

# ANARCHIST STRUGGLE IN ROJAVA



**The Final Straw Radio**  
Jan 23, 2022





Anarchist Struggle, or Tekoşîna Anarşîst in Kurmanji, is an anarchist combat medic collective operating in Rojava since the time of the war against Daesh / Isis, though its roots go back further. A member of TA calling themselves Robin Goldman speaks about the their experiences of Asymmetric Warfare waged by Turkey and its proxies in the TFSA, the culture of TA right now, the medical work they're doing, queerness in Rojava and other topics.

Search for this interview title at <https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/> to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

**TFSR: Would you please introduce yourself to the audience with whatever names, preferred gender pronouns, affiliations, or experience, as you would like (to help the audience orient itself)?**

**RG:** Yeah, so you can call me Robin Goldman. I use they/them pronouns. I am in my 30's. I've been in Rojava for a couple of years now. I have a background in a couple of things in computer work, and then also in healthcare work. And yeah, that's me in a nutshell.

**TFSR: Cool. Thank you, again, for having this conversation. Could you give listeners who may not be familiar with the Rojava revolution, like a brief synopsis of its kind of trajectory that you think people should know for this conversation?**

**RG:** So I'm absolutely not qualified to give a full synopsis of the Rojava revolution or anything, but the very bare bones for somebody who's not familiar at all, the reason that it's known as RO-ja-va, or Ro-JA-va, it's pronounced both ways, is because that's the Kurdish word for "west", and Kurdistan as an area the way that it's historically understood was divided into four regions. So Bakur, meaning "north", is the part that's in Turkey; Rojhilat, meaning "east", is the part that's in Iran; Başûr, meaning "south", is a part that's in Iraq, and Rojava is the part that's in Syria.

So when we talk about the Rojava revolution, we're talking about the western Kurdistan portion of Syria. And in 2017, there was the final push to to defeat ISIS and it's sort of self proclaimed capital of Raqqa, that kind of completed around 2018 and they're still, like, sleeper cells and Daesh carriers out bombings and stuff but for the most part, they're not holding any significant territory anymore.

In 2018, Turkey, and its proxy forces invaded Afrin, and in 2019, they invaded Serê Kaniyê. So over the last couple of years, before I came, there was a big shift from the way that the fighting happened and the type of combat and the type of diplomatic situation and everything, from kind of the images that Americans got used to seeing of a person on foot with an AK in their hand, like fighting Daesh, which was very much the image from kind of the Daesh war. Now, a lot of the fighting involves like drone strikes on the part of Turkey, and it's become much more asymmetrical.

Now we're in a situation for the last couple of years ever since the Serê Kaniyê invasion, which was a very quick invasion that Turkey did, that took a big swath of territory towards the end of 2019, that Serê Kaniyê

a meta-stable situation where there's ongoing aggression. There's shelling pretty regularly along the front line, which is like the new border between the area that's occupied by Turkish proxy forces and the area that is still held by the SDF, which a lot of people who are referred to as "the friends", so if I refer to area held by the friend, see if that's that's usually what that's what I mean, I might kind of forget and refer to them that way, cause that's the vernacular. And now, the issue is there's this constant brinkmanship from Turkey- well, I can get into later because I guess there's more questions about this stuff. So that's kind of where we're at now.

Ideologically it's based on a lot of ideology that comes from 40 years of armed struggle by the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, which originated in Bakur and the Turkish portion of Kurdistan and originally had the characteristic of like a national liberation struggle as a lot of sort of post-Soviet post-colonial struggles did. But over time, the main thinker of the party, Abdullah Öcalan, who was imprisoned in I believe, 1999, he did a big shift in ideological orientation from an authoritarian, communist, classic Marxist Leninist type of strategy to one that is much more democratic and much more compatible with anarchist ideals, in particular. And he exchanged letters with Murray Bookchin. And this got the name of the new paradigm and it's based on three pillars, which is ecology, women's liberation and democratic confederalism. So that's the ideological basis of the society that's being built in the autonomously administered area now.

**TFSR: Cool, thank you very much. Yeah and I'd like to talk about some of those other specifics of what's been going on a little bit later. So could you talk a little bit about - and please correct me if I'm wrong on this pronunciation - but Tekoşîna Anarşist, "Anarchist Struggle". For folks who aren't familiar with the project, like how long has it been around and what are its goals? How does it operate?**

**RG:** So I haven't been around since the beginning so I can't get a super detailed description of the origins, but Tekoşîna Anarşist, which is just Kurdish language for "Anarchist Struggle", has existed in its current form for I think, between three and four years at this point. And it started as a part of I know people have seen these logos and these groups with names like IRPGF, and IFB. The IFB, the International Freedom Battalion, was something that was, during the time of the Daesh war, a group of sort of various internationalist organizations that had militants -

\*cat meowing in the background\*

sorry, my cat is joining this. Our cat Shisha wants to join this interview.

**TFSR: Hello Heval cat.**

**RG:** \*laughs\* So those those were like a coalition of the different sort of internationalist groups that had militants here at that time. And they were like cooperating together - because some of them were kind of smaller groups - and there were multiple groups that have English as the common language, or were otherwise kind of not using mainly Kurdish or mainly Arabic, like a lot of the groups \*more cat meowing\*. who were from here were doing. And so there's still a lot of people from that struggle in that time around, but I wasn't around yet then, I was still in the states then. So I can't give like a real detailed history. But yeah, we started kind of under this umbrella and eventually kind of became more autonomous. And we're now an autonomous collective that is doing work with different partners, like we're involved with both the military work under the SDF, and also like the health committee kind of work. So we kind of have two bosses now at this point \*chuckles\*.

