State system, it is the democratic system of a people without a State... It takes its power from the people and adopts to reach self-sufficiency in every field, including economy." In Rojava, Democratic Confederalist ideology has three main planks: libertarian municipalism, radical pluralism, and social ecology. The TEV-DEM have been implementing this new social vision on a massive scale in Rojava since early 2012. The PKK has attempted (and succeeded to some degree) to implement democratic confederalism in scattered villages in Turkey along the Iraq border since 2009, experiments that served as an inspiration for much of the Rojava revolution. This vision, in both Turkey and in Rojava, draws heavily from contemporary anarchist, feminist, and ecological thought.

## Stateless Government: Radical Democracy and Decentralization

How do you base a government on anarchism? Rojava is not the first, and hopefully won't be the last, experiment in creating a new form of a decentralized non-state government without hierarchy. In the past two years, two-and-half million people in Rojava have been participating in this new form of governance, a governance related to that of the Spanish Revolution (1936), the Zapatistas (1994), the Argentine Neighborhood Assembly Movement (2001–2003), and Murray Bookchin's libertarian municipalism. Despite some similarities to these past experiments and ideas, what is being implemented in war-torn Rojava is unique — and it's extremely ambitious. It's no hyperbole to say that this revolution in northern Syria is historic, especially for anarchists.

At the core of this social experiment are the variety of "local councils" that encourage maximum participation by the people of Rojava. The Kurdish people have a long history of local assemblies based on tribal and familial allegiances. These semi-formal assemblies have been an important practice of social organizing for Kurds for hundreds of years, so it is no surprise that the face-to-face assemblies soon became the backbone of their new government. In Rojava, neighborhood assemblies make up the largest number of councils. Every person (including teenagers) can participate in an assembly near where they live. In addition to these neighborhood assemblies, there are councils based on workplaces, civic organizations, religious organizations, political parties, and other affinity-based councils (e.g. Youth). People often are part of a number of local councils depending on their life circumstances. These councils can be as small as a couple dozen people or they can have hundreds of participants. But regardless of size, they operate similarly. The councils work on a direct democracy model, meaning that anyone at the council may speak, suggest topics to be decided upon, and vote on proposals (though many councils use consensus for their decision-making). It is unclear how membership is determined in these councils, but we know that the opposition movement councils prior to 2012 had no fixed membership and anyone showing up at assembly could fully participate. It is also unclear how often these councils meet and who determines when they meet. It is known that the neighborhood assemblies in the Efrin Canton meet weekly, as does one of the hospital workers' councils. These local councils make up the indivisible unit of Rojava democracy. Larger bodies (e.g. Supreme Council of the Rojava cantons) are populated with representatives from these local councils. All decisions from these "upper councils" must be formally adopted by the local councils to be binding for their constituents. This is very different from the federalist tradition, in which the federation supersedes local control. In August 2014, for example, a regional council decided that local security forces could carry weapons while patrolling a city, but three local assemblies did not approve this decision, so in those local assembly areas security must refrain from carrying weapons. The role of the "upper councils" is currently limited to coordination between the myriad of local

councils while all power is still held locally. Representatives to the "upper councils" rotate frequently, with a maximum term set by the "upper council," but local councils often create their own guidelines for more frequent rotation of their representatives. The goal of the Rojava council system is to maximize local power and to decentralize while achieving a certain necessary degree of regional coordination and information-sharing.

