

Book Review of 'A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State'

By Meredith Tax, Bellevue Literary Press 2016

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Western media tells us very little about the society behind the Kurdish forces who have, with the help of air-cover from the US and European coalition, pushed ISIS out of Raqqa, the capital city of its so-called caliphate. Now public discourse is agonising about the level of threat posed by ISIS fighters returning to their European homelands, about morally superior forms of Western retribution and justice and about fears that ISIS will regroup.



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They say that history is written by the victors. However, this focus on ISIS has drowned out the voices of the people behind the rout of Raqqa. There are a few commentators - Meredith Tax, American feminist writer and activist, is one of them - who have understood the huge significance of the secular, radical democracy that is taking shape in the Democratic federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) or Rojava. Her well-researched book, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State*, was published in 2016, four years after the 'Arab Spring' triggered a revolution there and delivered a society where women are in the driving seat, where racial inclusivity, class equality, ecological sustainability and a co-op based economy are guiding principles.

It was during the siege of Kobani (started in September 2014) when Tax saw 'pictures of smiling rifle-toting girls in uniform defending the city' against ISIS that her curiosity was piqued. What she discovered left her stunned. She wrote to her friends on New Years' Day 2015 to tell them about Rojava "At the end of such a dark and difficult year, one searches for light. It can sometimes be found in unexpected places."

With Tax's long history of activism, she has been witness to many false dawns of women's liberation. Naturally she approached this feminist revolution with the same degree of hope and scepticism that I share: the question that simmers under this book is, 'So what makes the Kurdish women's movement different?' A particularly pertinent question as it evolved out of PKK, (Kurdistan Workers' Party) which began as a classic Marxist-Leninist party paying lip service to the equality of women.

In her preface, Tax says that the book revolves on two axes, 'One axis is the collision of three visions of social organisation, all reflections of larger global paradigms but particularly intense in Kurdistan: the Islamism of Daesh, the "capitalist modernity" (Ocalan's phrase) of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and the new kind of leftwing, non-state, democratic formation developing in the liberated cantons of Syria. The other axis is the role of women in these paradigms.'

Rojava cannot be understood without reference to the Kurdish struggle for self-government in Turkey and the political philosophy of the jailed leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, Abdullah Öcalan, whose ideas underpin the Rojava revolution. Although the KRG is politically opposed to the revolution, their history is also intertwined with that of the Syrian Kurds. The fourth part of Kurdistan which falls in Iran has not had as much

influence on events in Rojava which explains why Tax has concentrated on the Iraqi and Turkish histories as the context for Rojava.

The book begins with the siege of Sinjar mountains in Iraq by ISIS in 2014, the massacre of the Yazidis and the abduction, enslavement and rape of the Yazidi women. The way the three Kurdish areas respond to this siege captures the essence of their interrelationships in a microcosm. The Iraqi Peshmerga desert the Yazidis, which stirs the women's defence forces of Rojava (YPJ) and the women's unit of the PKK (YJA-Star), accompanied by their male comrades, into action, knowing the brutality that ISIS visits upon women.

Sinjar and the Yazidis are also an important reference point for the women of Rojava justifying the use of arms. Tax quotes a number of Kurdish women who argue that the only way to avoid femicide is to take up self-defence, that the Yazidi women would not have suffered the fate that they did if they had been armed, that you cannot negotiate with a force like ISIS who are not just an existential threat to the whole community but whose entrenched misogyny is the polar opposite of the gender equal society that the Kurds are trying to build. It is a robust rebuttal to the feminist pacifist tradition further bolstered by Öcalan's support for an autonomous women's army as essential to building women's self-confidence.

Tax tackles another question that troubles feminist activists – the issue of celibacy for revolutionaries, presenting arguments from both sides without actually stating her own position. These are doubts that I too have shared but have been persuaded by women fighters who say, it is your choice to give up your life for the revolution. Celibacy is part of that. Öcalan's theoretical position on the necessity of celibacy is that a new

culture has to develop before sexual intimacy can be detached from power relations because personal love relationships turn women into slaves.

This is a book expressing critical solidarity with the cause. Tax does not shy away from criticism of the ruthless execution of cadres on suspicion of being police agents under Öcalan in the early years but that does not prevent her from recognising that Öcalan's renunciation of violence later on was genuine.

With all the doubts that Tax expresses about Rojava, for example the difficulties of assessing the strength of its democracy during war time, she concludes with a resounding affirmation that 'It is already clear that, even under wartime conditions, Rojava may well be the best place in the Middle East to be a woman.'

Rojava has all the ingredients that should interest Western media: a David versus Goliath story; a clash of civilisations in the Middle East itself; and women in the frontline against barbaric Daesh fighters who believe that death at the hands of women will mean that the door to Paradise will be shut forever. And yet it is almost invisible. What might seem to progressive minded people all over the world like a good news story is actually too threatening for the establishment to contemplate as its success and spread could signal the demise of capitalism.

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