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Summary: Despite the resurgence of military authoritarianism and fundamentalism in Egypt and Syria, several more positive outcomes of the Arab revolutions are seen in the Tunisian constitution, the rise of the Syrian Kurds, and continuing ferment in Turkey. Originally appeared in *Logos* 14:2-3 (Summer 2015), here <http://logosjournal.com/2015/anderson-arab-revolutions/> - Editors

Four Years After the Arab Revolutions: Fighting on Amid Reactionary Retrenchment

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The Present Moment

Over the past year, the outlook for revolutionary change for democracy and social justice in much of the Middle East and North Africa has become bleak. Egypt has experienced authoritarian military rule at a level that exceeds the repression of Mubarak, thus rolling back the 2011 revolution, even as the US has restored military aid. Libya has descended into chaotic war between rival factions, both of them marked by warlordism. Bahrain continues under lockdown, with the US maintaining both its imperialist naval base and its support for the sectarian Sunni monarchy. Yemen's democratic opening has given way to a sectarian civil war with massive bombing of civilians by the US-backed Saudis. And most tragic of all, Syria has seen its grassroots democratic opposition shrink as jihadists gain more and more power, sometimes with the collusion of the murderous Assad regime, which itself projects a Shia-oriented sectarianism amid massive backing from Iran. To cap it all, the ultra-

fundamentalist ISIS (so-called Islamic State) has maintained most of the territory it seized last year in Iraq and Syria, visiting horrors upon women, religious minorities, and any who dare to express any reservations about its retrograde worldview.

However, this is not the whole story.

First, Tunisia certainly remains a bright spot, relatively speaking. In this small country, where the 2011 revolutions began, Islamist rule was averted and a liberal democracy that allows the left and trade unions to organize openly has been achieved, albeit with no serious measures to deal with the poverty and economic oppression that were at the root of the 2011 revolution.

Second, over the past year, leftwing Kurdish forces have fought the reactionary ISIS on two fronts. In Iraq in summer 2014, the People's Protection Forces (YPG) of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union party (PYD) protected the Yazidi minority from genocide, while in Syria in the fall of that year, they held the town of Kobane against ISIS, at the same time setting up a secular leftist self-governing community that empowered women and working people. While one can question whether the YPG has entirely broken with its Stalinist past, it has been a major force against ISIS, even compared with other Kurdish groups.

Third, a leftwing coalition headed by Kurds, and including socialists, feminists, and LGBT activists, has entered the Turkish Parliament as a result of the June elections in which it scored 13% of the vote, denying the Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) the supermajority it sought in order to change the constitution. Several observers have noted that this continues the spirit of the massive 2013 Gezi Park movement.

All of these events are occurring in the context of machinations by global and regional imperialist powers. The US-UN-Iran agreement is a major turning point in regional politics, one that has threatened old US allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia. It occurs in the context of the rise of ISIS, which has placed the US in an implicit alliance with the Iranian regime, especially inside Iraq, where US planes have aided Iranian forces allied with local Shia militias. Not only is the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran -- even if a decade or more down the road -- jarring to US allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel, but also of deep concern to

these allies is the possibility in the near future of at least a slight US shift toward Iran in terms of regional politics as a whole.

In the rest of this article I will look more closely at some of these developments across the region. But before doing so, I want to address two widespread limitations that have characterized much of the response to the Arab revolutions on the left.

The first limitation is seen in the denial that these were even revolutions at all, despite the fact that in the remarkable year 2011 three governments actually fell (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya) and three more were seriously challenged (Bahrain, Yemen, Syria). Some longtime Marxists have argued that these were not revolutions because they did not change the class structure of society. This is a very narrow definition of revolution, which is at variance with Marx's own view of different types of revolution, one of them "the merely political which leaves the pillars of the house standing," and the other "a radical revolution," attaining or at least aiming at "general human emancipation" (Marx, "[A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction](#)" [1843]). The Arab revolutions were somewhere in between these two types of revolution, mainly expressing political (democratic) aims, but also expressing class and economic ones, especially in Tunisia and Egypt.

The second limitation has taken the form of the premature burial of the Arab revolutions. When Islamist groups won elections in fall 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt, some were quick to say that the Arab Spring had already turned into the Arab Winter. That may be true today, but not everywhere and it was certainly not the case in 2011. For example, from 2011 to 2013, Tunisia deepened its democracy by placing the Islamists on the defensive after radical jihadists assassinated 2 leftist leaders. In Egypt too, the hour of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood was rather brief, as the military took advantage of mass discontent with the Brotherhood, including on the left, to stage the coup that reverberated against the left as well as the Islamists. At a more general level, the spirit of the Arab revolutions continues to reverberate throughout the region (Turkey's Gezi Park and 2015 elections) and more widely around the world (Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Podemos in Spain, etc.).

At a regional level, what the Arab revolutions achieved that cannot be put back into the bottle is the upsetting of a decades-old dualism in which nominally secular authoritarian regimes legitimated themselves by pointing to retrogressive

Islamist authoritarianism as the only real alternative. At a global level, the Arab revolutions illustrated for a new generation the suddenness with which mass movements of millions can arise, overthrowing seemingly entrenched regimes in a matter of days. This remains an historical fact even though in today's retrogressive climate, as Marxist scholar of the region Gilbert Achcar noted in an interview last winter, many parts of the region are again locked into "the bipolarity between two equally reactionary forces -- the old regimes on the one hand, and the Islamic fundamentalist opposition forces on the other" (Vidya Venkat, "'Arab Spring has now turned into winter'," [The Hindu](#) 12-25-14).