The remaining government above the upper council level seems similar to a council parliamentary system with rotating representatives, an executive branch composed of canton co-presidents, and an independent judiciary. All governmental power emanates from the councils, and the councils retain local autonomy, thus forming a confederation. The confederation is made up of three autonomous cantons that have their own ministries and militias. There is no federal government in the Rojava canton system. Voluntary association and mutual aid are key concepts for the confederation, as these ideas protect local autonomy. Voluntary association leads to radical decentralization, severely limiting any organizational structures above the primary decision-makers of the local councils. All bodies beyond the local councils must have proportional representation of the ethnic communities in the canton and at least 40% gender balance (this includes all ministries). Most ministries have co-ministers with one male and one female minister, with the exception of the Women's Minister. Most decisions by the Supreme Council need support of 2/3 of the delegates from the upper councils. Any canton retains autonomy from Supreme Council decisions and may override them in their own People's Assembly (the largest upper council of any region) while still being part of the confederation. This bottom-up decentralization seeks to preserve the maximum level of autonomy for local people while encouraging maximum political participation.

Both internal and external security for the cantons is administered by each canton's People's Assembly. The local security, which are equivalent to police, are called *Asayish* (security in Kurdish). The Asayish are elected by local councils and serve a specific term determined by the local council and the canton's People's Assembly. The Asayish have also their own assembly (but not one that can send representatives to the People's Assembly), in which they elect officers and make other decisions. In addition to the Asayish, there are people's self-defense militias to provide security from outside threats (e.g. currently the Islamic State, but this could also include regional and state government forces). These militias elect their own officers but are directly responsible to the canton's People's Assembly. Both the Asayish and the people's self-defense militias have two organizations: one a female-only group and the other co-ed. Militias that are providing mutual aid in another canton (Asayish are for the most part forbidden to work in other cantons) must follow that canton's People's Assembly but can retain their own commanders and units. In times of peace, the cantons do not maintain standing militia service.

Rojava's relationship with the Syrian state is yet to be tested. The Rojava Canton Confederation is not set up as a state. It draws instead on the idea of dual power, an

idea first outlined by the French anarchist Proudhon. The KCC described dual power as "a strategy of achieving a libertarian socialist economy and political and social autonomy by means of incrementally establishing and then networking institutions of direct participatory democracy" to contest the existing authority of state-capitalism. Rojava currently has set out a path of co-existence with whatever state arises from the Syrian civil war and to the current alignment of neighboring states (namely Turkey, Iraq, and Iran) that encompass Kurdistan. People in Rojava would maintain their Syrian citizenship and participate in the Syrian state so long as it doesn't directly contradict the Rojava principles. This uneasy co-existence is the reason the cantons have explicitly forbidden national flags, have not created a new currency, a foreign ministry, or national passports and identity papers, and why they do not have a standing army. It is unclear if the people of Rojava plan to maintain this relationship with the state or what would happen in conflictual situations.

Rojava is neither a state nor a pure anarchist society. It is an ambitious social experiment that has rejected the seduction of state power and nationalism and has instead embraced autonomy, direct democracy, and decentralization to create a freer society for people in Rojava. The Rojava principles have borrowed from anarchism, social ecology, and feminism in an attempt to chart a societal vision that emphasizes accountability and independence for a radically pluralistic community. It is unclear whether this experiment will move towards greater decentralization of the kind Bookchin suggests and the Zapatistas have implemented or if it will become more centralized and federal as, happened after both the Russian and Spanish revolutions. What is happening right now is a historic departure from traditional national-liberation struggle and should be of great interest to anti-authoritarians everywhere.

## Radical Pluralism

While we see the Rojava revolution as a Kurdish movement, we should not overlook the dynamic pluralism of the region and the aspirations of the peoples of the three cantons that make of the Rojava Confederation. We should also take into account the fact that the Kurds themselves are not a homogenous people, but instead one made up of numerous distinct tribal groups and four religions. The Kurdish diaspora had found numerous Kurds, including many of the Kurd's ideological leaders, living in cities and attending universities across Europe. This culture exposure helped instill a tolerant and pluralistic outlook in Kurdistan. The Rojava Principles not only talk about pluralism and diversity in regards to ethnicity and faith, but have created organizing structures to maximize these principles in practice.

