

ROJAVA: THE FRAUD OF A NON-EXISTENT SOCIAL REVOLUTION MASKS A KURDISH NATIONALISM PERFECTLY COMPATIBLE WITH ASSAD'S MURDEROUS REGIME

Rojava and the national question

While an abundant literature exists on Rojava¹, none of its eulogies concern themselves with the class composition of the region, nor with any precise characterisation of its economic development². It's an indirect way of hiding something essential: in Rojava, no revolutionary transformation of social relations is in movement and the subordinated classes, proletarians and poor peasants, remain as deprived as ever of the leading role which they would need to take if the social revolution was underway there.

What is at stake in the recent events in Rojava is the administrative autonomy of this majority Kurd region in Syria. While a minority in the country, the Syrian Kurds are markedly more numerous in Rojava than Arabs, Assyrians and Turkmens, who also live in these lands. If Sunni Islam is the majority religion in Rojava, there are also Christian and Yazidi religious minorities. Kurdish domination in Rojava, on the edge of the violent dissolution of the Syrian state, is hidden behind a thick ideological smokescreen from the good consciences of Western lefties. The new dominant classes of this area under the control of the nationalists of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Party of Workers of Kurdistan) from Turkey casually intone the siren songs of ecology, feminism and participatory direct democracy. It's a music relayed and amplified by all kinds of leftists and by the subsidiaries, established in developed countries, of the cult of adoration of Öcalan, the founder of the PKK imprisoned for more than fifteen years on the island of Imrali.

The oppression which the Kurds have been subjected to by the Assad dynasty is real enough. Since 1962³ between 120 and 300,000 Kurds have been classified as *ajaneb* (foreigners) and around 75,000 classed as *maktoomeen* (unregistered). The agricultural production of Kurdish farmers was restricted and they were subjected to restrictions on their access to ownership of farmland (Decree 49 from 1984), and a law from 2008 made it even more difficult for Kurds to acquire property. Revolts starting in 2004, as in Qamishli, harshly repressed by Bashar al-Assad⁴, testify to this reality, as does the execution in October 2011 of the liberal Mashaal Tammo, one of the founders of the Syrian National Council (SNC)⁵, the principal coalition at the time of the democratic bourgeois opposition in Syria.

Marginalised, discriminated against, repressed, the Syrian Kurds have excellent reasons for revolting against the Assad autocracy. But nationalism is the worst weapon for freeing themselves from "national" oppression. In the case of Rojava, taking account of the weakness of the productive structure and the restricted character of this region, nationalism has even less capacity than elsewhere to offer a solution to the problems of these populations.

¹ "The West" in Kurdish.

² Even for agrarian reform, we can only find a mention of 10,000 hectares redistributed in October 2015 to poor peasants. See: <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/10/30/self-government-and-land-redistribution/>

³ See the research paper: Rana Khalaf "Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria", Chatham House, December 2016.

⁴ There was a massacre of hundreds of civilians, following an uprising of the general population that, of the Kurdish parties of Syria, only the PYD had supported.

⁵ The SNC is a transitional political authority, created on 15 September 2011, and officialised on 1-2 October 2011 in Istanbul to coordinate opposition to the Assad regime, in Syria, Turkey and other countries. Composed of 400 members and dominated by Sunnis, the SNC gathers more than 30 organisations, including the Muslim Brotherhood (the majority), liberals and Kurdish and Assyrian parties.

In itself it becomes a weapon against them because it artificially separates them from the general fight against the despotic regimes in the region and blocks their route towards class struggle, the only viable way to eliminate exploitation and all oppressions, including those on a national basis.

The “national community”, like any other fictive community (including so-called religious ones), unlike the proletarian community of struggle against capital, is founded on a fundamental mystification, on the obscuring of social relations, on the denial (or relativisation) of the existence of classes with antagonistic interests. Every nation is a product of a society divided into classes, rooted in myths aiming at establishing a unity between exploiters and exploited, between dominant and dominated classes.

That is the reason why communists fight against every state, against every dominant nation and also against any attempt to constitute new “national communities” in the interstices of existing nations. It is the very essence of proletarian internationalism, because the proletariat has no nation, it is “foreign” everywhere, to the displeasure of nationalists, and therefore has no national interest to defend.

It is another thing, however, to fight with class means against oppressions engendered by the dominant classes. The question of national oppression (like any other oppression of the social individual) is not a matter of indifference for communists. But there can't be a response to it which is strictly within the framework that gives rise to it. Opposing an oppressed nation to a dominant nation only serves to create new oppressions, at best to replace those of the past with new national dominations, new dominations which in addition are not necessarily more acceptable or “open” – as the results of the recent “Arab Spring” or even the national liberation movements of the past have amply demonstrated.

Communists have no desire to draw new borders because they fight against all borders. They have nothing to do with the upgrading of states and the redefinition frontiers. If a separation takes place – like that between Czechia and Slovakia – without unleashing a war within the population, revolutionaries put proletarian internationalism to work and fight to guard class links across old and new borders.

When the redefinition of the boundaries of states provokes conflicts within the oppressed and exploited, as is the case in Syria today, or Yugoslavia in the past, communists act for defeatism and call on proletarians and poor peasants to unite against the old and new oppressors.