**TFSR: And you described as a collective right? Is it it's made up of people that are over in Rojava under the autonomous administration? Or is it like international? Or is that a thing that you can talk about? And like how do decisions get made, just collectively among the body of membership?**

**RG:** Yeah, we're really decentralized in the way that we make decisions, we try to embody our anarchist principles, which means different things to different people too so it's something that we're constantly working on within our organization. We're constantly evaluating our organizational structure and frame and debating about whether we want to change our decision making protocol, or how much protocol we want to have at all. You know, the same sort of things that any anarchist organization is going to be familiar with \*laughs\*. It's uh, always a bit of a struggle, but we're committed to putting our ideals into practice in terms of radical democracy and trying to root out the patriarchy and other oppressive dynamics, not just in society, but within ourselves and within our organization, as a continual process.

**TFSR: So would you say that as to the goals of TA that TA is about like supporting the Rojava revolution and challenging it to be more radical and some of its conceptions?**

**RG:** Yeah, I mean, we're a really small group - the number of us here at any given time is typically less than 10 - and so our purpose and our mission kind of evolves also, as the conditions change, but it offers a place for people that might not fit into another structure really well, like in particular, in terms of queer identity issues. Of course, ideologically, I think we're definitely not the only anarchists involved in this revolution, there's people in pretty much every international structure, you know, there's people of different anarchist ideals that have been or are currently in different groups and different types of work. So we're not claiming to represent all anarchists, by any means, but um, you know, to people who ideologically want to participate in the work in this particular frame, and to have these types of organizational discussions as they're, you know, participating in the work.

And also, yeah, to try to find ways to respectfully challenge the revolution, like you said, to push it to remain as what we understand is more radical and more revolutionary, as well as learning from them. I mean, Öcalan also has published critiques, specifically of anarchists, and you know, not saying that anarchism is wrong or bad, but his critiques I think, are actually quite the same as ones published by Malatesta many, many decades ago. So, engaging with these critiques we're in a unique position because we are not just reading anarchist theory or trying to embody anarchist theory in small collective in the midst of a capitalist economy like collectives in the US, for example, we'd be doing, but we're in the midst of a messy revolution, full of contradictions and really understanding what that means and seeing how the rubber hits the road, so to speak.

**TFSR: Cool and if you feel comfortable, if you don't, but if you feel comfortable, I'd love to hear a little bit about what inspired you to go over and to join and to, like, participate in this struggle that is, like difficult to get to and also dangerous.**

**RG:** Yeah, for sure. So I've been interested in, ever since 2016, when I met with somebody who had been here with YPG and he was just giving a question and answer to some anarchist groups about his experience and he was being really candid about it. And to me when I read about it, and

then also, when I heard about it from him, it's that it really reminded me and a lot of ways of, I was also reading a lot at the time about the Spanish revolution of 1936. It's something that a lot of anarchists, I think, will be really familiar with, really inspired by. And seeing kind of the similarities there and, you know, when I was reading about 1936 Spain, and thinking like, "oh, you know, if there was something like this in my lifetime," you know, and then realizing there is! And not only Rojava, Rojava is not the only revolutionary project in the world right now, but it's one that I was lucky enough to have some contact with. And I was able to join a Kurdish language class, which I didn't learn very much from at that time, but I, it got me started.

And then so over time, as I was also doing work before I came here with organizations that were inspired by a lot of the same ideas of this movement. I was really getting into ideas inspired by Murray Bookchin's ideas about municipalism, and social ecology, Democratic confederalism. These sort of ideas were interesting to me, not only at a theoretical level, but because I was working with groups that were trying to implement them, and that were already themselves inspired by hearing about the things that were happening here and other places, with setting up communes and decommunitizing the necessities, communization theory, dual power.

So I was working with groups that were republishing stuff that was being published by the movement here and stuff from Make Rojava Green Again and other groups that were here, and we were, you know, trying to put tekml, this critique and self-critique that's inspired by sort of a Maoist practice originally, you know, we were using some of these tools that came to us through this movement and things that they published.

So we really were curious about, if we could learn more from this revolution, and if we had anything to contribute to it. So yeah, for all those reasons, I came here to see what I could see, see what I could bring back to my organizing back home, and to see what I could possibly contribute, also, to moving the revolution here forward.

**TFSR: Can you talk a little bit about how TA, or Anarchist Struggle fits in and relates to the broader constellation of groups in the Syrian Defense Forces - the SDF - and with the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria, the long name for AANES, I guess, another name for Rojava? Is that a good way of putting it?**



**RG:** So like I mentioned, TA is one of many groups that are existing for internationalists, some of which are kind of involved with SDF military works, and others are more purely civilian. A lot of people who want to come here they go directly to talking to YPG, YPJ, because they don't know that non-military works exist. Or then a lot of times people contact us because we're the only group besides YPG that they've heard of that internationalists can join.

So I just wanted to like put out there that there's also quite a few others. For civilian groups there's the Internationalist Commune, and there's Jineology International, which is studying the women's movement and I think that one's only open to women and nonbinary folks. So on the military side, there's YPG and YPJ. Various communist parties have a presence here that are sometimes bringing internationalists from certain places, and sometimes not, I don't know so much about their...and they range from classic Marxist-Leninist/Stalinist organizations to other ones that are more Maoist inspired. So they have like, even within, you know, having in common that they're authoritarian communist, they have quite an ideological diversity, as well as tactical diversity among them.

And then there's also media groups, there's the Rojava Information Center, which is a great source of information, and also people are coming and working with them in a journalistic capacity. There's Heyva Sor [A Kurd], which is the Kurdish Red Crescent, which is the civilian medical work that has a huge project of like trying to set up basically a functioning health system in what is now kind of a chaotic systemless soup of various health services.