The Rojava region is dominated by Kurds, with around 65% of the population identifying as Kurdish. The remaining 35% is made up of Arabs, Armenians, and Assyrians. There has been immigration of both Kurds and non-Kurds to the region from war-torn areas of Syria. It is estimated (though the numbers are very unreliable) that over 200,000 people have relocated to Rojava since the beginning of the war from

other parts of Syria. A substantial number of these new immigrants belong to religious and ethnic minorities from Syria and Eastern Iraq.

As regards religion, the Kurds are the most diverse ethnicity in the region. The majority of Kurds (55–65%) are Sunni Muslims, belonging to the Shafi sect. There are also Muslim Kurds who follow Shia, Sufi, and Alawi traditions. There is a sizable number of Christian Kurds, many of whom immigrated to Rojava after the start of the war. Yazidis have also immigrated to Rojava. Yazidis are a syncretic religion that has connections to Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Islam. A small minority in Rojava follows a new form of Zoroastrianism, and there is also a very small pocket of Kurdish Jews. Most of these religious groups traditionally lived in communities side-by-side, partially due to forced resettlements and self-exiles, and many even shared religious buildings. There is a also a high percentage of inter-faith marriages.

Rojava has embraced its diversity and is explicit about its commitment to pluralism. They use the term radical pluralism to describe how their approach differs from the extreme sectarianism found in much of the region. There are specific local councils for each ethnic group and religious organization. In, addition upper councils (e.g. City and Regional Councils) have ethnic quotas to ensure that all ethnic groups are represented. A similar quota system exists in all ministries except the specific ethnic and religious ministries. The Rojava Principles also enshrine a number of protections for ethnic and religious minorities (including those without any faith). Even militias and security have explicit pluralistic characteristics with different ethnic and religious groups working together.

Rojava has staked out a new path of pluralism that doesn't currently exist anywhere else in the region. Rojava has rejected the call of secularism, like that of Turkey, that oppresses religious organizations and practitioners in exchange for a pluralistic society, but instead has set itself as a safe haven of respect and political empowerment for ethnic minorities in the region.

## Feminism in the Rojava Republics

Kurdish female fighters have recently been "discovered" and sensationalized by Western media — even fashion magazines have entered the fray. But this media is simply glamorizing female fighters without paying but little attention to their politics. It is all too easy to fall into the media trap of fetishizing the female fighters of the all-women Women's Self-Defense Brigades (the YPJ) and the mixed-gender General Self-Defense Brigades (the YPG) in Kurdistan without considering the implications of women choosing to be fighters in a very patriarchal society. The women who are fighting in Rojava are fighting for their lives and they are fighting for their rights as women against an enemy that rapes and sells women as sex slaves. But this isn't a new thing — women who have been fighting in the region for decades. In fact, traditionally, half the members of the PKK have been women. What *is* new about the women combatants of Rojava is their explicit feminism, a feminism that has become one of the founding principles of

the Rojava experiment. Kurdish culture is generally strongly patriarchal: male dominance is prevalent, and arranged and forced marriages are common. The YPJ are not only fighting against ISIS, they are fighting for feminism and gender equality — and they're doing it with ideas and bullets alike.

The YPJ exists as a counterpoint to the YPG. Women of Rojava hope that at some point the YPJ will no longer be necessary, but until that point it will function as an entirely-female force for both fighting Rojava's enemies and resolving social issues. The YPJ is meant to eventually become part of the YPG, but in a show of idealistic pragmatism, the KCK has designated that at least for the foreseeable future the YPJ as an exclusively female fighting force will be needed to balance out the traditionally masculine-oriented militarism of armed militias such as the YPG (or its parent organization, the PYD). Furthermore, while the leadership of all governing councils of the Rojava cantons are mandated to be composed of at least 40% of either gender, the leadership of the YPG is often more like 50–60% women as it recruits heavily from the leadership of the YPJ. In addition to the YPJ militia, the all-female security force Asayish-J (*Asayish* being the Kurdish for "Security") is alone responsible for crimes involving women, children, domestic abuse, and hate crimes, while also independently operating checkpoints and conducting other functions of the "standard" Asayish.