And when part of the population is the victim of a particular oppression (national, cultural, religious or gendered), communists take their side by defending the class perspective as a viable alternative to nationalist and religious-political illusions. This is still the case for the struggle against national oppression in Ireland, Tibet and Palestine, against the French colonisation of the “Overseas Territories” (*Territoires d'outre-Mer* - TOMs) etc. The same considerations also apply to patriarchy, where communists propose a struggle against the oppression of women (and sexual minorities) on the basis of a class movement rather than a perspective of modernisation of the democratic state.

But let's return to a more detailed analysis of the situation in Rojava.

What's going on in Rojava? A brief inventory of relations between Syria, Turkey, the PYD and... the PKK

The background to Rojava is without a doubt the Kurdish question. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds have been present in four states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, as well as in an important diaspora in Europe and America. In broad outline, the population was divided before 2011 as follows: Syria, 2 million; Iraq, 5.4 million; Iran, 7.8 million; Turkey 14.3 million. In Turkey, the provinces of “Kurdistan” have 9 million Kurdish inhabitants (including 2.65 million in mountainous provinces). The remaining 5.3 million Kurds live in the provinces of central Anatolia and above all in the economic capitals Ankara and Istanbul. In all the countries where they live the Kurds have been victims for a long time of national discrimination and repression.

Thus the Kurds have become hostages of confrontations between the regional powers (Iran-Turkey, Iran-Iraq, Syria-Turkey, etc.). The sudden changes in the alliances of their self-proclaimed representatives with regard to their successive protectors have never been crowned with any lasting success, with the exception of the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq since 2005. In the strict framework of Rojava, the determining element today is that of relations between the Syria of declining dictator Assad and the Turkey of rising dictator Erdoğan.

Syria became independent in 1946 (after 26 years under the French Mandate)⁶ and the sources of conflict with Turkey are:

- Territorial. The former Sanjak of Alexandretta was reattached to Turkey in 1939. It's a territory which Syria claims,
- Bloc membership. Turkey has belonged to NATO since 1951. On the other side, under the leadership of the Ba'ath Party, Syria drew closer to the USSR from 1954. A factor of great division is the attitude towards Israel, which Syria went to war with in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973. Ankara, on the contrary, recognised the "Jewish State" in 1949 and supported it without fail up until 2009,
- Control of water. Syria condemns Turkey for its upstream control of the Tigris and Euphrates, and has been opposed since 1980 to dam projects by Turkey (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*, South-East Anatolia Project)⁷.

The Kurdish question in Turkey makes the situation even more complex. From 1979, Öcalan, the iconic leader of the PKK, took refuge in Syria and was in close contact with the government of Assad senior. Thanks to his support, the PKK recruited tens of thousands of Syrian Kurdish fighters and persuaded them that the solution to their problems in Syria laid in fighting for the Kurds in Turkey. In an interview with a Syrian journalist, Öcalan himself denied the existence of a Syrian Kurdistan, claiming that the Kurds in Syria were only political refugees from Turkey. So, Assad Senior supported the PKK so as to help him get rid of the Syrian Kurds by inciting them to emigrate to Turkey⁸. The Syria-PKK honeymoon officially ended in 1999. Following the Adana agreement between Turkey and Syria, Öcalan had to leave Damascus. Assad Junior came to power, closing three PKK bases and handing 400 PKK militants over to the Turkish government⁹.

The coming to power of the AKP in 2002 accelerated the diplomatic reshuffle between Ankara and Damascus. On 22 December 2004, a free trade agreement was signed. In 2009, Erdoğan condemned operation "Cast Lead" by Israel against Gaza while recognising the so-called "Palestinian cause". The same year, a military cooperation between Turkey and Syria was announced (the first exercise in common was in April 2009¹⁰). In the process the Turkish President went to Damascus on 21 July 2009. Cooperation was also reinforced on the economic plain with negotiations, at the beginning of 2011, on numerous common projects – modernisation of the border post at Nusaybin-Qamishli, creation of a common bank between Syria and Turkey, the building of a fast train line between Gaziantep and Aleppo, the integration of the natural gas networks of the two countries and the construction of the "Friendship Dam" on the Orontes river¹¹.

⁶ See: Simon Fauret "Le rôle de la Turquie et de la question kurde dans les conflits irakiens et syriens. Partie 1 : Ankara face à Damas" in *Les clés du Moyen-Orient*, 26 May 2015, <http://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Le-role-de-la-Turquie-et-de-la.html>

⁷ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_d%27Anatolie_du_Sud-Est. For more information on the water problem, see:

<http://www.partagedeseaux.info/Le-bassin-du-Tigre-et-de-l-Euphrate-une-zone-de-tension-autour-de-l-eau>

⁸ Hosheng Ose, "The PKK-Assad regime story: harmony, discord and Ocalan", *Now*, 20 April 2015

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565108-the-pkk-assad-regime-story-harmony-discord-and-ocalan>

⁹ Hosheng Ose, op.cit.

¹⁰ Chris Phillips "Turkey, Syria's new best friend", *The Guardian*, 1 October 2009

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/oct/01/turkey-syria-friendship>

¹¹ The project was signed in 2009 and the first stone put in place on 6 February 2011. Since then, it's run into the sand... See:

But the war in Syria blew the rapprochement to pieces. A month after declaring that Assad was a “friend”, Erdoğan denounced his “savagery” and his “inhuman” behaviour towards the opposition. In August, he went as far as comparing the repression in Hama and Latakia to acts carried out by Saddam Hussein. The Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, went to Damascus on 9 August 2011 to demand the end of military operations against civilians¹².

