

# **The Threat to Rojava**

**An Anarchist in Syria Speaks on the Real Meaning of Trump's Withdrawal**

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# Contents

First of All: About the Experiment in Rojava . . . . .	4
The Factions . . . . .	5
Has ISIS Been Defeated? And by Whom? . . . . .	6
Outside Interventions . . . . .	7
What Does the Troop Withdrawal Mean? . . . . .	8
What Will Happen Next? . . . . .	9
First Scenario . . . . .	9
Second Scenario . . . . .	10
Looking Forward . . . . .	11
Appendix: Rival Narratives . . . . .	12
<b>Loyalist narrative:</b> . . . . .	12
<b>Western, gulf Arab, and rebel narrative:</b> . . . . .	13
<b>Turkish narrative:</b> . . . . .	13
<b>Western, Kurdish narrative:</b> . . . . .	13
<b>ISIS and radical Islamist narrative:</b> . . . . .	14

I'm writing from Rojava. Full disclosure: I didn't grow up here and I don't have access to all the information I would need to tell you what is going to happen next in this part of the world with any certainty. I'm writing because it is urgent that you hear from people in northern Syria about what Trump's "troop withdrawal" really means for us—and it's not clear how much time we have left to discuss it. I approach this task with all the humility at my disposal.

I'm not formally integrated into any of the groups here. That makes it possible for me to speak freely, but I should emphasize that my perspective doesn't represent any institutional position. If nothing else, this should be useful as a historical document indicating how some people here understood the situation at this point in time, in case it becomes impossible to ask us later on.

Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria is not an "anti-war" or "anti-imperialist" measure. It will not bring the conflict in Syria to an end. On the contrary, Trump is effectively giving Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan the go-ahead to invade Rojava and carry out ethnic cleansing against the people who have done much of the fighting and dying to halt the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS). This is a deal between strongmen to exterminate the social experiment in Rojava and consolidate authoritarian nationalist politics from Washington, DC to Istanbul and Kobane. Trump aims to leave Israel the most ostensibly liberal and democratic project in the entire Middle East, foreclosing the possibilities that the revolution in Rojava opened up for this part of the world.

All this will come at a tremendous cost. As bloody and tragic as the Syrian civil war has already been, this could open up not just a new chapter of it, but a sequel.

This is not about where US troops are stationed. The two thousand US soldiers at issue are a drop in the bucket in terms of the number of armed fighters in Syria today. They have not been on the frontlines of the fighting the way that the US military was in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> The withdrawal of these soldiers is not the important thing here. What matters is that Trump's announcement is a message to Erdoğan indicating that there will be no consequences if the Turkish state invades Rojava.

There's a lot of confusion about this, with supposed anti-war and "anti-imperialist" activists like Medea Benjamin endorsing Donald Trump's decision, blithely putting the stamp of "peace" on an impending bloodbath and telling the victims that they should have known better. It makes no sense to blame people here in Rojava for depending on the United States when neither Medea Benjamin nor anyone like her has done anything to offer them any sort of alternative.

While authoritarians of various stripes seek to cloud the issue, giving a NATO member a green light to invade Syria is what is "pro-war" and "imperialist." Speaking as an anarchist, my goal is not to talk about what the US military should do. It is to discuss how US military policy impacts people and how we ought to respond. Anarchists aim to bring about the abolition of every state government and the disbanding of every state military in favor of horizontal forms of voluntary organization; but when we organize in solidarity with targeted

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<sup>1</sup> In Hajin, where the last ISIS stronghold is, the American position is way behind the front, in artillery range but out of range of any weapons Daesh has, so they can sit there and pound away without being hit back, while the risks are run by ground troops of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This is precisely what the Turkish army would do to us if Turkey invades Rojava.

populations such as those who are on the receiving end of the violence of ISIS and various state actors in this region, we often run into thorny questions like the ones I'll discuss below.

The worst case scenario now is that the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA), backed by the Turkish military itself, will overrun Rojava and carry out ethnic cleansing on a level you likely cannot imagine. They've already done this on a small scale in Afrin. In Rojava, this would take place on a historic scale. It could be something like the Palestinian Nakba or the Armenian genocide.

I will try to explain why this is happening, why you should care about it, and what we can do about it together.

