

Rojava Needs a New Strategy to Survive

The al-Sharaa government has launched a bloody offensive against the Kurds in Rojava in a bid to secure the borders of Syria. The Syrian armed forces have snatched back large swaths of territory in the Northeast from the control of Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and remaining areas have come under heavy attack. While the SDF has fought back, the balance of power in the conflict has shifted decisively in favor of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), which is now in Washington's good graces. An extremely fragile cease-fire has been brokered, but it is only a matter of time before the offensive resumes.

The "pro-democracy" West has dropped any pretense of solidarity, and Kurdish leader Öcalan's decision last year to disarm and pursue the "peace process" with the SAR is now threatening the very existence of Rojava. The Kurds stand isolated. To defend Rojava and Kurdish self-determination, a new strategy is necessary, one that can overcome the imperialist-fueled sectarian divisions and rally broader masses on the side of the Kurds, against al-Sharaa, Israel and the U.S.

No Liberation with the Imperialists

The national democratic uprising in Rojava that began in 2012 had the potential to be a beacon for national liberation and social progress throughout West Asia. But this potential was quickly undermined when the SDF leadership put the fate of Kurdish liberation in the hands of the imperialists. As we have previously explained (see "Only Anti-Imperialism Can Unite the Peoples of Syria," *Workers Hammer* No. 255, Winter 2025), it was one thing to accept help from the U.S. when faced with the threat of extermination during the 2014 siege of Kobane by ISIS. But it was another thing altogether to formalize an alliance with the U.S. to wage a joint offensive against Arab-dom-

inated areas such as Raqqa. As Kurdish forces came to occupy Arab-majority regions, they imposed harsh repression and anti-Arab policies while guarding oil fields and prisoners for the U.S. The result is that the Kurds came to be seen as agents of U.S. imperialism in the region. This further fueled anti-Kurdish sentiment, deepened national divisions and contributed to the isolation of the Kurds from the Arabs and others who also suffered under Assad and ISIS.

As the Assad regime collapsed, the U.S. saw it as more fitting to work directly with al-Sharaa to advance its interests in the region. Thomas Barrack, U.S. envoy to the SAR, noted that the SDF's role has "largely expired" due to the shifting dynamics in Syria and in the fight against ISIS. And just like that, the imperialists abandoned the SDF, and along with it the democratic, women- and grassroots-led revolution of Rojava. The Kurds are now told that they have "a historic opportunity" to integrate into the Syrian state



with “democratic rights” under an Islamist government that has just carried out massacres of the Druze and Alawite minorities.

The main lesson from the experience of the last decade—and of the last century—is to *never* depend on the imperialists for national liberation. They will betray the minute they find a better agent to carry out their aims. The entire region, especially Kurdistan, is torn apart today precisely because of imperialist divide-and-rule tactics that keep the populations of West Asia fighting each other instead of uniting against imperialism.

A revolutionary strategy would have sought to unite the masses by upholding the democratic rights of religious and national minorities in opposition to the Assad regime as well as the U.S. and its allies. This is still what is urgently needed. The results of the SDF strategy are plain for all to see: Rojava is isolated, its Western allies are gone, and the Arab tribes that formerly fought ISIS together with the SDF are now abandoning the Kurds for al-Sharaa. As SAR forces retake Arab-majority cities like Tabqa and Raqqa, there is widespread cheering by people who saw the SDF as their oppressors. It is this strategy which prepared the ground for the defeat unfolding today.

Öcalan: Disarmament Means Disaster

Ahmed al-Sharaa took power in late January 2025, and a month later Öcalan called on all Kurdish groups to disarm and for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to dissolve. Soon after, the SDF agreed to integrate into the Syrian army. This was done under the pressure of increasing isolation from the U.S., which no longer saw the need to back Kurdish militias and sought to give Erdogan in Türkiye a win on the domestic terrain. Öcalan’s capitulation was the logical consequence of fighting according to the terms set by the imperialists. As we wrote at the time, disarmament was “an absolute betrayal of the Kurdish liberation movement” which “would mean death to Kurdish fighters” (“Öcalan, Rojava: No to the Betrayal!” *Workers Vanguard* No. 1184, 3 April 2025).

The gains of Rojava are the result of the democratic and armed struggle of tens of thousands of heroic fighters, especially women, for self-determination. These have meant a measure of safety and national existence the Kurds had never experienced under Assad. One year of the al-Sharaa government has proved beyond a doubt that the SAR will not tolerate any national rights for Kurds and other minorities. Rojava must be defended! Yet Öcalan continues to opine that the solution lies in “dialogue, negotiations, and shared wisdom.” This spells disaster.

It is good that the SDF is determined to fight, but to save Rojava it must fight differently: reverse disarmament and resist liquidation into the Syrian army. Crucially, what’s needed is an immediate break with the forces of Zionism and U.S. imperialism! The only way for the Kurds to break through their isolation and win

over the confidence of Sunni Arabs is by demonstrating that they are the best fighters against Israel and the U.S. This is also how they can undercut support for al-Sharaa, who is seeking to consolidate control by appeasing the butchers of Gaza. There can be no progress so long as regimes in the region continue to conciliate Zionism, the cancer of West Asia. Freedom for Kurdistan can only advance together with freedom for Palestine!

Only Anti-Imperialism Can Liberate Women

For many, Rojava is synonymous with women’s liberation. But for many others, no amount of talk about armed women, autonomy and women’s collectives is enough to hide the stain of association with imperialism. The world needs more armed women fighting their oppressors. But it matters under what banner the armed struggle is waged. We have explained how the strategy of looking to the West contributed to the current situation of isolation and weakness for the national liberation struggle. The same point is true for women’s liberation.

The imperialists used the images of heroic armed women to shore up their own image of fighting for democracy against Islamist reaction in the region. In the same vein, they used the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban in order to destroy the country. In both cases, associating the advancement of women’s rights with imperialist aims only fueled conservative Islamist reaction. And in both cases, the minute it was no longer convenient, the imperialists abandoned the women whose cause they once championed: the Taliban is back in power in Afghanistan and women are worse off now than before the 20-year war. And while the same cannot be said of Rojava yet, Afghanistan shows a crucial lesson.

The people of Rojava are facing a mortal danger. This is not a military failure but a political one. Women of Rojava and all Kurdish fighters: stop appealing to the West and pro-democracy forces to come to your aid! Fight under the banner of anti-imperialism! For women’s liberation, a free Kurdistan and a free Palestine! ■