So those are the words that are available to internationalists. And then as well as our relationship to the SDF, we are responsible to the SDF—the way that the SDF works is it's sort of administered by local military councils. So like, each area has a military council that serves for the defense of the area. Mostly, this was kind of set up, I think, during the Daesh war and continues to function during this phase of the war, that like, for example: in a region where we've got a Kurdish community and a Syrian community, an Armenian community, a Syriac community, there will be both military and civilian sides to the defense so there'll be like a local community defense which people are familiar with HPC, which got the nickname “grannies with guns”. So it's like the sort of civilian side of the community neighborhood defense and then the military council is the other side of that. That's the military side of the regional defense.

So there's, for example, the Khabour Guards are the Assyrian

community, and they speak an Assyrian language, it's different, it's not Kurdish, it's not Arabic. There are quite a few Arabic speaking groups that are participating in the military council. So the military council of a city or of a region will have representatives of all these types of groups that are functioning for the defense of these communities in the area and they'll coordinate together to coordinate the defense for the region. So we work with the one in the area where we're operating.

So that's how the SDF is structured. So when I say we have a relationship to the SDF, that's how that works. And then in terms of the health structure, there's a military hospital system that is free for members of the military. So that's where we get our health care from if we need care. There's also civilian hospital systems, and private clinics. Because it's a time of relative peace a lot of our work is civilian health work. There's a big epidemic of cutaneous leishmaniasis, which is a skin parasite that's spread by these little biting insects which requires a lot of injections to get rid of it and there's been a huge problem with overcrowding in the clinics. We've been assisting with the effort to give injections to people, both civilian and military, to get rid of it. So that's been taking up a lot of our time recently. That's just an example of the type of work that we have.

**TFSR: Awesome. Thank you for that there's a lot in there, I'd like to also get back to the some of the medical issue and the work that you do a little bit later. In the meantime, in November of 2021, there was a major fear that Turkey would be escalating, like creating a new offensive across the Syrian border into Rojava. Could you explain kind of what happened there to your understanding, and is that still looming danger?**

**RG:** It's always a looming danger. It seems like Turkey was hoping to get the go ahead from the US and or Russia to launch a full scale invasion and they didn't get it. They didn't get the permission they wanted. The impact that this had on us here was that people were really convinced that there was like an imminent full scale war about to happen. We really ramped up preparation, getting extra hospital space ready. And the fact that it didn't happen...these kinds of things - this was more pronounced example - but these kinds of like "an invasion is about to happen" feeling occurs pretty regularly, and so we'll ramp up the activity for a little while, and then we don't really ever, like let our guard down. I mean, I don't think there's a feeling that the danger is past, just postponed.

**TFSR: So the last time that The Final Straw spoke with members of TA it was before Turkey's 2019 incursion into Rojava - which, again, correct me if I'm wrong on these points that I'm making - but which seem to end up in a large stretch of territory along the border within Syria's borders, falling under the control of the Turkish state. I know that TA was heavily involved in the resistance to Serê Kaniyê, but can you tell us a little bit more about this? And have you heard about the Turkish state using the so called "buffer zone" that they put in to demographically shift the area, like pushing out Kurds and other residents from the region and resettling Syrian refugees that they had been taking from Europe within their borders?**

**RG:** Anything that Turkey is doing in terms of resettling people, officially, any information we would have about that would be from the same sources that y'all would have. So I don't really feel like I can comment on that. I do know there's been a lot of human rights violations by the occupying forces - the mercenaries and the Turkish state - in particular in Afrin and Serê Kaniyê regions there have been a lot of kidnappings of civilians, there have been a lot of reported rapes and there's been desecration of graves. There's been a variety of human rights abuses, there was a year end report that was published by the SDF about this topic. So yeah, people can...I don't have the exact numbers off the top of my head, but people can look into that.

Another way that they're using the Serê Kaniyê region and the Afrin region in particular - the reason they chose that region in particular to take - is because it has resources, it's very difficult to conduct life without. So in particular water the word Serê Kaniyê, I think - I could be wrong about this, my language skills aren't great - but I think it means "the head of the spring." It's where water comes from, or water comes through, Serê Kaniyê, and Turkey has really been using water and dams and the ability to shut off access to water, as well as shutting off access to other resources to try to wage war of attrition and really damaged the civilian morale by making it difficult to come by the necessities of life, really tryna starve us out. They cut so much water the past summer, the Xabûr river, basically completely dried up. Crop harvests were just a tiny fraction of what they were the previous year, especially with the grain. So there's going to be a huge problem with the grain shortages for the next year. We're looking at, like, potentially, like massive food shortages because of this, and there were massive water shortages last year. It was pretty grim.

So Turkey's strategy with this is not only to use the space to demographically create a buffer, which also was Syria's official policy prior to the revolution to the war. [Bashar al-] Assad was also doing this, he was trying to create a green belt of Arab populations through sort of a combination of targeted gentrification and more direct repression of Kurdish inhabitants of the area, to try to cut the unity of the of the Kurdistan geographical region.

**TFSR: That's terrible, I'm sorry. I mean, is part of the goal - besides just starving out and pressuring people - also to make them sort of identify the difficulties that they're facing with autonomous administration? Or is it a little less subtle than that?**

**RG:** Yeah, no, I think it's less subtle than that but I think also that's happening. And I mean, there are people that stayed and fought through years of war that now we're in relative peace, and they're just, maybe they have children, they're just experiencing so much poverty.

