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Rojava

YPJ as a symbol of women's resistance

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Hawzhin Azeez is co-founder the non-governmental organization Hevi (meaning hope in Kurdish). The NGO provides humanitarian aid to the people of Rojava (three autonomously run cantons located in northern Syria). Hawzhin is the creator of the Middle Eastern Feminist on Facebook. She writes passionately and eloquently about the Rojava Revolution, feminism and Kurdish issues. [1]

Andy Heintz – Can you describe your work as a member of the Kobane Reconstruction Board?

Hawzhin Azeez – My work was primarily focused on preparing information and reports on the different areas of needs in Kobane, such as documenting the level of damage to the education or healthcare system. It involved connecting with NGOs, solidarity groups, individuals and associations who wish to learn more about the rebuilding and wish to contribute and support the rebuilding process. This process also involved speaking to journalists, solidarity movements, academics and organizations who wish to know more about post-war Kobane. Another important aspect of my job involved documenting all projects and their progress in report, photo and video form and developing an archive of the rebuilding. This was very important as we wanted the world and future generations to see how the rebuilding of the city was conducted in light of such severe limitations and barriers.

More recently, I have co-founded an NGO on the ground here in Kobane, called Hevi- meaning Hope in Kurdish. Our effort is concentrated in providing humanitarian aid to the people of Rojava, as the ongoing humanitarian embargo from Turkey, the Assad regime and the Kurdistan Regional Government heavily incentivized by the Erdogan regime ensures that the economic situation is critical at the moment. Although co-operatives and communes are emerging at a fast pace there is still an urgent need for basic needs such as medicine, antibiotics, vaccinations, education, shelter and other needs within the community. The ongoing operation in Raqqa, the massive displacement that occurred in Aleppo and previously in Manbij means that thousands are internally displaced within Rojava and require urgent help. We hope to use Hevi to be a vehicle for support and solidarity for the displaced and the struggling communities here in Rojava.

Do you see the YPJ's as serving as role models for women in the Middle East when it comes to promoting gender equality between the sexes?

The YPJ serve as a symbol of resistance and self-protection for all minoritized, racialized, colonized women, not just in the Middle East but across the globe. They serve just as much as a symbol of resistance for women in the Middle East and Latin America and Asia as Western women since their resistance is not just against "Daesh" (ISIS) but against the oppressive political and economic conditions within the capitalist, neoliberal, statist system as well as obviously the patriarchal system. As a result of the close and interlinked connection between the capitalist system and the patriarchy all women suffer to varying degrees from the unequal conditions and the associated gender and sexual oppressions. Additionally, we need to note that the YPJ is not a solitary entity that engages in seismic socio-political and economic changes within the region. The YPJ is an extension of the Rojava Revolution and the efforts by the people in north Syria to implement a radical form of democratic model known as "Democratic Confederalism". This radical model was developed by the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, the founder of the revolutionary liberation movement the PKK (The Kurdistan Workers Party) who aimed to liberate the Kurds from the oppressions and violent assimilation policies of the Turkish regime. However, when Ocalan was captured through international collaboration with the Turkish deep state the aims of the PKK and later the liberation psychology and approach of the Kurds changed. The evolution occurred through Ocalan's reading of Murray Bookchin's work which led to a radical shift in Ocalan's ideology. The entire approach to the liberation of the Kurds and the so called Kurdish Question changed from a nationalist purely state-centric approach to a radical, stateless, democratic, confederal and

multicultural approach- an approach which saw the liberation of women, defined as the first colonized people by Ocalan, as integral and imperative. The formation of the YPJ is therefore an extension of other socio-political, cultural and economic changes which are occurring in north Syria and not just purely a military one- which often the YPJ is reduced too.

For this reason, it is problematic to believe that the YPJ only serve as a model of gender equality for women in the Middle East; instead they should be seen as models for all women in dismantling the roots of the oppressive capitalist, white supremacist, neo-colonial state-centric system. Moreover, I would go further to argue that the entire Kurdish women's movement, which now is very multicultural and includes Syrian, Christian, Arab, Armenian and other ethnic and religious groups- of which the YPJ is part of- should be seen as a collective movement of revolutionary women attempting to impact serious regional changes. Something which they have managed to do incredibly well.