The Egyptian Tragedy

The fact that reaction, civil war, and repression reign today in Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, and Libya needs to be viewed dialectically. In Egypt, for example, the brutality of the repression should not be seen, in essentialist fashion, as proof of that country's inherent authoritarianism or penchant for military rule. Instead, the very ferocity of the repression under General Sisi is necessary for the rulers in order to contain the very real threat to the system that the 2011 revolution represents.

When the Egyptian revolution began on the heels of the overthrow of the regime in nearby Tunisia with a demonstration in January 2011, three demands were articulated on the streets: end poverty and unemployment, end the state of emergency and establish an independent judiciary, and political reforms like dissolution of the corrupt parliament and new elections. During the ensuing few weeks, vast crowds gathered on Tahrir Square and the movement spread from student youth to the working people, forcing the resignation of the Mubarak government. The US arrived very late, sticking with Mubarak until nearly the end.

Over the next two and a half years, until summer 2013, three forces held power: the military, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the streets where the youthful left had at least some sway. At first, it seemed that the Brotherhood and the military would create a new regime where the Islamists would rule. But this did not go down well with the youthful revolutionaries, who kept up a protracted resistance on the streets. By spring 2013, this resistance had grown even larger. At this point, the revolutionaries, who had voted in 2012 for the Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as president rather than a pro-military candidate, made the fateful decision of allying with the military against Morsi. They did succeed in

creating extremely large demonstrations that brought millions onto the streets. But just as the Brotherhood tried to confiscate the 2011 revolution, the military now proceeded to confiscate the 2013 protests, installing General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as supreme ruler.

Sisi first targeted the Brotherhood, essentially outlawing the entire organization, in the process carrying out infamous massacres. Soon, however, he also targeted the smaller leftist forces and the liberal intellectuals. A few have disgraced themselves by tacitly supporting the Sisi regime, which by now exercises a more severe dictatorship than had Mubarak himself. Others, however, like the founders of the youthful April 6 Movement, have paid the price for their revolutionary principles and are now in prison or dead. One prominent example is Shamaa al-Sabbagh, a socialist poet killed by police as she sought to lay a wreath at the site of the 2011 uprising in Tahrir Square. Many others have simply disappeared, Latin American junta style.

Sisi has also targeted the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip. He razed the entire border town of Rafah last winter, sealing up the border even more than the Israelis have done on their end. Judges doing his bidding have reversed the sentences on Mubarak, his sons, and their cronies. Morsi has been sentenced to death in a bizarre case targeting him for escaping from one of Mubarak's prisons during the 2011 uprising, a breakout that is now officially -- and preposterously -- attributed not to the Egyptian masses but to militant Islamist Palestinians from across the border in Gaza (Jared Malsin, "[Egyptian Court Sentences Morsi to Death](#)," *New York Times* 5-17-15).

In April, the US responded to these outrages by restoring all military aid to the regime, which had been suspended since the 2013 coup.

As a result of Sisi's decision to outlaw the Brotherhood, violent terrorism has grown, with radical Islamists telling the Brotherhood youth that democratic politics is a sham. A group based in Sinai that has declared its allegiance to ISIS has gained steam, assassinating the chief prosecutor in June and destroying a naval ship in July. This is the kind of opponent that Sisi wishes for, however, as it helps his narrative of all Islamists as terrorists, and also allows him to present himself as the rational alternative.

Similarly to Saddam Hussein in his last years of power, Sisi has also manipulated Islamic themes, leading to the accusation that he is perpetuating "an

Islamist agenda without Islamists." More significantly, Sisi has attacked "deviance and perversion," as gay men have been rounded up and subject to anal tests by police, and radical philosopher Alain Badiou's book *In Praise of Love* has been banned (Hélène Sallon, "[En Egypte, Sissi impose un nouvel ordre moral](#)," *Le Monde* 12-14-14).

But what is really tragic about Egypt is that parts of the left and the trade union movement helped sow the revolution's demise, first by trusting the Muslim Brotherhood too much, then by trusting the military to overthrow Morsi and to institute a democratic order. In the worst cases, some of these people supported Sisi in the crucial early months when he was consolidating his power. Many on the left have continued to resist and have paid the price, while also laying the ground for the next outbreak of revolution. Still others are now in exile, rethinking in the face of the wrenching events of the past four years.

The Syrian Crucible

No country has suffered more than Syria as a result of the repression of the Arab revolutions. In a civil war that still seems far from over, some 220,000 people have perished, most of them civilians. Despite the spectacular barbarism of ISIS, magnified by the global media, the vast majority of these deaths have occurred at the hands of the Assad regime without much media exposure, whether in its dark prisons or the communities that its military has firebombed over and over again.

According to UN estimates, by this summer some 10 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes, with 4 million of them now languishing abroad. This means that nearly half the population of 23 million people is now refugees, most of them from the Sunni Arab majority that forms the core of the base of the opposition. For its part, the regime has fallen back more and more onto its sectarian base among the Alawite minority, an offshoot of Shia Islam. Some observers have suggested that the Assad regime's strategy involves the permanent expulsion of Sunni Muslims, in order to forcibly alter the country's demography in its favor. (At present the population is about 60% Sunni Arab, 16% Alawite and other Shia-oriented, and 11% Christian.) If true, this would amount to ethno-religious "cleansing" as seen in Bosnia, which would constitute a form of genocide.

A year ago, it seemed that revulsion at the rise of fundamentalists within the opposition had strengthened the Assad regime's base of support and that it was

likely to prevail in the end. This also produced a decline in international support for the rebels.