In parallel, from March 2011, Turkey received figures from the Syrian opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, close to the AKP. The Turkish President moved closer to Saudi Arabia since the coming to power of King Salman in January 2015. A Sunni axis of Saudi Arabia-Qatar-Turkey was created to support various Sunni components of the opposition to Assad. The military successes of the group *Jaish Al-Fatah* (Army of Conquest), founded on 24 March 2015, gathering several Islamist factions close to the Muslim Brotherhood, were pushed by the three countries¹³. It is in this context that the PKK and its Syrian subsidiary the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, Democratic Union Party)¹⁴ took their chances. Contrary to the propaganda of the PKK and its leftist supporters, these two organisations only got along because they shared the same ideology and a number of leading militants of the PYD (and the YPG *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, Kurdish People’s Protection Units, its armed wing) were active in the PKK.

The PKK, always a Stalinist party

We dedicated an article¹⁵ to the analysis of the politico-military defeat of the PKK following the surrender of Öcalan in 1999. Here are the main points:

“The Stalinist matrix of this party is at bottom its capacity to flip-flop between alliances and programmes: from Kurdish nationalism to Greater-Turkish nationalism, from atheism to Islamism, from warmongering to pacifism, from glorifying the most ferocious dictators to rallying to Western liberal democracy [and today to nonsense about participatory democracy]. The red line which they tie themselves to is the counter-revolution” [...] “The innumerable military and diplomatic mistakes are only a reflection of basic errors and continual political mistakes of the PKK. Over the years, this organisation has ceaselessly changed objectives and alliances while sowing the greatest confusion in the ranks of Kurds. First it proclaimed its fight for the constitution of a unitary Kurdish state; then it rallied to the point of view of independence of only Kurdistan in Turkey. Following this, the PKK declared the aim of a modest administrative autonomy for South East Anatolia and today, from the mouth of its President and from the conclusions adopted by the Seventh Congress of January 2000, it only demands the maintenance of the language recognition implemented since 1990 by the Turkish authorities. After having spread hate amongst the Kurds towards Turkish proletarians, who, on the contrary, had to be called for common struggle against the dominant classes of the country, the PKK made itself the champion of national unity and, according to the very words of its leader, democracy, the Kemalist state and the Greater-Turkish imperial project”. [...] “The PKK has for a long time succeeded in capturing the combative energies which are plentiful in the Kurdish proletariat and the poor peasants, deepened by the national oppression which they are victims of. The PKK has often appropriated for reasons of effectiveness, under the pretext of giving them structure, village self-defence initiatives against the violence of the state, monopolising them in a war of fronts against the Turkish army for contradictory and cheap objectives, all this without having demonstrated on the ground the capacity to protect populations from cleansing operations in

<http://www.partagedeseaux.info/Le-bassin-du-Tigre-et-de-l-Euphrate-une-zone-de-tension-autour-de-l-eau>

<http://istanbul.blog.lemonde.fr/2012/03/23/le-barrage-de-lamitie-a-pris-leau/>

¹² See: “Syria unrest: Turkey presses Assad to end crackdown”, BBC News, 9 August 2011

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14454175>

¹³ See: Hala Kodmani “Syrie: qui se cache derrière l’Armée de la conquête?”[“Syria: who’s hiding behind the Army of Conquest”], *Libération*, 26 July 2015

¹⁴ Officially founded in 2003, but underground since 1998 with its armed groups remaining, at the time, in Turkey.

¹⁵ See: MC n°9 “Kurdistan : comprendre la défaite pour recommencer la lute”, May 2000

http://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Reviews/rmc_9_kurdistan.pdf

combat zones. It's almost twenty year history is certainly that of the Kurdish revolt but it is also its worst expression. The determination to liquidate the guerrillas who don't want to make peace with the state, the pitiless annihilation of militants (several dozen deaths per week even today – in 2000 –) who, by the simple fact of resisting, refuse to denature their political engagement, in the sense of a life of combat against the Turkish state, are the other side of this great enterprise of pacification of which Öcalan has been made the spokesperson. So Öcalan will have betrayed one more time the cause of the Kurdish people and its most determined militants but certainly not the strictly nationalist political principles which have always governed the action of the PKK.” [...] “Since its first ambush against soldiers on 15 August 1984, this group has accumulated errors on the military level. The choice of a guerrilla war carried out far from urban centres showed itself to be a disaster. Little by little, the Turkish armed forces succeeded in fixing the armed Kurds along a front line far from the Kurdish towns, and the cities of Turkey where half the Kurds live. The departure of fighters for other countries in the region was a stage they had to follow. The breath of fresh air represented by the establishment of a ‘demilitarised’ zone between Turkey and Iraq in Iraqi territory following the insurrection in the Kurdish north of Iraq in March 1991 was translated into a veritable trap in which the two Iraqi Kurdish factions, the KDP and the PUK, led respectively by Masood Barzani and Jalal Talabani, united in the repression of the PKK militants.”

