

# In defense of Rojava

ANTHONY AVICE DU BUISSON

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## FULL TEXT

Donald Trump's announcement to withdraw US troops from Syria comes as a shock to administration officials, military advisers and local partner forces in the region. The sudden departure of US special operation forces from the northeast of Syria risks escalating the already costly Syrian conflict and puts the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic coalition of Syrian militias, under direct threat of attack by hostile neighbors. One of these hostile neighbors is President Erdogan's Turkey, who vows to cleanse the region of Kurdish terrorists. Causing locals within the 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria' (NES - Rojava) to fear over the fate of the region and the Rojava project.

Since the start of Syria's civil war, the minorities of northern Syria such as the Kurds engaged in the creation of a political project. This project - spurred on by optimism over the weakening of the Ba'athist led central government in Damascus - fostered ideas of pluralism, feminism, secularism and local democratic rule. Under the leadership of the political coalition of the 'Movement for a Democratic Society' (TEVDEM), the 'Democratic Union Party' (PYD) - chief party in the coalition - spearheaded the drive for minority rights and autonomy within a sovereign Syria. Both the central government in Damascus and the 'Syrian National Coalition' (SNC)-led opposition opposed the project.

TEVDEM's political project in the NES works by empowering local councils that are made up of different ethnicities and genders. Women are required to be on each council and govern jointly with their male counterparts, while each council also represents the demographics of the area it governs. For example, the 'Raqqqa Civil Council' (RCC) that governs the city of Raqqqa is made up of a Kurdish feminist co-head (Layla Mohammed) and an Arab tribal co-head (Mahmoud Shawakh al-Busran). Each council's governing area is protected by local defense forces - such as in the case with the RCC and the 'Raqqqa Internal Security Forces' (RISF) - with each area's governance and security reflecting the demographics of the area.

The ideological inspiration underpinning TEVDEM's project comes from jailed 'Kurdistan Workers' Party' (PKK) founder, Abdullah Ocalan. Ocalan's book of Democratic Confederalism forms the base ideology of Rojava. At its core, Democratic Confederalism advances support for ecology, women's empowerment through feminism, pluralism, secularism and decentralization. All these ideas make up the ideology and provide for the structure of the system that TEVDEM wishes to foster. This system seeks to dismantle patriarchal, statist and nationalistic structures in the aim of facilitating local autonomy, equality and order. This focus on creating a multiethnic system created tension between the SNC and TEVDEM, which believes TEVDEM is creating a separatist project.

Through local self-defense forces, primarily the 'People's Protection Units' (YPG) and its women's branch the 'Women's Protection Units' (YPJ), TEVDEM fought against Islamists of Al Nusra and later Islamic State to defend areas in the northeast. However, the Islamic State's expansion across northern Syria and siege of Kobane created a humanitarian crisis. This crisis caught the eye of the US and the world who provided support to YPG/YPJ

and Free Syrian Army (FSA) allies defending the city. The international community poured out its support for the fighters of Rojava engaged in the defense of their city and the principles of the revolution, such as women's empowerment. A victory at Kobane in 2015 through resistance to Islamic State tyranny and US support, facilitated the rise of a partnership between the YPG/YPG and its allies and the US.

Helping the various ethnically diverse militias form under one banner in 2015, the US and the newly created SDF went to work fighting the Islamic state. Through the assistance of US airstrikes, artillery and special forces SDF continued breaking apart Islamic State's proto state. Liberating areas from Manbij to Raqqa, the SDF successfully freed thousands of civilians and minimized the size of the proto-state until it was less than 5% of its former territorial strength. Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Yazidis and many more worked jointly to free their homes from the Islamic State - reclaiming homes and working to rebuild what was destroyed with what limited resources and funding they had.

Meanwhile, increasingly worried at the territorial expanse of Rojava, the largely Islamist and nationalist Turkish government militarily intervened in Syria in 2016 to stop the linkage of Afrin canton in Syrian northwest with the Kobane canton. Wedging itself between these two cantons, the Turkish government established a foothold in Syria to train and equip Islamists to fight the SDF. Erdogan's foreign policy maneuvers against the predominantly Kurdish YPG/YPJ continue a long Turkish state policy of denying any form of Kurdish autonomy. Erdogan's government views the YPG/YPJ as an extension of the PKK in Syria and seeks to deny the existence of a terrorist state-let alone along the border as a result. Under this pretext, the Turkish government launches operations targeting YPG/YPJ or affiliate entities' territory.