Of course, the YPJ calls to mind other all-female fighting forces — perhaps most famously, the *Mujeres Libres* of the Spanish civil war. This parallel is both accurate and dangerous, as the Mujeres Libres did indeed form a fearsome fighting force for the inherently radical political notion of sexual and gender equality, but unfortunately they've also become an idea that many radicals have placed on a pedestal and exalted without seeing the Free Women of Spain as human. We must not compound that same mistake with Orientalism when it comes to feminism in Rojava; these are real people risking their lives for powerful political ideas. They're not the storybook women the media caricatured by popular media as "badass," "sexy amazons" because they have taken up arms.

One of the other ways the Rojavans have been fighting for the rights of women in Kurdistan has been the creation of all-women's houses run by the Asayish-J. These are houses where any woman over the age of 15 can go and stay for as long as they'd like and receive free education, and then return home (if they so chose) whenever they'd like. No men are allowed in these houses, so as to protect the houses' integrity and to ensure that the women feel comfortable and secure. There are currently 30 of these centers across Rojava. And as a response to suicides caused by forced marriage, the Asayish-J runs a hotline for women which offers emotional and physical support at any time.

Feminism in Rojava transcends just the YPJ and the Asayish-J and is one of the three founding principles of the Rojavan Revolution. Society, as envisioned in the Rojava Principles, must be set on a new path towards feminism and simply declaring support for feminism is not enough. With this in mind, feminism is an essential practice

of all social interactions in the three cantons, and women are considered true political actors with genuine agency — which is revolutionary in and of itself.

## A People's Economy

The Rojava revolution's economic plan is called a "People's Economy" to differentiate it from traditional market and socialist (i.e. state) economies. But though it posits itself as an alternative to the dualism of capitalism and communism, it is really not a fully formed model as of yet. There are three major concepts in the People's Economy: commons, private property based on use, and worker-administered businesses. The Rojava economic experiment is less an implementation of a single concept than a jury-rigged system that must respond to the needs of a war and a crippling economic embargo.

In 2010, a year before the Arab Spring exploded in Syria, the Rojava region provided over 40% of the country's GNP and 70% of its exports despite only about 17% of Syria's population living in the region. And yet people in Rojava made well below the median income of the country. The Rojava region sits on the famous Mesopotamian Plain, between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and is the oldest agricultural center in the world. Until 2011, northern Syria exported grain, cotton, and meat to its neighbors and Europe and was the country's largest producer of oil. Plentiful water from the region's rivers allowed for cement factories and other medium industrial plants to be built in the area in the 1970s and 1980s. However, since the start of the Syrian civil war, the infrastructure required to support these economic activities has been falling apart. Power, communications, roads, and railways have all been seriously compromised. Failed infrastructure, constant war, and a strictly-enforced embargo (most notably by Turkey, which shares Rojava's only stable border), have ruined the traditional economy of the area. In 2012, the PYD launched what it originally called the Social Economy Plan, which would later be renamed the People's Economy Plan (PEP). The PEP was based on the writings of Öcalan and the lived experiences of Kurds in North Kurdistan (southern Turkey).

Traditional "private property" was abolished in late 2012, meaning all buildings, land, and infrastructure fell under control of the various city councils. This did not mean people no longer owned their homes or businesses, however. The councils implemented an "ownership by use" sovereign principle, a principle that could not be overturned by any council. Ownership by use means that when a building like a home or a business is being used by a person or persons, the users would in fact own the land and structures but would not be able to sell them on an open market. Öcalan wrote that use ownership is what prevents speculation and capital accumulation which in turn leads to exploitation. Aside from property owned by use, in principle any other property would become commons. This abolishing of private property did not extend to commodities like automobiles, machines, electronics, furniture, etc. but was limited to land, infrastructure, and structures.

