4 YEARS LATER

An Interview on the Middle East

Fire to the Prisons

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firetotheprisons.org

NOTE: The following is an interview with Tom Nomad regarding the current state of the middle east today since the 2011 'Arab Spring'. Tom is a midwest-based anarchist who authored The Master's Tools: Warfare and Insurgent Possibility and a member of the Institute for the Study of Insurgent Warfare, which recently published the first issue of Insurgencies: A Journal on Insurgent Strategy. Tom talks about anarchist approaches towards ethics and strategic choices, the Insurrectionalist turn in North America and the growing focus among many of a study of Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency for the purpose of reframing our struggle against State, Capital and other enemies.

This interview was conducted in November 2014. Like the last three years in the middle east, the political situation continues to change every day. For example, since this interview was conducted, the YPG officially claimed victory over ISIS in Kobanê, Syria and seventy-three Bahraini revolutionaries have had their citizenship revoked by the state. This interview provides a great deal of information and insight into the situation in the middle east, but it is time sensitive, and we apologize if things have changed, or were not mentioned that should have been.

be more grounded about our objectives and strategic capacities.

This means that we have to draw a line between those that we work with and those that we work parallel with, and in what ways we work with those we work with. On a series of levels this is a relevant question. Most anarchists have either experienced or heard stories of liberals and communists handing anarchists over to the police, many of us have had confrontations with the self-appointed peace police or with some self-righteous meeting facilitator or well meaning do-gooder. This is not a question of doing good things, it is a question of doing effective things. On this level the lines can be very clear, even if they may shift as conditions change.

But above and beyond all of this we have to move beyond positionism; this tendency among anarchists to have to articulate the correct political line, often based on thin and removed understandings of events. At the point that we become locked in this dynamic not only is there a tendency to place capacity in actions that are unlikely to have much impact, and are often more militant ways of complaining loudly, but we distract from our focus on immediate dynamics and developing an understanding of immediate dynamics, and fall back into issue-based activism.

It is also on this level that we fall prey to the "popular front;" to this tendency to support the least of bad options, and it is from this place that these tragedies tend to occur, of course when mixed with a clear sense of naivety. Now, this is not to say that we should not engage in these sorts of initiatives, cynically, but that the focus of this intervention still needs to remain on strategic outcomes; we may even get a lot out of engaging in a social movement, but that cannot be thought of as an injunction, a moral imperative.

The question here is not what groups we should support, but what support means for us, what we get out of it, how that propels our strategic trajectory forward. If it does not contribute to our strategic ends, whatever these may be at any given moment, then intervention is not the relevant framework to think through this question, and without intervention support becomes nothing but a discursive statement. But, if the calculation is that intervention is strategically important then by all means intervene, but at that point the question shifts from a question of why one is intervening to how one intervenes, and that is a question of material effectiveness, one that we have to engage on that level.

FTTP: In 2011, there seemed to be a glimmer of liberatory possibility unfolding in the uprisings of the Arab Spring. In light of the growth of ISIS, as well as the current state of affairs in Egypt and Libya, do you think there has been a drastic transition in the Middle East towards more authoritarian military conflict? If so, why?

Tom Nomad (TN): To understand how to approach this question it is important to understand the fundamental separation between insurgency and the separate process of capture that occurs in the process of attempting to end insurgency. Often these two processes are conjoined in a single process within the modernist thinking around the concept of insurgency; that insurgency is for something and attempts to create something directly. If we pay close attention to historical moments, such as the American and French Revolutions, as well as events in Russia or Spain, we can clearly see the separation of these processes. In these instances insurgency operates as a process of degrading the infrastructure of State operational capacity; this is a process that is fundamentally centered not on taking and holding space, but on logistical degradation and strategic maneuver. But, at a point, after the logistics of State operations has collapsed there is a second process, the process of some faction attempting to end the insurgency, often through repression, and create a different state logistics.

That is what we have witnessed during not only the recent uprisings in the Middle East and northern Africa, but also in Ukraine, although this was a much accelerated process. It is within this dynamic of the unleashing of political possibility through conflict, and the attempt to capture that possibility, eliminate outside possibilities and decelerate conflict that we can read these events. If we take a look at ISIS we can clearly see this. Their strategic movements across space are typified by a series of stages. First, they tend to move into empty space, and do this well. Sometimes this occurs by launching attacks into other areas, usually small scale single operations that will concentrate opposing forces away from their line of movement, which they then exploit. From that point they will begin a process of repressing possible opposing factions within these areas through extreme methods that are usually public; this begins the process of the mobilization of a repressive operation. Often, this has occurred in areas in which a regime has already been driven out, or is specifically weak, as in what occurred within Iraq. What is not clearly acknowledged about ISIS is that they tend to move into these sparsely defended or weak areas, and have had a significant amount of trouble fighting concentrated opposing forces, as in Kobanê. However, what is also clear about ISIS is that their policing apparatus is not evenly spaced across the areas that they claim to control, rather, this is a process of entrenchment, often behind lines, and often in areas that are far from lines of direct confrontation, in which they are attempting to end insurgency.