However, the regime seems to have weakened in recent months, as its military has become overstretched due to the scale of the fighting and the drying up of its base for recruits among the ethnic minorities, especially the Alawites, many of whom are fleeing the country.

While Russia's involvement has been steady, Iran has increased its activity in Syria in response to these regime setbacks. Large numbers of Iranian Revolutionary Guards, their Lebanese Hezbollah allies, as well as Shia volunteers from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have joined the fray. This has also had major sectarian economic and cultural implications. Wealthy Iranians have reportedly been buying up real estate in Damascus. Last November, Assad allowed for the first time a large public celebration on the streets of Damascus of Ashura, the most important Shia religious holiday. This broke with decades of regime policy restricting outdoor religious celebrations of Syria's various religious communities to specific neighborhoods where they predominate rather than the city center. While Damascus is by no means about to become a majority Shia city, these developments have stoked Sunni fears (and prejudice) regarding the danger of a Shia "takeover," which could increase even further the sectarian element in the civil war (Amar Abdo Rabbo, "A l'instigation de l'Iran et avec l'aval de Bachar al-Assad, les chiites se comportent en maîtres à Damas," [*Le Monde*](#), 11-10-14).

Some cities, most significantly Idlib in the north, have fallen to rebels, who are primarily Islamist, although not ISIS. And though the Assad regime was able to retake some of the southern cities like Homs, the key northern city of Aleppo remains in play in a three-pronged battle among the Assad forces, the mainstream rebels, and ISIS. Last year, mainstream Syrian rebels took on ISIS as an enemy of their uprising, driving it from the center of Aleppo. As I argued in a previous article, it was this defeat that drove ISIS back into Iraq, where it captured the second largest city, Mosul, and re-emerged as an even greater force (Kevin Anderson, "Popular Movements and Their Contradictions: From the Arab Revolutions to Today," [*The International Marxist-Humanist*](#), July 26, 2014). By spring 2015, however, those mainstream rebels had become even more Islamist, and they used armed force to make groups like the more secular Hazzm Movement join the Islamist coalition that is fighting Assad and ISIS in Aleppo. For its part, ISIS has gained additional territory in some parts of Syria,

this spring taking the historic city of Palmyra, where it threatens to blow up its sizable Roman ruins, which form a key part of Syria's and the world's cultural heritage.

While the magnificent Syrian civil opposition that arose in 2011 has been to a great extent driven underground by the militaristic maneuvers of increasingly Islamist armed factions, it has by no means disappeared. To take one dramatic example, inside the ISIS capital city of Raqqa itself, a network of clandestine revolutionaries has spraypainted "Down with ISIS" on walls and has sent damning videos out of the city: "We are revolutionary activists, anti-regime and anti-ISIS. Since ISIS took control of the city in January [2013] our role is to expose its crimes" (Benjamin Barthe, "A Rakka, des citoyens journalistes résistent," [Le Monde](#) 11-18-14). When a grassroots democratic movement is forced off the stage by authoritarian armed groups, its aims can sometimes also be reflected in exile politics, as seen in a March 2015 demonstration in Paris on the fourth anniversary of the 2011 uprising in Syria. There, rally organizer Hassan Lababibi declared: "Assad and Daesh [ISIS] are two sides of the same coin, and getting rid of Assad carries with it the disappearance of ISIS" ("Manifestation à Paris contre Assad et l'État islamique, un 'monstre à deux têtes'," [Le Monde](#) 3-15-15).

Wealthy Saudis and other Gulf Arabs have continued to supply ISIS and other jihadist groups with funds and arms, most of which pass through Turkey, where the moderate Islamist and increasingly authoritarian government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has turned a blind eye, if not engaged in actual assistance to the fundamentalists. Thousands of foreign fighters have arrived in Syria, most of them also passing through Turkey. The most extreme among the Sunni fundamentalists, like ISIS or the local Al Qaeda branch Al Nusra, are of the same ilk that attacked the World Trade Center on September 11. Here, it should be remembered that most of these groups trace their origins to the Afghan war of the 1980s, when the US played with fire in order to counter Russia in the Cold War by arming, funding and organizing jihadist groups. Moreover, ISIS actually formed out of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, the most extreme form of Sunni resistance to the US Occupation of Iraq, a group that was condemned even by Al Qaeda for its brutality toward Shias.

ISIS and the Assad regime have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, and the regime certainly seemed to encourage ISIS's rise for two reasons: (1) sapping the forces of the other opposition groups, which ISIS was bent upon dominating or

destroying; (2) allowing its most unattractive enemy to become more prominent, thus gaining reluctant support at home and abroad. As French journalist Alain Frachon reminds us, the Assad regime is no bulwark against Islamism, as some elements of the international Left maintain:

"They are intrinsically linked to radical Islam: its violence is the reflection of theirs in a diabolical pact. To get the Americans to leave Iraq after the 2003 invasion, Bashar Assad's Syria organized or supported jihadist networks... that went on to nourish Al Qaeda in Iraq, the womb of the Islamic State [ISIS]... In 2011, during the first days of the rebellion that threatened it, the same regime, playing the sorcerer's apprentice, freed the most radical jihadists from prison: this was in order to portray the ongoing confrontation [with the civil opposition] as a struggle against [religious] extremism! Recruiting Bashar Assad into the struggle against jihadism is like bringing pyromaniacs into the fire brigade" (Alain Frachon, "Islam: la bataille des réformateurs," [Le Monde](#) 1-16-15).