## **First of All: About the Experiment in Rojava**

The system in Rojava is not perfect. This is not the right place to air dirty laundry, but there are lots of problems. I'm not having the kind of experience here that Paul Z. Simons had some years ago, when his visit to Rojava made him feel that everything is possible. Years and years of war and militarization have taken their toll on the most exciting aspects of the revolution here. Still, these people are in incredible danger right now and the society they have built is worth defending.

What is happening in Rojava is not anarchy. All the same, women play a major role in society; there is basic freedom of religion and language; an ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse population lives side by side without any major acts of ethnic cleansing or conflict; it's heavily militarized, but it's not a police state; the communities are relatively safe and stable; there's not famine or mass food insecurity; the armed forces are not committing mass atrocities. Every faction in this war has blood on its hands, but the People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) have conducted themselves far more responsibly than any other side. They've saved countless lives—not just Kurds—in Sinjar and many other places. Considering the impossible conditions and the tremendous amount of violence that people here have been subjected to from all sides, that is an incredible feat. All this stands in stark contrast to what will happen if the Turkish state invades, considering that Trump has given Erdoğan the go-ahead in return for closing a massive missile sale.

It should go without saying that I don't want to perpetuate an open-ended Bush-style "war on terror," much less to participate in the sort of "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West that bigots and fundamentalists of both stripes have been fantasizing about. On the contrary, that is precisely what we're trying to prevent here. Most of the people Daesh [ISIS] have killed have been Muslim; most of the people who have died fighting Daesh have been Muslim. In Hajin, where I was stationed and where the last ISIS stronghold is, one of the internationals who has been fighting Daesh longest is an observant Muslim—not to speak of all the predominantly Arab fighters from Deir Ezzor there, most of whom are almost certainly Muslim as well.

## The Factions

For the sake of brevity, I'll oversimplify and say that today, there are roughly five sides in the Syrian civil war: loyalist, Turkish, jihadi, Kurdish,<sup>2</sup> and rebel.<sup>3</sup> At the conclusion of this text, an appendix explores the narratives that characterize each of these sides.

Each of these sides stands in different relation to the others. I'll list the relations of each group to the others, starting with the other group that they are most closely affiliated with and ending with the groups they are most opposed to:

**Loyalist:** Kurdish, Turkish, jihadi, rebel

**Rebel:** Turkish, jihadi, Kurdish, loyalist

**Turkish:** rebel, jihadi, loyalist, Kurdish

**Kurdish:** loyalist, rebel, Turkish, jihadi

**Jihadi:** rebel, Turkish, Kurdish and loyalist

This may be helpful in visualizing which groups could be capable of compromising and which are irreversibly at odds. Again, remember, I am generalizing *a lot*.

I want to be clear that each of these groups is motivated by a narrative that contains at least some kernel of truth. For example, in regards to the question of who is to blame for the rise of ISIS, it is true that the US "ploughed the field" for ISIS with the invasion and occupation of Iraq and its disastrous fallout (loyalist narrative); but it is also true that the Turkish state has tacitly and sometimes blatantly colluded with ISIS because ISIS was fighting against the primary adversary of the Turkish state (Kurdish narrative) and that Assad's brutal reaction to the Arab Spring contributed to a spiral of escalating violence that culminated in the rise of Daesh (rebel narrative). And although I'm least sympathetic to the jihadi and Turkish state perspectives, it is certain that unless the well-being of Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria is factored into a political settlement, the jihadis will go on fighting, and that unless there is some kind of political settlement between the Turkish state and the PKK, Turkey will go on seeking to wipe out Kurdish political formations, without hesitating to commit genocide.

It's said that "Kurds are second-class citizens in Syria, third-class citizens in Iran, fourth-class citizens in Iraq, and fifth-class citizens in Turkey." It's no accident that when Turkish officials like Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu list the "terror groups" they are most concerned about in the region, they name the YPG before ISIS. Perhaps this can help explain

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, there are two major parties in Iraqi Kurdistan in addition to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). They each have their own armies and police; they fought an actual civil war once. They do not like each other at all. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Barzani family dynasty, is more closely aligned with Turkey and the US; it was more closely aligned with Saddam Hussein before. They have bad relations with the administration in Rojava; they are roundly despised here because they basically stood aside and let the catastrophe in Sinjar happen in their own backyard while the PKK scrambled to rush into the breach. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has better relations with Iran, PKK, and the administration here. There is a KDP-related militia called Rojava Peshmerga in Rojava; again, they have a poor reputation because they've spent the whole war doing very little while YPG has died in droves fighting ISIS. All this is simply to say that there is no single Kurdish position; there are reactionary Kurdish groups, too.