The PYD, a pale copy of the PKK in Syria

Ally of Assad, Russia and the USA

But what is this strange politico-military object which claims to apply the principles decreed by Öcalan of democratic confederalism¹⁶ in the line of Murray Bookchin¹⁷? Creating a free agrarian society opposed to the big owners, for gender equality and a secular society? Bookchin theorised that hierarchical relations are the cause of all oppressions (men/women, young/old, rich/poor) and of the ecological disaster to come. He thought therefore that the state (all states) is the cause of corruption and the loss of liberty. Relations of production themselves are therefore reduced by this ideologue, who professed himself to be a libertarian and an ecologist, to simple relations of command by man over man. According to an official of the PYD, “*Rojava is beyond the nation state*”¹⁸. What is the reality of this?

The mini-state of Rojava sets itself up in opposition to the Assad regime. Yet, since 2011, the PYD/PKK has been the most constant and consistent internal ally of that regime, which removed its troops from this territory in 2012. Coordinated military operations against the militias of Aleppo have been conducted since then. The YPG have never practically crossed swords with the Syrian, Russian or Iranian butchers present on Syrian soil. Its great military feat remains the victory over IS at Kobanî, a victory which nevertheless would not have been possible without hundreds of American air raids against the Islamist attackers.

The PYD have therefore made the choice of an alliance with the Assad regime twice over: to undermine the position of the KDP and let it fight the regime alone as the only Kurdish force, and to benefit from refusing to fight the regime (by *de facto* allying with it) so as to consolidate its own forces and to control territory. The agreement doesn't just favour the PYD, the Assad regime also gains significantly: on the one side, taking troops out of the Rojava zone to concentrate them in the useful central Damascus-Aleppo zone; on the other, assuring themselves an ally capable of fighting against IS and preventing the unification of the Kurdish forces in Syria. Assad made a gesture of goodwill to the

¹⁶ “*There's a reason we apply the philosophy and ideology of Apo to Syria: It offers the best solution to Kurdish problems*”, said in November 2011 Salih Muslim, co-president at the time and still in charge of the PYD, “*Carried away by the PKK*” (*New York Times*, 29 November 2015).

¹⁷ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murray_Bookchin

¹⁸ “‘*Rojava is something beyond the nation-state*’, said Hediye Yusuf, co-president of Jazeera canton, the local municipality of which Qamishli is part. ‘*It's a place where all people, all minorities and all genders are equally represented.*’” See: Wes Enzinna, “*A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS's Backyard*”, *New York Times* magazine, 24 November 2015

PYD: around a hundred Kurdish political prisoners from the PYD were freed, the leader of the PYD, Mohammed Salih Muslim, was allowed to return from exile and 300,000 Kurds were granted Syrian nationality in April 2011^{19 20}. This agreement works well, so the Syrian administration remains in place, in Hasakah and Qamishli where the two administrations cohabit - sometimes lodged in the same building, and with the Syrian officials always paid by the Assad government. But this most certainly does not work for the good of the local population: often, some people are taxed twice. For judicial matters there is a competition, with each administration refusing to recognise documents issued by the other one.

The Rojava experiment claims to be anti-imperialist²¹. Yet the PYD is at the same time the ally of the USA and Russia. Its military force, the YPG, is by far the biggest component of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), a military coalition called for and recognised by Washington. The YPG are armed by the USA and trained by Russian Special Forces. And it was American and Russian diplomats who stopped the “Shield of the Euphrates” offensive by armoured Turkish divisions in the Manbij region held by the PYD²². Did you say anti-imperialists?

So, on 31 January 2015, Brett McGurk, special emissary from the White House for the fight against IS, went to Kobani to reinforce links between Washington and the PYD, a trip renewed in September 2016. As well as providing arms and ammunition (but no heavy gear such as missiles), the USA has sent a small contingent of special forces (250 military experts) and supervised the construction of the military airfield at Rimêlan, in the canton of Djezireh, inaugurated in January 2016. In addition, the YPG participates in fighting against IS under US coordination²³. This participation is in accordance with the requirements of the US High Command.

This was confirmed on 10 May 2017, when the Pentagon declared that it considered the arming of the Kurdish forces of the SDF (mostly made up of the YPG) “*as a necessity to ensure an overall victory*” in Raqqa, the real capital of IS. A Pentagon spokesperson specified that the equipment provided to the SDF would be limited, and was intended for a precise mission and would be provided “*in so far as the objectives are achieved*”. Another US official stated, under condition of anonymity, that the essential equipment provided to the YPG included submachine guns, light arms, munitions and armoured vehicles²⁴.

But the PYD can also count on Russia (which in the same time period has developed Qamishli airport in the far east of Rojava). For Russia, maintaining aid to the PYD allows it to have a supporting force in addition to Assad’s army. Russia has always supported the project of autonomy for Syrian Kurdistan, a means of putting pressure on Turkey. The reshuffling of Russo-Turkish relations since the failed coup against Erdoğan, in all its variations, has not stopped for one moment Russian support for the Kurds in Syria. Thus the PYD was invited as an observer at the Astana conference on 23 and 24 January 2017 (to the great displeasure of the SNC), where the Russian government proposed a project for a constitution which is not based on Islamic law as the principal legal foundation, recognises the Kurdish language, but does not call for any kind of federalism, just a decentralised Syria²⁵.

The PYD is supposed to be a champion of democracy. Too bad if its opponents should be systematically prevented from acting and speaking publicly. The party-state controls everything and will

¹⁹ <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/04/07/syria.kurdish.citizenship/>

²⁰ See: Aimad Hesso and Cyril Roussel “*Les alliances des Kurdes de Syrie: un jeu de dupes?*”, *Moyen-Orient* n°33, January-March 2017.

