

The battle of Kobane: Humanity defying darkness

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The two jihadists were quite demoralized. "The fighter jets bombarded us day and night, shooting at everything, even motorcycles," says one of the IS fighters. The other one scoffs at the situation they are in, "We had to retire, the rats have returned."

The video from which this scene emerges is a historical document in its own right. It's a testament to the moment when the Islamic State (IS) had, for the first time, acknowledged their defeat at the Battle of Kobane. After four months of fighting street by street and house by house, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) expelled the jihadists from the city on the Syrian-Turkish border. The YPG/YPJ had won, IS had lost.

The defenders of Kobane -especially the fighters of the PKK and YPG/YPJ - did not only fight for themselves, nor like their opponents did they consider theirs a fight

against the Western world. Rather, as Stéphane Charbonnier, the murdered editor-in-chief of Charlie Hebdo put it during the Kobane resistance: "The besieged Kurds in Syria are not Kurds, they are humanity defying darkness."

The heroic victory came as a surprise to many. Undoubtedly, it shattered the worldview of sceptics, political analysts and right-wing zealots who insisted that there could be no viable resistance against the forces of IS, insofar as that force came from the region itself. With the battle of Kobane, the peoples of Syria had once again proven that they were neither in need of a saviour nor were they a "burden" to the West. Rather, if given the gun, they were fully capable of defending themselves. This came equally as a surprise to the analysts who considered the residents of Kobane to be helpless as it did to the IS forces who tried to overrun the city.

Another group was also caught off-guard. Some so-called left-wing anti-imperialists felt ambivalent about supporting a fight waged with the support of American weapons air-dropped at the last moment. The battle shattered a simplistic worldview which equates heroism with wars fought with the AK47 alone. Such a battle, of course, could have been waged, but then the Kurds would have risked not being able to defy the Islamic State's heavy - military grade - weapons. They would have risked not breaking the myth of IS's immortality to residents of the region.

It must be said that the consequences of the battle of Kobane have yet to be fully appreciated. The world witnessed the liberation of Sinjar and the protection of Yazidis from what could have been a genocide. The battle of Kobane also made possible the many images and videos of women - from cities liberated by the Kurdish-led coalition - enjoying their first cigarettes after many years of repression under the Islamic State. It is these kinds of events, from the extraordinary to the mundane, which resonate so much with the historical memory of Madrid in 1936 and the defence of Stalingrad.

Turkey, on the other hand, if we are being generous, always approached the battle of Kobane with caution. Turkey reluctantly picked up refugees from Kobane and at the same time allowed IS to supply ammunition through its territory.

When news of the battle began to proliferate, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan thought that the timing was right to express his position that the PKK lied on the same moral plane as IS. What better timing? And did he ever care to ask himself the simple question as to why the two were sworn enemies fighting on the same battlefield?

No, he did not. Instead, almost as if he was rubbing his hands with glee, Erdogan

kept on counting down the days until Kobane would fall. The excitement could be sensed with every periodic announcement he made exclaiming that the day was soon.

Today, we now know why he was so insensitive to the plight of the Kurds in Northern Syria. The emergence of a recognized northern Syria, just like northern Iraq, is unacceptable to the very foundations of the Turkish State, and he's explicit about it. Erdogan and the Turkish military are paranoid that the Kurds of Northern Syria will get a taste of self-determination.

And it is this desperation that Erdogan dragged Turkey into the Syrian War.

Erdogan and his party, the AKP, are not IS. Such a comparison would be too much. But the truth is that to Ankara, both IS and/or Nusra Front have always been useful auxiliaries in the fight against Assad, useful tools for Erdogan's neo-Ottoman fantasies. Erdogan and IS also don't share the same ideology. The vision of Erdogan might seem to stand against the brutal and viscous caliphate that we're accustomed to hearing about, and it is a mixture of something else: uninhibited capitalism and religious conservatism. But where they stand in common is in their common dream.

"The true caliph is not Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who is the leader of IS, but Tayyip Erdogan," the current PKK leader Cemil Bayik said in a recent interview in 2015.

In Syria, the PKK and YPG/YPJ do not only fight against today's most brutal and organized machine of cruelty, they also fight for a democratic and secular future for the region – they are a living counter-proposal to the phantasm of despair imagined by both the Islamic State and the seemingly friendly Islamist conservatism of the AKP. And it is precisely for this reason that those forces feel so truly threatened. They are afraid of the images we have seen since the battle of Kobane: pictures of women cheering, women laughing, women fighting, and women dancing in their revolution.

It is of course not enough for us to celebrate the past, we must also look to the future of Kobane. The reconstruction of Kobane in every sense bears just as an important symbolic meaning as did the defeat of IS in Kobane. If the defence of Kobane meant survival, the reconstruction of Kobane represents a qualitative leap into the future. Kobane will become the antithesis to the caliphate.

And the reconstruction, which is ongoing, is one that seeks to prevent the re-emergence of hierarchical, undemocratic, monist and profit-motivated administrations

that historically played the role of bringing West Asia into the position that it is in today.

Now, in Kobane, hospitals, schools, public places and houses are being built by the decisions of assemblies in which unremitting discussions take place between men and women of all ages and ethnicities. Assemblies are built from the bottom-up, they span from the neighbourhood commune to the city assembly. Everyone is welcomed to participate in the decision-making process. Day to day life is not left to the whims of elected bureaucrats. If anything, this is what the courageous women and men of Kobane deserve.