So, on the one hand, many of the conflicts that have arisen as a result of the uprisings in the Middle East and northern Africa have begun to resemble power struggles, but we should not read this as a logical outcome. Rather than competition over the direction of an insurgency, what we have begun to see is a competition over who gets to end the insurgency, and this is clear in Libya and parts of Syria. But, within the very trajectory of insurgency there is necessarily possibility generated through conflict, and this cannot be seen as the same process as the attempt to capture and eliminate this possibility.

FTTP: What role has the West played in the Middle East since the Arab spring, as well as helping to fund the repression of struggles such as student revolt in Egypt or proletarian youth in Bahrain?

TN: This is a complex question that involves a lot of discussion to actually begin to sufficiently discuss, but I will attempt to give an overview. For those that want to read a good, and lengthy, discussion of this dynamic I recommend Vijay Prishad's book Arab Spring, Libyan Winter. [While] there are a series of problems with the analysis of the implications of Western involvement on the actual dynamics of the on the ground insurgent forces in Libya...the over-arching narrative is very informative.

To begin to understand Western involvement, and the contradictions of Western involvement within the conflicts in the Middle East and northern Africa we have to first discuss the policy goals of Western, and by Western I mean NATO, government in the region, and this adds to the complications. Much Western involvement has been centered on the attempt to influence the direction of economic projects and access to resources within the Middle East and northern Africa. We could see this dynamic play out in Libya, in which NATO forces gave air support to units of the Libyan insurgency aligned with the National Transitional Council, a well-connected and sympathetic collection of defected regime officials, former international economists and former regime military personnel. It was clear within this dynamic that NATO countries were attempting to use NTC support on the ground to shape the post-Gaddafi Libya, which not only occupies a strategic place in northern Africa, but is also home to a series of shipping ports and large reserves of both oil and natural gas. In this instance these concerns drove NATO to support the insurgency.

This is a different role than the one played within the conflict in Bahrain, in which NATO nations supported the repression against Bahraini activists and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) intervention in Bahrain. There were a series of considerations that drove this approach, I will discuss three specifically. First, the US Navy Fifth Fleet is based out of Bahrain. Not only is this the primary base for all US Navy operations in the Persian Gulf, it is also seen as a central deterrent mechanism to Iranian naval expansion.

regime bases, oil fields and gas fields to attempt to starve the Syrian regime out. If this were to occur additional stress would be placed on Iran to support the Syrian regime with oil and gas shipments, and they are already stretched to the breaking point as well. They could deploy forces into northern Syria in an attempt to surround and take Aleppo or send these forces into central Syria to take either Homs or Hama. They could also deploy these forces in dispersed units to attempt to launch attacks in cities in Syria and Lebanon to draw oppositional forces away from the line of confrontation and create space for additional expansion.

Any of these scenarios are possible, and it is for this reason that the fighting around Kobanê is so strategically important, it is tying down large numbers of ISIS forces and keeping them locked in a situation that they are unlikely to be victorious in, and this is opening up a series of lines of attack. In the near future we may even see ISIS break off the fighting to free these forces up for other deployments, but that would be a potentially fatal admission of defeat.

If ISIS is successful, the momentum that they would gain from taking Kobanê is unable to be measured. They are already drawing fighters from all over the Middle East, Asia and Africa, as well as from Europe, Australia, Canada, the US, and this would likely increase to a certain degree. However, taking Kobanê, for as much as it would likely change the situation, and may even spark a Turkish intervention into Syria to secure their southern border, is unlikely to be the death of movements for autonomy in the region. In the areas in northern Syria these communities have already had to deal with military occupations, bombing from the air, massacres perpetuated by the Syrian regime and years of deprivation. The question is not even so much whether ISIS can take Kobanê, which they are unlikely to do, but if they were able to, and this is a relevant question for the Syrian regime as well, how do they plan to control a largely hostile population of people, which may have been displaced, but are not gone forever.

FTTP: Throughout history, anarchists and other rebels have championed those who have turned the guns of those who support autonomy and direct action; from the Bolsheviks to Castro and beyond. How can we support resistance in the Middle East without falling into the trap of supporting the newest groups of politicians and butchers?