A lot of people have family members that have gone to Europe to work to send money back, and more and more family members are having to leave to go to make money to just survive, that like people who are really ideologically and personally connected to their land and to their cultural identity, they don't want to leave, (but their) finally getting close to throwing in the towel because of the shortages and economic difficulties, even though they weathered the storm of close to a decade of war.

So that's something that's like really, also a huge part of the fight that like as we lose civilians, if we don't have civilian populations, the population become sparsely it becomes much more difficult to defend the land.

**TFSR: So you've already said before about stuff that goes on in Turkey, you may not have a more immediate connection to but I'm gonna ask the question anyway and you can give me that same answer if you want. But over the last number of years, Turkey's economy has been sliding into a crisis that's worsened dramatically - specifically, over the last few months - has this tension spilled over the border in any way that you've experienced? And, just speculating, do you think that this could mean the end of the 20 year AKP rule and its neo-Ottomanist push?**

**RG:** I have no idea what this means for specific political parties in Turkey, but the way that this is affecting us is that like everything that goes wrong in Turkey, everyone wants to point the blame onto a different scapegoat. So he'll blame the Kurdish movement in Turkey, you know, the guerrillas in the mountains there, or he'll blame Rojava, and he'll, you know, cut resources. He's got different alliances with Iraqi Kurdistan, and political parties there. Like, right now, the borders closed between Iraq and Syria, the Semalka Crossing, that's like the sort of unofficial crossing, that's been the main one that we're able to use for the last few years.

It's estimated it'll be close for two months, it's, we don't know when it will open again. There's been shortages of sugar, which is a big deal, because people put like, they have half chai, half sugar in there, in their cup of chai. So like, not having sugar for their chai is like a really huge issue for people's morale, culturally, it's very important to have, you know, these resources. You know, they're not letting cigarettes go across, just things that are designed to like, make people's lives miserable here, they're doing this to make up kind of political points that they're losing in Iraqi Kurdistan or in Turkey respectively. So I think Rojava economically kind of becomes the scapegoat or the you know, the whipping post for failing economies in the neighboring countries.

**TFSR:** So to kind of keep on the Iraq question, like there's been a lot of conflict in south Kurdistan and Iraqi Kurdistan between the Turkish state and PKK elements that are there with the Kurdish Democratic Party. The more conservative Barzani-led administration, they're siding with Turkey. For instance, there are allegations also a Turkish use of chemical weapons, but this hasn't been making news in the US so much. Are you aware of this? And has this affected things in in Rojava?

**RG:** I'll be honest, I can't I don't really know of an answer to that question. I'm not knowledgeable about that.

**TFSR:** Cool, I appreciate that honesty. Back to TA a little bit: can you share a little more about the medical work that y'all do? And why this was chosen as a focus? As I understand in 2018 or 2019 y'all got an ambulance, for instance, that enabled y'all to do combat medic work during that time. How widespread was or is this among SDF, I guess the practice of ambulances and mobility, and what's the general response to your work been in the area?

**RG:** In the time that I've been here, which again, I came after the Serê Kaniyê war, so there hasn't been a full scale war in the time I've been here. We do have an ambulance, we had one already when I got here, I'm not sure when we got it. I know during the time of the war, they were using it to evacuate wounded, to evacuate people from the hospital in Serê Kaniyê out of the city, and that kind of thing, to protect civilians as well as wounded military members. I know that there were members of TA that were here at that time that did very heroic things and saved a lot of lives. I think that the space for that kind of work opened up because a combination of the disinvestment over decades in this region, plus the brain drain of, you know, 10 years of war, resulted in a situation where there was just like, really a huge lack of people who were both trained and willing to go into dangerous areas to do kind of emergency medical work. And I know, like, for example, I heard from people who were in the time of the Serê Kaniyê war they were giving out tourniquets and, like, there were people who were arriving at the hospital with wounds that they would have been saved by a tourniquet, from people that were their people in their unit or wherever had been given tourniquets, and they weren't using them. Where people would get these individual first aid kits and just empty it out and use the thing that they came in to carry stuff.

So there was a big gap in understanding or seeing the value in this kind of work. I think that coming from a Western perspective, and also with more of an understanding and experience of how state militaries work, there was more of a value placed on this type of preparation. So seeing how that went down, there's been a big work not only in our group and other groups as well, to do like education, we've been teaching the different military groups about how to use tourniquets, how to improvise tourniquets because we don't have a good supply of premade tourniquets but you can make a pretty great one from you know, a torn piece of T-shirt and the cleaning rod of your rifle, for example. Giving education on how to stop massive bleeding, how to do chest seals for something that's punctured a lung, basic stuff for just keeping people alive long enough to get them to the hospital.

We've been really shifting our focus from providing the care directly to providing education to people on how to do this kind of care. And like I said, we've been doing work with the civilian medical system as well, to try to improve and develop our skills and stay ready when we're not in a situation of having to provide emergency medical care. There were also reports - and I don't know how official these are or whatever - but I heard

more than one person talking about feeling at least like Turkey had been targeting ambulances, or that marked ambulances were a target. And a lot of times now, especially with the drone strikes and stuff, when people are injured they're not waiting for an ambulance to show up, they're being thrown in the back of a pickup truck or a logistics van or something that can go faster than an ambulance can over the shitty roads here and get to the hospital as fast as possible.

So having people that are able to stop massive bleeding or you know, keep their lung from collapsing or whatever, while they're in the back of their of their Hilux, or whatever, I think we're seeing that that's going to make more of a difference than having an ambulance. I mean we do still have the ambulance and we make visits around places where maybe other other ambulances aren't willing to go. But it's become more of a mobile clinic for the time being. Like, not a real clinic, but like, you know, we go and we make checkups, we give the injections for leishmaniasis. If people look really sick, and their commanders aren't letting them go to the hospital, we'll write them a note and sometimes that carries an extra authority. We give them advice for like if they've got a cold or something you know how to take care about and not get sick or this sort of thing.

