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Kurdistan

Analysing the PKK: a reply to Alex de Jong

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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In the wake of the failed military coup in Turkey, and the massive wave of state repression that has followed, building solidarity with the progressive resistance in Turkey and Kurdistan is even more vital. The attention of socialists and democrats worldwide will be turned towards the reactionary mobilisation that the ruling AKP has unleashed. This will put the HDP (Peoples Democratic Party) and the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) centre stage.

Alex de Jong has contributed two IV articles – [The New-Old PKK](#) and [A Commune in Rojava?](#) – that in our view make a sectarian and doctrinaire assessment of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) and its co-thinkers in the liberated cantons of north Syria, called by the Kurds ‘Rojava’.

In the first article, The New-Old PKK, comrade Alex challenges the widespread view that in the past decade or so the PKK has made a substantial political turn, and as the title suggests tends to stress that not a lot has really changed, it’s old wine in new bottles.

Actually, the PKK has changed on two main questions. First it has replaced its demand for an independent Kurdish state with the proposal for ‘democratic confederalism’. This is the idea of democratic self-rule for districts, towns and villages confederated into regional councils, and then wider federations on a national and potentially international level. In this process the mainly Kurdish areas of Turkey and Syria would have their own self-rule, but one based on equality, not ethnic exclusivity. Both in South East Turkey and in Rojava the PKK and its allies have been trying to put this proposal into practice.

Second the PKK has substantially deepened its position on women’s liberation, ensuring equality for women at every level both in its own organisations and the substantial part of Kurdish public life it influences.

First, though, is the issue of tone and timing. When the militants of the PKK and its allies in Turkey, and its co-thinkers in Syria are under ferocious attack from the Erdoğan regime and ISIS, this seems a particularly ill-judged time to carry articles full of sarcastic irony about the PKK and its leadership. In South East Turkey (‘northern Kurdistan’) between September 2015 and April 2016, more than 1000 people – mainly Kurdish civilians but also some PKK fighters – were slaughtered by the Turkish army using airpower, tanks and heavy weapons of all kinds. Villages, towns and Kurdish suburbs were destroyed or wrecked and 500,000 people were displaced.

Could one really imagine that if the Zapatista base communities in the Chiapas cloud forest had been invaded by the Mexican army, 1000 indigenous people slaughtered and thousands imprisoned, International Viewpoint would be carrying articles at the very same time saying – “by the way Subcommandante Marcos’ theories are rubbish”? Why does the PKK get singled out for this type of treatment?

In Rojava the PKK’s co-thinkers in the PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its armed wing the YPG (Peoples Protection Units) have played an heroic role – at the cost of hundreds of dead and wounded – in the fight against ISIS, driving ISIS out of the town of Kobanî- and rescuing thousands of the besieged Yazidi population threatened with massacre. By common consent, they have been the most effective fighters against ISIS in Syria.

The above mentioned articles break with the usual approach of the Fourth International of judging liberation movements primarily by their social practice: Alex de Jong instead makes a critique which is fundamentally ideological. In the past this has not been the case.

Did the Fourth International, for example, judge the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam (and its leadership, the Vietnamese Communist Party [Lao Dong]) primarily by its ideology, based on its semi-Stalinist origins? Did we wax lyrical about the ambiguous theoretical formulations of the VCP and emphasise their dangerous concessions to a semi-Stalinist ‘stages’ theory of revolution? Not at all: we stressed their objectively revolutionary, anti-imperialist character in practice.

If comrade Alex says, as he did previously in a private letter to us, that his intention was indeed to just make an ideological critique of the PKK, then frankly he is doing the wrong thing. Because you can’t make a critique of a national liberation (or any other) movement without reference to its concrete political practice: or if you do, then it is scholastic and doctrinaire.

An example of this wrong approach was the assessment made by some people of the South African ANC in the 1980s that it was basically revolutionary with a ‘permanentist’ practice based solely on a reading of the ANC’s ‘Freedom Charter’, which promised ownership and control, of the economy by the people. In the real transition in South Africa, the function of this document was mainly decorative.

