

Kurdish Women are Shining

by Michael Curtis



There'll be some changes made in part of the state of Syria from now on. In his brilliant new book, *The Opinion of Mankind*, discussing, among other things, theories of the state and how we should think about politics today, Paul Sagar contends that although the state remains the central unit of analysis in both domestic and international politics, its basis , nature, purpose, and normative authority are subjects of protracted disagreement and confusion. Nowhere is this more true than in the remarkable new political entity, run by Kurds in Syria, stemming from a democratic and humanistic revolution that has women's liberation at its center. That entity has some powers though it is not an ultimate decision making agency.

This is the advent of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, Rojava, (DFNS), in an area that got autonomy in 2012,

and which created a de facto unit of three non-contiguous cantons, about the size of Connecticut, in March 2016. Politics are rarely tidy, or take undeviating forms. Though Rojava declared its independence, it is not a state but at the moment more a stateless democracy with local self governance and popular assemblies. The DFNS is not officially recognised by Syria, nor by any other state or international organization. In a statement by Mark Toner, then U.S. State Department spokesperson, the U.S. in March 2016 warned it would not recognise the self rule of an autonomous zone in Syria, and that the U.S. was committed to the unity and territorial integrity of Syria. That policy should be now be changed.

The world owes the Kurds proper treatment. They are an ethnic group who go back in Syria over 1,000 years. Perhaps the most famous Kurd was Saladin, the 12th century Kurd from Tikrit (now in modern Iraq) who defeated the Crusader states in the Levant and ruled most of the Middle East. The Kurds were ill served after World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire. The Peace Treaty of Sevres signed on August 10, 1920, partitioned that Empire and provided for the future creation of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Mandatory Palestine including Transjordan. It also promised that part of the new country of Turkey, the predominantly Kurdish area lying east of the Euphrates, should have autonomy. Turkey agreed to accept this and to execute the consequent decisions.

However, Sevres was amended by the Treaty of Lausanne of July 24, 1923 that recognized the creation of the Republic of Turkey and its boundaries, and ended the demands of autonomy for "Kurdistan."

The moment has arrived for the Trump administration to recognise fundamental changes in the area, to change U.S. policy and support true allies, especially those like the Kurds with a message of democracy and civil rights. This is even more the case in a period when Russia has been

manipulating the U.S. media and part of Congress, sowed discord in the U.S. political system, and been unhelpful in solution of the brutal Syrian civil war. At a minimum argument, Kurdish forces in Syria have been playing a significant role in fighting and defending themselves against terrorist groups, ISIS among others.

The world is confronted by a Syrian regime that in a fierce air campaign continues with savage carnage to bomb the area of Eastern Ghouta near Damascus, home to 400,000, in spite of the delayed and waterdowned resolution of the UN Security Council on February 24, 2018 for a 30 day nation wide cease fire, to be implemented "without delay", except for military operations against terrorist groups such as ISIS, Nusra Front, and al Qaeda. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has defied the international resolutions for a cease fire. It is imperative that a cease fire be applied across the whole country, including Afrin. This should apply also to Turkey which is warring against the Kurkish militia, the Kurdish People's Protection Units, YPG, in northern Syria. Turkey sees this as the branch of the Kurdistan Worker's Party, PKK, that it regards as a terrorist group. The U.S. is directly involved since the attack is in an area where U.S. troops are stationed.

In stark contrast to the Assad Syrian regime is the new entity, the DFNS, known as Rojava, the outcome of a so-called "secret revolution." Officially a secular system and presenting a challenge to Islamic Law, and based on gender equality, power is decentralized with village assemblies and communes, legislative councils and commissions.

What is outstanding is the prominence of Kurdish women. The role of women has been applauded for their strong performance in the armed forces. Female fighters in the Women's Protection Units, YPJ, played a key role in the siege of Kobani, and in rescuing Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar. The prominent Egyptian feminist writer and activist, and co-founder of the

Arab Association for Human Rights, Nawal el Saadawi, complimented Kurdish women for their fight against ISIS, showing courage and great bravery. Those women are waging a battle against a patriarchal society, and for democracy, and defining the identity and honor of the world's women. The Equality Decree of November 10, 2014 in Syrian Kurdistan provided rights for women, equality "in all walks of public and private life."

In Rojava, womens organizations, whose functions change, are funded and run by volunteers, and provide a variety of services, control of gender violence especially honor killings, family mediation, legal support, safe houses for women and children, and personal economic and social empowerment. There are now rules against child and forced marriage, women must be 18 to marry, and they must consent to marriage, as well as against female genital mutilation, and domestic violence.

Women are participating politically in law making, holding political positions, and in co-presidencies. Some were candidates in the 2015 election. All administrative bodies have co-chairs, and 40% of any governing body must be female.

The Rojava entity can be seen as concerned not only as a national ethnic issue but as as a form of experiment in Middle East democracy, and an example of the importance of women in an area where women have traditionally been repressed. It could be a blueprint for other societies in the area. In any case, it is important that the Trump administration welcome and encourage it.