**TFSR: That's awesome. That's super insightful. I really appreciate that answer. So how have you seen COVID-19 experienced in Rojava, as far as like how it's spread, or access to tests, vaccines, and PPE, any of this sort of stuff?**

**RG:** With PPE, it's really not widespread. Some people are wearing masks now. It's become not super strange to wear a mask. I would say it's not normal, like most people aren't wearing masks or practicing social distancing or anything but at the beginning, like if you didn't shake people's hands and give everyone a hug, it was super rude. Whereas now people have started a little bit, if you do like a little bow or a wave instead of shaking hands, or if you are wearing a mask, people don't think that's super weird. They started to understand what that is and what it's about. They still don't give a lot of attention to COVID, although they it's been really inconsistent. Because they built a new hospital for COVID but it's been pretty much empty because people aren't going to the hospital when they have these symptoms. And people have definitely died of COVID here, a lot of people have gotten COVID, people in our group have gotten COVID and have mostly recovered thank God. So like people are seeing

that it's existing, but sometimes there are tests, we had PCR tests for a while, then we had the rapid antigen tests, and now I guess they don't have any test? So they're saying that there's no COVID anymore like it's done, just because, I think it's because they ran out of tests.

So it's a really inconsistent response, like and they got a vaccine, we got the first dose of the vaccine, but then we couldn't go on time and get the second dose. And then by the time we went to get the second dose, they didn't have it anymore. So now we're trying to figure out if there's some other city where we can go to get the second dose, it's really, it's really a mess. There have been some lockdowns, but they've been really inconsistent. It's been different, like, from city to city and a lockdown pretty much means that you just can't go in or out of the city for usually like a week or two. It's been it's been really inconsistent.

**TFSR:** Yeah, that doesn't sound dissimilar, actually, to a lot of other places, just maybe on a different scale. But yeah, a lot of the same problems are pretty, seem pretty ubiquitous, as far as accessing testing and the social spreading of like what knowledge there is to protect oneself from it.

This is off topic, but I just heard an interview the other, I think earlier this week on Democracy Now with folks at the Texas Children's Hospital that had developed an open source and copyright free vaccine and were distributing it, like they were working with a manufacturing infrastructure in India and a few other parts of the world to just get it as widely distributed as possible. That's pretty hopeful for me, as far as that one specific, like, you were mentioning those bite vectored infections that y'all are helping to inject folks against, but as far as the COVID thing, I don't know.

**RG:** Yeah, I mean, part of the issue with the COVID thing here, too, is like, I think part of the reason that they didn't keep the vaccines around, it's not like there was so much demand that they were going like hotcakes, I think nobody wanted them.

**TFSR:** Because they didn't see it as an actual threat or because they're, they don't like vaccines?

**RG:** I think it's a combination of as much of health literacy is an issue everywhere, it's like very, very much an issue here. People aren't trusting



the countries that are manufacturing these vaccines, they're also occupying forces. Like it's all coming from either the US or Russia. So there's like political mistrust, as well as like, kind of the attitude towards you know, after 10 years of war, people are kind of, a lot of people have this sort of like, "you can't scare me," like "COVID, I don't care" kind of attitude. So it's a combination of things.

**TFSR: Yeah, that's that sounds kind of common also the people that I've talked to imprisoned in the so-called US, they're like, "I don't want to catch this, but they're trying to kill me every day and have been over this whole sentence, so whatever. Something's gonna get me or it's not."**

**RG:** Yeah, it's really, really difficult to fight against this kind of fatalism and this kind of mistrust, because it's not wrong. Like, it makes sense.

**TFSR: Yeah, yeah, for sure. You've mentioned with like, ambulances being targeted by drone strikes and I kind of wonder what it's like being engaged, even though you're not currently engaged in hot and regular and heavy war with Turkey - even though the threat is constantly looming, and there are things like drone strikes - what's it like being engaged in such an asymmetrical warfare against the state power was such advantages in terms of resources, weaponry, like drones, and airstrikes and border fortifications, and the ability to organize assassination attempts, notably against leaders of the Turkish Left in Rojava. And I know it's a big question, but also being party to a conflict that is facing off against in this complex mess between like, Turkey as a NATO force and the second biggest military in NATO, and the US at some points, acting as a support in some parts of the conflict also, as a NATO state, you know, this sort of thing.**

**RG:** I mean, I can only speak for me in terms of like, what it feels like, to me. To be honest, it's terrifying. It's very scary. When I first got here, especially for the first few months, I was just conscious constantly of the fact that like, we could all die at any moment. I guess you kind of get used to it, you focus on what you can do. You get to be able to kind of recognize how far bombs are by what they sound like. I don't know. I don't have a good answer for that. You just, you try to focus on on what's in front of you, and you try to have an eye on the long game, you know. To know that nobody knows what's going to happen, that there are more important

things, there are there other determiners of victory rather than who has the biggest guns.

**TFSR: I think that I already kind of asked the thing about what is TA working on right now, or you answered it through a lot of the medical discussion. Do you do want to sort of wax philosophical about the future of TA and what directions that might go?**

**RG:** Yeah, like I mentioned, we're talking about our questions of organizational form. We're having debates right now about some readings that we did about the Makhnovists platform and we're talking about platformism, we're talking about decision making strategies and consensus and you know, a lot of the same things that any kind of anarchist organization struggles with. Because as we grow, and as we develop over time and have different organizational needs, we have to sort of refine our approach to the concept of structuring ideologically and practically what that means for us.