As is well known, in 2014 ISIS took over large swathes of Iraq, including its second city Mosul, gaining huge caches of arms and money. At this point, the US started to alter its policy toward both Syria and Iran. It began to work almost openly with Iran in Iraq to forestall further gains by ISIS, given the disintegration of the Iraq Army in the Sunni belt. This meant US airstrikes to support Shia fighters, some of them Iranian Revolutionary Guards. In Syria, the US also began to bomb ISIS and Al Nusra targets, something that outraged the Syrian resistance, which noted that the US had not intervened -- and was still not intervening -- against the Assad regime itself, which had carried out so much more carnage than had these fundamentalists (Michael Karadjis, "Syrian rebels overwhelmingly condemn US bombing as an attack on revolution," [Links International](#), September 25, 2014).

In April, another cruel setback occurred when ISIS forces, apparently abetted by Al Nusra, overran the Yarmouk district of Damascus, whose 160,000 residents once formed the largest Palestinian refugee community outside the West Bank and Gaza. Beheadings of perceived opponents of ISIS began immediately, in what some are calling the second Palestinian Nakba, a reference to the catastrophe for Palestinians of 1948 defeat of the Arabs by Israel. By 2015, only 18,000 increasingly desperate souls remained in Yarmouk, with some 200 having died of outright starvation during a 700-day siege at the hands of the Assad regime. At the beginning of the 2011 uprising, Yarmouk tried to stay neutral, but was pressed by Assad's forces to side with the regime. Once they

refused, they were put under siege. Many observers say that it is inconceivable that ISIS could have entered Yarmouk without the complicity of the Assad regime (Gerry Emmett, "Death in Yarmouk," [News & Letters](#), May-June 2015). Assad is now calling on Palestinians to rally to his side against ISIS, something neither the Palestine Liberation Organization nor Hamas has agreed to do (Clément Melki, "Ce qui se joue à Yarmouk," [Le Monde](#) 4-11-15).

Syria Again: Enter the Kurdish Left

But the newest development in Syria in the past year has been the rise of the Kurds as an independent factor. This began in 2014, when the US-backed Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq almost buckled in the face of the ISIS conquest of Mosul. After thousands of members of the Yazidi minority fled onto the blisteringly hot and arid Sinjar Mountain in order to escape ISIS beheadings and sexual enslavement, the US only sent airdrops of food and water and the Peshmerga did little. Instead, the Marxist People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) took to the field across the border in Northern Iraq, establishing a human corridor to Turkey to rescue the Yazidis when no one else would do so.

Six months later, in fall and winter 2014-15, YPG forces inflicted the first major defeat on ISIS at Kobane, Syria, a Kurdish town bordering Turkey that ISIS had surrounded, threatening to kill or enslave the population. Kobane's successful resistance, abetted by 700 US airstrikes, galvanized the progressive left all over the world. Images of youthful YPG women fighters enjoying equality with their male counterparts, as well as their explicit revolutionary politics, suggested a leftwing turn in Syria after years of horrific civil war. Their enactment of social justice measures in Kobane seemed to recall -- and perhaps even deepen -- the original social justice content of the Arab revolutions of 2011 in Egypt and Tunisia.

As a group of Iranian writers stated at the time: "An autonomous society with its radical democracy, Kobani is experiencing three special years [sic]. Community councils, in which every walk of life has its own representatives, are the decision makers. Kobani people don't have their own masters, they make their own destinies. Kobani has surpassed all identity borders of race and gender and is a perfect model of human equality, an example unrivaled in the modern history of the region; a life in which people can live differently, an equal life free from all identity limitations; a style of life in which every member of society, whatever

their religion, gender and race is, live with equal rights and shoulder to shoulder they manage their society; a life in which man is valued because he is a human. From this viewpoint, Kobani is crucial as a resistance center. Reactionary governments of the area and colonial governments are scared of the spread of such an idea of lifestyle in the region, an idea roaring to the people of the world that ideals of equality and freedom are not mere dreams" ("[Kobani, Another World: A Declaration of 209 Social Activists of Tabriz in Support of Kobani Resistance](#)," October 2014)

Since 2012, the PYD has established Rojava, a de facto autonomous Kurdish zone in northeastern Syria, an area not far from where ISIS has its core strength. The PYD is the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of Turkey, historically a Stalinist Kurdish nationalist group with an iron hierarchical discipline. For a time during the 1990s, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan orchestrated their guerrilla forces in eastern Turkey from Syria, where the Assad regime granted the PKK legal status. Since his expulsion from Syria and capture by the US and Turkey in 1999, Ocalan has altered his politics, now espousing Kurdish autonomy -- dubbed "Democratic Confederalism" -- inside Turkey rather than independence. He has also written of a libertarian form of socialism influenced by an eclectic mix of disparate sources, including Friedrich Nietzsche and US anarchist and social ecologist Murray Bookchin.

It was this type of politics that was on display in Kobane last winter and that won the admiration of so much of the global left. For example, the anarchist David Graeber compared Kobane to the anarchist and socialist revolutionaries of Spain in the 1930s. Acknowledging the authoritarian history of these Kurdish tendencies, Graeber focused on grassroots democracy and changes in property relations: "Clearly, authoritarian elements remain. But what has happened in Rojava, where the Syrian revolution gave Kurdish radicals the chance to carry out such experiments in a large, contiguous territory, suggests this is anything but window dressing. Councils, assemblies and popular militias have been formed, regime property has been turned over to worker-managed co-operatives -- and all despite continual attacks by the extreme rightwing forces of Isis" ("Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria," [Guardian](#) 10-8-14). Graeber also compared the PKK-PYD to the Zapatistas.