How has the YPJ's role in battling ISIS, Bashar Assad and the al Qaeda linked al-Nusra front played in changing the perceptions of men towards women in your region? Do you hope the YPJ breaks down some of the patriarchal barriers in Kurdish culture?

The YPJ has served to break down many gender barriers not just regionally but also globally- but again we must remember that the YPJ is an extension of a socio-cultural, politico-economic and gender changes being implemented in Rojava and does not stand alone as a movement. The YPJ as a military movement have demonstrated most effectively that women are just as capable of engaging in traditionally masculine work, and the most difficult work of all- defending the community and even succeeding where men may have failed. But more than that, they have managed to fundamentally re-order and challenge orientalist, Eurocentric views of what Middle Eastern women are capable of. In fact, their resistance was of such significance for gender, socio-political and cultural rights that it has caused flow on effects across the Western, so-called developed world, which still struggles with entrenching its own women and gender rights.

However, there is still an element of exoticization of Kurdish women fighters, Orientalizing them, turning them into some mythical, Amazonian, extraordinary figures of unusual courage and strength in battling Daesh, al-Nusra, and other similar organizations. An effort which the statist, capitalist, imperial international system attempts to water down and dilute the significance of the YPJ. In fact, the YPJ are normal, ordinary women who have been placed in the difficult position of having to defend themselves and that of other women's rights in the absence of appropriate alternatives and the failures of the international statist, capitalist, neoliberal system.

But we must also remember that the YPJ did not form within a vacuum, or emerged without a background context and ideology. It is really Abdullah Ocalan's radical democracy of Democratic Confederalism, which paved the way for not only the formation of the YPJ but also the collective social consciousness which was necessary to allow women the freedom to join the YPJ in defense of their communities- whose predecessor existed in the YJA-Star movement which is the women's self-defense units in the PKK. Without the essentiality of this ideological core the YPJ would have never formed, nor would the community had the necessary foundational consciousness to allow for such progressions to occur, developments which are still deemed unthinkable within the Western, capitalist, imperial world.

At the same time, it is essential to note that long term, comprehensive, effective and organic social change and progress is not something that can occur overnight. In order for these changes to be organic and accepted long term by society the changes need to be understood and accepted by the community. For this reason, the YPJ have done some of the work, though obviously essential work, there is still a significant amount of work that needs to be done before all women within society here in Kobane, in Rojava, in the region can be free. Although for instance, at the moment, thanks to the YPJ and YPG the women in the Rojava region are politically free from the Assad regime and the threat from terrorist organizations has reduced significantly, gender equality has a long way to go yet. It is

important to note that the Rojava Revolution is not actually over; but rather that the revolution is an ongoing effort to engage in social change across cultural, political, economic, social and gender spheres. We must not forget that gender equality must also encompass LGBTQAI+ communities as well. This is still an ongoing global problem in even in the most developed, privileged societies, let alone in war-torn and destroyed communities like Rojava and the Middle East. Therefore, we cannot view gender liberation as solely a women's liberation from oppressive, violent, and abusive brown men but rather a complete rupture of societies internal and external social, cultural, religious, economic and gender-based relations to reflect a deeper, more critical and radical understanding of individual and collective freedom- all of which are concepts that Abdullah Ocalan focuses on intensely in his ideology of Democratic Confederalism.

I think it's really problematic to be asked whether the YPJ will serve to breakdown the patriarchal practices within Kurdish culture because patriarchy is a global issue and crisis. It is something which is just as prevalent in the East as it is in the West. In America, one of the most 'democratic' countries in the world women are slowly losing basic rights that the suffragettes had fought and even died attempting to implement and institutionalize. The increased move towards right wing politics, Trumpism, liberal feminism personified in Hillary Clinton's politics which ignores imperial impacts of Americanism on the developing world has contributed to a gender and rights crises and regression. Sexual abuse, domestic violence, sexual harassment in public spaces, lack of access to reproductive rights, ongoing belief that women's primary role is still in the home in caretaker roles, lack of LGBTQAI+ protections and rights, the ongoing abuse of transgender women among other issues mark the social problems that the West is currently experiencing. In contrast, what I believe will have a profound effect on reducing the patriarchal practices within the Middle East and Kurdish culture is reduced imperial and neo-colonial interventions and interferences, entrenched and promoted by the statist, capitalist international system through the imposition of artificial states. The levels of patriarchy in Kurdish culture and community is a direct response to the decades of state-sponsored terrorism and violence, ethnic cleansing and genocides, and aggressive assimilation policies that led to the erosion and loss of basic cultural, linguistic and previously egalitarian gender relations. The very existence of the YPJ and the PKK guerrillas and other Kurdish women fighters across Kurdistan is a reflection of the egalitarian gender relations that has always existed in Kurdish culture but has been suppressed, or deteriorated as a result of modern violence and oppressions.