TN: To avoid this we have to be very clear to draw a distinction that is not often drawn: between those that we have some form of similarity in objective, those we can use in furtherance of an objective (those that we can form immediate alliance with even if their immediate objectives are different) and those that we are in open conflict with. This means breaking with the mentality of activism and movements, breaking from the injunction to work with others, break away from the focus on numerical quantity, and begin to

Syrian regime took advantage of this and attacked ISIS forces in Deir ez Zor and around the gas fields in eastern Syria. At the same time ISIS had to pull forces from areas of western Iraq to defend these gas fields, which required forces from other areas of Iraq to be thinned out.

As time has gone on, it seems as if ISIS is maintaining a siege around Kobanê, but with fewer and fewer forces; other resources are more important. This is coupled with the tenacity of the YPG/YPJ and Free Syrian Army forces in Kobanê, as well as the impact of US airstrikes in the area, which have tapered off in the past two weeks or so.

This indicates something important about ISIS; their organizational style depends on obtaining resources on a consistent basis, and maintaining a growth rate concurrent to the space that they are attempting to occupy; neither of these attempts are likely to succeed in a fight that requires them to deal with well-organized forces like the YPG/ YPJ fighting in urban areas, where armor is not specifically useful, where movement becomes difficult, and in which knowledge of the terrain is paramount. These factors have combined to give YPG/YPJ forces a dramatic advantage in Kobanê, and have allowed them to turn the tide of the fighting.

FTTP: If Kobanê and other areas of Kurdistan and the Rojava revolution was destroyed and ISIS was to take hold, what would the result be? How would this impact the Middle East and future struggles for freedom and autonomy? *Note: As this goes into print, Kobanê has declared victory against ISIS as cited in the picture at the beginning of this interview. The following speculation can provide insight on the importance of their defense recently, and going into the future.

TN: This seems like an unlikely possibility; ISIS is logistically stretched currently, dealing with a dynamic that requires them to concentrate force but being unable to do so, and caught in large scale confrontations on a series of fronts currently. However, if this were to occur the first thing that would likely happen would be large scale executions and the mass displacement of people. It is often forgotten that for as much as ISIS tends to be strategically adept their strategy is often driven by passions and perceived political imperatives, and one of these is a modified concept of ethnic cleansing.

If Kobanê is taken, for example, the effects could be profound. On an immediate level, outside of the genocide and ethnic cleansing that would almost certainly occur, this would free up hundreds of ISIS troops for other assignments. There is not much significant resistance left in northern Syria, with both rebel forces and regime forces locked into fighting in Aleppo. It could be that ISIS redirects forces into Iraq to hold space against a building Iraqi military offensive north and west of Baghdad. It could be that they redirect these forces into the deserts of eastern Syria to take the remaining

Second, GCC nations are not only primary oil exporters and major business influences within NATO economies, but they also form a pro-Western power block within the Middle East. The repression in Bahrain came directly on the heels of GCC air and special forces assistance in Libya, in which Quatari special forces played a central role in arming and training commando units within the Libyan insurgency before launching the operation in Tripoli that was essential in the displacement of the Gaddafi regime; this is detailed in a report by Reuters titled "The Secret Plan to Take Tripoli." As Prishad details in his book, this intervention was part of a deal between NATO and the GCC, to encourage the uprising in Libya, while turning a blind eye to GCC intervention in Bahrain. The third consideration, and this has caused the most confusion, has been the attempt to then use this power bloc to contest the expansion of the Iranian sphere of influence in the region, which includes the Iraqi State, under Maliki and his successor, the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah, all of which have been reduced to playing the role of Iranian clients in the past 10 years.

This attempt to counter Iranian influence in the region is being balanced against an attempt to maintain regional geopolitical stability and achieve a deal over Iranian nuclear research. This has created a series of complications in Syria, as well as contradictions in the NATO approach to ISIS. On the one hand the Iranian State funds the Assad regime, is their primary economic support structure, trained their intelligence operatives and informal militias, funds their outside support from Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militia forces and even intervenes directly in combat situations. This has caused the US specifically to be placed in a situation in which they are attempting to aid in the elimination of the Assad regime, largely to prevent spillover in the conflict, while also attempting to not anger the Iranian state. At the same time Iranian and American military advisers are both operational in Iraq in the fight against ISIS. This is all occurring within a context in which ISIS now controls most of the major oil fields in Syria, sells oil to the Syrian regime, and until recently had an informal alliance with the Syrian regime in order to concentrate their forces against Syrian rebel and Kurdish groups. So, on the one hand it is clear that NATO forces have been arming a very small number of Syrian rebel forces, though not to a significant degree, as well as training certain units, through training camps in Jordan, while at the same time not doing enough to swing the balance of the conflict, as in Libya, in order to not end the possibility of a negotiation on Iranian nuclear research.