An international delegation of leftist academics reached similar conclusions after visiting Rojava in December, giving particular stress to women's liberation:

"In Rojava, we believe, genuinely democratic structures have indeed been established. Not only is the system of government accountable to the people, but it springs out of new structures that make direct democracy possible: popular assemblies and democratic councils. Women participate on an equal footing with men at every level and also organize in autonomous councils, assemblies, and committees to address their specific concerns. The women we met embodied the empowerment, self-confidence, and pride recently gained by the women of Rojava. We saw banners and slogans that read: 'The Rojavan revolution is a women's revolution.' It really is."

"Rojava, we believe, points to an alternative future for Syria and the Middle East, a future where the peoples of different ethnic backgrounds and religions can live together, united by mutual tolerance and common institutions. Kurdish organizations have led the way, but they increasingly gain support from Arabs, Assyrians, and Chechens, who participate in their common system of self-government and organize autonomously" (Statement from the Academic Delegation to Rojava, "[New Compass: Toward an Ecological Society](#), January 15, 2015; see also socialist feminist Meredith Tax, "The Revolution in Rojava," [Dissent](#), April 22, 2015).

Controversy on the Left over the Syrian Kurds

Not all are so enthusiastic about the PYD and Rojava. Longtime Syrian revolutionary -- and former Marxist -- Yassin al-Haj Saleh has pointed to the PYD's failure to support the 2011 uprising and noted their earlier history of "siding with a regime that never recognized the very existence of the Kurdish population (8-10% of Syrians) in Syria, let alone their rights," something he attributed to "lenses borrowed from the PKK in Turkey" (Frieda Afary, "Syria, Iran, ISIS and the Future of Social Justice: 'In dialogue with Yassin al-Haj Saleh'," [Radio Zamaneh](#) 5-29-15; see also "[Anarchist Federation statement on Rojava](#)," December 1, 2014).

To be sure, the PYD even today enjoys a truce with Assad regime forces at several locations, part of a "non-aggression pact with Damascus" (Allan Kaval, "A Kamechliyé, capital fantôme du Kurdistan de Syrie," [Le Monde](#) 6-16-15). At the same time, however, the PYD has fought against Assad's forces elsewhere, as in the strategic city of Hasakah, where its forces repulsed those of the regime and its allies in January and began to establish a local autonomous zone, while also having to contend with ISIS forces in the area. In Hasakah the PYD

espouses the same concepts of grassroots democracy that it put forth in Kobane. At the same time, however, the Asayish, the PYD political police, seem to exercise substantial control over the population, including drafting youth into their armed forces (Allan Kaval, "Hassaké, carrefour de la guerre civile syrienne," [Le Monde](#) 4-15-15).

As Joseph Daher, a member of the Revolutionary Left Current in Syria put it in an interview during the siege of Kobane last year:

"What is happening in the Kurdish autonomous region is far from perfect. There is repression of Kurdish activists and forced conscription -- people who refuse are imprisoned. Institutions that criticized the PKK were closed. The PYD -- the Democratic Union Party, a Syrian Kurdish political party established in 2003 -- like its mother organization the PKK, is not democratic in its internal functioning. We must remember for example the protest movements in late June 2013 in some cities of Rojava, such as Amouda and Derabissyat, against the repression by the PYD of Kurdish revolutionary activists."

"But at the same time you have some very positive aspects when it comes to the protection of religious minorities, strengthening women's rights, and secularism. In comparison with the popular councils that were established from below in the liberated areas of Syria by the revolutionaries, which are real examples of self-administration, in the case of Rojava it is more a dynamic from above, led and controlled by the PYD. So again, these are the different aspects that you can say about this intervention in Kobanê and how I see it." ("Kobanê, Turkey, and the Syrian Struggle: Joseph Daher interviewed by Riad Azar," [New Politics](#) 11-18-14).

Two issues are paramount here. First, there is a strong element of grassroots democracy, women's rights, and a leftist political program on property relations being implemented in Rojava. This is very important indeed. One would have to be very naive to think that this is the only element and that the PKK-PYD have not retained some of their old practices and theories.

But what seems to be happening, as Onur Kapdan, a Turkish leftist intellectual suggests, is that the PKK and PYD have been evolving over the past decade or so, moving away from their earlier Stalinist politics and organizational forms and toward something more open. This is even more the case when it comes to legal Turkish groups linked to them, like the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

This young intellectual writes that in Turkey "young Kurdish activists," sometimes influenced by the Zapatista movement in Mexico and by anarchism, "have been pushing different interpretations of revolution and independence as well as different organizational forms to achieve that. I believe that this new generation managed to push the PKK towards their interpretation as well." At the same time, this correspondent concludes, some PKK leaders "are still as Stalinist as it gets." This has led to a three-sided debate in Turkey among the HDP youth, Ocalan, and older Stalinist elements of the PKK (Onur Kapdan, private communication, 7-28-15).

Second, one cannot underline too much that the PYD and Rojava are the most important force confronting ISIS barbarism in eastern Syria and northern Iraq, a barbarism that enslaves women and executes Shia Muslims, religious minorities, and anyone else who does not swear immediate fealty to their dogmatic form of Islam. (ISIS is so repulsive that even the knee-jerk response to all forms of US intervention, even those against genocide, that is usual in many parts of the global left, has been strikingly absent this time.) The PYD and Rojava are confronting something like fascism and they are espousing principles of gender equality, religious tolerance, and progressive changes in the socio-economic system.