Can you describe the YPJ's role in saving the Yazidi population trapped on Mount Sinjar in Iraq from ISIS?

The YPJ joined the YPG and the PKK to help save the Yazidis when they were attacked by ISIS in August 2014. ISIS was attacking the Yezidi people and threatening them with either the choice of death or conversion to Islam. The tragedy that ensued included 13 thousand KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) members abandoning the Yazidi people in Shengal, northern Iraq and even leaving their weapons for ISIS to take over. There was no effort made to warn the Yezidi people of the advancing terrorists. Thousands died, many were massacred and thrown in mass graves, thousands of women were captured as sex slaves and hundreds of children were traumatized, dehydrated, blinded, starved and lost their lives. Thousands ended up escaping to the mountain tops of Shengal in order to get away from the advancing ISIS terrorists, but faced immediate starvation and dehydration. The American, Australian and UK air force made urgent humanitarian food drops but the situation looked critical.

When it became obvious that a humanitarian crisis was occurring, and that thousands more were in danger of being massacred in the genocide the PKK, YPG-YPJ forces moved in and cleared a humanitarian corridor to bring the people down from the Shengal mountain to safety. A refugee camp was set up by the PKK-YPG-YPJ forces housing thousands of traumatized people; but as a result of the action of the PKK-YPG-YPJ forces hundreds and thousands of people, women and children were saved.

The YPJ played an important part in the rescue operations and were integral in saving the Yezidi people. Since then the Yezidis have been encouraged to create their own self-protection units (called the YPS), along the line of the YPG-YPJ forces so that they will never again be vulnerable to such attacks and terrorism. This is very important as

the Yezidis have been subjected to 74 genocides across history. To ensure that such a tragedy does not occur again the YPJ forces were integral in educating and speaking to the Yezidi people, but especially the women to encourage them, support and train them in protecting themselves.

Do you think the fact that many ISIS fighters are fearful that being killed by a woman in combat because they think it will mean they are banned from Paradise gives the YPJ a mental edge over their adversaries? Why or why not?

No, I believe, in my experiences of living here in Kobane, in something contrary to what has been widely reported about the YPJ. I think this notion is really something that has been propagated by Western media and its Islamophobic tendencies. The YPJ do not need a mental edge in this form, nor do they need this form of propaganda to dilute the courage and strength it takes to go to the frontlines and fight ISIS. Their mental edge comes from having been women who have lived in deeply oppressed societies and experienced the double oppression of being Kurdish and women who now have the capacity to not only defend themselves but also their communities and other women from terrorists and violence. Their mental edge comes from the liberation ideology which is Democratic Confederalism and their personal commitment to understanding and learning this ideology as a foundational approach towards their lives, and individual and collective liberation of women and society. What is underestimated here is the experiences of oppression of Kurdish women as racialized, minoritized, colonized and oppressed women and Kurds. Experiences which have contributed to the need to develop a liberation ideology that addresses these oppressions and experiences; but one which is radical, critical, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial and anti-racist. The liberation ideology as defined by Democratic Confederalism is not just something that applies to Kurdish women or Kurdish society but all oppressed and marginalized communities. Knowing this, the YPJ engage in their resistance against not only ISIS but also capitalism, imperialism and patriarchal global practices entrenched in systems and institutions within the statist system. The YPJ is therefore much more than just a "military" force fighting against ISIS. It is a reflection of historical oppressions that existed and impacted women's lives long before ISIS and its ilk rose up.

The Western media has focused a lot on the YPJ's role in fighting ISIS, but little has been said about the group's political ideology? Can you describe the ideological orientation of the YPJ? What role does austerity, socialism, charity and discipline play in the YPJ's overall ideology?