The commons encompasses land, infrastructure, and buildings not owned by individuals but held in stewardship by the councils. Councils can turn over these public goods to individuals to be used. Commons are conceived of as a way to provide both a safety net for those without resources and a way to maximize use of the material resources of the community. Commons also include the ecological aspects of the region including water, parks, wildlife and wilderness, and even most livestock. According to Dr. Ahmad Yousef, an economic co-minister, three-quarters of traditional private property is being used as commons and one quarter is still being owned by use of individuals. The PEP posits that the commons are robust enough economically that there is no need for taxes, and since the beginning of the Rojava revolution there have been no taxes of any type.

Worker administration is the third leg of the stool of the economic plan. Workers are to control the means of production in their workplace through worker councils that are responsible to the local councils. According to the Ministry of Economics, worker councils have only been set up for about one third of the enterprises in Rojava so far. Worker councils are coordinated by the various economic ministries and local councils to assure a smooth flow of goods, supplies, and other essentials.

The PEP also calls for all economic activity in the cantons to be ecologically sound. It is unclear who has responsibility for this, whether it is the workers' councils, the local councils, the City Councils, or the Peoples' assemblies. Throughout the various statements from the economic ministries, one sees mention over and over again about the primacy of ecologically sensible industry — but details are lacking.

The PEP is also vague when it comes to its relationship with other economies inside and outside of Syria. A substantial amount of the current economic activity in the region comes from black market oil being sold outside the region. In Autumn, 2014, representatives of Rojava travelled around Europe looking to create "trading partners" and seemed to be suggesting a standard free market policy, while at the same time eliminating banks and other financial institutions inside Rojava. The Rojava canton principles also clearly state that the region will not produce its own money or bonds, so it is unclear how such trading relationships between other governments would actually come to pass even if the embargo is lifted.

The strength of the PEP seems to be in how it humanizes economics for local people. It achieves this by both having commons available to the community to provide for those in need and by creating small-scale limited ownership to promote and meet local needs and markets. Worker administration increases and expands participation in the local economy and makes the economy more accountable to those directly affected by it. The PEP seeks to create a self-sufficiency that is aligned with ecological stewardship that actually puts people and the planet before profits. In short, the PEP is trying to create localized participatory economics to match the localized participatory governance.

## Rojava Can't Wait and Neither Can We

Radicals in the West have been mostly silent as regards the Rojava Revolution, and we find ourselves in a strange situation where the mainstream media seems more interested in these events than we are. There are of course a number of reasons, and excuses, for this lack of interest in the revolutionary experiment going on in Northern Syria.

The most commonly voiced objection on the Left to supporting the Rojava revolution is that its motives are unclear or suspect. Anarchists have a long history of seeing popular revolutions in other places being neutered by liberal elements or even hijacked by Leftist authoritarian groups. Many on the Left are concerned by the role the PKK and its proxies play in this revolution. The PKK had a thirty-year history of unwavering support for a Stalinist/Maoist ideology and practice that has rightfully alienated much of the libertarian Left in the West. In particular, the PKK's hardline authoritarianism and their sectarian tendency to violently silence any dissent among radicals in Kurdistan has rightfully seen support for the PKK dry up in Europe and in North America. But for more than a decade now, since Öcalan has been jailed, the PKK has been claiming a more anarchistic organizing model and have since worked with a number of other radical groups. More importantly, Rojava, which has a strong PKK proxy presence through the PYD, has not only rejected authoritarianism in words and writings but more obviously in practice. Even if one remains skeptical of the PKK and PYD, the fact that currently there is nothing authoritarian or sectarian in the political structures of Rojava should give the West some cause to hold their skepticism.

