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KURDISTAN DIARIES VJ “WE WANT PEACE. BUT WE WILL NOT SURRENDER.”

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Freedom in the Mountains: Visiting the PKK in the Qandil Region

Over the past few months, Turkish media has reported repeatedly that hundreds of fighters have been killed during bombardments in the Qandil mountains, the stronghold of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, PKK. The Qandil region straddles the borders between Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. We cannot deny feeling uneasy, as the driver of our vehicle navigates the tight switchbacks on the way to the guerrilla. But images of hideous bombardments are not strong enough to tear our attention away from the awe-inspiring landscape. The Qandil mountains are by far the most beautiful region I have ever seen. Two guerrilla fighters stop us briefly, greet us, and send us on our way. Between crystal-clear mountain streams, green forests, and magnificent peaks, we see images of Abdullah Öcalan and Sakine Cansiz.

By the time we reach Heval Zagros and his companion Heval D., a young fighter from Bakur, we can hardly remember what we were afraid of. First – and we would hear this time and again – the airstrikes of the Turkish military against the PKK have hardly any effect; the guerrilla simply knows how to move in this terrain. Secondly, the unassuming calmness of the region’s people brushes away all fear.

“You cannot be anxious all the time”

We climb onto the backseat of Heval Zagros’s jeep, next to the



There is not much that stays: ruine in the village that was extinguished by Turkish bombs, killing 8 people.

Kalashnikov. As Zagros drives further into the mountains, we see the consequences of the bombardments. Since the state cannot harm the guerrilla, it punishes the civilians. In the Qandil region, 8000 people live in 61 villages. They coexist with the guerrilla, the fighters are welcome, and their presence is a part of daily life.

If you travel through Qandil, there are no real indications for it having been turned into a warzone by the Turkish state. Herders lead their sheep, goats, and cows along bumpy paths, women work in the fields, and children eat melon icecream outside small shops. Only the occasional charred building reminds us of the airstrikes usually accompanied by drones.

In one village, Zergelê, eight people were killed in August 2015. The circumstances were particularly horrid. When the inhabitants heard the sound of explosions, they fled. Once they realized that an old woman who had been hit was missing, they returned to save her. The fighter jets noticed their movements and returned to drop the fatal bombs.

Despite this the people of the region defy Turkey’s terror by maintaining their regular daily life. When we stop at a cemetery named after Mehmet Karasungur, the first of the martyrs buried there, we meet a women’s guerrilla unit. I ask Heval Zagros if it wasn’t dangerous to be there with so many people. His response is honest but clear: “Of course. But you cannot be anxious all the time.”

Against Turkey and Daesh



The Mehmet Karasungur Cemetery is an architectonic monument to both the longevity and the legitimacy of the Kurdish liberation struggle. More than 400 fallen fighters are buried here. The conflicts in which they died confirm that they did so for freedom and equality. As Heval D. explains: “Here lie martyrs from fights with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, from the war against Turkey in the 1990s, from confrontations with Iranian forces, and from the campaigns against Daesh in Syria and Iraq. If you want to live in peace and freedom you have to make sacrifices.”

The importance of the Kurdish struggle becomes evident if we consider the world views of their opponents, from the Turkish government to Daesh. The Kurdish guerrilla provides a glimpse of the society it envisions. Many of its ideals have already been implemented, at least as far as that is possible under the circumstances of war. The hevals live together, decide together, and secure their livelihoods together. They share, they discuss, and they criticize, not least themselves. No matter how romanticized it may sound, the social relationships here are so comradely and so different from what we are used to that we cannot help but feel ashamed.

“We have found our freedom”

The women’s guerrilla unit we have met joins us for lunch. We set the table and eat delicious chicken, rice, and “gerilla ekmek”, a bread prepared by the fighters themselves. Heval Berivan laughs heartily when she explains to us “that the taste can differ: sometimes it’s good, sometimes bad – when the men bake it, it’s usually bad.”



One of the female fighters

Heval Berivan has come to the mountains for two reasons: “The most important factors for me were to be a woman and a Kurd.” As a child, she experienced the discrimination of Kurdish culture and the Kurdish language. “I remember that I was sent to a Turkish school, but I spoke no Turkish. I did not understand anything, and it was a different culture. We Kurdish kids knew that something was wrong, but we couldn’t put our finger on it. They try to turn you into something that you are not, to detach you from your own culture. And they humiliate you.” She asked her mother why she was allowed to speak Kurdish to her but not in school. “We knew that this was a contradiction. But only the PKK made us understand the broader context.”

