

Rojava in view

*Salih Muslim Muhammad
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In December 2016 in Brussels, the European Parliament hosted the 13th international conference on the European Union, Turkey, the Middle East and the Kurds. Sponsored by three political groups, the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL), The Greens and the Socialists and Democrats, the conference attracted hundreds of participants at a time when Kurds in many places are under attack. A keynote session was the three-way interview of Salih Muslim Muhammad, the acknowledged spokesman of Rojava ('the West' in Kurdish), a part of northern Syria distinguished by sustained attempts to establish a secular society based on social economy, gender equality and grassroots democracy that may provide an alternative model for the wider region. At the time of the interview, the battle for Aleppo continued to rage.

JS: My name is Jonathan Steele. I'm a journalist. I used to be for many years on The Guardian. Now I work for the website called Middle East Eye. But the star of our proceedings for the next hour is, of course, Salih Muslim Mohammed, the co-chair of the Democratic Union Party of Syria – the PYD – who is really the hero of the liberation movement of the Kurds of Syria. In the whole tragedy of Syria of the last five years, the only beacon of hope, the only positive benefit of this terrible war has been the emergence of a democratic, self-ruled, autonomous region in northern Syria led by our friend Salih Muslim Mohammad – and his co-chair, Asya Abdullah. She is sitting here in the front row. What we're going to do now is hear for about five minutes or so from Mr. Muslim himself directly, and then I and a friend from New York, Carne Ross, will put some questions to him.

Carne Ross is a former British diplomat who now runs a non-profit diplomatic advisory group called Independent Diplomat. He visited Rojava in 2015, and he's written about self-government and anarchism in his most recent book, which is called The Leaderless Revolution. But he's taking part in this discussion in a personal capacity.

We'll talk first about the war and the latest position in Rojava. We'll talk about peace, developing some of the ideas about the peace options in Syria, and then we'll talk, obviously, about democratic federalism and the whole experience of building a newly independent Rojava in northern Syria. Let me start by asking you, Mr Muslim, to address us.

SMM: Hello to everybody – dear guests, dear friends – and dear friends who prepared this conference here. I am glad to be among you. It really is a good opportunity to talk to each other and to discuss what's going on, and even to exchange opinions about what's going on. I am glad that Mr Carne Ross joins us. Thank you, Mr. Carne Ross. And our dear colleague here, Jonathan Steele, tried to show us as a hero. Actually, we are all friends – there are no heroes here. The only hero is the Kurdish people, who struggle, who pay the price of this struggle for freedom and protecting human rights and human values in the Middle East. We believe these human values are the only thing which connect us, all of us, together – to be protected by all humanity. So, if they are doing this, they are heroes because they are protecting humanitarian values in the Middle East. At the same time, these human values are not just for the Kurdish people, they are for all humanity. I think especially for Europeans. They also had a similar struggle, maybe in past centuries, until they reached these humanitarian values. And now these humanitarian values have been challenged in the Middle East. The Kurdish people, not only the Kurdish people, but all the components over there in Rojava protect the same values. All of us come together to defend these humanitarian values.

Actually, what's going on in the Middle East is just like the story of what happened in the 20th century at the beginning. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was at the beginning of the century. They were dividing this territory between two countries, or two imperial powers. They had a victory against the Ottomans and, at that time, nation states were valued. So they divided the Middle East according to the ideal which was common at the time, and in the modern time, to establish one nation state. And then what happened? This model was not convenient for the Middle East, as it was not convenient for the reality of Europe before. So, these nation-states established in the Middle East started to fight, and started, of course, to ignore the Kurdish existence, denying the Kurdish existence or denying the other minorities, or the nations and states who were not decided. Just like Armenia – there was the Armenian Genocide, and the same for the Syrians, and the Kurdish massacres, and the genocide against them. And until 1923 and the Treaty of Lausanne, which stabilised things a little bit, this was continuing. What we are doing now is these nation states is trying to complete what was not completed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Now, if Mr. Erdogan or the Turkish state tries to build an Ottoman Empire again, it's the same dream they had at the beginning. And, of course, the other ones like Saudi Arabia or the Qataris or even, maybe, the

Iranians want to establish another empire. It's the same mentality. Also, the Saudi Arabians want to have territory in Syria, or they want to change the regime in Syria, because of their interests. They still have the same mentality. The subject we are discussing is democratic alternatives for the Middle East. I think, first of all, this mentality, which is one nation state, should be changed and, according to our experience and what we have in Rojava, we try to make this solution, because we believe in many, many things.

