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The IS conundrum

The siege of Kobanê raises more questions than it answers, writes Yassamine Mather



Islamic State: who is serious about defeating it?

In the early hours of Tuesday October 7 reports confirmed that the group formerly known as Daesh (Isis), now Islamic State, had entered the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanê.

Currently street-to-street fighting is taking place and initial reports suggest that in these battles secular Kurdish forces allied to the People's Protection Units (military wing of the Democratic Union Party or PYD) are doing better than IS mainly because they are more familiar with the town and IS's heavy weaponry are of little use in street battles.

However, the town is in the process of being destroyed, its inhabitants are refugees and it is highly unlikely that Kurdish forces can win this battle.

Who is to blame for the catastrophic situation in this border town? The list is long, but let me start with the United States and its coalition partners - not just for their role in the Iraqi invasion of 2003 that is the root cause of all this, but, more important than that, for their association with and support for the countries who created and financed this monster.

Last week US vice-president Joe Biden said: “My constant cry was that our allies in the region were the largest problem in Syria” - he mentioned the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Biden added:

The Turks were great friends, but, when it came to Syria and the effort to bring down president Bashar Assad there, those allies’ policies wound up helping to arm and build allies of al Qa’eda and eventually the terrorist Islamic State ... What were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war? What did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad - except that the people who were being supplied were al Nusra and al Qa’eda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.

Biden was subsequently forced to apologise to the four states he implicated. However, that will not change the facts - the genie is out of the bottle. The US’s allies were so obsessed with the overthrow of Assad that they did not care who they supported. Of course, in his candour the US vice-president failed to mention that until last autumn the Obama administration shared the views and tactics of the above-mentioned states and even when the US decided to do a complete U-turn, for all the propaganda about air raids by a coalition of 40 countries, there has been no serious attempt to weaken IS in Syria. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds have been forced to leave their homes and, according to the fighters and the people of Kobanê, coalition air raids, which came mostly after the IS incursions into the town on October 7-8, were too little and too late to make any difference.

Turkey

Another culprit is the Turkish army. Controlling the heights north of the city, it stood by, as IS used heavy artillery, tanks and rocket launchers to attack the poorly armed Kurdish guerrillas. According to a Kurdish commander speaking in the town, Turkey hopes the fall of Kobanê will create the conditions where it can send ground troops into Syria, paving the way for the establishment of a pro-Turkish regime in Damascus.¹ Indeed Turkish president Tayyip Erdoğan, speaking on October 7, seemed to confirm this view when he called for the launch of a ground operation against IS to halt its advance: “The terror will not be over unless we cooperate in a ground operation,” Erdoğan said.²

For the last two years the town had been controlled by the PYD, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is fighting for Kurdish freedom from Turkish rule. The PYD and its People’s Protection Units (YPG) claimed it had created a region of self-governance. Those familiar with the PKK’s authoritarian politics would consider such claims with a degree of cynicism. However, there can be no doubt that tens of thousands of Christians, Yazidis and Turkmen from all over Syria had sought refuge in Kobanê, a town that became an island of secularism surrounded by Islamic forces close to IS and Al Nusra, as well as the Turkish military forces under the semi-Islamic Justice and Development Party.

Last week we heard a lot of rhetoric from the Turkish president regarding his country's 'commitment' to fight IS, yet in reality there has been no sign of any serious effort by the Turkish state to weaken the jihadist group. The country is said by many to be amongst those who directly or indirectly helped IS's rise, both by funding aspects of its activities and by allowing easy access to foreign volunteers to cross the Turkish border into Syria. In recent weeks it has closed the border to Kurds wanting to cross into Syria and join the defence of Kobanê. Last month the release of 46 Turkish hostages came after negotiations between the Turkish state and the jihadist group. And last week PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, held in prison near Istanbul, warned Ankara that the peace process between Turkey and the Kurdish rebels would collapse if IS seized Kobanê.

While PKK/YPG officials in Syria were adamant that they did not want Turkey to intervene in the conflict, they did call for an easing of border controls between Syria and Turkey, so that Syrian Kurd fighters can be supplied with arms. The group's military forces - a poorly trained group of male and female peshmergas - have only light weapons and a few captured tanks. The YPG also claims that, for all its rhetoric, Turkey has been and remains in an undeclared alliance with IS, more concerned as it is about defeating Syrian Kurdish forces allied with the PKK.

Turkey, for its part, is blaming the Kurdish group for choosing an "isolationist position", and for refusing to join the Free Syrian Army and other Syrian opposition groups funded by Arab countries. Turkey has maintained close relations with the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Kurdish regional authority in Iraq. However, YPG/PKK fighters have dismissed KDP efforts in opposition to IS as half-hearted and ineffective. A claim supported by Kurdish, Yazidi and Turkmen refugees in the region.

I have already written about the treachery of the leaders of the Kurdish regional authority,³ which is a recipient of generous aid from the United States and the European Union. It is a living example of a corrupt, decadent, semi-colonial state. Its leaders were so alarmed by YPG's experiments of 'self-governance' that they were ready to sit back and watch brutal jihadists take over Kobanê. But the problem they will face in the long term is obvious: by the time IS reaches Suleymaniye or Kirkuk, the major cities of the KRA, there will be no-one left to defend its decadent, autocratic, misogynist rulers.

If IS succeeds in defeating the Kurdish guerrillas in the current street battles in Kobanê, it would gain control of most of the Syrian-Turkish border - Kobanê is already flanked by two IS-controlled towns to the east and west. This would be a strategic victory for IS, as it would then be able to control the key Raqa-Kobanê route. That is why, irrespective of its political differences with the PKK and YPG, for the left in the region, Kobanê has become a symbol in the fight against IS.