Both aspects of PKK’s substantial political turn have been inspired by the writing of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ã–calan, on confederalism and women’s liberation. On the former Ã–calan puts forward detailed analyses of the origin of the state and how to overcome it; on the latter he puts forward detailed arguments about the history of women’s oppression and the central role he believes that women’s liberation will have in creating international social justice.

Alex de Jong goes to some lengths to demonstrate that in his writings Ã–calan has “a concept of women’s liberation is shaped by myths of a Neolithic matriarchal past.” Well, it’s clear that Ã–calan does adhere to views about a Neolithic matriarchal society that are very controversial. In fact there are many differences about the origins of women’s oppression, including among Marxists. But is that the main thing we want to say about the PKK and women?

In the past five or six years the PKK’s turn on women’s liberation has been real and dramatic. It is not just a question of women’s units among the guerrilla fighters. A feminisation process has gone deep into the PKK’s practice and its mass work. In the liberated cantons of Rojava in northern Syria, and in the autonomous people’s councils of ‘northern Kurdistan’ in Turkey, women are in the leadership at every level, implementing the 40% minimum quota, but also acting for example as co-mayors and co-leaders at every level. Because the PKK is a mass organisation, its line of prioritising the involvement and leadership of women has an impact in families and communities – and opens up many more choices for Kurdish women across the board. It goes into all the organisations influenced by the PKK, for example the HDP – the People’s Democratic Party – in Turkey.

At the very least one would have expected an assessment of this process to be prioritised, rather than Ã–calan’s theories of women’s oppression. But it comes under attack from Alex de Jong precisely because he regards what underlies it as false theoretically. He says:

“Ã–calan’s essentialist view of identities – whether he is talking about Kurds or women – has passed through his ‘turn’ with little change. For the PKK, ‘women’ are the social subject that stands at the center of emancipation, playing a similar role to the proletariat in classical Marxism – the universally oppressed subject whose emancipation entails universal emancipation. According to Ã–calan the ‘role which once was allotted to the working class, today falls to women.’

“But the category of women itself is never interrogated. According to Ã–calan, women are biologically more

compassionate and empathic than men and have more “emotional intelligence.” Womanhood is associated with motherhood – women “possess life itself” and thus are supposedly closer to nature than men.

“This leads to seeing women as a homogeneous category with a singular ideology corresponding to its liberation struggle. The PKK’s women’s party – Party of Free Women (PJA) – declared that “the women’s liberation ideology is an alternative for all previous world-views, whether right-wing or left-wing.”

So for comrade Alex the problem is that Öcalan has “essentialist” views about women and that “the category of women is never interrogated”. Yes sometimes certain traits are ascribed characteristically to women in an essentialist way – but by no means always, while Öcalan often in fact dwells on how women’s role has been socially constructed through a long history – the details of which are arguable, it is true, but the real issue to be confronted is this: is the deepening of the PKK’s (and PYD’s) women’s liberation turn real or imagined? Is it really driving the political practice of the PKK (and HDP) in Turkey and the YPD in Rojava? We say it is real. Further we say this is the biggest example of a leftist or liberation movement putting women’s liberation absolutely central in its practice anywhere in the world. This is the first thing you have to say about the PKK and women.

Alex de Jong is sceptical about the PKK’s shift towards democratic confederalism on an all-Turkey level, and seems to attribute this to Öcalan’s reading of the American anarchist Murray Bookchin. But in reality, as many observers have pointed out, what’s behind this turn seems much more like Otto Bauer’s approach to the national question – ie that cultural autonomy, rather than full independence can be a solution, or at least an interim solution, for oppressed nationalities. It’s obvious that this democratic confederalism advocated by Öcalan is a step towards self-government by the Kurds; and that the PKK’s attempts to actually implement self-government by the Kurdish communities in south east Turkey is designed to give practical meaning to this line. The Turkish government understands exactly what this is, which is why they attacked these communities with such ferocity. The same is true of their attitude to Rojava.