So in ideological terms, we're doing that. We're working a little bit on our image, I think, especially early on with the nature of the Daesh war in particular, and the demographics of the group, that it got a bit of a bro-y image. We've gotten critique for that, we've taken this to heart. We've really tried to focus on not only questioning the patriarchal values that get embodied in military works, and the way that we do that, but also focusing more on the women's liberation in the ecology, pillars of the revolution that we're involved in.

We've gotten more involved in society works, like, we've gotten to know people, both civilian and military people kind of in other groups or who aren't officially affiliated, but are just supportive, that we interact with in the villages around us. We visited some kind of cultural activities, in particular, like Armenian cultural revival. There's a lot of Armenians in Syria, who ended up here as a result of the genocide. There was a huge forced march of Armenians to Deir ez-Zor. Also a lot of Armenian women and children were kidnapped and sold or adopted by Kurdish and or Arab families.

**TFSR: At the beginning of the 20th century, the Armenian genocide by the Turkish state you're referring to? Or is this something during Daesh war?**

**RG:** No, no, this is the 1915 genocide. So there's a big effort as part of this, I think that Öcalan calls it "xwe nas bikin", and it means like, "know yourself", meaning like, know your roots, your heritage. There's a big push for sort of cultural pride among Armenians, Assyrians, people who are cultural and religious minority groups here. There's a council that's doing Armenian language lessons.

We're trying to get involved with learning about this kind of thing, and about the history and the cultures of the area. And try not to have like a white savior complex or anything like this, where we kind of just come in and like do our work. I think, earlier on, there was less opportunity to do anything that wasn't immediately necessary because the situation was the way it was. Now we have a lot more opportunities.

So yeah, just being more connected and more involved in the many, many facets of this revolution that aren't immediately obvious, or things that we're necessarily already thinking about, from the way that - in particular from America - like what we, what we see. And a lot of the news and the image that we have this place, I think in America in particular, is like at least three years out of date at any given time, because we don't have such strong ties to here the way that Europe has a much more lively exchange of people between this region. And in for example, Germany and England both have big Kurdish movements.

Sorry I'm getting a little bit off topic. So the question what is TA working on now and in the future...so yeah, we're trying to bring more people, especially we're prioritizing bringing women comrades, gender nonconforming comrades, trans comrades. There's a lot of contradictions on on queer issues in the movement generally, but in terms of our ability to exist an organized as queer internationals, we have been very lucky. We have the space to exist and challenge some of the beliefs and assumptions that people have. That's something that we really value as an opportunity we want to make the most of.

**TFSR:** Yeah that's awesome. Yeah, in the past, the Kurdish movement in Rojava has been somewhat unwelcoming to gay, lesbian, queer and trans folks. It's our understanding that the Kurdish movement in Bakur, in Turkish occupied northern Kurdistan, has historically been amazingly pro LGBTQ but because of some local attitudes in shorter time for building up support in the region, the movement has been really impacted by holders of conservative social mores. That said, over the past years, the women's movement was starting to slowly try and

**shift that attitude. How do things stand now, if you all have insights on this?**

**RG:** There's a lot of really contradictory things going on. My experience has been that, especially as internationals, we can get away with a lot more than people from here can in terms of this kind of stuff. Especially because, I mean, they consider it as weird to be vegetarian as they do to be gay, for example. Like, \*laughing\* we're just freaks in general like so they kind of just shake their heads and let us get away with being weird. Whereas for a person from here who's queer, they, they face a lot, a lot of difficulties, a lot of danger that we as internationals are privileged to be largely exempt from.

That said, I think within the movement, there are people who see queer issues as part of the struggle against patriarchy, and there are people who don't. You get a variety of attitudes, ranging from you know, "homosexuality is a social disease of capitalist modernity", to you know that it's just simply doesn't exist, you know, to people who, like I said have a much more progressive attitude towards it. The comrades from Turkey or from Bakur do tend to have a much more informed and accepting attitude, I would say, in my experience.

We are not the only group by any means that has out vocal queer members. And I think that we've gotten more careful and respectful and strategic since the days of the, you know, TQILA banner, if anybody saw that photo, which was a great photo, but it caused huge, huge problems. Especially with like, for example, the more socially conservative tribes that the autonomous administration needs to try to bring into its project and win some goodwill with. There's just a lot to balance. Because on the one hand, we're pushing to try to, you know, advance social attitude towards the concept of gender, the concept of sexual orientation.

On the other hand, you know, we had friends that were working in a women's health clinic, and one of the questions for women that were having various health problems was, "how often do you have sex with your husband? How often do you want to have sex with your husband?" And some of the women were like, "Want? What do you, what do you mean, want? Like, what does this want that you're talking?" It just, depending, there's just such a huge range of attitudes and experiences related to gender and sexuality here that it's a complicated situation.

**TFSR:** Thank you for that. The broader Kurdish movement has a

**heavy focus on the ideological aspects of the struggle and the Rojava revolution being part of military training, with studies of Öcalan's work and structured collective life considered as or more important than the combat related training. What sort of commonalities does life at TA have with the way life is structured in the broader movement? And are there ways in which an anarchist perspective causes it to diverge?**

**RG:** Yeah, that's a good question. And I think it's been different at different times in TA's history. I think for the time that I've been here, at least, the last year especially, we've had a lot of emphasis on the ideological development. Not only within our organization, like when we did military training, we allocated ample time for discussions of patriarchy, patriarchal dynamics, how we can engage with the realities of our situation without unnecessarily advancing sort of patriarchal values. And we talked a lot about the role of sport, our relationships to our bodies, competitiveness, you know, whether it's good to be competitive, the destructive nature of competitiveness, toxic masculinity.

