

A glimpse of the future? The changing dynamics in Afrin

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Betrayal.

It is a word that has frequently been used over the course of the past month in light of Turkey's invasion of Syria. The passive green light that was provided for Erdogan's disgustingly named Operation Olive Branch by the western powers has revealed the true nature of their position toward the democratic aspirations of the Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen and other peoples of the region.

In particular, statements from U.S. officials that have aimed to distance themselves from the People's Protection Units (YPG) that it has previously referred to as a 'partner' in the fight against the Islamic State (IS), has been referred to by some as the height of betrayal.

At best, U.S. talking heads have called for 'restraint' on both sides, thus equating the violence of the occupying forces and the resisting forces. Undoubtedly, this is a slap in the face to the men and women who have played such a frontline role in defeating

the fascism of the Islamic State, and now don't hesitate to make the same sacrifices to defeat Turkey's genocidal conquest.

However, for those who have long been paying attention to the complex and often turbulent relationship between the YPG and Washington, it shouldn't have truly come as a surprise that a socialist-oriented militia has been left 'abandoned' by the American empire now that their enemy is no longer IS, but the Turkish Army and its Free Syrian Army proxies (even if many are evidently former IS members and other members hold a very similar ideology).

While the United States sides with its NATO ally, Erdogan's troops use tanks provided by the German government to engage in wholesale murder and attempted ethnic cleansing. To throw insult to injury, a European Union country (the Czech Republic) detained former Democratic Union Party (PYD) leader Salih Muslim on the orders of Ankara for two days before he was released on the condition that he would need to remain in the EU.

It has never been more evident that the western imperial powers are no friends of the Kurdish national liberation movement, and that their talk of being advocates of 'democracy' is utterly hollow while they tacitly approve of aspiring Sultan Erdogan's neo-Ottoman gamble.

Did the United States really betray their Kurdish 'allies'?

Speaking with ANF News in the aftermath of Turkey commencing its invasion of Syria, Riza Altun of the Union of Kurdish Communities (KCK), an umbrella organisation that includes both the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Democratic Union Party (PYD), was baffled at the notion that the United States could even be in a position to 'betray' the Rojava Revolution.

As he put it, "It is said 'the USA sold Kurds out.' In which way could the USA sell Kurds out?! Kurds who are in a strategic relationship with America could be sold out. If there are Kurds who attached their future to America, using the word "sold" would be true. Yet, in Rojava "selling out" is out of the question. Who will sell whom out, how? If we consider the USA's ideological structure, political structure, strategic objectives by contrast with the YPG's strategic, ideological goals, there is obviously no concept to create a future together here. Such a union is not a topic. What are their current relations? An imperialist power that seeks to establish a world system of its own, by appropriating the values emerged out of a people's struggle for freedom."

The tentative unity between Damascus and Rojava

While the west looks the other way and allows Erdogan's fascistic forces to slaughter villagers in northern Syria, dynamics are once again shifting in the country's war that has raged for over half a decade.

Just over a week ago, the YPG announced that militias loyal to the Syrian central government would join the Afrin resistance to safeguard the territorial integrity of the country and repel the Turkish invasion.

As a convoy of vehicles flying Syrian Arab Republic flags entered Afrin, soon the city centre saw a sea of images that on the surface may appear rather contradictory – flags of the Arab state side by side with those of Kurdish/multi-ethnic Rojava; portraits of President Bashar al-Assad next to those of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) founder Abdullah Ocalan.

However, such scenes are not without precedent in Syria. Nor is the collaboration between the leftist Kurdish revolutionaries of Rojava and the Syrian state without its history, both recently and in more distant memory.

Although calling for the democratisation of Syrian society and autonomy for its Kurdish-majority regions, the Rojava Revolution never positioned itself as part of the mainstream 'Syrian opposition'. Instead, the PYD and the Movement for Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) that took on the role of administering the areas that fell under 'Kurdish control' advocated a 'third way'. This meant that in the battles unfolding between the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), their de-facto position was one of neutrality. This ideological position has led the YPG and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) to have a deeply complex relationship with Damascus – at times one of cooperation, at others conflict.

Lines of temporary demarcation were drawn in cities such as Qamishlo, with Syrian government forces still controlling the airport and pockets of the city. While skirmishes between the government's National Defense Forces (NDF) and YPG/J have broken out for short periods, in large part the relationship between these forces has been constructive in the city which serves as the administrative centre for not only the Cizire canton, but the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (often called Rojava).

At the beginning of this year, with the IS primarily removed from the landscape after the proclamation of the end of its caliphate following their losses of Raqqa (as well as Mosul in Iraq), it was clear that the 'winners' of the conflict were the Syrian government and the YPG/J (and their umbrella the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF). Due to Syria's status as a proxy battleground, some reduced this to a sphere

of Russian/Iranian influence (the Syrian state) and U.S. influence (Rojava). However, the intervention of Turkey in mid-January has changed this equation dramatically (if you truly believed it was ever really accurate, which I have argued against).