Overall, despite their compromises with Assad and their legacy of Stalinism, one can say that the PYD and Rojava are putting forth not just resistance to ISIS -- and to an extent, Assad -- but also a vision of different human relations, toward the overcoming of the oppressions of gender and class. Such a vision is sorely missing at this juncture, not only in the Middle East, but also globally. (See Peter Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*, Chicago: Haymarket, 2012. Also, it goes without saying that examples like Kobane should not be seen as connected to the spurious Stalinist notion of "socialism in one country," since no truly revolutionary transformation can be ultimately successful without the uprooting of the global capitalist system.)

In June, the PYD, in alliance with Syrian opposition forces and with support from US airstrikes, took from ISIS an even more important border town, Tal Abyad. Control of this town cuts off the supply line from Turkey to the ISIS capital city, Raqqa (Ben Hubbard and Maher Samaan, "Kurdish Fighters in Syria Seize Much of ISIS Stronghold," [*New York Times*](#) 6-16-15). It also linked two large parts of Rojava together, which had been separated by this ISIS stronghold up to now. The fact that the PYD and the Syrian opposition were allied in this

attack could be a turning point for the entire Syrian civil war, although that of course remains to be seen.

The ISIS response was swift, and murderous. A week after Tal Abyad, ISIS forces raided Kobane again. Before they were driven back, they had managed to kill some 150 people, most of them civilians. A few weeks later, an ISIS suicide bomber blew himself up in the Turkish town of Suruc, killing 31 young supporters of Kobane who had gathered there. Far from intimidating the supporters of Kobane, it only increased their determination. (This incident is discussed more below, in the section on Turkey, but first I want to take up briefly another relatively positive development in the Arab world, in Tunisia, where events have taken a turn different from both Egypt and Syria.)

Liberal Democracy in Tunisia under a New Constitution

In what amounts overall to a very bleak period for the Middle East four years after the 2011 revolutions, another positive development needs our attention, the establishment of democracy and constitutional rule in Tunisia. This small country, the first to rise up in the 2011 revolutions, has also been the most resilient in terms of maintaining some of the original goals of 2011. However, this resilience has been limited to the political level, that of democratic and human rights, and does not extend to the social sphere, to the central demands also raised in 2011 for an end to poverty and unemployment.

As in Egypt, Islamists and their allies came to power in the first post-revolution elections in fall 2011, but the Tunisian Islamists of the Ennahda Party were less dogmatic than the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, the military was far weaker -- and the trade unions and the left stronger -- than in Egypt. Still, it took massive street protests in 2013 after the assassinations by Salafists of two leftist leaders, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahimi, to force Ennahda to retreat and to allow a more secular and feminist Constitution to be written and enacted in fall and winter 2013-14.

Feminists also played an important role from 2011 onwards in combating any attempt to roll back the fairly strong women's rights gains achieved since Tunisia won its independence from France in 1956. At least around gender, much of the Tunisian constitutional debate took place on the streets as feminists vehemently opposed a 2012 draft paragraph written by Ennahda supporters that described men and women as "complementary" rather than "equal." According to

sociologists Mounira M. Charrad and Amina Zarrugh, "Women's organizations, which historically did not exert significant influence on the state in Tunisia, have been exceedingly important to debates about the constitution... All of a sudden, constitution writing emerged as an integral part of the new 'politics from below' in which different groups expressed their opinion, sometimes vehemently." This is very different from the top-down enactment of women's rights provisions under the pre-2011 regimes and it suggests that the new gender rights in the 2014 Constitution will enjoy a deeper level of support within society as a whole (Charrad and Zarrugh, "Equal or complementary? Women in the new Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring," *Journal of North African Studies* 19:2 [2014]). A very small LGBT movement has also emerged publicly, and it is campaigning discreetly to decriminalize homosexuality, now punishable by up to three years in prison (Frédéric Bobin, "En Tunisie, le combat fragile des homosexuels pour la reconnaissance," [*Le Monde*](#) 7-1-15).

The 2014 Constitution enshrines a host of democratic and human rights for citizens in relation to the state. It also establishes the principles of gender equality and parity in terms of political representation. In the sphere of religion, it prohibits the accusation of apostasy (takfir), a common tactic of religious extremists that amounts to a call for someone's assassination. These are very significant gains indeed. They are not, however, without their limitations, even on gender. As French scholar Edith Lhomel notes, while women are granted political and economic equality, "these advances unfortunately do not pertain to the private sphere" (Esprit de la Constitution tunisienne," *Esprit* 3-4 [2014]).

The biggest gaps appear in what the Constitution does not even address seriously, the socio-economic sphere. With unemployment and recourse to informal labor at catastrophic levels, young people have been immigrating across the Mediterranean to Europe in droves, often at great risk. Some youth have been drawn to radical Islamist groups, which have profited from the chaos in Libya and the availability of funding from Gulf Arabs to set up training camps in Libya. These Salafists, most of whom now express loyalty to ISIS, have recently bragged of their role in the assassinations of the two leftist leaders in 2013. More recently, they have staged two terrorist attacks on Western tourists, in March and in June. These have claimed dozens of lives and will only increase economic misery by damaging the country's important tourism industry.

The March attack occurred just six days before the leftist World Social Forum in Tunis, which led to the fear that many organizations would pull out at the last

minute. Instead, there was "an avalanche of messages" stating that virtually all of these leftist organizations would attend, "more than ever, in a spirit of solidarity with the Tunisian people." The opening demonstration of the WSF ended at the Bardo Museum, the site of the attack, under the slogan: "The peoples united, for freedom, for social justice, for peace, and in solidarity with the victims of terrorism and all forms of oppression" (Pierre Beaudet, "Le Forum social mondial, un outil toujours essentiel pour les mouvements et les luttes: Entrevue avec Gustave Massiah").

