

Kobanê, Turkey, and the Syrian Struggle

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An extended interview with Joseph Daher, a member of the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria, living in Switzerland, will be published in the forthcoming Winter 2015 issue of New Politics. Here we just post the questions dealing with Kobanê and Turkey. Daher is the writer and editor of Syria Freedom Forever, a blog dedicated to the struggle of the Syrian people in their uprising to overthrow the Assad authoritarian regime and to build a democratic, secular, socialist, anti-imperialist, and pro-resistance Syria. A Ph.D. student in Development, he works as an assistant at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. He was interviewed in Geneva on October 22, 2014, by New Politics board member Riad Azar, with some email updates.

New Politics. Regarding the recent events in Kobanê, you have reported on a statement by the YPG General Command (the acronym for the People's Protection Units, the currently recognized army of Syrian Kurdistan), and their fight against Islamic State (IS). The report details their determination to see the fight for Kobanê as the struggle for a free and democratic Syria. How do you read events in Kobanê and the struggle against IS, especially since the United States has not only been directly involved in airstrikes against IS, but has been sending supplies to Kurdish fighters?

Joseph Daher. Let me begin by saying, as a question of principle, that we as the revolutionary left current in Syria support the self-determination of the Kurdish people, not only in Syria but also in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran as well, where they have been oppressed for decades. Further, in Syria we should not forget that the Assad regime developed a policy of *colonization* of northern and northeastern Syria, where the Kurds are very much present. We strongly condemn this. At the same time, we say also that we would like the Kurdish popular forces to become an ally with us, with the democratic and progressive forces of Syria, to build, and to struggle for democratic, socialist, and secular Syria. We are happy to note that the statement of the YPG Armed Forces goes in this direction.

The latest events in Kobanê show once more that even though a U.S.-led coalition has recently strengthened its bombardments on IS forces, the intervention is still insufficient in many ways in protecting the Kurdish forces. The sending of arms is propaganda and solely to avoid a complete massacre of the Kurds. I think from the standpoint of the imperialist and sub-imperialist states, the issue of Rojava — which is the Kurdish autonomous region — is a problem and a challenge. These states only favor an autonomous region for Kurdish political forces that are submissive to imperialism, like Barzani in Iraq. Turkey does not want to see a challenge to the status quo that began with the 2013 peace process between the PKK and Turkey. If the PKK had bases in Syria, or ties with a sister organization — which is the YPG — it could challenge the status quo with Turkey. This is an important framework to think about when we speak about the U.S.-led intervention. Only now is the intervention taking a more direct form with some assistance given directly to the Kurdish forces by the United States. But it is very, very light. We will see what will happen. Of course, when Washington really wants to support an ally, like Israel — which is a surrogate of imperialism in the region — it really does work effectively.

We should put Kobanê into a framework of the U.S.-led coalition, and also remind ourselves that the Rojava administration is a direct consequence of the Syrian revolutionary process. There is no way Kurdish autonomy could have existed without that process. Kurdish autonomy would never be given by the Assad regime, which is chauvinist and Arab nationalist. The Assad regime has been oppressing Kurdish national rights for forty years. It was the Syrian popular uprising that pushed the

regime to withdraw from regions where the Kurds are a majority. And some very good things are happening in these areas, although we should not fetishize them; there are also problems. As a principle we support the self-determination of the people of an oppressed nation, but we can also criticize the political leadership. Just as we support the self-determination of the Palestinian people, but we should criticize very much the Palestinian Authority or Hamas. This does not stop us from supporting the self-determination of both peoples.

What is happening in the Kurdish autonomous region is far from perfect. There is repression of Kurdish activists and forced conscription — people who refuse are imprisoned. Institutions that criticized the PKK were closed. The PYD — the Democratic Union Party, a Syrian Kurdish political party established in 2003 — like its mother organization the PKK, is not democratic in its internal functioning. We must remember for example the protest movements in late June 2013 in some cities of Rojava, such as Amouda and Derabissyat, against the repression by the PYD of Kurdish revolutionary activists.

But at the same time you have some very positive aspects when it comes to the protection of religious minorities, strengthening women's rights, and secularism. In comparison with the popular councils that were established from below in the liberated areas of Syria by the revolutionaries, which are real example of self-administration, in the case of Rojava it is more a dynamic from above, led and controlled by the PYD. So again, these are the different aspects that you can say about this intervention in Kobanê and how I see it.

But I also understand that the fall of Kobanê will not only be a big loss for Kurds, but for the Syrian revolution as a whole. Any kind of progress towards greater Kurdish self-determination is linked to the deepening of the Syrian revolutionary process. If that revolutionary process is defeated, you can be sure that the Assad regime and Turkey will do everything in their power to undermine any kind of Kurdish autonomy.

NP. The latest news speaks to Turkey's conflicting interests, on the one hand bombarding the PKK, while on the other also allowing Iraqi Kurds to cross the Syrian border to fight ISIS. How do you read Turkey's actions?

JD. Turkey's actions are definitely linked to the peace process with the PKK that has been ongoing since 2013, and its will to control the PKK's process and Kurdish autonomy in southern Turkey. We are very far from peace, and we can see that curfews have been implemented for the first time since 1992 in the southern and eastern regions of Turkey that are majority Kurdish. Approximately 30-35 Kurdish protestors have been killed and a thousand arrested, so repression is still very much present. There is a fear in Turkey that the PKK might get strengthened by Kurdish autonomy in areas of Rojava.

The Turks refused the passage of Kurdish PKK fighters to go to Kobanê, just as they wanted to kick out people that were affiliated with the Syrian PKK, and put them back in Syria. The Turkish government has also declared that the PKK are terrorists similar to IS, while saying that it did not understand why Kobanê was such a strategic city for the USA, a way to criticize the very small assistance given by the Americans to the PYD.

So the solution was, in my view, to allow the passage of a symbolic number of 200 Iraqi peshmerga that are linked to Barzani, who is a Turkish ally. We should not forget that the biggest investor in northern Iraq and Kurdish Iraq is the Turks, and Barzani has been an ally of imperialism for decades. To let the Iraqi peshmerga pass was a way to deal with the Kobanê issue, because they do not want it to fall completely. The Turks wouldn't like to have IS on their border. But at the same time, today the Turkish government said that it was a bad idea for the Americans to send weapons

through airdrops to the Kurdish forces in Kobanê. So we can see the double game. Certainly Turkey is not a friend of Kurdish self-determination and Kurdish popular forces. Exactly the opposite, they are an enemy and Turkey sees any kind of strengthening of Kurdish popular forces and Kurdish autonomy as a threat to its own political interests.

NP. What would you like to see happen in Turkey?

JD. I would like to see an uprising against the Turkish government and the Turkish army, both of which represent the different interests of the multiple factions of the bourgeoisie in Turkey. They both use forms of sectarianism and national chauvinism against religious and ethnic minorities, with the objective of dividing the popular classes. So I can only support my comrades and the left in Turkey to build a large and independent, democratic, social justice oriented organization, opposed to sectarianism and nationalism. The Turkish left must build a strong front, allied with the Kurdish minorities, to challenge the kind of bourgeois interests represented by the AKP and the army.