

How far can Rojava swim against the imperialist tide? Last week in Kurdish news

As North and East Syria negotiates its future, I examine what the Autonomous Administration has achieved and also what it has not been able to do, and I look at how, yet again, the imperialist powers have chosen to promote Islamist reactionaries rather than risk encouraging a progressive alternative that might challenge their control.



As followers of Medya News may have noticed, I spent last week in Kurdistan as part of a [delegation](#) led by the co-chair of the Left Group in the European Parliament, Martin Schirdewan. Meeting with key players, visiting new places and revisiting old ones provided plenty to think about as we drove for hours through the dusty landscape, checking all the while on the latest reports of negotiations between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and Turkey, and on wider political developments. This week's column gives me the opportunity to put those thoughts into some sort of order.

I could fill this space with travellers' observations – the different styles of the rooms in which we met, from Bafel Talabani's enormous polished wood table, via the more relaxed modernism of the Autonomous Administration's Foreign Affairs Department, to the peeling plaster of the committee for IDP's in Raqqa – the incongruity of the excited white puppy that greeted us as we waited to meet with Mazloum Abdi – the contrasting nature of official protocol in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and in the Autonomous Administration – but in order to make sense of it all, I want to stand right back and look at what is happening in Kurdistan within the wider context of 21st-century imperialism.

Revolution meets realpolitik

Like many other supporters of the Rojava Revolution, my interest in the area was first aroused by accounts of a new sort of politics that rejected the values of capitalism to prioritise community and grassroots democracy. Of course, everyone knew that this project – this democratic experiment in the making that had been able to put down roots in the cracks opened up by the Syrian civil war – would never be supported by the hegemonic powers. But that could not stop it from trying to build something different and to demonstrate that another way of organising society is possible.

When I first went to Rojava, in 2018, despite the ongoing fight against ISIS and the huge setback of the Turkish occupation of Afrîn, there was still a revolutionary optimism – inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan – that made everything seem possible. Today, the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are much stronger, and international powers have been forced to acknowledge the Administration, even though they don't officially recognise it. However, the focus has had to turn towards negotiations and the necessities of survival in a world where, yet again, western imperialism has demonstrated its preference for conservatism and reaction over anything that might promote social progress. This is not a situation that allows much room for experimenting with revolutionary systems.

The delegation from North and East Syria that is negotiating over the region's future with Damascus is concentrating on preserving regional autonomy, minority rights, and women's rights. They want to achieve a measure of self-determination similar to that accorded to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but with recognition for all minority groups – and, presumably, better defined structures than those that are the source of constant conflict between the Kurdistan Region and the Iraqi Federal Government. If, despite destructive interference from Turkey, the Autonomous Administration can succeed in moving the new Syrian government on these issues, it would be a huge achievement

that would benefit the whole of Syria; but it would not be the revolutionary change demanded by Öcalan's philosophy.

Contradictions and complications

In making this comparison between my first visit and now, I acknowledge – along with other sympathetic but critical commentators – that the Rojava Revolution has never truly achieved the democratic society Öcalan envisaged. It has changed lives – especially for women – and it has bolstered self-belief and political consciousness – though also, inevitably, disillusion. Its military defeat of ISIS, its defence of minorities, its promotion of women's rights, and its fundamental sincerity, have won it respect in North and East Syria and also more widely. And it has introduced Öcalan's ideas as a living possibility to people throughout the world. These are impressive achievements, however, outwit the circle of dedicated cadres, the realisation of a radical new world remains elusive.

As Cihad Hammy and Thomas Jeffrey Miley explain in their chapter in [Rojava in Focus](#): Critical Dialogues, grassroots democracy will always face tendencies to move towards centralisation and new state-like forms, in both political administration and military organisation.

The revolution in Rojava was made possible by the power vacuum created by Syria's civil war, but the situation of its birth has also burdened it with intrinsic contradictions. It was brought into being by a revolutionary vanguard that has attempted to impose bottom-up democracy from above, while retaining a guiding hand. The necessities of a war economy have prioritised immediate survival above the ideals of an ecological economy that responds to community needs. Oil has been the basis for economic survival, while blockades and sanctions have created dependence on black-market trade and informal finance. And the pivotal role of defence has resulted in a centralised and dominant military.