None of this says anything about Egypt, which has very different dynamics. At the beginning of the uprising, by all accounts, the involvement of Western governments was limited. But, as Mubarak fell, and the uprising was repressed by the Muslim Brotherhood, there were indications of Western support for literally any force that could end the uprising. Massive development loans

were signed with the transitional government and then the Brotherhood government in Egypt. Then after the Brotherhood regime, which was increasingly generating resistance, fell to a coup, Western governments largely stayed silent. It is not clear what role Western governments had in the coup, except to support it from afar, but there has been a series of attempts to legitimize the regime since that point. It is important to keep in mind that there are two considerations involved in this situation that are driving Western policy. The first is the Suez Canal, which lies at the center of a conflict between the Egyptian State, various workers organizations and a militant jihadi movement in the Sinai. Second, the majority of smuggling into the Gaza Strip happens literally under the border with Egypt, and it was this smuggling infrastructure that was the excuse for the recent Israeli invasion of Gaza.

FTTP: Why has jihad (religious motivated resistance to oppression) become so popular to some Arab youth, when concerns over employment, State repression, or a more free society were a considerable motivation to rebel in 2011?

TN: This is a potentially impossible question to really answer, but there are a series of things that we have to keep in mind. Western, specifically American, media discourse around this phenomenon tends to focus on the rise of jihadi organizations in isolation of the other dynamics that surround this rise, and tends to overemphasize the perception of the size and strength of these organizations, and there is good reason for this. If we go back to the 1990s, when bin Laden is in the Sudan, a shift occurs, one that was foreshadowed by a series of disagreements within jihadi circles around the war in Afghanistan against the Soviets, and this is documented in detail in Stephen Coll's book Ghost Wars. This disagreement did not focus so much around tactics, it focused on the projection of image, and the use of media, at that time cassette tapes and video, to project an image of jihad. In the intervening 20 years successful jihadi organizations, the ones that can attract resources and recruits, tend to be the ones that carry out the most spectacular attacks, coupled with the ability to expand access to this spectacle. This was the case with jihadi organizations before the rise of ISIS, and is more the case now. This media tactic is usually coupled with outside intervention from foreign fighters and large amounts of funding. Again, even before the rise of ISIS this was the case, with local resistance groups in Libya and Syria often being poorly funded and obtaining most of their equipment through re-appropriation, and comprised almost entirely of fighters local to the region within which they were operating.

Early in the Syrian revolution, after ISIS intervened in Syria in force in 2012, they were known primarily for carrying out big attacks, but not attacks that

has become caught in a process which there seems little way out of. They began this process of massive expansion at a point in which they were a fraction of the size that they currently are, but at a time in which the force quality that they had was much higher. To a large extent their expansion was the result of a series of dynamics. First, they are able to move quickly, and with localized command structures. In other words, commanders, earlier in the development of ISIS would travel with their forces, often fighting along-side them. This allowed ISIS to move on areas that were lightly defended or poorly defended, gather resources, leave behind a skeleton crew, and then move on to the next area of confrontation. Those that had been tracking certain commanders through Youtube videos often note that some commanders would engage in two different confrontations in a single day, often hundreds of miles apart from one another.

This spread out ISIS forces and kept them mobile, a dynamic that was beginning to pose difficulties for their ultimate political goal, which is to run a functional State, to a certain degree. However, as they obtained resources they were able to expand forces, making it much easier to hold on to space, to police space, but at the cost of mobility. This was coupled with a compression effect, in which forces oppositional to ISIS had compressed in space. This meant that ISIS was no longer fighting dispersed and/ or poorly motivated fighters; they were increasingly running into larger and larger concentrations of oppositional forces, resulting in the need to launch sustained large scale frontal attacks. This not only further contributed to their general loss of mobility, (they had to maintain supply lines all of a sudden), but this also meant that they were covering less space, even though they had more forces numerically, as forces concentrate they are less able to project across space.

This is the dynamic that we have been seeing play out over the past few months. Even though ISIS is still able to take Syrian regime airbases in isolated areas in eastern Syria, these operations are taking

more time, consuming more resources than they are obtaining after the capture, and resulting in large numbers of casualties, all of which have an attrition effect. This attempt to concentrate forces for large scale assaults has also been complicated by US airstrikes, which can easily strike a convoy from 30,000 feet, as well as the rise of antiISIS guerrilla organizations that have been ambushing convoys and assassinating ISIS commanders in eastern Syria and western Iraq.