Thus, Tunisia has set up a somewhat liberal democratic republic in which feminists, trade unions, and the socialist left can organize openly, something that is hardly the case in most of the region. This has by no means brought about the original revolution's social justice aims.

Two sets of elections were held in the fall of 2014. In the parliamentary elections, the Nida Tounes Party -- a coalition of liberals, nationalists, former officials from the regime of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, and some parts of the left - came in first, but without a majority. The moderate Islamist Ennahda Party placed a close second, while the openly socialist Popular Front drew about 6% of the vote. The first round of the presidential elections had a similar result, with the second round giving a clear majority to Nida Tounes leader Beji Caid Essebsi, who was by then supported by most of the non-Ennahda parties, including the Popular Front, which saw the Islamists as the greater enemy. Essebsi, an 88-year-old politician who served under independence leader Habib Bourguiba, retired from politics in the early 1990s, during the first years of Ben Ali's rule. In the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's overthrow in 2011, Essebsi became interim prime minister, but was for a time eclipsed by Ennahda.

The recent terrorist attacks on tourists have led to a crackdown by Essebsi's government, with some stringent new security laws that undermine civil liberties enacted. At the same time, social unrest persists. As Nadia Marzouki and Hamza Meddeb report: "Since the formation of the government in February 2015, strikes, demonstrations and occupations of work places have been incessant. Members of the health sector, schoolteachers, railway workers, civil servants have organized numerous protests and strikes. Since March 2015, strikes in the mining region of Gafsa have completely blocked all economic activity in the surrounding area. Recently, clashes occurred between unemployed youth and police forces in the city of El Faouar in the South West of the country. The protesters reclaimed their right to employment and the development of their

marginalized region, where many oil companies are installed without endorsing any social or environmental responsibility in the development of the area. As representative of the middle classes, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) appears increasingly unable to deal with these protests and to channel the social claims of the disenfranchised lower classes, who feel excluded from political representation and from enjoying the benefits of the revolution" (Marzouki and Meddeb, "Tunisia: Democratic Miracle or Mirage," [Jadaliyya](#) 6-11-15).

On the one hand, this kind of unrest shows the severe limits of the new political order that has been established in Tunisia, one that is still clearly within the framework of capitalism. On the other hand, it is only through these kinds of actions that the revolution begun in 2011 can be deepened into something that fulfill those aspirations at their deepest level by challenging that very capitalist order.

Turkey in Flux, with Erdogan on the Defensive

Turkey, which straddles Europe and the Middle East, was not immediately convulsed by the Arab revolutions of 2011. However, as the new social consciousness born in 2011 spread globally, it eventually reached Turkey as well. The resulting Gezi Park occupation of 2013 constituted the most significant leftist mass movement in Turkey in decades. It also created the first serious challenge to over a decade of the ascendancy of the Islamic conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its demagogic leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As against earlier Turkish leftist upsurges, which involved hierarchically organized trade unions and Marxist-Leninist parties, Gezi had a more grassroots, more horizontalist flavor, one that emphasized ecology (the spark for the protests) and feminism alongside older leftist concerns like labor and the Kurdish struggle. After several weeks, the protests, which had spread across the country, were put down via harsh police repression (Onur Kapdan, "Reflections on Turkey's Gezi Park Protests," [The International Marxist-Humanist](#) 8-13-13).

A year later, the spirit of Gezi seemed to have dissipated as the AKP won easily against the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) in the mayoral election in Istanbul, while Erdogan soundly defeated the CHP in the August 2014 presidential election. In neither case did the CHP invoke the Gezi protests. Erdogan then set about turning the largely ceremonial presidency into a new

power office after having installed a close ally as prime minister, here following the pathway of Russia's Putin.

Within the next few months, Erdogan's support plummeted, however. In fall 2014, as ISIS seemed on the verge of overrunning Kobane, Erdogan not only refused to support the Kurds, but also seemed indifferent to their fate. This led to outbreaks of violence across Turkey in which pro-Kobane demonstrators clashed with Erdogan supporters, leaving some 40 people dead. Even though the Turkish border has been the main conduit for ISIS recruits, it was only after strong US pressure that Erdogan allowed Kurdish Peshmerga forces from Iraq to cross over to Kobane, while still refusing to allow the US to use its military bases in Turkey to bomb ISIS.

By 2015, Erdogan had detained a journalist from the respected leftist newspaper *BirGun*, his police had violently repressed the May Day labor rally, and he had continued to make disparaging remarks about women. Erdogan had also begun construction of a 1000-room presidential palace, which led critics to dub him the new sultan of Turkey, this at a time when the economy had slowed down and unemployment had reached 11%.

Most importantly, his indifference to the fate of Kobane inflamed the Kurds, driving away his conservative religious Kurdish supporters. This also outraged the Turkish radical left, which looked to Kobane as well. The radical left now largely united behind the new Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the June 2015 parliamentary elections.

In these elections, Erdogan was seeking a supermajority for the AKP in order to change the Constitution to convert the presidency into the chief executive office, thus prolonging his rule. Instead, in a sharp repudiation of the AKP's 14 years in office, it failed even to maintain a simple majority in the new parliament.