Once again, it is hard to see why this position of the PKK comes in for such harsh attack. You could criticise the Zapatista base communities on exactly the same basis. It is not an implementation of Murray Bookchin’s ecological-anarchist ideas of a radically downsized society in which the cities are dispersed. It is about democratic, autonomous self-organisation.

In his article *A Commune in Rojava?* Alex de Jong wants to pour cold water on what he describes as the “illusions of anarchists and libertarians” about what is happening in the three liberated, mainly Kurdish, cantons of northern Syria. Their liberation of course is a formidable achievement by the YPG fighters, in the face of harsh attack by ISIS.

Comrade Alex’s critique comes down to three things. First that Rojava is insufficiently socialist in its socio-economic organisation; second that the PYD-YPG has made impermissible political compromises with the Syrian regime and American imperialism; and third that the political organisation of Rojava is undemocratic, “top down” and insufficiently “bottom up”.

About the economy he says:

“Öcalan’s vision of a socio-economic alternative to such conditions can be described as social-democratic... The relatively vague economic proposals of the PYD for Rojava can also be called social democratic. The goal is a mixed economy with strong social services. The “social contract” of Rojava declares natural resources and land to be property of the people and their exploitation to be regulated by law. At the same time, the contract protects private property and declares that nothing shall be expropriated. About 20 percent of the land in Rojava is in the hands of landlords, and their property is protected by the social contract. Formerly state-owned farms have been distributed

among poor families. The formation of cooperatives is encouraged by Tev-Dem (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, or Movement for a Democratic Society), the governing structure of Rojava. In the longer term, cooperatives are supposed to become the dominant form of enterprise.”

But what exactly is wrong with the PYD's position that comrade Alex describes here? He himself says that in this mainly rural area in which capitalism is not much developed. Why should Rojava move rapidly towards the expropriation of private property, when it's clear that the dominant mode of production being promoted is that of people's co-operatives? What's wrong with that?

Second Alex criticises the PYD-YPG for its alleged military alliance with American imperialism and not expelling all Syrian government troops from the region. YPG fighters were in a de facto alliance with the US airforce during the liberation of Kobani. The bombing of ISIS by the Americans was a key factor in enabling the YPG to prevail in this Kurdish city: hundreds of civilians and hundreds of Kurdish fighters were killed in the battles to relive the city. In our view it is formalistic to criticise the YPG over this. Some US special forces have also been spotted in Rojava aiding the YPG fighters against ISIS. Probably both sides know this is a time-limited alliance.

Syrian troops in Rojava are mainly concentrated in Qamishii, although there have been several outbreaks of fighting between them and the YPG, the latest in May 2016. Paradoxically the regime still continues to pay the wages of local civil servants, an important source of income for local people. No one believes this is anything more than a temporary modus vivendi, and everyone knows that eventually the Syrian regime will attempt to crush a self-governing Rojava. But for the moment the YPG priority is to defeat ISIS, the main contemporary threat to Rojava, alongside the Turkish government. Faced with such gigantic enemies it is unrealistic to demand the YPG avoid tactical military alliances and stand-offs.

Finally is the issue of democracy in Rojava. Alex de Jong says that it isn't bottom up democracy there, it's top down:

“We should be careful not to project Euro-centric ideas of socialist revolution on Rojava (sic!). But in the absence of a working class that in its struggle for self-emancipation can be the driving force of social change, it is clearly the PYD itself that is playing the decisive role. Before being largely wiped away by the two counter-revolutionary poles of the Assad regime and Salafi jihadism, autonomous self-organization was an important element in the Syrian revolution, as shown by the grassroots structures that sprung up across Syria in the earlier phase of the revolution. The councils in Rojava, however, are the initiative of a political force, not of autonomous bottom-up initiatives. The PYD is the dominant force in Tev-Dem. The armed forces in Rojava (YPG, YPJ, and the security forces, the Asayi?) are trained in the ideology of the PYD and swear an oath to *Ä–calan*.”