<sup>3</sup> Mind you, the Syrian rebels were never homogenous; among them, you can find both an element aligned to Turkey and jihadis and an element aligned more closely with YPG/YPJ. Unfortunately, many of those who were interested in more "democratic" solutions to the situation in Syria were forced to flee the country years ago.

the cautious response of many Kurds to the Syrian revolution: from the Kurdish perspective, regime change in Syria carried out by Turkish-backed jihadis coupled with no regime change in Turkey could be worse than no regime change in Syria at all.

I won't rehash the whole timeline from the ancient Sumerians to the beginning of the PKK war in Turkey to the 2003 invasion of Iraq to the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS. Let's skip forward to Trump's announcement on December 19: *"We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency."*

## **Has ISIS Been Defeated? And by Whom?**

Let me be clear: Daesh has *not* been defeated in Syria. Just a few days ago, they took a shot at our position with a rocket launcher out of a clear blue sky and missed by only a hundred yards.

It is true that their territory is just a fraction of what it once was. At the same time, by any account, they still have thousands of fighters, a lot of heavy weaponry, and probably quite a bit of what remains of their senior leadership down in the Hajin pocket of the Euphrates river valley and the surrounding deserts, between Hajin and the Iraqi border. In addition, ISIS have a lot of experience and a wide array of sophisticated defense strategies—and they are absolutely willing to die to inflict damage on their enemies.

To the extent that their territory *has* been drastically reduced, Trump is telling a bald-faced lie in trying to take credit for this. The achievement he is claiming as his own is largely the work of precisely the people he is consigning to death at the hands of Turkey.

Under Obama, the Department of Defense and the CIA pursued dramatically different strategies in reference to the uprising and subsequent civil war in Syria. The CIA focused on overthrowing Assad by any means necessary, to the point that arms and money they supplied trickled down to al-Nusra, ISIS, and others. By contrast, the Pentagon was more focused on defeating ISIS, beginning to concentrate on supporting the largely Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) during the defense of Kobane in 2014.

Now, as an anarchist who desires the complete abolition of every government, I have no love for the Pentagon or the CIA, but if we evaluate these two approaches according to their own professed goals, the Pentagon plan worked fairly well, while the CIA plan was a total disaster. In this regard, it's fair to say that the Obama administration contributed to both the growth of ISIS and its suppression. Trump, for his part, has done neither, except insofar as the sort of nationalist Islamophobia he promotes helps to generate a symmetrical form of Islamic fundamentalism.

Up until December, Trump maintained the Pentagon strategy in Syria that he inherited from the Obama administration. There have been signs of mission creep from US National Security Advisor John R. Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who ultimately hope to undermine Iran on account of it supplying oil to China. This far—and no further—I can understand the concerns of a pseudo-pacifist "anti-imperialist": war with Iran would be a nightmare compounding the catastrophe brought about by the war in Iraq. So yes, insofar

as the YPG and YPJ were forced to coordinate with the US military, they were working with unsavory characters whose motivations were very different from their own.

To sum up: what has brought about the by-now almost total recapture of the territory ISIS occupied isn't rocket science. It's the combination of a brave and capable ground force with air support. In this sort of conventional territorial war, it's extremely difficult for a ground force without air support to defeat a ground force with air support, no matter how fiercely the former fights. In some parts of Syria, this involved the YPG/YPJ on the ground with US backing from the air. Elsewhere in Syria, it must be said, ISIS was pushed back by the combination of Russian air support and the loyalist army (SAA) alongside Iranian-backed militias.

## Outside Interventions

It would have been extremely difficult to recapture this territory from ISIS any other way. The cooperation of the YPG/YPJ with the US military remains controversial, but the fact is—every side in the Syrian conflict has been propped up and supported by larger outside powers and would have collapsed without that support.