²¹ As defined by Lenin in “*Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*”.

²² Faced with this Turkish offensive, the PYD officialised an agreement with the Assad regime, and Russian troops, an accord signed by Lieutenant-General Sergei Rudskoy of the Russian High Command.

<http://aranews.net/2017/03/russian-general-confirms-a-kurdish-russian-deal-against-turkey/>

²³ Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson, “*America’s Marxist Allies Against ISIS*”, *Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2015.

²⁴ Phil Stewart, “*Washington arms the Syrian Kurds against Islamic State*”, Reuters, 10 May 2017

²⁵ Rûdaw, “*Syrian draft constitution recognizes Kurdish language, no mentions of federalism*”, 26 January 2017.

kick out any functionary who is not loyal to it and replace them with its disciples. According to Jian Omar, an oppositionist from the Future Party, the PYD is a “dictatorship” whose “arbitrary practices” include “repression, assassinations and detentions for those who oppose PYD policies”.²⁶ This is confirmed by *Human Rights Watch*, which carried out a three-week investigation on the spot in February 2015, as well as by Amnesty International in October 2015. The NGO accuses the PYD of destroying Arab villages which protected fighters from IS^{27 28}. In mid-March the PYD regime carried out a serious raid against the Kurdish opposition to its dictatorship and closed the offices of its opponents²⁹.

The kings communication

In the end it's in the field of communication that the PYD truly shows how modern it is, with a bourgeois media coverage which goes well beyond its real influence and presumed exemplary character. The postulate of its propaganda is to aim at bourgeois lefties who want to depict themselves as radicals. YPG commander Cihan Kendal (actually a German from Saarland with an anti-fascist background³⁰) was interviewed on 1 August 2016 by Gary Oak (another international volunteer for the YPG) and the interview appeared on numerous sites in the UK³¹, Belgium³² and France³³. In response to the question “... in Europe we have seen the rise of anti-austerity movements like Podemos, Syriza and Jeremy Corbyn. Do you see any similarities with these movements?”, he replied:

“Of course, as we are part of the anti-capitalist struggle ourselves, we are always glad to see that people in different parts of the world are criticising the capitalist system ... But when we are talking about building up a revolution, then it is clear that classical political parties that are just working in parliament don't work. ... The most important part is when people organise to run society themselves, go beyond the state. Abdullah Ocalan has a formula for this – “state plus democracy””

We can put it better by saying that classes continue to exist in Rojava and that the state is the great organiser of them. In passing, this professional soldier, addressing supporters from the Western far left, says that all this can only function by self-organisation. A self-organisation of very state-oriented “people” to be sure! There is another weighty truth in the interview when the military chief claims links with the Assad regime. We can see that the effective programme of the PYD is that of a Kurdish autonomy within Syria, including in agreement with its principal butcher, a plan in every way identical to that of the PKK which wants a Turkish Kurdistan within a Turkish federal state.

“Rojava is for sure not a PKK dictatorship” he continues, *“There are so many contradictions in the revolution it's clearly not a dictatorship of any kind. There is no connection with the PKK; Öcalan is our philosophical and ideological leader, but there is no PKK here. ... of course we have a police force, how else would it be possible to defend ... the necessary order in society without a police force? But as well as our first police force ... there is the HPC, Society Defence Force – they are civilians ... getting trained in conflict resolution ... They try to solve problems, not to create new ones by punishing people and sending them to jail.”*

²⁶ Wes Enzina, “A Dream of Secular Utopia in ISIS' Backyard”, New York Times, 24 November 2015.

²⁷ The Amnesty International report: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2425032015ENGLISH.PDF>

²⁸ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurdish-fighters-deny-claims-house-demolitions-and-ethnic-cleansing-northern-syria-245454000> <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/160620151>

²⁹ <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/17032017?keyword=PYD>
<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/150320174?keyword=PYD>

³⁰ Interviewed by Vice news in January 2016:

<https://www.vice.com/de/article/das-was-er-macht-ist-gut-aber-meine-angst-bleibt-772>

³¹ See: <https://internationalrevolutionarywomen.wordpress.com/2016/08/01/interview-with-ypg-commander-cihan-kendal/>

https://www.reddit.com/r/Anarchism/comments/5ts2c9/interview_with_ypg_commander_cihan_kendal/
<http://www.weareplanc.org/blog/interview-with-ypg-commander-cihan-kendal/>

³² See: <https://albruxelles.wordpress.com/2017/01/17/interview-du-commandant-cihan-kendal-des-ypg/>;

<https://hubzilla.nl/channel/anarchism/&f=&mid=78c0365608592e8ef4f7099d3c927f31124755a42f10ef1aabdcde6ffa3b3d9@hubzilla.nl?f=&jsdisabled=0> ; <https://www.infolibertaire.net/rojava-interview-du-commandant-cihan-kendal-des-ypg/>

³³ See: <http://forum.anarchiste-revolutionnaire.org/viewtopic.php?t=6912&p=251021>

The 6,000 *Asayish*³⁴ cops are still there to assure the role of control of populations. The hard core of the state is firmly in place. This was demonstrated in June 2013 in Amuda when the repression of an anti-PYD demonstration organised by the Democratic Party led to six deaths and 50 people in prison³⁵.