For someone keen on combatting libertarian and anarchist illusions, this statement is at least ironic. Search for a successful national liberation movement, especially one engaged in armed struggle, you will find a political party. In Vietnam local self-organisation was propelled by the NLF, in Nicaragua by the FSLN, in Chiapas by the EZLN (a political party by any other name). Popular self-organisation is not, as far as we understand it, counterposed to political parties ‘from above’. Starting in Petrograd in 1905.

The ten members of the academic delegation who visited the three Rojava in December 2014 made a public statement about the democratic autonomy they observed:

“In Rojava, we believe, genuinely democratic structures have indeed been established. Not only is the system of government accountable to the people, but it springs out of new structures that make direct democracy possible: popular assemblies and democratic councils. Women participate on an equal footing with men at every level and also organize in autonomous councils, assemblies, and committees to address their specific concerns. . . . Rojava, we

believe, points to an alternative future for Syria and the Middle East, a future where the peoples of different ethnic backgrounds and religions can live together, united by mutual tolerance and common institutions. Kurdish organizations have led the way, but they increasingly gain support from Arabs, Assyrians, and Chechens, who participate in their common system of self-government and organize autonomously.” [1].

A bit starry eyed perhaps, but this self-organisation is real.

Alex de Jong implies there are problems with human rights violations in Rojava. We don't pretend to know all the details of these accusations. But the main conflicts in Rojava have been with supporters of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KPD) of Mahmoud Barzani. The Barzani mafia clan exercises near- control of the Kurdish enclave in Iraq, in competition and sometimes coalition with the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) and Gorran (Movement for Change); it is bitterly hostile to the PKK and is closely aligned with the West, the US and the UK in particular. PYD leaders know Barzani works closely with Turkey, for example by frequent closures of the border gates from Iraq to Syria, which worsens the food blockade made by Turkey, and currently increasingly blocks the passage of journalists and delegations into Rojava from Iraq.

In a crucial passage from *The New-Old PKK* Alex de Jong makes Öcalan's role central to his critique of the PKK:

“The Kurdish struggle has attracted attention for good reason, and the dedication of its militants in the worst of conditions should not be in doubt. But the much-lauded transformation of the PKK leaves much to be desired. It's not the clear example of a transition from authoritarian Leninism to libertarian socialism it is often made out to be.

“Before and after Öcalan's capture” before and after what the PKK calls the “paradigm-shift”” one essential element of the party remained unchanged: Öcalan is “the leadership” (önderlik). But liberation cannot come from following the twists and turns of a single leader; liberation needs a collective struggle on the back on mass organizations that foreshadow the radical democracy we wish to see in the world.”

Of course the Trotskyist movement, by contrast, has never succumbed to the temptation to organise itself around the thought of a single great leader, now has it?

The role of central leaders in many progressive, liberation or revolutionary movements has often been problematic. For example while he was still politically active, it appears that every major decision in Cuba went via Fidel Castro. The over-centralisation of power around Hugo Chavez in Venezuela was a major problem of the Chavista movement. In Vietnam it appears that there was a more collegiate leadership around Ho Chi Minh including Võ Nguyên Giáp and Pham van Dong. In the EZLN, who knows the real role of Subcommandante Marcos?

Clearly our tradition is against the elevation of single guru, all-seeing and all-knowing leaders. But whatever the excesses around Öcalan in this regard, you have to make an all-round judgement of the movement.

When you are the leadership of a movement supported by millions; when you insist on women's equality at all levels; when you urge people to take control of their lives and destinies through democratically organised solidarity and struggle; and when hundreds of thousands start to do this in practice, then the social effects will be massive and long lasting. Against all that, the excesses of extolling the virtues of “Apo” won't count for much. In any case the movement has had no contact with Öcalan at all for over a year, and only spasmodic contact for some years before that, as he is held in isolation on the prison island of Imrali, so for practical purposes, while there is no doubt that his ideas are hegemonic, the leadership of the movement has to take its own decisions on both tactical and strategic issues.

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Finally, the general issue of how revolutionary socialists should approach liberation movements. Alex says, well our tradition is one where we have combined solidarity with criticism, the two are not contradictory.

We agree with that, but the criticism must be accurate and proportional. And the priority of our tasks is clear: solidarity first.

[1] [See here](#)