People employing the Turkish, loyalist, and jihadi narratives often point out that Kobane would have fallen and YPG/YPJ would never have been able to retake eastern Syria from Daesh without US air support. Likewise, the Syrian government and the Assad regime were very close to military collapse in 2015, around the time Turkey conveniently downed a Russian plane and Putin decided that Russia was going to bail out the Assad regime no matter what it took. The rebels, on their side, never would have come close to toppling Assad through military means without massive assistance from the Turkish government, the Gulf states, US intelligence services, and probably Israel on some level, although the details of this are murky from where I'm situated.

And the jihadis—Daesh, al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, and the others—would never have been able to take control of half of Iraq and Syria if the US had not been so foolish as to leave an army's worth of state-of-the-art equipment in the hands of the Iraqi government, which effectively abandoned it. It also helped them that a tremendous amount of resources trickled down from the above-mentioned foreign sponsors of the rebels. It also helped that Turkey left its airports and borders open to jihadis from all over the world who set out to join Daesh. There also appears to have been some sort of financial support from the Gulf states, whether formally or through back channels.

The Turkish state has its own agenda. It is not by any means simply a proxy for the US. But at the end of the day, it's a NATO member and it can count on the one hundred percent support of the US government—as the missile sale that the US made to Turkey days before the withdrawal tweet illustrates.

In view of all this, we can see why YPG/YPJ chose to cooperate with the US military. My point is not to defend this decision, but to show that under the circumstances, it was the only practical alternative to annihilation. At the same time, it is clear that this strategy has not created security for the experiment in Rojava. Even if we set aside ethical concerns,

there are problems with relying on the United States—or France, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or any other state government with its own state agenda. As anarchists, we have to talk very seriously about how to create other options for people in conflict zones. Is there any form of international horizontal decentralized coordination that could have solved the problems that the people in Rojava were facing such that they would not have been forced to depend on the US military? If we find no answer to this question when we look at the Syria of 2013–2018, is there something we could have done earlier? These are extremely pressing questions.

No one should forget that ISIS was only reduced to their current relative weakness by a multi-ethnic, radically democratic grassroots resistance movement, that incidentally involved international volunteers from around the globe. In view of Trump's order to abandon and betray the struggle against ISIS, every sincere person who earnestly wants to put a stop to the spread of apocalyptic fundamentalist terror groups like ISIS or their imminent successors should stop counting on the state and put all their resources into directly supporting decentralized multi-ethnic egalitarian movements. It is becoming ever clearer that those are our only hope.

## **What Does the Troop Withdrawal Mean?**

I'm not surprised that Trump and the Americans are "betraying an ally"—I don't think anybody here had the illusion that Trump or the Pentagon intended to support the political project in Rojava. Looking back through history, it was clear enough that when ISIS was beaten, the US would leave Rojava at the mercy of the Turkish military. If the forces of the YPG/YPJ have dragged their feet in rooting ISIS out of their last strongholds, this may be one of the reasons.

But it is still very surprising and perplexing that Trump would rush to give up this foothold that the US has carved out in the Russosphere—and that the US military establishment would let him do so. From the perspective of maintaining US global military hegemony, the decision makes no sense at all. It's a gratuitous gift to Putin, Erdoğan, and ISIS, which could take advantage of the situation to regenerate throughout the region, perhaps in some new form—more on that below.

The withdrawal from Syria does not necessarily mean that conflict with Iran is off the table, by the way. On the contrary, certain hawks in the US government may see this as a step towards consolidating a position from which that could be possible.

However you look at it, Trump's decision is big news. It indicates that the US "deep state" has no power over Trump's foreign policy. It suggests that the US neoliberal project is dead in the water, or at least that some elements of the US ruling class consider it to be. It also implies a future in which ethno-nationalist autocrats like Erdoğan, Trump, Assad, Bolsonaro, and Putin will be in the driver's seat worldwide, conniving with each other to maintain power over their private domains.

In that case, the entire post-cold war era of US military hegemony is over, and we are entering a multipolar age in which tyrants will rule balkanized authoritarian ethno-states: think



Europe before World War I. The liberals and neoconservatives who preferred US hegemony are mourning the passing of an era that was a blood-soaked nightmare for millions. The leftists (and anarchists?) who imagine that this transition could be good news are fools fighting yesterday's enemy and yesterday's war, not recognizing the new nightmares springing up around them. The de facto red/brown coalition of authoritarian socialists and fascists who are celebrating the arrival of this new age are hurrying us all helter-skelter into a brave new world in which more and more of the globe will look like the worst parts of the Syrian civil war.