A second and equally significant new development in these elections was the strong showing for the Kurdish-led HDP, which garnered 80 seats in the new parliament, with 13% of the total vote. Under its co-chairs Selahattin Demirtas (m) and Figen Yuksekdag (f), the HDP reached out far beyond its leftwing Kurdish base to embrace numerous other progressive communities and areas of concern. For example, some 32 of the HDP's deputies are now women, this after Erdogan had declared that equality of the sexes was "against human nature" (Ghalia Kadiri, "Les femmes entrent en force au Parlement," [Le Monde](#) 6-10-15)

This HDP success occurred in the face of a violent verbal and physical campaign accusing it of terrorism. This included physical attacks on over 70 of its offices across Turkey. Then on June 6, the day before the election, a suicide bomber sympathetic to ISIS blew himself up at a large HDP campaign rally in the principal Kurdish city, Diyarbakir, killing two people.

Istanbul political scientist Ahmet Insel connected Erdogan's defeat to the spirit of Gezi as well, which had evidently not disappeared: "Undoubtedly, it is the HDP, this alliance between the pro-Kurdish party and multiple organizations of the left and of civil society that is the great victor in this election... Embodying in a way the spirit of the Gezi Park movement of June 2013... [they] suffused Turkey with their demands for equality and recognition, for participatory democracy and for respect for pluralism" (Ahmet Insel, "Après le revers électoral d'Erdogan, 'la Turquie respire!'," [*Le Monde*](#) 6-9-15).

HDP leader Demirtas touched these core issues in a pre-election speech: "I did not become a candidate in order to preside over an authoritarian, bureaucratic, anti-democratic, sexist state. The president we hope for is one who will be with the people on the streets.... We will establish assemblies of women, youth, the disabled, belief groups, cultural and ethnic groups, farmers, workers and laborers. Instead of increasing the powers of the presidency, we will undertake a presidency which will guarantee the increased power of the people.... Life together can only be based on equality and freedom. The pressure on all the oppressed and excluded faiths—Alevi, Christians, Jews, Yazidis—must be lifted. The way must be opened for all faiths and worldviews to coexist freely in a pluralist democracy.... The call for a new life means a sexually free society. The system ignores the fate of those LGBTI individuals who face oppression and murder because of their sexual orientation or sexual identity. The very existence of LGBTI individuals is seen as a crime. Homophobia and transphobia are encouraged. In the way of new life, every citizen, whatever their sexual identity, will have equal rights and be able to live freely life without facing discrimination."

On the need to uproot capitalism, the HDP leader became a bit more vague, however: "The neoliberal period has brought fundamental changes in property relations, production and employment. The production process has been atomized, split into small units and reorganized. Under the heading of 'flexible working,' workers face insecure, subcontracted, uninsured employment conditions that not only divest workers of their basic employment rights, but also

rights in all aspects of their lives.... The new life must guarantee the social rights of all workers, especially those in precarious employment" ("Turkey's left party leader Selahattin Demirtas' call for 'new way of life': radical democracy," [Links](#) 6-8-15).

Afterwards, Demirtas underlined HDP's debt to earlier movements: "As to our source of inspiration, it can be found in the common history of Turkey's socialist movements and in the Kurdish movement, among those who resisted at Kobane and at Gezi Park" (Selahattin Demirtas, "Le rêve d'une Nouvelle Turquie est possible," [Le Monde](#) 6-30-15).

On July 20, large group of Kurdish and leftwing activists, mainly youth, gathered in Suruc, Turkey, just across the border from Kobane in order to organize support for that town which, as discussed above, had recently been attacked again by ISIS. These youth did so in the wake of both this electoral upsurge for the HDP and that of the Kurdish YPG having wrested the key Syrian border town of Tal Abyad from ISIS. As an evident act of revenge, ISIS supporters proceeded to set off a bomb that killed 32 people and wounded over 100.

This forced Erdogan finally to acknowledge ISIS as a threat to Turkey itself. Thereupon, he did three things: (1) he allowed US planes to target ISIS from Turkish bases; (2) his air force bombed ISIS positions inside Syria; (3) his air force bombed Kurdish positions in Iraq, and, despite his denials, apparently Syria as well. In so doing, Erdogan sought to contain the decline in his support at home and to firm up his ties to US imperialism, which seemed to oblige. He demagogically equated ISIS with the Kurdish liberation fighters to justify his attack on the latter. His aim seems to be to shore up his support at home by appealing to anti-Kurdish fears. In terms of his subimperialist aims, he wants to weaken and destroy the large liberated Kurdish enclave on his southern border that includes Kobane and other towns wrested from ISIS and Assad. Whether this will help him at home or with the US remains to be seen.

What is clear is that since Gezi and Kobane, new liberatory forces have emerged inside Turkey, at a level not seen in decades. To be sure, the AKP machine remains entrenched and is counterattacking, but it was the AKP that was placed on the defensive, first with Gezi in 2013, and then with the 2015 elections. At

this writing, it is unclear if it will be able to recover from this setback. Moreover, it should be noted that the most effective challenges to the AKP of late have come from new forces tied to the left, not from the old Kemalist or military establishments.

Where Things Stand in Summer 2015

Overall, the situation in the Middle East today is one of counter-revolution and retrogression, whether one considers the Sisi regime in Egypt, the rise of ISIS, the carnage in Syria, or a host of other setbacks for the forces of democracy and human emancipation.

At the same time, we have seen a few green shoots that point – amid all the carnage, repression, and imperialist maneuvers – in the direction of an emancipatory future. As discussed above, these include the emergence of leftwing Kurdish forces in Syria, the Tunisian Constitution, and the new ferment inside Turkey, sparked in part by those new developments in Syria. These green shoots encompass a host of issues central to the twenty-first century left: grassroots democracy, feminism, self-determination for oppressed minorities, LGBT liberation, and, to a degree, discontent with the capitalist order.

"The revolution is dead, long live the revolution!" (Marx, [The Class Struggles in France](#) [1850]).

-- July 29, 2015