Iran

All this, combined with a level of nostalgia for the 'liberated' areas in Kurdistan, has led to a hunger strike in Tehran, where 14 well-known left/liberal activists began a protest in

solidarity with Kobanê on October 6. Of course, how a hunger strike in Tehran can help Kurdish fighters in Kobanê or Kurdish refugees is another matter, but left and centre-left websites and social media are full of messages of support for Kobanê fighters. Photos of the heroes of the war - the men and women guerrillas who have given their lives to defend the city - are prominent, including that of the young mother, Arin Mirkan, who launched a suicide attack on advancing militants on October 5.

The attitude of the Iranian left can only be explained as a leftover from the early 1980s - a period when it romanticised the Iranian Kurdish resistance: the brave fighters in the mountains were going to pave the way for the overthrow of another Islamic state - Iran's Shia republic - and establish socialism! Those of us who were in the region at the time felt a heavy burden of responsibility on our shoulders, yet the reality of our fight ensured we took a much more down-to-earth, realistic approach. This type of war was not going to bring success in the 1980s, and it certainly is not going to lead to national liberation - never mind socialism - today. At the end of the day, it is more likely to lead to demoralisation and the inevitable loss of life.

Of the hundreds of leftwing peshmergas I knew when I was in Kurdistan, less than a handful are alive today and, as far as I know, none of them died of natural causes. Then, as now, an ill-equipped army of brave young men and women faced volunteers who were armed to the teeth, financed by the wealthy, powerful forces (at that time the Islamic Republic of Iran) and determined to die for Islam.

It is not difficult to guess who will win. We should leave the suicide attacks to the Islamists (Shia or Sunni) - for the left this is not the way to fight, however desperate the situation gets. But the politics of vanguard activism, which created such illusions in Iranian Kurdistan in the 1980s, is fostering similar illusions about Kobanê, at least amongst sections of the Iranian left. This does not mean that in the Middle East, and especially in the west, the left should not support the fighters in Kobanê, who, as secular, leftwing forces, remain a source of hope, a progressive force fighting reactionary Islamists. My comments are directed at those sections of the Iranian left who seem to have become obsessed with promoting YPG guerrilla heroism.

Who and why

For all the talk of a 'US-led coalition', to include Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, none of these states are serious about stopping the funding of the jihadists or preventing the financial transactions of banks and institutions in IS-occupied northern Iraq. Who is buying the oil IS sells? Turkey. Who is allowing international transactions from Mosul banks? Qatari, Saudi and UAE banks are laundering money from their counterparts under IS control in northern Iraq.

Is international capital incapable of stopping the flow of funds to IS? Of course not. We know from the recent example of sanctions against Iranian banks that the world hegemon power, the United States, is capable of closing down all international monetary

routes. It is capable of tracing the smallest transactions between individuals associated with 'rogue states' and punishing banks who fail to comply. Yet we are expected to believe that it cannot do the same when it comes to the northern Iraqi cities controlled by IS? The reality is that a disorientated US does not want to confront its allies in the Arab world ...

The ability of IS to maintain and expand its influence is due to a number of factors - not least the reputation it has gained as a force that does not compromise with the west, even though it relies on continued support from the west's coalition allies in the region: Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

For all the religious statements issued by Sunni clerics denouncing the group's brutal methods, many young Muslims are still travelling long distances to join it. Defeating this force requires a bit more thought than the simplistic approach taken by Cameron and Obama. Its brutal methods may be medieval, but IS has shown considerable ability in managing the cities it has captured.

According to the Irish *Independent* newspaper,

The 'Islamic State' group, infamous for its beheadings, crucifixions and mass executions, provides electricity and water, pays salaries, controls traffic and runs nearly everything from bakeries and banks to schools, courts and mosques. While its merciless battlefield tactics and the imposition of its austere vision of Islamic law made headlines, residents say much of its power lies in its efficient and often deeply pragmatic ability to govern ...

"Civilians who do not have any political affiliations have adjusted to the presence of Islamic State, because people got tired and exhausted, and also ... because they are doing institutional work," one Raqqa resident opposed to Isis said.

[IS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has appointed a Tunisian with a PhD in the subject. Baghdadi has also separated military operations from civilian administration, and has appointed civilian deputies called 'walis' - an official similar to a minister - to manage institutions.⁴

A number of military experts have attempted to explain the lack of progress made by the US airforce, accompanied by a token presence of local allies and the UK. So far these operations, relying on long-distance bombing (to ensure minimum risk to military personnel and warplanes), have only succeeded in gaining new allies for IS, as well as the occasional change of tactics.

This week will be remembered as the one when a US vice-president apologised for telling the truth, but, amongst all the uncertainty in Washington, there is another worrying thought. Is the US serious about defeating IS or is Iran right to believe that there is a 'stage two' in the US-led action against IS - one dedicated to overthrowing Assad from above, with Turkey waiting patiently in the wings? And is this ultimately aimed at regime change in Iran?

Given the current confusion, it is unlikely that anyone has an answer to this conundrum.

yassamine.mather@weeklyworker.co.uk

Notes

1. Jiyar Gol, BBC Persian Service, October 8.
2. <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2014/10/07/turkey-erdogan-says-ground-operation-needed-to-defeat-is>.
3. See 'The origins, politics and economics of the Islamic State' *Weekly Worker* September 4.
4. www.independent.ie/world-news/middle-east/isis-group-run-everything-from-bakeries-to-banks-30566896.html.