The ambience of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Women's Defence Forces may be very different from the rigidities of a British regiment, but this is a professional and disciplined army. And it is notable that negotiations with Damascus have been led by that army's commander in chief, Mazloum Abdi, a military man and not a civilian – though many would like to see him take up a political role in a future peaceful Syria.

All these problems have been much discussed, but I want to focus here on the role of Western imperialism, and of intervention by the forces of liberal democracy. Historically, these forces always ensure that system change fails. This is not because it can't work, but because it is not allowed to work, and is not allowed to develop the momentum that could allow change to spread and to begin to turn the tide against capitalist hegemony.

Intervention by America and friends

The Syrian uprising cannot be reduced to simply an American regime change operation, as some have liked to portray it. Bashar al-Assad stole Syria's wealth for himself and ruled the country through violent repression, and there were good reasons for Syrians to protest against his regime. But it is also well documented how the United States has attempted to exploit genuine unrest and intervene to force regime change.

Between 2012 and 2017 the CIA spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to arm and train opposition fighters in Operation Timber Sycamore. The campaign was supported by Saudi Arabia, the UK, Turkey, Qatar, and Jordan, and the groups that benefited were increasingly involved in Islamist politics.

Recently, more information has come out about the role of both the United States and Britain in building up Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and in converting the group's leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, from outlawed terrorist to Syria's internationally-courted new president. We already knew that Hillary Clinton's policy advisor had [written in 2012](#) that "AQ [al-Qaeda] is on our side in Syria", and there was much speculation when al-Sharaa, then known as Jolani, gave a [long interview](#) to Martin Smith for Frontline in 2021. Last month, Robert Ford, a former US Ambassador to Syria who has a [long history](#) of supporting opposition groups and also of following Turkey's line against the Syrian Kurds, recounted in a [public speech](#) how he helped a British NGO bring al-Sharaa "out of the terrorist world into regular politics". [Independent Arabia](#) revealed the NGO to be Inter-Mediate, founded by Tony Blair's former Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, who was recently made National Security Advisor to Keir Starmer. Powell has described his organisation as working closely with the British government and security services, and Britain has been quick to make links with the new man in charge of Syria.

Some critics of US intervention – especially Assad apologists – have tended to depict the Autonomous Administration and SDF as American stooges; however, it has always been clear that American support for the SDF does not extend beyond their joint actions against ISIS. It is not the secular bearers of what the West likes to think of as European values that the United States and their friends have chosen as the new rulers and agents of regime change. Yet again, fear of any sort of progressive challenge has driven the liberal establishment into the arms of Islamist reaction.

Now the United States has given the green light to the [integration of thousands of Uyghurs and other foreign fighters](#) into the Syrian army; with Tom Barrack, US Ambassador to Turkey and Special Envoy for Syria, accepting the argument of al-Sharaa's government that it was safer to include these fighters than exclude them.

Ambassador Barrack made a fortune in real estate. His grandparents were Lebanese Christian immigrants and he [told Turkey's NTV](#) that he thanked for his success American freedom and his "great Ottoman DNA". He also claimed that Turkey "does not have its eyes on Syrian territory", despite the fact that they occupy significant areas of it and show no sign of moving, and that "It is absolutely ridiculous" that the European Union will not give membership to "its valuable defence ally".

Liberalising the economy

Al-Sharaa, the new president of Syria, has secured the support of his western backers by [demonstrating his allegiance to the neoliberal order](#); and, after a meeting with al-Sharaa in Istanbul that followed Donald Trump's lifting of sanctions, Ambassador Barrack [declared](#), "Syria is now OPEN FOR BUSINESS!". Under the Baath regime, much of the economy was taken into public ownership, but this was then used to benefit the Assad family rather than the country as a whole. Al-Sharaa is ready to privatise public assets and to welcome foreign investment. Last week the government announced a \$7 billion deal with Qatar for the building of new power plants, but these exclude North and East Syria.