The YPJ is a deeply disciplined militia-I am hesitant to call them a military force because they do not fulfil the traditional function of a military which always tend to be an invasive, patriarchal, colonizing force. Their aspirations are defined by two core goals. The first is to fight physically against the forces of patriarchy because they recognize that without military capacity their attempt to dismantle patriarchy is heavily limited. This is in direct contrast to liberal feminism which views legal and social changes as the limit to the changes they require to attain gender equality. However, the conditions within the Middle East are significantly different and a military self-protection element is required. The second goal of the YPJ is to face immediate threats of state and local terrorism such as Assad regime's terrorism of the Kurdish people or ISIS, al Nusra and other similar groups who have directly attempted to target women as a form of gender-based terrorism.

Returning to the notion that the YPJ is an extension of the social and cultural changes occurring within the women's movement, the overarching women's organization the Kongreya Star (Star union) represents the social, cultural, economic, political and legal changes being implemented. The YPJ is the physical and military arm of this movement. The continuous effort to focus on, romanticize and exoticize the YPJ has come at the detriment of the collective women's movement and changes they have been implementing. In fact the social changes being implemented is the foundational base that continues to prop up the YPJ and provides it with the widespread support it requires.

How important is it to include people from other races and ethnicities in the YPJ?

It is foundational to the underlying ideology of Democratic Confederalism which the YPJ follow. It is important to note that the formation of the YPJ is a reflection of the radical form of co-existence that the Rojava community has accepted. This system under the model of Democratic Confederalism is multicultural, democratic, promotes ethno-religious diversity and the right for differences to exist. For this reason, the YPJ is open to all women who wish to join and views itself as representing all women rather than just a Kurdish or a Middle Eastern movement. However, why women choose to join the YPJ is also just as important. The YPJ encourages the notion of women's self-protection in a deeply capitalist, patriarchal, statist world. Hundreds of international volunteers have joined the YPG-YPJ movement, and continue to flow into Rojava to join. Although some have been deeply problematic in being clearly right wing and conservatives whose ideological orientations were contrary to the aspirations of the revolution here. However, some have been clearly ideologically aligned and affiliated with the leftist, socialist, feminist and ecological aspirations of the people here. Ivana Hoffman (code name Ava?Ã©n Teko?Ã©n Gne?), a South African with German citizenship who joined the YPJ and lost her life fighting against ISIS in early 2015 in Til Timer represents that international, revolutionary, fiercely ideological and committed group of activists and fighters who have come from all over the world to stand with and in the revolution.

We have had people as far as Australia, Canada, America, England, Scotland, Germany, Sweden and Ireland come and join. We have also had shahids among these groups who gave up their lives so that the revolution can succeed and achieve its aims. This is something that needs to be touched on-the love, adoration and worship of the shahids and the immense sacrifices they have made for humanity and for the oppressed. Their pictures color the roads and streets of Rojava whether international or otherwise. It is essential considering the immense sacrifices made by so many that we ensure that we achieve the democratic, feminist and ecological aspirations of Rojava Revolution. It is an ideological, psychological, revolutionary and moral imperative that we honor those who have fallen and those who continue to fight, risking their lives every single day by ensuring the democratic confederal system is entrenched and implemented solidly here.

[[Can you describe the importance of the term "Heval" to the YPJ?

The term "heval" is a Kurdish word meaning friend, but it functions similar to the word comrade as well. It is a term signifying solidarity, commitment and unity towards a similar ideological revolutionary goal. It is also a political term which in the military sense means that a heval is closer than family, and represents your ideological comrade and friend. It represents the rupture from old ties, such as ties to the family which are traditional social constructs of the capitalist, patriarchal system, and instead ideological ties based on free will and association. The term heval is this and much more, and its difficulty of concrete definition is representative of the difficulty of the Kurdish movement itself and the liberation efforts of the Kurds. In fact, I feel to define the term is to try to grasp the mists of the mountains of Kurdistan or to capture the meaning of freedom for a deeply oppressed, colonized people. It is to try to understand the causes of the thousands of graves of freedom fighters scattered across Kurdistan, or to grasp the gravity of the genocides and the massacres, the ethnic cleansings and entire cities and thousands of villages razed to the ground. It is, in other words an impossible task to define an emotion that has yet to be defined, and whose power is in its definitionless state-as if, like the Kurdish liberation movement, it is a term, a concept, a feeling, a commitment, an ideological and revolutionary wave that can redefine and reformulate itself with the necessity of the time and the urgency of the situation.