This is no more evident than with Operation Olive Branch, where Turkish forces pushed into the predominantly Kurdish enclave to uproot TEVDEM's local government in 2018. The operation resulted in the displacement of over 300, 000 residents as well as mass looting, violence and demographic change that aims to remove local Kurdish population, and to replace it with a predominantly Arab and Turkmen population. Thousands of lives were lost defending the canton, which included the loss of a British internationalist and volunteer by the name of Anna Campbell who was killed in Turkish airstrikes. Alteration of Kurdish signs, denial of the Kurdish language, violence towards Kurds and construction of Turkish infrastructure indicated that the Turkish government is not just fighting PKK. It is fighting Kurds and Kurdish identity.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT by the Trump administration to withdraw from Syria comes at a delicate time in the fight against ISIS and the Rojava project. US forces embedded with SDF formed friendships with locals and these friendships fostered stability in the northeast. US servicemen are not worry of being attacked by locals in places like Kobane and can roam freely without fear of retaliation. This successful partnership that developed between the SDF and US, as well as the Kurds and different ethnicities in the region, is unique to the region. You cannot find this form of stability elsewhere in Syria. Not under the Turkish-backed opposition and not under the regime in Damascus.

However, all this is at risk now that the US is departing from the northeast. The fight against the Islamic State is far from over. Hajin pocket in Deir Ezzor's southeast still holds Islamic State fighters who are increasingly becoming emboldened due to the announcement. The ideology of the Islamic state being combated by TEVDEM's ideology is not yet entirely defeated, which indicates the likelihood of a resurgence of the group should it regain a foothold over its former territory. Areas devastated in the fight against the Islamic State such as Raqqa are not rebuilt, and some parts of the city are uninhabitable for former residents.

There also remains the issue of Turkey wanting to export its Olive Branch model eastward to the areas currently

ruled by TEVDEM. Locals who took issue with TEVDEM's model of governance are fearful of a Turkish incursion and are preparing for the likelihood that homes will be lost. This would not be an issue had the US or coalition established a no-fly zone over Rojava and ensured protection of TEVDEM's project, but due to the unpredictability of the Trump administration and the capitulation to Turkish threats made by Erdogan, this has not come to pass. And here lies the central problem with the withdrawal: the lack of forethought.

There is no mechanism in place to ensure the protection of local partner forces and facilitate the longevity of stability in the area. What Trump has done with this announcement is to cut and abandon locals who fought and died to defend their homes. Without international political recognition of Rojava and support for a containment of Turkish aggression towards it, there will likely be an escalation of violence within Syria and a new humanitarian crisis. Should Turkey invade the northeast and implement its Afrin model, then there is the likelihood of mass demographic shifts in the area, which would create the groundwork for ethnic cleansing and genocide. This is not good for the US's reputation and it is most certainly not good for the locals who will be forced to defend themselves against artillery, aircraft and whatever else the Turkish military uses.

The cost of inaction on this issue is immeasurable. Victories against the tyranny of the Islamic State are subject to reversal. A Turkish annexation of northeast Syria and Turkification of the region become possible. Mass displacement, ethnic cleansing and genocide arise in the vacuum of violence left in the wake of a NATO nation's invasion. With a population of three million, refugees fleeing violence will seek refuge in neighboring nations - facilitating the rise of a new refugee crisis. Animosity's seeds are sown with a new generation of people susceptible to radicalization. A new cycle of violence is born. These are just some of the costs that inaction creates.

During moments like these, the international community needs to stand together in support of Rojava and the millions of civilians within the northeast of Syria who are under threat. This support is not necessarily directed towards maintaining a long-term US presence in Syria, but rather calls upon the Trump administration and wider international community to defend the people of Rojava. An internationalism in the form of support and solidarity for Rojava is what is needed. Supporting the existence of Rojava means supporting the longevity of a thriving progressive democracy in a region where authoritarianism and Islamic fundamentalism run rife. A disregard for the humanity of these people only welcomes barbarism and the worst elements of the human condition.

Anthony Avicé Du Buisson is an Australian-based freelance writer who focuses on politics and the Middle East. He is a contributor for a number of online syndications such as Areo Magazine and the Region. He studies law and international relations at James Cook University. Contact him via Twitter at @StoicViper.

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