Second only to ecology, economic change has been one of the least well-developed aspects of the Autonomous Administration's programme. The Autonomous Administration inherited Assad's centralised system, but their attempts to make it work for the benefit of the people have been impeded by poor planning as well as the impact of war and Turkey's relentless destruction. Healthcare and education are free, and the Administration sets wheat prices and subsidises bread, fuel, and seed. However, [farmers complain](#) that the subsidies have not been reliable.

The Autonomous Administration currently controls the majority of Syria's oil fields – captured in the fight against ISIS – and these supply [three quarters of the Administration's income](#), with the rest coming from customs dues and taxes. They have made clear that they regard the oil as a common Syrian resource, but how the income from oil will be shared is still being debated; they will not relinquish control without securing other demands.

Cooperatives have been helpful in enabling women to be more self-sufficient, but are only a tiny part of the economy as a whole, and have not managed to create the community-based economy of Öcalan's vision.

Now there will be strong pressure to commercialise everything and to issue licenses to foreign companies that give those companies both power and profits. The availability of new consumer goods will be welcomed, and by the time people discover their new subservience to big business, it will be too late. Meanwhile, as everyone [eyes up the oil wells and gas reserves](#), there is no chance that Öcalan's ecological ideas will get more than a superficial acknowledgement.

Climate change does not respect borders, and even if North and East Syria stopped oil and gas production tomorrow, the region would still suffer from the droughts that threaten to turn Syria's breadbasket into a desert. Now it is harvest time, but many fields that should be full of wheat are barren and dry. Farmers can't afford the fuel needed to irrigate them and can't risk too much seed on the uncertainties of the rain.

The global destruction of climate change has been compounded by the withholding of river water by upstream Turkey, in defiance of long-standing agreements. This is a part of their criminal assault on the region's vital infrastructure, but is also a diversion of

scarce resources for their own use, which is something that climate change will only encourage.

It is not just Islamist intolerance, militia violence, and Turkish aggression that threaten the Autonomous Administration. They must also face up to the global challenges of corporate capture and drought.

Talks

Last Sunday, the carefully selected delegation from North and East Syria went to Damascus for talks with government representatives. Turkey has put pressure on the Syrian Government not to make concessions; however, Al-Monitor revealed this week that [secret talks](#) have been taking place between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds since spring last year – long before the fall of Assad. This should not come as a surprise as such talks tend to avoid the glare of publicity – and, indeed, the Administration's Co-chair for Foreign Relations, Ilham Ahmed, referred to direct communications with Turkey when we met her last Saturday.

Turkish regression

At the same time, the rhetoric coming out of the Turkish Government makes no acknowledgement of talks and gives no indication of a desire for genuine negotiation, either with North and East Syria or in the PKK peace process. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is still [publicly insisting](#) on the unconditional dissolution of both the PKK and the SDF.

The [new amnesty bill](#) expressly excluded all political prisoners, and there is little expectation of political developments before the summer recess. By contrast, the far-right leader, Devlet Bahçeli has demonstrated his commitment to the peace process with a [call for a dedicated parliamentary commission](#), but this has been ignored.

Öcalan and the PKK have scaled down their immediate ambitions and are demanding only fundamental Kurdish rights and the ability to continue their campaign through political means. That requires a process for allowing the guerrillas safely back into civilian life, and it also requires the existence of a functioning democracy. But every week sees democracy further eroded.

The Turkish government can't defeat the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) at the ballot box, so they are arresting their elected mayors. This is similar to their attacks on the DEM Party and its predecessors, but in the CHP case they prefer to accuse them of "corruption" rather than "terrorism". There have also been [investigations launched](#) against the CHP leader based on his speeches at the big protest rallies. The latest five mayors arrested, along with their senior staff, were [videoed in handcuffs](#), reminding people of other authoritarian moments in Turkey's history.

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