“[W]e all know what the US wants and what it doesn’t want, and their responsibility for groups like ISIS and Al Nusra. ... They want to use us and we try to get the best out of it. Their main regional allies are of course Turkey, Barzani’s Peshmerga forces, and still parts of the FSA who they are training with the British Army in Lebanon. America would like to have us as a main ally, but they know that is not possible; militarily we are cooperating at times, but ideologically we are enemies.”

And so here is declared, it couldn’t be clearer, the military alliance between the USA and the PYD. An alliance which rests on the provision of weapons, the sending of Special Forces by Washington and the coordination of American air strikes with the YPG.

The PYD also shows off its feminism, which clearly draws a line in relation to the outrageous sexism of the Islamists. But is it enough to create women’s battalions to proclaim the end of the oppression of women by men? Certainly not. To do that, the first objective would be to demolish from top to bottom the patriarchal structure of civil society and the tribes. A policy which the PYD would never adopt because it is always on the lookout for support from Kurdish “traditional society”, exactly like IS with the Sunni tribes of Iraq and Syria. When asked about the discontinued “Lions of Rojava” campaign which presented a very male (indeed thoroughly macho) image of the Rojava warrior, “Kendal” replied:

“I personally believe that, let’s say in a month, and let’s say in a year, the number of women coming to Rojava will be bigger than the number of men. The main force of this revolution is the women’s movement and their ideology”

Let’s just say we’re sceptical about this claim... Multiplying the images of women fighters or members of cooperatives says nothing about relations between men and women, and says nothing about relations of reproduction. It means forgetting the yoke which always subjugates those women who live under the tribal regime with its accompanying forced marriages and “honour” crimes. And this remains true even if no one doubts that today it’s better for a woman to live in Rojava than under the yoke of IS.

But what became of social classes in Rojava?

To summarise, classes certainly exist and reproduce themselves in Rojava, as everywhere else. You can find peasants of all incomes, petty merchants of all kinds, bosses, employees of the Syrian state or the new PYD state, teachers, workers in small-scale industry and the liberal professions. The great majority of PYD cadres are lawyers, teachers, doctors or engineers qualified in Syria (a few) and in Turkey (a lot). Akram Kamal Hasu, the prime minister of the Canton of Jazira³⁶ is a Syrian “rich businessman”.

If we examine the class composition of Rojava, we see that it’s a mostly rural society in an area which is partly fertile, with artisans, small-scale commerce, and limited services. There are two factories (the Lafarge cement works in Jalabiya³⁷ and the oil refinery at Rumêlan³⁸), therefore a very rudimentary industrial proletariat. Over this structure there remains a pre-capitalist organisation of civil society

³⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asayish_\(Rojava_cantons\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asayish_(Rojava_cantons))

³⁵ See: Rana Khalaf, op. cit. (note 19, page 9).

³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazira_Canton

³⁷ Set up in 2010, this cement works had an annual production of 2.7 million tonnes. It has continued to function during the occupation by IS – with Lafarge paying rent to them. See: *Le Monde*, “Syrie : LafargeHolcim reconnaît que son usine a financé des groupes armés”[“Syria: LafargeHolcim recognises that its factory has financed armed groups”], 2 March 2017.

³⁸ Formerly run by the *Syrian Petroleum Company* and occupied by the PYD since April 2013, its production has gone from 15 to 40,000 barrels per day for internal consumption and export (which has improved since an 8.9km oil pipeline was put in service to Iraq, where the oil is transported to Turkey). This raises \$10 million per month, shared between the PYD (20 %), the Syrian government (70 %) and the Shamamr tribe (10 %).

maintaining itself in the form of clans and tribes. The tribes are not necessarily nomadic, as generally in the Arab world, but clearly it is a system of social relations which is strongly hierarchical.

Tell me who you support, and I'll tell you who you are

The passion of the last few remaining Maoists, third-worldists of every hue, “anti-imperialists”, Scottish nationalists, alter-globalists, Trotskyists and even anarchists and “antagonists” for Rojava can only be compared to that for the “Palestinian cause”. After the Stalinist USSR, Mao’s China and all the exotic destinations which followed, it’s now fallen to Rojava to bear “revolutionary” hopes. Rojava feeds the hopes of those who’ve turned their backs on class struggle or who never waved its flag. The popularity of these marginal phenomena of the permanent restructuring of capitalist domination is inversely proportional to the intensity of class struggle which goes on there. Today, it scarcely appears at all so inter-classism and nationalisms of various colours prosper. Pilgrimages by “antagonists” to the new holy places of anti-imperialism and nationalism multiply as they did in the past to Cuba, Maoist China, Palestine or Chiapas..

Among the enthusiastic visitors³⁹, we find David Graeber, one of the initiators of *Occupy Wall Street*, who, during his visit in December 2014, declared to the Turkish journal *Evrensel*: “*These people are doing it now. If they prove that it can be done, that a genuinely egalitarian and democratic society is possible, it will completely transform people’s sense of human possibility.*”⁴⁰ And in a preceding article in the *Guardian*⁴¹, this same personage dared to claim that the Spanish Civil war was being replayed in Rojava, adding that the PKK was “inspired by the strategy of the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas...”