So we've made time in our training schedule to really intentionally sit down and discuss these aspects, discuss our relationship to the concept of hierarchy, being you know, in a military situation versus in other situations. As well as at various times we do reading groups, discussions on topics that are, as we get time - lately we've been really busy - but when we get time we do a rotating seminar where someone will kind of prepare an hour or two discussion about a topic related to women's revolution, gender liberation, some aspect of anarchist history. We did one on understanding antisemitism, just a variety of topics. We're a bunch of nerds at heart to like, we're all always reading things. I'm in like a signal group of people who are reading the book, *The Ghetto Fights* right now, which is about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

I think one of the things we did for a while, it's a kind of a common practice that we adopted from other groups is when we have our list of who has night watch duty and people take like an hour or two shift for security in the night, and there's a list and it's really common to put like an inspirational revolutionary quote on the list, so whoever's making the list has to like constantly be reading more stuff and finding new sources of inspiration there.

And we don't only do these kinds of education's in our own group, we've also participated in more formal education with other internationals

from other organizations that were coordinated to come together for like a month long, you know, learning about the history of this movement, the history of philosophy in the Middle East, readings and discussions like an intensive 10 hours a day of lectures and discussions and movies about relevant topics, so. As much as we get time for we really we really do take seriously the ideological development.

**TFSR: Can you share with us a little about your understanding of the Kurdish movements approach to autonomy and statehood? Do y'all have any insights into the possibility of, I guess the TEV-DEM, or PYD, formalizing an autonomous region with Bashar al-Assad's government?**

**RG:** Um, as far as the relationship between the autonomous administration and the Assad regime I don't understand it, and I can't comment on it. As far as kind of summarizing my experiences or my discussions that illustrate some of the wide variety of opinions within the quote unquote "Kurdish movement", I would say that - saying "the Kurdish movement" implying that there is just one, or even just several - like, I don't know. The discussions I've had with people, just like random people on the streets sometimes even, like I talked to one guy, this one old guy I met in Qamişlo who was saying he was really supporting the PKK for a long time, and he's a, he described himself as a Stalinist and he really was pro USSR and but then, when the new paradigm happened and the split in the party happened, he started to support the model of Başûr Iraqî Kurdistan, he became a Barzani supporter. Because to him, a state was just so important. Even though he called himself a communist, communism was like nothing compared to having a state. So that was a wild ride of a conversation.

So I mean, there's people you know, that range from, there was like a really, bit irreverent, but quite illustrative meme that was going around of like a political compass of people within the Rojava movement, too, and there was the PKK boomer who doesn't know that there's a new paradigm. Like a bit making light of the wide variety of ideological orientations you find towards the concept of statehood. But in terms of how it's actually being implemented, it seems like there's a big, almost US-style democracy, I say, "almost", is something that a lot of just regular people are supporting, as far as I can tell. At least from what I hear from friends, for example, in Rojava Information Center who know a lot more about this than I do, so this is all like third hand information.

But that like, you know, in these council meetings are trying to, they're working right now on writing a new social contract, so that they've, like, you know, decided to both enshrine property rights and also, for example, guarantee your right to housing as like a human right. So how these contradictions are going to play out, the details it's not clear. I'm really interested to see how that goes.

But yeah, in terms of like the approach to statehood, there are some people that are like really still hardline, like we need our own state. There are some people that ride around with pictures of Saddam Hussein on the front of their motorbikes because they're the same flavor of Islam that he was and they see this cultural identification is the most important thing to them. It's a huge variety of opinions. And what is happening within the more ideological oriented discussions is maybe not completely reflective of what the general everyday man on the street kind of person's gonna think as well.

And also to call it "the Kurdish movement", like again, at least in the area where we are there's a lot of Assyrians, there's a lot of Armenians, there's a lot of Arabs. There's definitely a lot of Kurds as well, but to describe this movement at this point as "Kurdish" is a, it's Kurdish inspired, it's Kurdish led but it's not a "Kurdish movement".

**TFSR: In a recent interview that Duran Kalkan of the Kurdistan Democratic Communities Union, which was conducted by the group peace in Kurdistan, Duran Kalkan spoke about his view that while Western governments like the US may strategically partner with the SDF under Rojavan command in the fight against Daesh or ISIS, they're not committed to the project of democratic and federalism but only destabilizing Turkey and opposing Russian and Iranian influence in the region. It's a proxy situation.**

**This specific radio show and podcast is based in the US, you've mentioned that a number of people involved as internationals are from the US, and a lot of our audience, most of our audience, is based in the US, so I think this, this is why I bring up this question: can you talk about the US relationship to Rojava, the illegalization of the PKK and the KCK, and what impact that has on the ground in areas controlled by the autonomous administration of north and east Syria? As I understand many internationals who come back from Rojava face difficulties from the various states that they live under because of some of these are similar illegalizations?**

**RG:** Yeah, I think Americans have a bit easier time than some of the people from other places, I think Brits have quite a difficult situation now, the laws that have been passed in the last couple years are horrific. As far as the criminalization of the PKK, I know that increasingly different countries, including I think England recently, most of them haven't changed their evaluation, but have at least reopen the debate into a classification of PKK and whether it's the terrorist organization or not. I don't know the history of how the illegalization happened, or, you know, I can't really comment on that, as far as just anecdotally, like I know, I've had friends that have come back from Rojava to different places, and in the US, some friends have kind of gotten follow up from the feds, but I don't know of anybody who's really faced heavy repression because of it.