Back to Kobanê, currently there are a series of directions that ISIS forces are being pulled. At the beginning of the assault on Kobanê a large portion of mobile ISIS forces were thrown at the city, which is not only the capital of that Kurdish canton, but also a major commercial trading hub and a significant border checkpoint. As they began to be bogged down in the center of the city they had to pull forces from other areas in eastern Syria. The

indications. Rather ISIS is a force that is capable of paying fighters, in a situation of profound political alienation, in a space devoid of much internal resistance, and even then, their strength is often over-emphasized. As we have seen time and time again, ISIS is effective as a mobile force that is capable of utilizing effective strategies of target selection and situational alliance to gain an advantage in localized areas. However, when they have to engage with concentrated opposing forces their weaknesses become apparent; their fighters, the ones still alive, are not specifically experienced, they are not specifically effective, and they have yet to take a fully defended urban area in the face of significant resistance. What ISIS is excellent at doing is maintaining local advantages through effective strategies and then projecting this to the world, expanding the image of their effectiveness far beyond what it actually is at any given point.

The same can be said for Right Sector. They were able to achieve notoriety far beyond their size and actual political influence would otherwise generate due to the dynamics of specific events and their effective use of social media. During the movement in Kiev, Right Sector was able to seize control over the defense forces, drive events through effective uses of confrontation, and use a cold strategic outlook to maintain inertia, specifically after it seemed as if the movement was collapsing a couple of weeks before the fall of the regime. But, when it came time for parliamentary elections they got less than 1% of the vote. We see similar strategies in the US being tried by groups like the Revolutionary Communist Party, which will organize a generally popular front-esque sort of demonstration, fill the stage with their speakers, dominate contacts with the press and attempt to create a situation that results in arrests which they can take credit for, even if people outside of their organization take the fall.

This is an interesting strategy on some levels, but it fails in the attempt to turn this contextual participation into actual seizures of power, unless one is in a position to attempt to eliminate all resistance in an area, which ISIS is attempting but Right Sector was not in a position to do. The other phenomena that has been occurring in Syria and Iraq has been that when an organization that is seen as an outside group that does not have much actual support on the ground seizes power, they [find that they] can hold this for a period of time. [But soon the] shock of the seizure dulls, the fear of repression wears off, and resistance begins to rise. This is beginning to occur inside ISIS controlled areas as we speak.

FTTP: How has the resistance against ISIS been successful? What have they done to hold them off?

TN: The resistance against ISIS has been successful, thus far, largely due to both tenacity and the wider strategic conditions around ISIS operations. ISIS

had much strategic purpose or importance. They have since morphed into an organization that is excellent at the projection of imagery, the use of social media, as well as military operations. This has amplified the perception of the size of ISIS, which is in actuality around 30,000 troops, as well as their influence, even though most of the space under their control is isolated desert. This shift has begun interplay with a series of other dynamics, convenience, and economic desperation. As ISIS began its drive through Iraq, which came at the end of the repression of a social movement against the Maliki regime in Anbar Province, they began to both align themselves with other resistance organizations, specifically organizations that trace their roots to the Baath Party, as well as eliminate oppositional forces through assassination. They used resources that they obtained through involvement in Syria to fuel this rise. As they moved through Iraq earlier in 2014 they were able to further displace opposition, drive the forces that had often set the stage for this rise underground and obtain large amounts of monetary and military resources. So, in many places within the ISIS area of operations the conditions that drove these initial uprisings had not changed, both Assad and Maliki remained in power, with Maliki being replaced by one of his allies, and ISIS became the only force in the area that one could join up with. This dynamic is often seen in Syria as well, where fighters, regardless of the unit they end up with, often join up with the first unit that rolls through their area after they decide that they are going to join the fight. So, while ISIS began its life as a dedicated force of a few thousand largely foreign fighters and veterans of the war in Syria and the Iraqi insurgency, many of these initial fighters have been killed or incapacitated and they are left with a much larger, less dedicated, less experienced and well trained force.

We cannot also under-emphasize the role of economic desperation and the failure of prior uprisings in this equation either. One thing is clear about ISIS, they pay, and they pay well. We can see the influence of the role of money in the rise of ISIS in the rapid growth in combat strength after the taking of Mosul in Iraq. During the taking of the city, ISIS fighters were met with little resistance, other allied units had been launching attacks on Iraqi forces, which were numerically strong but under equipped and led by political appointees (this is discussed at length in the report that ISIW wrote about ISIS), and upon the arrival of ISIS on the outskirts of the city most of the military forces, around 30,000, abandoned their posts and left their equipment behind. ISIS then set about robbing every bank in the city, including the Central Bank branch, and removing as much military gear as they could. This netted them somewhere around $2 billion US dollars worth of cash and enough equipment for around 10,000 fighters. After this point ISIS began paying fighters a very high wage, and were willing to take in any able-bodied male that was capable of fighting. This recruitment drive locally in Iraq and Syria was bolstered by the rapid increase in the number of foreign

fighters that flooded into the area, largely from areas where resistance movements had occurred and failed, places like Afghanistan, Morocco and Egypt. Unlike other jihadi groups in the region, ISIS does not draw a significant amount of foreign funding compared to coalitions like the Islamic Front in Syria, a moderate Islamist coalition, but it does specifically target its operations at resource rich and poorly defended targets, like oil fields, or cities like Mosul, in order to maximize the resource windfall and continue this growth.