First of all, our people should be organised and we have done it a little bit, maybe not 100 per cent as we'd like. And then we tried to change the mentality to accept to live with each other. I mean, to accept pluralism. And the second thing we tried to do was – in our model we tried to establish in Rojava – is gender equality, which, in our model, we have established now. We have three components over there: the Kurdish people, the Syriacs, the Arabs. They are living together, all of them. And we have a social contract which was put together by the representatives of these components and they have agreed it as a kind of constitution for the area. Women's gender equality is valued in all of our institutions. Already, they have a co-presidential or co-chair system, which is full equality. Secularism is also in our principles, because of the diversity of our society. Especially if you are talking about the components of our society – the Syriacs are Christians, we know that; the Kurds – we have Yazidis, also Muslims, Shia, also Alawites amongst our Kurdish society. The model we have established in Rojava, we believe this model could be adopted in Syria and, maybe, in the Middle East, in future, this democratic alternative to all systems. We believe this could be valid.

This democracy should be secular, pluralistic, and have gender equality. All these specifications we have implemented in our area. It is the alternative we are looking for. But this needs, I think, a change of the mentalities a little bit, because we are talking about mentalities which can think about the Islamic State, about the Caliphate, the Emirate, whatever it is, and empires. So this mentality should be changed, and we believe this will need more struggle. Of course, our people, we have tried to do it, and we succeeded until now to protect ourselves. But the problem is still we have this fighting.

Now what happened in the area is really a very big war. It's a very, very dirty war, really. What organises our people – I mean, this model we are trying to explain – has stood until now, and that's proof that this model is the only solution that can settle things in the future, not only in Rojava, but for Syria and the Middle East. And we are continuing this struggle. We

believe the European people, the European Parliament, and other nations can help us in this matter. We are suffering from many, many subjects – if we have time, we will discuss them – like these immigrants who are used by some sides to blackmail Europe, which is against our principles. Also, we would like these people to stay in their homes and not be immigrants to Europe or wherever they are. Because we need them over there. This is brutal, they are used as tools by them, and they are trying to veil many things under them. For example, they are saying we occupy another country's land to prevent connection between the Kurdish areas. This is totally wrong. They are there just to have a connection with Daesh, because they don't want Daesh to be destroyed. So, they could persuade other sides and they are not talking about the reality.

JS: *Let me continue your theme of the dirty war which is going on now in your area. The Turkish army has moved into parts of northern Syria and is now embedded in the areas to the west of Kobane and Tal Abyad where your friends in the YPG – the People's Protection Units – are deployed in two cantons of Rojava. Do you expect the Turkish army to try to move into those areas, to move east into Kobane and Tal Abyad?*

SMM: I think we should know the real goal of the Turkish mentality, what they are doing. They are trying to veil – as I mentioned – they are trying to veil everything. Still we are dealing with a mentality saying that the best Kurd is a dead Kurd. So they want to kill the Kurds everywhere. Maybe they are planning for one step, a second step, the third step. But the matter here, especially in Rojava, the matter is connecting or not connecting. Daesh and these jihadist groups did not just come from the sky. Somebody created them, somebody helped them, somebody gave them money, somebody gave them the weapons. So, there were some forces that created them. And we believe that Turkey was one of those who created these jihadist tools to be used against the Kurds. So now, if Turkey is seeing that Daesh has been defeated in Raqqa or Tal Abyad or in Manbij, so Turkish forces cannot stay there. They don't want those tools who were created by them to be destroyed. So, we consider this invasion of the north of Syria, it's not only to the Kurdish cantons in the east, just to help Daesh, to prevent this Raqqa operation. Because, as you know, there was a very successful coalition between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the international alliance against Daesh, and they were just planning to work for Rojava. In order to prevent that, or just to help Daesh, they invaded there. The Turkish invasion, with 90 tanks and maybe the air force as well,