Rojava is saluted not only as a glimmer of hope against the “fascist” obscurantism of IS but also as a “*proud experience of grassroots democracy*” as is claimed by Sarah Glynn⁴², a Scottish activist in the campaign “Solidarity with Kurdistan”. Testimonies of defenders of Rojava are constantly relayed without the slightest concern to go beyond “combat” folklore and the soothing communications of the new authorities of the territory. Not a word is said in explanation of the complicit relations with the Assad regime. No study is ever undertaken to understand class composition and to unveil the perfectly capitalist social relations which reign in the enclave of the PKK/PYD. Starting from that point of view, the conclusion is inevitable: Rojava is a paradise on earth. Down with Paradise!

The only solution for ending the national oppression of the Kurds, communist revolution

In a short text from the beginning of 1916, “*The socialist revolution and the right of nations to self-determination*”⁴³, Lenin correctly pointed out that “*The aim of socialism is not only to abolish the present division of mankind into small states and all national isolation; not only to bring the nations closer to each other, but also to merge them*”. It’s an aim completely opposed therefore to one pursued within the capitalist mode of production.

For all that, communism cannot remain indifferent to the fact that the infinite summersaults of capitalism are always throwing the borders between states into question, sometimes peacefully but more often through war. The end of the colonial era in the division of the planet has not put an end to the imperialist policies of states. Since the first Iraq war, marked by Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, annexations

³⁹ Unfortunately, supporters are falling over each other to recount their vision of paradise in Rojava and we can no longer do justice to them all, but here’s a pitiful interview with a YPG fighter, a member of the IWW from Montréal: <https://durereality.wordpress.com/2016/12/16/entrevue-un-wobbly-de-montreal-au-rojava/>

⁴⁰ <https://libcom.org/forums/news/no-genuine-revolution-interview-graeber-evrensel-newspaper-29122014>

⁴¹ See: David Graeber, “*Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?*”, *The Guardian*, 08/10/2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>

⁴² See: “*Discovering Syria’s ‘real revolution’: In conversation with PYD co-chair Salih Muslim*”, 19 December 2016, on <https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/10058/discovering-syria-s-real-revolution-conversation-pyd-co-chair-salih-muslim>

⁴³ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm>

have followed one after another, the latest being that of Crimea, achieved, like the one attempted in the Donbass, by Russia. And let's not forget the expansionist plotting of China in the sea bearing its name and the endless war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Across the world, hundreds of different inert populations are jolted about, displaced, repressed. Others, such as the Kurds, Palestinians and Tibetans, are under the yoke of a central state and are victims of policies of massive displacement or of repopulation with injections of people considered more loyal. "Official" colonies have diminished in number but enclaves of segregation flourish even in modern states on the basis of ethnicity or religion. National oppression still has good many days ahead of it in the epoch of developed capitalism

These oppressions end up in conflicts and, in some cases, in civil wars where states throw one part of the population against another. Despite that, as Lenin says in the text cited above, it is perfectly possible that certain "national questions" cannot be overcome by capitalism. And this is exclusively a reflection of its own interests. In this regard, Lenin set out a general criterion:

"The more closely the democratic system of state approximates to complete freedom of secession, the rarer and weaker will the striving for secession be in practice; for the advantages of large states, both from the point of view of economic progress and from the point of view of the interests of the masses, are beyond doubt, and these advantages increase with the growth of capitalism." (idem)

Lenin denied that national self-determination is impossible within the framework of capitalism. But he specified that it would be, at best, imperfect and only "political", not "economic" because it would not call into question the existence of classes and the dictatorship of today's dominant classes.

"even the one example of the secession of Norway from Sweden in 1905 is sufficient to refute the argument that it is "infeasible" in this sense." (idem)

More recently Czechia and Slovakia separated in a consensual fashion. The self-determination of nations under capitalism can only be a political emancipation of an oppressed nation in the form of the creation of a new state. This is why recognising the necessity for the revolutionary proletariat to fight oppressions coming out of societies divided into classes must not imply direct or indirect support for the constitution of new bourgeois states, including "freer" and more democratic ones.

"The right of nations to self-determination means only the right to independence in a political sense, the right to free, political secession from the oppressing nation. ... this demand is by no means identical with the demand for secession, for partition, for the formation of small states." (idem)

Even more, to achieve freedom from oppressions maintained by capital or simply inherited from preceding societies, it is necessary that this specific battle should be fought with the means of the proletarian revolution and under the direction of the only class in today's world which is the bearer of the project of liberation, the working class. But let's let Lenin speak again:

"it is necessary to formulate and put forward all these demands, not in a reformist, but in a revolutionary way; not by keeping within the framework of bourgeois legality, but by breaking through it; not by confining oneself to parliamentary speeches and verbal protests, but by drawing the masses into real action, by widening and fomenting the struggle for every kind of fundamental, democratic demand, right up to and including the direct onslaught of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, i.e., to the socialist revolution, which will expropriate the bourgeoisie. The socialist revolution may break out not only in consequence of a great strike, a street demonstration, a hunger riot, a mutiny in the forces, or a colonial rebellion, but also in consequence of any political crisis, like the Dreyfus affair, the Zabern incident, or in connection with a referendum on the secession of an oppressed nation, etc." (idem)

The proletariat of today must take charge of this struggle in the same way that its English ancestor of the nineteenth century should have taken charge of the struggle against the national oppression of the Irish. Marx thus defined the class line:

*“I have become more and more convinced—and it is only a question of driving this conviction home to the English working class — that it can never do anything decisive here in England until it separates its policy with regard to Ireland most definitely from the policy of the ruling classes, until it not only makes common cause with the Irish but even takes the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801 and replacing it by a free federal relationship. And this must be done, not as a matter of sympathy with Ireland but as a demand made in the interests of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain tied to the leading-strings of the ruling classes, because it will have to join with them in a common front against Ireland. Every one of its movements in England itself is crippled by the strife with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England.”*⁴⁴ (Karl Marx, Letter to Kugelmann, 29 November 1869).