So, to begin to analyze whether there has been a political shift in the region, which seems to be over-emphasized, this has to be counter-balanced against these dynamics: exclusivity, financial resources, and the amplification of the image of size through the use of media and the prevailing political dynamics in the region. These factors can go a long way toward explaining a process in which, as resources are increasingly obtained and oppositional forces are increasingly eliminated, ISIS seems to continue to gain momentum, as other more moderate jihadi organizations and secular groups seem to be waning. It is not even clear whether we can see this as a shift in the motivations for fighting, as both economic desperation and political repression are still playing a role and the dynamics released by repression and unemployment have been channeled in a different direction due to a series of important factors.

FTTP: What is happening in the area of the world known as Kurdistan? Many have heard for some time that the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party) is now influenced by anarchism. What do you make of this?

TN: Often Kurdistan, a region that stretches through areas of northern and eastern Syria, south central and eastern Turkey, and northern Iraq, is thought of as a single region, but this is only partially the case. This region is a region that has been formed, to a significant degree, around the political dynamics of the various states that Kurdish populations find themselves in. For example, in Kurdish Iraq, politicians are very much a part of the prevailing post-US State structure, and serve as a very powerful parliamentary and executive bloc, which is led by a series of often feuding centrist and nationalist political parties, aligned around two primary blocs of politicians. This is a dynamic that has existed around the formation of the peshmerga, or units of armed Kurds that were formed to fight against the Hussein regime. This series of political parties and fighting units are highly formalized, and their influence extends into the regions in northwestern Syria. This bloc is in direct conflict with the PKK, or the Kurdish Workers Party, which rose to prominence in an urban and rural guerrilla campaign against the Turkish State. The politics of these regions are very different, as well as the dynamics of fighting and social norms that are enforced.

other communities in northern Syria. They are also taking a directly oppositional stance against the regime, specifically in areas under influence of the PKK; as some Syrian regime outposts remain in extreme northeastern Syria. Second, the YPG/YPJ units have, for the most part, come to eclipse the Kurdish Supreme Council in importance, and have seemingly taken on a sense of autonomy, often organizing their own offensives and initiatives. This has not only led to some interesting military developments on the ground, but also a process in which more leftist units of the Free Syrian Army have been aligning themselves with the YPG/YPJ in the fight against ISIS.

More and more the YPG/YPJ has become aligned with the PKK, and this is both a result of rising PKK influence, and falling Kurdish National Council influence, as well as combat conditions on the ground. As ISIS has expanded into areas in Syria and Iraq much of the nationalist forces within the Kurdish resistance have become concentrated within Iraq, attempting to prevent ISIS incursions into cities like Erbil, the Iraqi Kurdish capital. At the same time YPG/YPJ forces along with the PKK have not only been fighting ISIS in Syria, but have also made incursions into Iraq, specifically to drive ISIS forces away from Mount Sinjar in order to prevent a massacre of Yazidi peoples, a group of Kurdish religious minorities theologically tied to Zoroastrianism. This came after the Iraqi peshmerga abandoned the town to defend more central areas closer to the core of Iraqi Kurdistan. After rescuing hundreds of people on Mount Sinjar the YPG/YPJ and PKK set up refugee camps to house many of the displaced. This operation coupled with the defense of Kobanê, have significantly shifted the political dynamics on the ground, and this has contributed to increasing shifts in the structure and politics of the YPG/YPJ.

FTTP: Is it fair to call ISIS a fascist group? Is the growth of ISIS similar to the growth of right-wing groups in say, the Ukraine or elsewhere?

TN: I would like to leave the discussion of political typification alone for the time being; there are many definitions of the term "fascist," all of which would likely be applicable here. Rather, I would like to focus on the second part of this question, the rise of the right-wing in Europe and how this relates to Ukraine and ISIS.

In approaching this question, we have to draw a distinction between the process of the rise of parliamentary right wing parties in Europe and the rise of Right Sector in Ukraine or ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In the case of right-wing parties in Europe as a whole there is a disturbing trend in which they are winning mass support at a time of economic crisis, and that is a dynamic that has been seen in Europe not infrequently over the past 100 years or so. However, this is very different than what is occurring with ISIS or with Right Sector in a very important way.