so everyone's there – the connection between them is still going on. The families of Daesh members who were evacuated from Mosul, they are coming to Raqqa and through borders. So, this is the aim. If they have opportunities, if they find there is no resistance, of course they will destroy everything, not only in Kobane. They want to destroy the other Kurdish areas, in Kobane and Serêkaniyê. Even when they say it was a mistake in 1992 and 2003 to accept this federal system in Iraq, it was our mistake. This means they think they have an opportunity to remedy their mistakes, to destroy the federation of north Iraq, also. Still I believe, I mean this, what they are saying – the best Kurd is a dead Kurd. So, you are dealing with this mentality still.

JS: *What do you expect from the United States? It's working closely with the YPG, it's co-ordinating air strikes against Daesh with the YPG, it's using special forces alongside the YPG. So the YPG is an ally of the US, the US is an ally of the YPG. But what happens if Turkey tries to move much further into Rojava? Do you think the US will protect you or are we facing the possibility of yet another historic betrayal by the US of Kurdish interests?*

SMM: For Kurdish-American relations, I mean the United States, I think what they were planning for the Middle East at the beginning and even after the first, second stage, they took no account of the Kurdish situation. And if they did take some account, they were trying just to use us. I mean, those Kurdish people – how can they be used to help their plans? What happened, actually, on the ground was the Kurds were able to stop Daesh and these jihadis using a different mentality, with a very advanced system which they have established in their area. So the world, including the United States, started to discover the Kurdish people, who they are, and what they are doing. And of course, as the Kurdish people, we were happy about that. I mean to discover us, to establish relations, to know us. And we are in one front against those brutal groups, against Daesh and the other jihadists. So, they know the reality now. But the problem with the United States is how they can change what they have agreed before. They were listening to the others about the Kurds, getting information about the Kurds from the Turkish side or from the Arabs – from the sides who were denying the Kurdish existence. But now they have a direct connection, so it's kind of discovering the Kurdish people. Of course, we are happy about that. We are trying to go further – not only fighting against Daesh and the brutal ones. Of course, we'd like to go further – policy wise, and even

diplomatically – to have very close relations. I think they'll be happy when they know the Kurdish people, the reality. Not only for the Americans, but also the others, the Europeans, also. Just a few years ago they were refusing to meet the Kurdish people. And still now, some sides refuse to meet the Kurdish people's representatives in their countries or to meet them officially because we know there is a ban from some other sides – from Turkey and some others. I know they are doing all they can just to prevent a meeting, to prevent the Kurdish people from knowing other nations and having relations with them. So, we are happy about that and we expect them to know the Kurdish people better, to understand them better, because we are talking about not only the Kurdish people in Rojava, but also the 40 million Kurds in the Middle East, the fourth nation in the Middle East. So I think the Kurdish reality could be known very well.

CR: *Could you tell us a bit about how you see the diplomatic situation with Rojava right now? Sitting here in New York at the United Nations, I'm afraid the picture is generally one of isolation, exclusion from the UN process such as it is on Syria, and exclusion from the big power politics at the moment which seems to be centred around Russia which is perhaps discussing a future dispensation, a future settlement for Syria. So, could you tell us what would your message be to the international community about Rojava and what, perhaps, diplomatically you in Rojava are doing to reach out to the diplomatic community?*

SMM: As you know, the Syrian conflict started in 2011 and there was an effort from the beginning to find a solution and discussions for it. There was Geneva One and Geneva Two, and those continued for three years. The reason for those failing was because they excluded the Rojava people. I am not talking only about the Kurdish. I am talking about the Kurds, the Syrians, and also the others sharing in this system and the structure established in Rojava. So, excluding this one meant they were not serious to find a solution for the Syrian crisis. If they are serious, they should not exclude these components. And even, as you know, there was recently this High Negotiation Committee, which was established in Riyadh. They also excluded all these components. So, if they are serious to solve it, Rojava, the Rojava system, and the structure established in Rojava, should not be excluded anymore. If they are serious about it. And I think, until now, by not inviting them, it means they are not serious about finding a solution for Syria. We are talking about a structure, a model that could be a model for all the Middle East. So it's not only for an ordinary group to be excluded

or included and it wouldn't make any change. I think it's crucial if they are seeking a solution in Rojava.