The response brought forward is that of federation. The federative form is that best adapted to heal the deep wounds caused by millennia of wars, of breaches of trust, of hostility and competition between population groups. The proletarian revolution of October 1917 in Russia scrupulously applied this directive of Marx, by inscribing in its Constitution of 1918: *“The Soviet Republic of Russia is founded on the free union of free nations, as a federation of national Soviet Republics”* (Article One, Chapter 1, Point 2)⁴⁵. A federation all the more free in that it opens the way to the abolition of everything which imposes the exploitation of people and of nature. A federation which is conceived as an indispensable, inevitable step towards the unification and centralisation of the human community beyond borders and all other differentiations inherited from the past. Lenin again:

“One may be a determined opponent of this principle and a partisan of democratic centralism and yet prefer federation to national inequality as the only path towards complete democratic centralism. It was precisely from this point of view that Marx, although a centralist, preferred even the federation of Ireland with England to the forcible subjection of Ireland to the English.” (idem).

There’s no longer a question of supporting bourgeois democratic movements which fight for the end of national oppression in the advanced capitalist countries because *“the bourgeois, progressive, national movements came to an end long ago. Every one of these “great” nations oppresses other nations in the colonies and within its own country”* (idem). Nor is there any longer a question of taking the side of movements of national liberation in the less advanced capitalist countries. Very simply, these movements all failed and, when they existed they were from the outset the vassals of the dominant classes. That was the case with the Tricontinentals⁴⁶, the “non-aligned” movements after the Second World Butchery, and as is the case today with the PKK, the various Palestinian factions⁴⁷, the Tibetan religionists, the Zapatista organisation in Chiapas, etc.

Along the same lines, revolutionary defeatism in the case of bourgeois wars must be expressed as a rejection of all annexations. And this is not in defence of the frontiers as they are, but as a materialisation of the proletarian rejection of capitalist conflicts. Being favourable to the political self-determination of nations and fighting annexations are two faces of the same revolutionary policy, according to Lenin.

“The specific question of annexations has become a particularly urgent one owing to the war. But what is annexation? Clearly, to protest against annexations implies either the recognition of the right of self-determination of nations, or that the protest is based on a pacifist phrase which defends the status quo and opposes all violence including revolutionary violence. Such a phrase is radically wrong, and incompatible with Marxism.” (idem)

⁴⁴ https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1869/letters/69_11_29-abs.htm

⁴⁵ <http://mjp.univ-perp.fr/constit/ru1918.htm>

⁴⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization_of_Solidarity_with_the_People_of_Asia,_Africa_and_Latin_America

⁴⁷ *“The resumption of class struggle is more than ever necessary to end the sacrifice of masses of proletarians for interests opposed to theirs. It is only when exploited Palestinians sweep away the nationalists and the mullahs who act in the name of their dominant classes and their Israeli class brothers have done the same that the war, discrimination and exploitation will take any great steps back.”* (MC Letter no. 29, March 2009)

It is by scrupulously applying this line that we opposed the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq and, more recently, that of Crimea by Russia.

“Faced with the Russian occupation of the Crimea with the added threat of invasion of the eastern regions of the country, the only possible response for revolutionary proletarians is that of defeatism in both the bourgeois camps which face each other. The colonial policy of annexation and Russification of the eastern Ukrainian provinces is a reflection of the Ukrainian nationalism triumphant in the west. Yet every annexation accelerates the course to capitalist war. Revolutionaries at all times reject annexations not in order to defend the territory of such or such a state but rather because they are an important step towards war. And capitalist war is terrain which is particularly hostile to the emergence of the proletariat as a class for itself. Rejecting Russia’s colonial policy of annexation and promoting defeatism in the two bourgeois camps confronting each other today constitutes the two indispensable bases of an independent workers’ politics in the region.” (MC/KpK, bulletin no. 6, 4 March 2014)⁴⁸

Following the red line up until the present day involves, in the specific case of the so-called Kurdish question, placing ourselves firmly on the side of the populations harshly oppressed in all the states where they are present in large numbers, defending the perspective of political self-determination in the framework of an international revolutionary process led by the proletariat, the only class capable of putting a definite end to all oppression. It also supposes fighting against all arrangements with oppressor states in the region and elsewhere, like the ones made by the dominant Kurdish organisations to survive by sacrificing the liberation of all Kurds from national oppression. Finally it supposes that Kurdish proletarians identify and fight their own bourgeoisie on the terrain of class struggles, with independent class means and organisation. When the proletariat does not struggle as a determined and organised actor, it is certainly necessary to contribute to its entry into struggle, but this in no way prevents oppressed populations from fighting for specific demands like the end of discrimination, the fight against repression or the defence of a language, but supporting the idea that political self-determination can be truly won without the destruction of the state and going beyond capitalism is a typical nationalist illusion.

MC/KPK, 15 May 2017

Check out the websites of Mouvement Communiste: www.mouvement-communiste.com and Kolektivně proti kapitálu: <http://protikapitalu.org/>

⁴⁸ See: <http://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT1403ENvF.pdf>