As a woman, joining the PKK was a new beginning. “It is like a second birth. You shake off the social ways you know from your family, society, and the entire system. Here we have very different perspectives on women, nature, and life.” In the ruling system, women are second-class human beings, Berivan explains. “They are considered a piece of furniture, or a machine to produce children.”

In the mountains, the women really get to know themselves. “After we had been kicked and beaten, we started to develop a consciousness and realized that we could do things ourselves. We have found our freedom, and it feels wonderful.”

Heval Berivan concedes that life in the mountains has its challenges. But she adds: “You create yourself anew. If you manage to endure all of this, you can endure almost everything. The challenges make you stronger, more alive.”

From the German armed forces to the mountains

There are quite a few people here from Germany. We are told that Kevin Jochim – the internationalist with the nom de guerre Dilsoz Bahar, who was killed in Rojava – had taught himself Kurdish and Turkish so well that he was appointed coordinator of the communication between the guerrilla units.



PKK founding-members Abdullah Öcalan and Sakine Caniziz

We get to meet a fighter who has come from Germany ourselves. Heval Harun has been here for one year. “A member of my family had fallen as a martyr in Rojava. Some of my family is Kurdish and I have many Kurdish friends in Germany. None of them wanted to come, but I told myself that people here need all the help they can get.” It was not necessary for Heval Harun to go through weapons training when he arrived. For six years, he had been the commander of a special forces unit in the Bundeswehr, the German armed forces. “The guerrilla is entirely different from NATO. In NATO, commanders are commanders and they show it. I know how to do that myself. But here it’s different. Here, everyone is equal; only the tasks differ.” Heval Harun, a friendly and muscular man, laughs. In Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Kosovo he fought for money. NATO, he says, fights without any ideology, and that’s the problem: “The soldiers only fight for wages.”

Harun had constant doubts during his NATO service. “Every day I asked myself whether this was the right thing to do. Finally, I decided to never fight for money again.” Harun does not regret his decision and doesn’t want to return. “Most of the people who join the guerrilla come from the capitalist system. For them, almost everything changes, because we have nothing to do with that.” Harun has left his old life behind, including his children, who, he hopes, will one day be able to join him. “In the capitalist system, everything is about money. If you don’t have any, you are nothing. If you have much, you have many friends. Here, it is not like that.”

Like others, Harun is not afraid of the airstrikes. “Let me put it that way: we are always ready for camouflage. If we hear through the radio that drones or fighter jets are approaching, everything will be covered in an instant.” He points to a neighboring valley and says: “That’s where they bombed just two days ago. They dropped eight or nine bombs, but none of our people are there.” He adds: “This is our territory and they have nothing against us here. Of course, they can drop bombs from their F16’s, but if they send troops, they’ll get nowhere.”

Things you can’t explain

“You cannot talk about a truce right now. We all want peace and that’s why we’re here. But we will not surrender.” Many here are optimistic about the guerrilla’s military prowess. The guerrilla is strong and still getting stronger. One day before we arrived in Qandil, the People’s

Defense Forces, HPG, published a video of the downing of a Turkish army helicopter. This was the first time that the successful use of a so-called MANPAD by the Kurdish guerrilla was documented. Before the release of the video, the Turkish government had cited “technical problems” as the reason for the helicopter crash.

After our conversation with Heval Harun, we head to meet with



KCK Co-Chair Bese Hozat

Bese Hozat, co-chair of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan, KCK, and a leading PKK member. She arrives with a bodyguard but has no pretensions. We can't help comparing this with meeting leading officials of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, one of the big parties in Southern Kurdistan. They were friendly as well, but the pompous rooms in which they received their guests alone conveyed the message that you are visiting important people with servants; people who “have made it”, the ultimate virtue in capitalism. Bese Hozat, on the other hand, sits underneath a tree, on the same plastic chairs as us. Like all guerrilla fighters she lives in the mountains, facing the same dangers. Just as we want to start our interview, we receive the message that fighter jets are approaching. Unlike us, Bese Hozat shows no concern. Only the flags are taken down, since the drones can see them.

Like everyone else we have met here, the KCK chairwoman impresses us with her personality. It is hard to capture in words, but the effortless solidarity, the calmness, and the generosity of the people we meet is enthralling and expressed in every gesture, smile, look, even handshake. Their surroundings and way of life have produced special characters. As it is hard to escape clichés in describing the situation, Heval Berivan probably puts it best: “You cannot really explain the life here. You have to live it.”