As I mentioned before, the concept that ISIS has mass support is false by all

possible, as a governing structure, and is formed from a partnership between the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, affiliated with the PKK, and the Kurdish National Council, a party aligned with the Iraqi nationalist parties, and one that has declining influence in relation to the rise of the PKK aligned groups in Syria. This complicates the move toward direct and immediate control that is occurring within primarily Syrian Kurdistan. In Iraqi Kurdistan there have been moves in this direction, but they seem to be much more limited, confined to areas of PKK influence and with only minor in-roads into areas controlled by the traditional Kurdish nationalist parties.

FTTP: Break it down for us. What is the YPG (People's Protection Units) and the YPJ (Women's Protection Units)? The YPJ in particular have captured the attention of people throughout the world as a fierce band of women fighters. Are they simply an arm of the PKK, something else, or both?

TN: The YPG/YPJ are technically a joint military operation formed by the fighting units of the parties within the Kurdish Supreme Council. As such, technically, they are comprised of fighters from both the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, which is affiliated with the PKK, and the Kurdish National Council, which is affiliated with the Iraqi Kurdish Nationalist parties. Now, with that said, there has been significant development within this formation which reflects a rising influence among PKK affiliated fighters.

At the point of inception the units were comprised of anyone of Kurdish descent that wanted to sign up; there was no gender restriction on fighters, and the YPJ formed as an attempt among female fighters to have more control over fighting units comprised of primarily women. The fighting units also elect commanders directly from among the fighters. These structures are both clearly outgrowths of developments within the PKK. Iraqi peshmerga fighters, by contrast, fight within a rigid command structure, often led by political appointees, and are all men.

At the beginning of the conflict in Syria the YPG/YPJ units maintained a directly defensive stance, in that their primary goal was to assert control over Kurdish areas and prevent the dynamics of the wider Syrian revolution from spilling over into Kurdish regions. This stance led to a complicated relationship with both Syrian insurgents and regime troops, specifically in northeastern Syria; areas where the Kurdish National Council is much stronger. However, as the fighting has stretched on, the Kurdish National Council has seemingly lost a lot of influence, while Kurdish Democratic Union Party influence has grown. This has led to a series of important shifts.

Firstly, YPG/YPJ units are not only comprised of Kurds anymore. Rather, a series of fighters have defected from other units of the Syrian insurgency and have joined the YPG/YPJ. The focus of the organization is also not directly defensive and nationalistic anymore, with YPG/YPJ units working to protect

This has led to a series of contradictions within the dynamics of the fighting in the region. For example, throughout the battle for Kobanê, and specifically after the US intervention, the fighting in the city has been largely carried out by forces of the YPG and YPJ, which are aligned with the PKK. At the same time, the Turkish State is attempting to force the PKK into a negotiation process to end the conflict in Turkey, and as a result they are attempting to prevent a concentration of PKK fighters and sympathizers from crossing the border from Turkey to help in Kobanê. This seems to be based on a calculation in which the Turkish state is assuming that a YPG/YPJ led victory in Kobanê will strengthen the PKK; this decision, instead, has led to a lot of resentment among the Kurdish populations within Turkey, leading to rioting and a resumption of the armed struggle. To mitigate this effect the Turkish State has allowed a small number of peshmerga fighters from Iraq to cross through Turkish territory, with US supplied arms, to give to YPG/YPJ fighters in Kobanê. So, on the one hand both the Turkish and American States consider the PKK, along with the YPG/YPJ, terrorist organizations, but they are allowing other Kurdish armed organizations, which they directly support, to enter into Kobanê through Turkish territory. This underscores the tension between these different regions within what is often called Kurdistan.

This is further complicated by the often complex relationships that different fighting units have with different elements of the prevailing state in Syria, Turkey and Iraq. As I mentioned, the peshmerga and affiliated political groups in Iraq work with the state, carry out joint operations with the military and are recipients of American arms; [meaning] they are fighting with American arms in support of an Iranian client state against ISIS. This alliance with the State carried over into northeast Syria, where peshmerga aligned forces and Syrian regime troops existed in a state of non-confrontational stand-off, in which Syrian troops did not attempt to impose control and the peshmerga aligned forces worked to keep rebel groups and ISIS out of the area. In north-central Syria, pushing into northeast Syria, and into Turkey, areas in which the PKK and YPG/ YPJ forces operate, the Syrian regime has been pushed out of the area, attacks and logistics are often staged over the border, and the relationship with non-Kurdish Syrian rebel groups fluctuates depending on which group it is, what coalition they are a part of and so on. In the case of Kobanê, some secular units of the Free Syrian Army have been sending troops and supplies into the city to help the YPG/YPJ fight off ISIS. We also have a situation in northeast Syria in which PKK and peshmerga aligned forces have come into contact, often keeping their distance and maintaining influence in different towns, and sometimes coordinating to fight a common enemy.