Whether this is because the PKK has changed of its own volition or because it was forced to change by the people doesn't really matter. The only question in this regard is how is the revolution is being manifested in words and actions, and whether these actions and words are authoritarian or sectarian. Any sincere analysis of the past two years in Rojava shows an honest commitment to pluralistic and decentralized ideas, words, and practice. The PKK's sketchy past makes it that more incumbent on Western revolutionaries and anarchists to support the Rojava revolution now. If the PKK has *not* really changed, then we need to support and buttress where we can the ideology of anti-authoritarianism and radical decentralization to avoid any compromise of the current revolution by the PKK or any other authoritarians of the left. And if the PKK *has* changed, then all the more reason to support a political project that is authentically radical and liberatory.

Many of us are rightfully confused by the complexities of the Kurdish struggle and the politics of the region. This is understandable, but complexity should not be an excuse for us withholding solidarity and support. Every day there are new resources (including this small book) that explain the complex history not only of the long Kurdish struggle but also that of the entire region. We can learn about it. This has been done before. For instance, the Palestinian struggle is also extremely complex and nuanced but the radical left has taken it upon itself to make the struggle

understandable. We must educate ourselves and others on the Kurdish struggle and that in Rojava in particular instead of withdrawing from this historic situation or waiting for others, who do not share our politics or the politics of the Rojava revolution, to explain it to us.

There are many radicals suspicious of the Kurds, and by extension of Rojava, because of the US government's military support of the YPG/YPJ fighters. The US has used Kurdish fighters as proxies for the past twenty years in various conflicts in the Middle East. There is a concern that Rojava is or will become a puppet state of US interests in the region, something most US radicals would not be willing to support. But support for the anti-capitalist and anti-state revolution in Rojava can hardly be seen as implicit support for US political interests abroad. It seems clear that the US' current support of Rojava is simply a matter of pragmatism to further their attempt to "degrade" ISIS. The Rojava revolution is not specifically anti-American, but it *is* explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-state, which is something we can and should fully support. To ignore these facts is to play the same essentialist game that so often constricts Western radicals to fields of academia and theory.

The geographical distance and isolation, along with a lack of any sizable Kurdish immigrant population in the US, has made face-to-face connections difficult, thus forcing most people to rely on mainstream media for information about the region. While it is absolutely true that it is easier for radicals to travel to Chiapas, Greece, Palestine, or Ferguson than to northern Syria, we should not let that postpone our support and solidarity. Other means of communications have also been compromised because of the Syrian Government and the civil war. During the Arab spring the Syrian government severely limited the internet, going so far as to actually cut cable lines, and the civil war has since made internet extremely precarious in the region. The embargo and the closing of the Turkish/Syrian border by the Turkish military has also severely limited both travel and the flow of information. This geographic and informational isolation has undoubtedly retarded some support from the West's radical communities. But Mexico, the United States, and Israel have all tried some versions of these reprehensible tactics before, in their attempts to suppress support for other struggles, and that didn't stop us then. And if the danger is greater in Rojava, then so too is the necessity of our support. Every week activists in Rojava and elsewhere are opening up channels of communications that we should be actively engaged in.

There are numerous excuses for why radicals in the US might wish to wait to support the revolution in Rojava, but we can't afford to wait. While it is obvious the brave revolutionaries of Rojava could use our support now, we also need the Rojava revolution for our own work here in the West. Revolutionary politics in the West have been waiting far too long for an infusion of new ideas and practices, and the Rojavan Revolution in all of its facets is something we should support if we take our own politics at all seriously. The people of Rojava cannot wait for our support, and so too can we not wait for the selective safety of hindsight to analyze the revolution now unfolding. The people of Rojava have chosen to fight, and so must we.

*This text is an excerpt from our book* A Small Key Can Open A Large Door*. The full book collects this introduction together with numerous interviews, public statements, firsthand accounts, and other articles that help give context to the struggle in Rojava. The book is available from Combustion Books, its distributor AK Press, and major book retailers and distributors.*

Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness
A Mountain River Has Many Bends
The History and Context of the Rojava Revolution
December 2014

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