**“Don’t know us because of our guns, but because of our ideas”**

Two years ago, on January 9, 2013, Sakine Cansiz, Fidan Dogan, and Leyla Saylemez, were murdered in the heart of Paris. Beyond their deaths, which caused an immense trauma for many, they were labeled as “terrorists” for being members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Back then, Kurdish women’s militancy was a very obscure topic to the world. Today, especially due to the resistance against the Islamic State in Kobanê, people have woken to the cause of Kurdish women. But how many know that these fighters, who became symbols of resistance and hope worldwide, decorate their common rooms with photos of these three women?

First off, the meaning of women picking up guns against ISIS must be analyzed with the patriarchal implications of war and militarism, as well as the systematic nature of ISIS’s war on women. In war, women are usually perceived as passive parts of the lands that men protect, while sexual violence is systematically used as a war tool to “dominate” and “humiliate” the enemy. ISIS launched an explicit war on women through abductions, forced marriages, rape, and sex slavery. This systematic destruction of women is a specific form of violence: **feminicide**. Fighting women are punished for violating a perceived sphere of male privilege via sexualized violence. So, for ISIS-members, who are promised virgins in paradise for their atrocities, militant women are indeed the ultimate enemy.

But considering that - apart from the explicit gendered nature of war and violence - around the world, women often play key roles in freedom struggles, but are abandoned once "liberation" or "revolution" is perceived to be achieved, that traditional gender roles make a comeback, supposedly to reestablish “normal” civil life, what can we learn about liberation from a radical standpoint?

The experience of Kurdish women with multi-layered oppression perpetuated by the status quo created consciousness of the fact that different forms of oppression are inter-related and constituted a starting point for the ideology that now drives the resistance in the three cantons that were declared in January 2014 as autonomous in Rojava (mainly Kurdish-populated parts in northern Syria), of which Kobanê is one - a resistance which resonates with struggling people worldwide, who claim the cause as their own.

So what are the politics behind Kurdish women’s resistance?

“We don’t want the world to know us because of our guns, but because of our ideas”, says Sozda, a YPJ (women’s defense units) commander in Amûde, and points at the pictures on their common room’s walls: PKK guerrilla fighters and Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned ideological representative of the movement. “We are not just women fighting ISIS. We struggle to change the society’s mentality and show the world what women are capable of.” Though there is no organic tie between the PKK and the Rojava administration, the political ideology is shared.

The PKK, founded in 1978, started a guerrilla war against the Turkish state in 1984. Initially aiming at an independent Kurdistan, it long moved beyond statehood and nationalism, both of which it now critiques as inherently oppressive and hegemonic, and advocates an alternative liberationist project in the form of inclusive, feminist, radical democracy and regional autonomy: “democratic confederalism”, based on gender equality, ecology and grassroots-democracy for all ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious groups.

Abdullah Öcalan explicitly states that patriarchy, along with capitalism and the state lie at the roots of oppression, domination, and power: *"Man is a system. The male has become a state and turned this into the dominant culture. Class and sexual oppression develop together; masculinity has generated ruling gender, ruling class, and ruling state.”[[1]](#footnote-1)* He emphasizes the need for autonomous and conscious feminist struggle: *“Woman’s freedom cannot just be assumed once a society has obtained general freedom and equality”*.[[2]](#footnote-2) PKK cadres attend seminars to challenge patriarchy and advocate gender equality to transform men’s sense of privilege and entitlement. Öcalan makes the connection between different institutions of power clear: *“All the power and state ideologies stem from sexist attitudes and behaviour[...]. Without women’s slavery none of the other types of slavery can exist let alone develop. Capitalism and nation-state denote the most institutionalized dominant male. More boldly and openly spoken: capitalism and nation-state are the monopolism of the despotic and exploitative male”.[[3]](#footnote-3)* The women’s movement independently produces sophisticated theories and critiques as well, but it is striking that a male leader of a Middle Eastern liberation struggle places women’s liberation as a critical measure of freedom. Only when reading and understanding this movement’s position and its corresponding actions, it is possible to grasp the mass-mobilization of women in Kobanê. It did not emerge out of nothing, but is based on a rooted tradition with a determined set of principles.

The PKK splits administration equally between one woman and one man from party presidencies down to neighborhood councils through its co-chair principle. Beyond providing women and men with equal decision-making power, the co-chair concept aims to decentralize power, prevent monopolism, and promote consensus-finding. The women’s movement is autonomously organized, socially, politically, militarily. While these organizational principles seek to guarantee women representation, massive social and political mobilization aims to raise society’s consciousness so that it internalizes the advocated principles. One impact this has had is the normalization of Kurdish women’s strong position in Turkish politics, compared to the rest of the country.