In many ways the concept of Kurdistan is impossible to politically conceive of in a singular way. Even though all of the Kurdish identified organizations

involved grew out of a nationalist struggle, they have taken very different directions based in the wider political conditions. Not only does this complicate the discussion of Kurdistan, but it also complicates the discussion of US military strategy, which is directly opposed to helping PKK/YPG/YPJ forces, but arming peshmerga forces to fight in PKK dominated areas, and launching air-strikes against ISIS in support of PKK aligned forces in Kobanê, and even infrequently air-dropping them supplies.

As far as the discussion of the PKK and an embrace of anarchism, the situation does not seem to be as simple as it is often made out to be. We have to remember that the PKK comes from a Leninist formation, and spent years developing a cult of personality around Ocalan. From all indications it seems that Ocalan has undergone a shift in his political thinking since being incarcerated in Turkey, and that is significant. This has led to some changes on the ground, largely through the structure of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, that is the PKK affiliate in Syria and has been organizing assemblies in towns under their control. However, there are two primary complications within this move. First, though the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, to a certain extent the PKK in Turkey, and [in] the refugee camps they run in extreme northern Iraq, [people] have been moving into a process of decentralizing political power [in] assemblies, eliminating the tax structure, and organizing cooperatives to take on much of the material production and maintenance work. [This is] a process akin to the [one carried out by the] CNT in areas they were strong in during the Spanish Revolution. [However], they are still a coalition partner in the Kurdish Supreme Committee, the governing body for Kurdish regions in Syria, in which they share power with the Kurdish National Council, a nationalist party tied to Iraqi Kurdish politicians. Second, there is a certain inertia within the PKK that maintains a Leninist structure in certain areas, under certain commanders and so on. This is a result of the legacy of Leninism and the cult of personality around Ocalan, which many PKK fighters and their commanders grew up [with, and are] very much embedded within. So, it remains to be seen whether the PKK can or will overcome the legacy of Leninism and the tendency to govern due to the shift in thinking that Ocalan has seemingly undergone.

FTTP: What is the extent of the Rojava revolution? In what ways have people taken control over their own lives? Is there a division between the organizations which seek to represent people and those who are self-organizing in their own neighborhoods?

TN: As I mentioned above, it is really a question of where you are. This dynamic has to be thought of in relation to two other dynamics, the impossibility of a form of political perfection or the constant development of political dynamics, and the dynamics of insurgency. During the uprising in Syria, and to a lesser extent during the collapse of the Iraqi State, political autonomy is something that has arisen out of necessity. As the logistics of the State collapse, as the logistics of policing become less able to project force into areas, (either as a result of area denial or as a result of attrition), the functions of the State dissolve and political possibilities emerge as apparent. This is not just a dynamic that occurred in Syrian regions of Kurdistan, but is a dynamic that has occurred in many towns and cities across the Middle East and northern Africa during this process of upheaval, with specific concentrations in Libya and Syria, where the State is unable to operate in large areas.

This is not a question of the stated metapolitics of insurgent groups, this is a byproduct of the dynamics of conflict unleashed within direct confrontation with the logistics of policing, unleashed within the degradation of the logistical capacity of the State to project force across space. The question at this point, as I mentioned, becomes one of the dynamics of capture; whether there is an attempt, a successful attempt, to end conflict and destroy political possibility, to form the State anew.

What seems to have taken hold in areas of Syrian Kurdistan is an embracing of this political possibility: a realignment of political dynamics around the immediacy of everyday life, and the imperatives of armed struggle. From reports coming out of the region there is definitely a process in which people have seized direct control over aspects of their lives in the midst of conflict, and that this is a developing process. This seems to be a process, and again I am going off reports from the region, which is occurring in different areas in different ways and to different degrees. What is important about this process is not whether it is a political solution, there is no such thing, and to declare some solution is to begin this process of capture. Rather, it is a dynamic, one that is in constant flux, and one that is not embracing a given form; it is, in this case, from what can be seen within the US from a distance, a process of embracing possibility.

This has become complicated, however, by the traditional mechanisms of representation. It is important to keep in mind that all attempts at representation, as Schmitt discusses, necessarily implies the imposition of some form of political engagement and a removal of that engagement from the immediacy of everyday life. So, the problem here is not so much the parties, although there are problems here that I will discuss later, but that there are representatives, or those claiming to represent (something which in itself is philosophically impossible), at all.

In Syria, the so-called representatives have been locked into this governing structure, negotiated by Massoud Barzani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan and important player in Iraqi politics, which functions, to the degree