As a mutual enemy of the Turkish state, it makes tactical sense for the Syrian state and Kurdish revolutionaries to unite at this juncture to fight the Islamist incursion being undertaken by Erdogan at the present moment. Turkey has never been shy during the Syrian war about its desire to overthrow both the Damascus government and to destroy any form of Kurdish autonomy in the northern part of the country.

The as of yet hugely unsuccessful operation has shattered the myth that somehow the YPG/J are nothing but U.S. puppets or proxies, as well as the mythology that they aspire to see the country fractured by carving out a state of their own on the grounds of nationalist sentiments.

What then, is to be made of the at least tentative and limited unity we are seeing in Afrin? Could it be the glimpse of the future, of a united but inclusive Syria in which autonomy of governance is granted to the Kurdish majority regions, and fraternal relations exist between Damascus and these areas?

This, of course, remains to be seen. There are hugely contentious issues that would need to be resolved – whether the Syrian government is actually willing to recognise itself as a multi-ethnic and pluralistic country, and about the status of U.S. forces who are currently operating in areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

PKK-Syria unity once existed – but couldn't last

There was previously cooperation between the government of Hafez al-Assad and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which based itself first in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley of Lebanon in the early 1980s, and later in Damascus where the PKK administered a Party school and where its leader Abdullah Ocalan and much of the leadership was based.

It seems quite perplexing that Syria, which was rooting its Arab revolution on a monolithic program of “one nation, one language, one flag”, would give refuge to Ocalan and his organisation which at that time called for the establishment of a Kurdish nation-state.

However, when one considers that the PKK was fighting for the establishment of this state in Turkey --and that the Syrian government also viewed Ankara as an enemy-- we can get a better sense of the mutual interests that gave rise to this relationship at this time.

Ironically, the PKK's ability to organise and recruit cadres in Syria – although leading in one sense to the challenging of Kurdish national aspirations outside of Syrian borders – also led to a national awakening inside of the country.

This dialectic meant that the Arabisation policies pursued by the Ba'athist government were largely rejected by the Kurdish population. Efforts at assimilation were pushed back against by not only the illegal Kurdish parties operating in Rojava such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S) but also the PKK.

The PKK-Syria relationship eventually ran dry, as the Cold War dynamics gave way to new realities. The active threat of Turkey launching a war against Damascus led the Assad government to tell Ocalan his time in Syria was up. This led to his subsequent capture in Kenya in 1999 as part of the international plot pursued by the United States, Israel and other agents of international reaction.

The Qamishlo massacre of 2004 in which Syrian Arab Army killed up to 100 Kurdish protestors came in the aftermath of an organisation being founded in Rojava that took on the ideology of the PKK, while at the same time maintaining organisational independence. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) would enter the scene as an advocate for democratic confederalism, thus providing a theoretical link with revolutionaries in Turkey and the other parts of Kurdistan, and rejecting the narrow nationalist political program of the majority of the other parties operating illegally in northern Syria.

What's preventing a political solution to the Syrian war?

Whether or not a definitive agreement is to found between the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and the central government that will create the groundwork for a political solution to the Syrian conflict, and whether or not ultimately they can be more than simply temporary military allies, remains to be seen.

As Altun of the KCK said, "with the defeat of ISIS in Syria, all conditions of the emergence of a truly democratic Syria have matured. If this is taken up with the right approaches of the regional and international powers, the war in Syria can be brought to an end, and the emergence of a democratic Syria can certainly be ensured. But it has turned out that this is not wanted."

Altun's position is clear: if left to their own ability to engage in negotiations, parties within Syria who have leverage on the ground can bring about a lasting and just peace. However, the intervention of foreign actors has stifled this process.

Rojava's true allies: The global democratic forces

On the question of the Rojava Revolution's genuine allies, Altun asserts that they can be none other than the left-wing revolutionaries the world over, saying, "As international imperialism and the regional hegemonic states represent their own line and strategic position, against this the paradigmatic stance created by the Kurds represents another line. The main allies of this line are the global democratic forces. They are the peoples' forces. They are the forces against the system. Whether or not there will be a betrayal can only be conceived by developments in these areas."

The position of the KCK as expressed by Altun reveals a lot about the tactical approach of the organization to fighting fascism on the one hand (in which they have cooperated with both imperialist powers and the Syrian state), as well as their strategic approach to revolution and the remoulding of society and the Middle East (in which the socialists of the world would stand as their most viable and valuable of allies). Throughout every twist and turn of war, the KCK has been able to keep politics in command. Flexible in tactical relationships, the revolution has survived due to its ideological inflexibility – that is, not discarding key or fundamental principles.

The success of this project is inextricably linked to the revival of the socialist, anti-racist and anti-imperialist political movements and formations globally. Our duty remains to offer our solidarity to those who are carving out a new society in the midst of an ongoing anti-fascist struggle. Yesterday, that struggle pointed the gun at the Islamic State. Today, it's aimed at the partial rebranding of that organisation as the FSA, and under the banner of Erdogan's Turkish Republic.