Do you think the Western media has accurately depicted the Rojava revolution? If not, what are some of the things the media have gotten wrong?

The Western media has rarely depicted the struggle of the people and the liberation efforts accurately. But there is no reason to expect that the oppressive, capitalist, neo-colonial system which is responsible for the ongoing oppression of our people and other colonized and marginalized communities would depict our fights, our struggles and liberation from this very said system accurately. And let's be clear, our struggle with ISIS is only a temporary, surface conflict. Our greater objective is an ideological shift and the re-ordering of the existing status quo.

Western media has used oppressive and inflammatory terms to sell their stories. The Kurdish people are often depicted as "terrorists", "rebels", "US-backed fighters"; more often than not there is a reference related to Turkey viewing the YPG as a terrorist organization but no reference at all as to the unbelievable levels of state imposed terrorism that the Kurds and other minorities have experienced in Syria. All of these labels erase what the Kurdish people and the people of Rojava are trying to achieve. However, it is no surprise that the mouth pieces of the capitalist, statist system make every effort to whitewash and erase the efforts of the people there. What is also disturbing is that the fight against ISIS is most often depicted as a fight between ISIS and the Kurds. There is no effort to see that what the YPG-YPJ forces are attempting is to eradicate a deeply violent terrorist organization that is a direct threat to all of us.

More disturbingly, social media including Twitter and Facebook consistently censor Kurdish activists and allies when they post about the Kurdish struggle. All PKK and Abdullah Ocalan related images and posts, flags and mentions are removed from social media with lengthy bans and even removal of pages. This censorship does not occur in isolation but is a part of a global effort to reduce content, information and support for the Kurdish people in Syria.

How can people not living in Rojava show solidarity with the revolution?

There is a lot of confusion about what is happening in Rojava due to lack of information, due to language issues, and the ongoing border issues which prevents the easy flow of people. However, there is still a fair bit of information emerging from the region and it is essential that those who wish to stand in solidarity with Rojava take the time to inform themselves, read about the ongoing efforts of the people, both on the military and the civilian side. Just as importantly, it is imperative that solidarity groups and allies read about Abdullah Ocalan's ideology of Democratic Confederalism and learn who the Kurds are, and what their liberation struggles have involved. You cannot understand the struggle and the revolution in Rojava if you do not understand who the Kurds are and the historical and political oppressions that they and other minorities have experienced.

We also need to remember, that this is not a nationalist - not a Kurdish revolution alone - it is rather a global, humanist revolution that attempts to restructure oppressive societies and produce a bottom up form of democracy, that empowers citizens and reduces the authority and decision making capacity of the state; which as we know can often be oppressive and exclusionary. For this reason, everyone who wishes to live in a better world, needs to take ownership of the Revolution, to educate themselves, to learn the ideology, and to make every effort to support the efforts of the people there by speaking about it, to join local solidarity movements, to donate to relevant NGOs and make an effort to keep the Rojava Revolution in focus. At the same time there is significant misinformation and deliberate anti-propaganda emerging about the Revolution. To determine what is true and what information is false we need to hear from sources on the ground, from activists who have been here and who have experienced the situation first hand. The fact that the region, relative to the rest of Syria is a peaceful, inclusive, and safe zone which has taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees from Iraq, including Yezidis and civilians fleeing ISIS in Mosul, to displaced people from Raqqa, Aleppo and Idlib speaks for the basic ideology which functions here. It is because of its immense capacity to enforce change and progress that Rojava now faces a harsh and crippling embargo spearheaded by Erdogan's AKP government.

It is essential, that we stand in solidarity with one another, as feminists, as anarchists, as communists, Marxist-Leninists, as socialists, as whatever we define ourselves so long as we are moved by the pain and the violence experienced by the oppressed. It is after all, the reason for our ideological orientations and leanings, it is the reason that we believe at the core of it all that we are capable of great and collective social change and progress, of humanity and of love.

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YPJ as a symbol of women's resistance

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[1] This interview will be included in Andy Heintz's upcoming book Dissidents of the International Left