Inspired by these principles, the Rojava cantons enforce co-presidencies and quotas, and created women’s defense units, women’s communes, academies, tribunals, and cooperatives. The women’s movement Yekîtiya Star is autonomously organized in all walks of life, from defense to economy to education to health. Autonomous women’s councils exist parallel to the people’s councils and can veto the latter’s decisions. Laws aim to eliminate gender-based discrimination. Men committing violence against women are not supposed to be part of the administration. In the midst of war, one of the governance’s first acts was to criminalize forced marriages, domestic violence, honor killings, polygamy, child marriage, and bride price. Many non-Kurdish women, especially Arabs and Syriacs join the armed ranks and administration in Rojava and are all encouraged to organize autonomously as well. In all areas of life, including in the internal security forces (asayish) and the YPJ and YPG (people’s defense units), gender equality is a central part of education and training.

While some white women arrogantly claimed that women in Kobanê fight “for western values”, women’s academies in Rojava critique the misconception that women in the west are so much more liberated than them. “There is no individual freedom if the whole of society is enslaved.” In public seminars, women come up with their own critiques of the social sciences and propose ways of liberating knowledge from power. Yet, this popular and explicitly feminist social revolution is completely ignored by mainstream media.

“Our struggle is not just to defend our land”, YPJ commander Jiyan Afrin explains. “We as women, take part in all walks of life, whether fighting against ISIS or combating discrimination and violence against women. We are trying to mobilize and be the authors of our own liberation”.

**What liberation?**

The experience of the Kurdish women’s movement illustrates that for meaningful social revolution, concepts of liberation must be freed from the parameters of the status quo. For instance, nationalism is a gendered, patriarchal concept. Its premises limit struggles for justice. Similarly, the idea of a nation-state perpetuates the dominant oppressive hegemonic system. Rather than subscribing to these concepts, liberation should be seen as a never-ending struggle, a quest to build an ethical society, solidarity between communities, and social justice. Hence, rather than being a rights-based side issue that puts the burden on women, women’s liberation and equality of all genders become a matter of responsibility for all of society, because they become measures of defining society’s ethics and freedom. For a radical and revolutionary freedom struggle, women's liberation must be a central aim, but also an active method in the process. Political participation must move beyond voting and rights, and be radically reclaimed by the people.

Without this collective effort to raise society's consciousness, to transform formerly silenced people into political subjects, Kobanê would not have been able to resist for this long. That is why the ideological and political mobilization of the population of Rojava cannot be treated in isolation of their victories against ISIS - genuine revolution must first challenge society’s mentality. Thus, the women’s fight against ISIS is not only militarily, but also philosophically an existential one. They not only resist against feminicidal ISIS, but also the patriarchy and rape culture prevalent among their own community. After all, ISIS exploits the concept of “honor” in the region, constructed around women’s bodies and sexualities. Thus, a large banner in the city centre of Qamishlo declares: “We will defeat the attacks of ISIS by guaranteeing the freedom of women in the Middle East.”

In an era in which female policy makers feed unjust wars in third world countries by pleading to “save the poor oppressed women”, along with racist, chauvinist groups that seem to believe to contribute to the cause of Middle Eastern women through sensationalist egocentric actions they consider as radical, and in which extreme individualism and consumerism are propagated as emancipation and empowerment, the struggling women in Kobanê contributed to rearticulating radical feminism by rejecting to comply with the premises of the global patriarchal capitalist nation-state order, by reclaiming legitimate self-defense, dissociating the monopoly of power from the state, and by fighting a brutal force not on behalf of imperialists, but in order to create their own terms of liberation.

One does not need to like the PKK, but one cannot appropriate Kobanê’s resistance, while denying the thought behind it and yet claim solidarity with the brave women fighting ISIS. You cannot write the epos of Kobanê’s women without reading the life of Sakine Cansiz, who led a prison uprising in Turkey and spat at her torturer’s face, later on adding “As a militant of a just cause, I was afraid to say ‘ah’”. Women like her paved the way to the fight against ISIS - women, labeled as prostitutes, terrorists, and confused irrational evil witches prior to the rise of ISIS, because they were fighting NATO-member Turkey. Today, Rojava’s women, while fighting ISIS, demand justice for their comrades Sakine, Fidan, and Leyla.

The de-politicization of the struggle in Kobanê robs the fighters off their agency and takes the collective mobilization out of context for the interest of the coalition, which consists of states that ignored and marginalized the resistance of Rojava against ISIS for two years and which previously provided weapons to those now forming the same murderous group.

Solidarity with Kobanê’s women means to actually care about their politics. It means to challenge the UN, NATO, unjust wars, patriarchy, capitalism, political religion, global arms trade, nationalism, sectarianism, the state-paradigm, environmental destruction – the pillars of the system that caused this situation to begin with. Do not allow those who created the dark, violent shadows over the Middle East, which led up to the rise of ISIS, pretend to be the good guys. Supporting the women in Kobanê means to get up and spread the revolution.

Notes:

Öcalan, Abdullah, 2011, *Democratic Confederalism* (Cologne: Transmedia Publishing Ltd.).

Öcalan, Abdullah, 2013, *Liberating Life: Woman’s Revolution* (Cologne: Transmedia Publishing Ltd.).

1. (Öcalan, 2013, p.51) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Öcalan, 2013, p.53) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Öcalan, 2011, p.17) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)