However, the issue is there have been some people who have been accused of unrelated things, but then had their prior involvement with this region used to kind of intensify the repression they face for other things. So the repression is there and it's definitely important to be conscious of it, and for individuals who participate to be careful, but also for people who care about this revolution, or who just care about freedom generally, to fight against the criminalization of the PKK, the criminalization of participation in this revolution, the criminalization of you know, even travel to this region for some people. As far as the impact on the ground for people here who aren't internationalist, I don't know that there's a quantifiable simple like impact, it just makes things generally harder. But I think the impact, as far as I'm at least able to comment on this, you know, is mostly to people going to other places, working in other places....

**TFSR:** **And for listeners who are interested in more on the lasting effects of repression in the US, they can check a couple of episodes ago to our interview with some supporters of Dan Baker, who formerly had participated in the Rojava revolution, and is facing a few dozen months in prison, not for that directly but that was definitely brought up in his court proceedings.**

**RG:** Yeah, he is the one that put something on Facebook, no? And, and it was sort of connected somehow, abstractly?

**TFSR:** **Well he was, yeah. Definitely that has something to do with it, yeah. He basically had said, after the January 6 events in DC, he was**



in Florida, and he said, “Hey, Trumpists in Florida are threatening an arm siege on the Capitol, antifascist should come out with weapons and like keep them from attacking the general population”. And it had been brought up since he had come back from Rojava, like he had, he was doing some medical work at The CHOP Seattle, and after a shooting had happened had been approached by the FBI. But then also, yeah, his participation in Rojava had been brought up during his court proceedings for calling for people to show up at the Florida capitol to act as a community defense, not a defense of the Capitol, but act as a community defense against armed Trumpists who are trying to commit a putsch.

**How can listeners learn more about TA and the social revolution occurring in Rojava, or the struggle going on in Rojava? And how can they get involved or support the communalist movement and aims from where they're at?**

**RG:** Well I've mentioned earlier on this list of different organizations that people can do work with here. So knowing that if people are interested to come here, it's not only military connected work that's available to them, their civilian work for internationalist as well.

There's also, you know, the need for solidarity work in people's home countries, in the US, in particular, like pressuring lawmakers to reduce the repression on on not just people who come here, but also to remove the PKK from this international terrorist list. There's a push to have a no-fly zone for Turkey to limit Turkey's ability to make incursions into the area. There were some boycott movements on companies such as Garmin that were manufacturing drone parts that Turkey was using, which Turkey is also now supplying drones to Ethiopia to suppress the resistance to the genocide in Tigray as well, so that's worth noting the connection there.

As far as learning more about TA in particular, we have Twitter, we don't update it super often, our internet's not super reliable all the time and media isn't our top priority. And we do answer our email when we can. So if people have questions for us, we can be contacted that way. And as far as supporting Rojava generally: inform yourself, follow the news and the history. There's a really great book that I read called *A Road Unforeseen* by Meredith Tax. I know she, Meredith Tax, has done speaking tours with Debbie Bookchin, I believe, who runs the Emergency Committee for Rojava. They have events that you can get involved with, you

can educate yourself, you can connect other people. So yeah, Emergency Committee for Rojava is usually a good place to find stuff.

**TFSR: I can put links in the show notes to some of the texts that you've brought up. There's, for instance, the one about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising., there's like a free PDF on the publishers website, which is really helpful. If you have any other links that you want to share, too, we can happily put those in there. Is there anything that I failed to ask you about that you'd like to share?**

**RG:** I think one of the most valuable things that I've quote unquote, "learned" from the revolution here in my time here, and just from the society and seeing the effort, and the slow and steady pace of building the communes and the cooperatives and all of the issues that they've run into, and starting over that they've had to do, and the perseverance that they've had to have, is that the work that that I see a lot of my friends, in particular anarchist, but not only anarchists, doing in the US, and in Canada and other places like it - and I'm talking about like housing cooperatives, land trusts, tenants unions, connecting the tenants unions to labor unions - any kind of organizing like this with the people, that is with the eye to, not just to win a concession from the boss or the landlord, but to further connect the people to their community and to each other and going to city council meetings, doing things that that may seem pretty unrevolutionary and unglamorous at the local level...that's the quote unquote, "real work".

Like I think American anarchists suffer the most from a belief that the *real* revolution is always somewhere else, that the *real* revolutionary possibilities and activities are always somewhere more exciting. That anything we do is, you know, we like to call each other "cosplayers" or kind of put down each other's work or our own work, and I think that the most valuable thing that I've learned from being here is, is this is the real work, the work that we're doing here is not significantly different than the work that revolutionaries, I'll use that word, are doing in the US, are doing in Canada, and that especially those connected to land struggles for Indigenous people, I think that is absolutely the right track. And we should have more faith in ourselves, we should take ourselves more seriously and we should have more of an appreciation for the ways in which the conditions are good for us to do this work, the material resources, the access to knowledge that we do have, and to, to support each other in this and to really see the potential.

**TFSR: Yeah, I appreciate that. Thank you. And thank you, Robin, thank you so much, after long days and in the middle of your busy schedule to take the time to, to communicate your views and your experiences. I really appreciate hearing him and I'm excited to share him with the audience. Thank you.**

**RG: Yeah, thank you for taking so much time to talk to me and being patient with all this, tech issues and everything. \*chuckles\***

**TFSR: \*laughs\* Blasted technology. And pass my love and appreciation to TA please.**

**RG: I will do that, thank you**

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

Email us at:

**thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net**  
or **thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com**

To hear our past shows for free, visit:  
**<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org>**

You can send us letters at:  
**The Final Straw Radio**  
**PO Box 6004**  
**Asheville, NC 28816**  
**USA**