And speaking from this vantage point, here, today, I do not say that lightly.

## **What Will Happen Next?**

Sadly, Kurdish and left movements in Turkey have been decimated over the past few years. I would be very surprised if there were any kind of uprising in Turkey, no matter what happens in Rojava. We should not permit ourselves to hope that a Turkish invasion here would trigger an insurgency in northern Kurdistan.

Unless something truly unexpected transpires, there are basically two possible outcomes here.

### **First Scenario**

In the first scenario, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) will make some kind of agreement with the Assad regime, likely under less favorable terms than would have been possible before the Turkish invasion of Afrin; both sides would likely make concessions of some kind and agree to fight on the same side if Turkey invades. If Russia signs off on this, it could suffice to prevent the invasion from taking place. Either YPG/YPJ or SAA will finish off the Hajin pocket, and the war could be basically over except for Idlib.

Both the Assad regime and the various predominantly Kurdish formations have been extremely hardheaded in negotiating, but perhaps the threat to both Rojava and the Assad regime is so extreme that they will choose this option. It is possible that this is one of the objectives of the Turkish threat, or even of Trump's withdrawal: to force YPG to relinquish military autonomy to the Assad regime.

YPG, PYD, and company are not in a very good bargaining position right now, but the regime knows it can at least bargain with them, whereas if northern Syria is occupied by Turkish-backed jihadis and assorted looters, it is unclear what would happen next. Rojava contains much of Syria's best agricultural land in the north, as well as oil fields in the south.

I can only speculate what the terms of this theoretical agreement might be. There's lots of speculation online: language rights, Kurdish citizenship being regularized, prior service in YPG counting as military service so that soldiers who have been fighting ISIS all these years can return to being civilians rather than immediately being conscripted into SAA, some kind of limited political autonomy, or the like. In exchange, the YPG and its allies would essentially have to hand military and political control of SDF areas over to the regime.

Could Assad's regime be trusted to abide by an agreement after they gain control? Probably not.

To be clear, it's all too easy for me to speak abstractly about the Assad regime as the lesser of two evils. I'm informed about many of the atrocities the regime has committed, but I have not experienced them myself, and this is not the part of Syria where they did the worst things, so I more frequently hear stories from the locals about Daesh and other jihadis, not to mention Turkey. There are likely people in other parts of Syria who regard the Assad regime regaining power with the same dread with which people here regard the Turkish military and ISIS.

In any case, there are some signs that this first scenario might still be possible. The regime has sent troops to Manbij, to one of the lines where the massive Turkish/TFSA troop buildup is occurring. There are meetings between the PYD and the regime as well as with the Russians. An Egyptian-mediated negotiation between the PYD and the regime is scheduled to take place soon.

This first scenario does not offer a very attractive set of options. It's not what Jordan Mactaggart or the thousands and thousands of Syrians who fought and died with YPG/YPJ gave their lives for. But it would be preferable to the other scenario...

## **Second Scenario**

In the second scenario, the Assad regime will throw in its lot with Turkey instead of with YPG.

In this case, some combination of the Turkish military and its affiliated proxies will invade from the north while the regime invades from the south and west. YPG will fight to the death, street by street, block by block, in a firestorm reminiscent of the Warsaw ghetto uprising or the Paris Commune, utilizing all the defensive tactics they acquired while fighting ISIS. Huge numbers of people will die. Eventually, the Assad regime and Turkey/TFSA will establish some line between their zones of control. For the foreseeable future, there would be some kind of Turkish-Jihadi Rump State of Northern Syrian Warlordistan.

Any remaining Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Christians, and other minorities would be expelled, ethnically cleansed, or terrorized. TFSA and related militias would likely loot everything they could get their hands on. In the long run, Turkey would probably dump the Syrian refugees who are now in Turkey back into these occupied areas, bringing about irreversible demographic shifts that could be the cause of future ethnic conflicts in the region.

We should not believe any assurances from the Turkish state or its apologists that this will not be the result of their invasion, as this is exactly what they have done in Afrin and they have no reason to behave differently in Rojava. Remember: from the perspective of the Turkish state, the YPG/YPJ are enemy number one in Syria.

Now let's talk about Daesh. Despite the looming threat of invasion, SDF is still finishing off the Hajin pocket of ISIS. If it weren't for the fact that Turkey is throwing Daesh a lifeline by threatening to invade, Daesh would be doomed, as they are surrounded by SDF, SAA, and the Iraqi army. Let me say this again: *Trump giving Turkey the go-ahead to invade Rojava is practically the only thing that could save ISIS.*

Trump has repeatedly said things to the effect that Turkey is promising to finish off ISIS. To believe this lie, you would have to be politically ignorant, yes—but in addition, you would also have to be geographically illiterate. This describes Trump's supporters, if no one else.

Even if the Turkish government had any intention of fighting Daesh in Syria—a proposition that is highly doubtful, considering how easy Turkey made it for ISIS to get off the ground—in order to even reach Hajin and the Euphrates river valley, they would have to steamroll across the entirety of Rojava. There is no other way to get to Hajin. If you're unfamiliar with the area, look at a map and you'll see what I'm talking about.

The Assad regime holds positions right across the Euphrates River from both the SDF and Daesh positions, and would be willing and able to finish off the last ISIS pocket. As far as I'm concerned, I'd rather see the regime take the losses there to accomplish that than see YPG overextend itself and bleed any further. But the point here is that when Trump says something to the effect that "Turkey will finish off ISIS!" he is sending a blatant dog whistle to Turkish hardliners that they can attack Rojava and he won't do anything to stop them. It has nothing to do with ISIS and everything to do with ethnic cleansing in Rojava.

If nothing else, even if Assad allies with the Turkish government, we can hope that the forces of the regime will still finish off ISIS. If Turkey has its way and does what Trump is talking about, beating a path all the way through Rojava to Hajin, they will likely give Daesh's fighters safe passage, a new set of clothes, three meals a day, and this village I'm living in in exchange for their assistance fighting future Kurdish insurgencies.

So there it is: in declaring victory over ISIS, Trump is arranging the only way that ISIS fighters could come out of this situation with their capacities intact. It's Orwellian, to say the least.

The only other option I can imagine, if negotiations with the Assad regime break down or PYD decides to take the moral high road and not compromise with the regime—who are untrustworthy and have carried out plenty of atrocities of their own—would be to let the entire SDF melt back into the civilian population, permit Turkey and its proxies to walk into Rojava without losing the fighting force of the YPG/YPJ, and immediately begin an insurgency. That might be smarter than a doomed final stand, but who knows.

## Looking Forward

Personally, I want to see the Syrian civil war end, and for Iraq to somehow be spared another cycle of war in the near future. I want to see ISIS prevented from regenerating its root system and preparing for a new round of violence. That doesn't mean intensifying the ways that this part of the world is policed—it means fostering local solutions to the question of how different people and populations can coexist, and how they can defend themselves from groups like Daesh. This is part of what people have been trying to do in Rojava, and that is one of the reasons that Trump and Erdoğan find the experiment here so threatening. In the end, the existence of groups like ISIS makes their authority look preferable by comparison, whereas participatory horizontal multi-ethnic projects show just how oppressive their model is.

Overthrowing Assad by military means is a dead project—or, at least, the things that would have to happen to make it plausible again in the near future are even more horrifying than the regime is. I hope that somehow, someday, there can be some kind of settlement between the regime and YPG/YPJ, and the regime and the rebels in Idlib, and everyone else who has been suffering here. If capitalism and state tyranny are the problem, this kind of civil war is not the solution, although it seems likely that what has happened in Syria will happen elsewhere in the world as the crises generated by capitalism, state power, and ethnic conflicts put people at odds.

**What can you do, reading this in some safer and stabler part of the world?**

First, you can spread the word that Trump's decision is neither a way to bring peace to Syria nor confirmation that ISIS has been defeated. You can tell other people what I have told you about how the situation looks from here, in case I am not able to do so myself.

Second, in the event of a Turkish invasion, you can use every means in your power to discredit and impede the Turkish state, Trump, and the others who paved the way for that outcome. Even if you are not able to stop them—even if you can't save our lives—you will be part of building the kind of social movements and collective capacity that will be necessary to save others' lives in the future.

In addition, you can look for ways to get resources to people in this part of the world, who have suffered so much and will continue to suffer as the next act of this tragedy plays out. You can also look for ways to support the Syrian refugees who are scattered across the globe.

Finally, you can think about how we could put better options on the table next time an uprising like the one in Syria breaks out. How can we make sure that governments fall before their reign gives way to the reign of pure force, in which only insurgents backed by other states can gain control? How can we offer other visions of how people can live and meet their needs together, and mobilize the force it will take to implement and defend them on an international basis without need of any state?

These are big questions, but I have faith in you. I have to.

## **Appendix: Rival Narratives**

Here is a review of the narratives we often see from different sides in the Syrian civil war:

### **Loyalist narrative:**

- Emphasis on how the US and other countries supported and financed rebels for their own geopolitical ends as the main cause for the escalation of the conflict.
- The existence of ISIS is mostly attributed to rebel support landing in the wrong hands and more fundamentally as a result of the fallout of the 2003 Iraq war.

- Emphasis on links and cooperation between so-called moderate rebels and groups like Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in order to argue they are all part of the same problem.
- Varying views on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its legitimacy. This seems to be different from loyalist to loyalist, with some thinking they are almost as bad as traditional rebels and others seeing them as allies against ISIS and Turkish-supported rebels.

### **Western, gulf Arab, and rebel narrative:**

- Emphasis on the Arab spring and how the brutal suppression of (relatively) peaceful protests led to an escalation of the conflict and armed rebellion and eventually full blown civil war.
- Existence of ISIS mostly attributed to Assad's actions. Often claiming how his brutal actions and reliance on sectarian militias created an environment in which ISIS could grow and gain support. Moreover, the point is made that Assad's military deliberately targeted other rebels more than ISIS, and hence is for a large part to blame for its rise.
- Emphasis on how there is a clear distinction between moderate rebels and radicals, and we should separate the two in honest analysis.
- Views on SDF ranging from unfriendly to outright hostile. Often couched in emphasizing cases in which the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the SDF worked together. In milder forms, this narrative criticizes a perceived overreliance on Kurds in majority Arab areas, while still recognizing the legitimacy of the organization in majority Kurdish areas.

### **Turkish narrative:**

The Turkish narrative is basically the same as the previous on most issues, with the important exception that the hostility towards the SDF intensifies to the extreme. Here, the links between the SDF and the PKK are emphasized and the SDF is characterized as an illegitimate terror organization that is a threat to Turkey and suppresses local Arabs.

### **Western, Kurdish narrative:**

- The conflict is often seen as a historic opportunity for the Kurdish peoples in their quest for nationhood. Emphasis on how Kurds were discriminated against before the war and how they can take matters into their own hands now.

- The existence and expansion of ISIS is mostly blamed on Turkey. Especially Turkey's passivity during the battle of Kobane is highlighted, along with accusations of direct support of ISIS and importing ISIS oil.
- Regarding rebels, the views tend to come closer to that of loyalists. Rebels (in relevant areas, anyway) are seen either as Turkish proxies or as radical lunatics to whom Turkey can turn a blind eye. The line between rebels and ISIS is often blurred, though they aren't lumped in together to the same extent as in the loyalist narrative.
- SDF is seen as one of the only sane and moral armed actors in a battle otherwise characterized by bad versus bad. Both rebel and loyalist atrocities are emphasized to support this point of view.

### **ISIS and radical Islamist narrative:**

- The start of the conflict is seen as a great awakening of Muslims against their apostate Alawite overlords. Emphasis on the solidarity of foreign fighters towards their suffering Syrian brethren.
- This perspective includes ISIS itself and also Al Qaeda and similar radical groups, who see ISIS as a group that betrayed the jihadi cause.
- The rebels are seen as naïve sellouts serving the interests of foreign governments and implementing non-Islamic ideals on their behalf. Emphasis is also put on how rebels negotiate and reach deals with loyalists, only to be betrayed and lose territory.
- SDF are seen as atheist apostates on the US payroll. The chief difference with Turkey is perhaps the emphasis on lack of religion rather than connections to the PKK.

find each other.



CrimethInc.  
The Threat to Rojava  
An Anarchist in Syria Speaks on the Real Meaning of Trump's Withdrawal  
28<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Retrieved on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2020 from <https://crimethinc.com/2018/12/28/the-threat-to-rojava-an-anarchist-in-syria-speaks-on-the-real-meaning-of-trumps-withdrawal>

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