For the United Nations, also, I think until now if they don't have a direction connection with Rojava, it's a problem. Because even for humanitarian aid and so on, it doesn't go fairly. You are dealing with the regime or you are dealing with the Turkish side, you are not dealing with the people. We have many non-governmental organisations, we have organisations, institutions which are established in Rojava by the Rojava people themselves. They are not dealing with them directly. Because they are saying they are illegal. By illegal, it means they should have permission from the Syrian regime or Turkey. Both of them deny the Kurdish existence and its components, even the Syrians. So, this is the problem even with the United Nations and so. Anyway, we try to do it. Maybe, the recent resolution by the Security Council. Maybe they have made some changes to make them able to deal directly with the United Nations. I mean, to deal directly with the components, the structure in Rojava. Maybe it will ease things a little bit for the humanitarian aid and the humanitarian health. Of course, it's not enough. We have to do more and more.

JS: *It looks very likely that the Syrian Army will take over the whole of Aleppo in the next few weeks or months. How will that – if that happens – how will that change the chances of getting an end to the war? Will it make it quicker to get an end to the war, will it make it slower, what do you think?*

SMM: Actually, we don't know. All we are trying our best to do is to stop this bloodshed in Syria. To come to the negotiation table, and to see the Syrian people doing it politically, not by fighting. We don't care, but we want this fighting in Aleppo to stop. What's going on is really a big tragedy. I mean, just shelling the areas – by the Syrians, by the Russians, by maybe the Iranians, and also those groups supported by Turkey. It's a mix really. The fighting anywhere – if the regime and the Russians when they come in – we have hope for it to be stopped. I mean, this massacre going on in Aleppo to be stopped, because, as I know, everybody is involved in it. We want this tragedy in Aleppo to be stopped by any means. But the United Nations couldn't do it. And we have – as you know – a group of Kurdish people in Sheikh Maqsoud [a neighbourhood of Aleppo] and also the areas around it, which are all controlled by the Kurdish people now. We have maybe ten thousand civilians moving into this area,

protected by the YPG and the YPJ [Women's Protection Units] over there. Of course, we will do our best as the Kurdish people to protect those people, those civilians. Until now, there is maybe still some shelling coming far away from the groups outside Aleppo. But the regime didn't attack them, the Kurds in this area. They didn't attack them. We hope there could be a ceasefire, be an agreement. We don't know what they are up to. But nobody – even these groups in Aleppo, or even the Syrians and supporters – they don't care about the civilians. So, there could be a ceasefire. I mean instead of the government killing each other. There could be a ceasefire, which was rejected by the Russians and China by veto, just yesterday, I think. The resolution for a ceasefire was rejected by them. What's important for us is for this bloodshed to be stopped as soon as possible.

CR: *One of the criticisms one hears a lot about Rojava, the YPG, the PYD, the Syrian Kurds is the relationship with the Assad regime. From where I sit, this looks like your relationship with the Assad regime appears to be a kind of non-aggression pact or an uneasy truce. Could you talk about your relationship with the Assad regime and talk about how you see the future of Syria if there ever is a settlement to this dreadful war?*

SMM: For the regime, we've mentioned many times that if you have your own way, your own line and you are not connected to two sides fighting each other, each side will consider you on the other side. So, this was the way, from the beginning of the Syrian revolution, we were in the revolution because we needed what the revolution was for – democracy, freedom. We needed that. We were part of this revolution. But we could not be on the side of the regime, because already we were fighting against them, struggling against them since 2004. And we didn't believe in this revolution to go from ... I mean, for some other sides to come as jihadists. We had our own line, organising the people, defending ourselves. And these forces, the democratic Syrian forces – it was the YPG, YPJ, and then it became the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – they are defenders, they are just defending, they are not attacking anybody anywhere. So, they defended people when they have been attacked, and we have done the same. And now, the regime forces are far away. But tomorrow, if they are able to attack our areas, of course we will defend ourselves. And we don't have any agreements with them. But we are against sending our people to Damascus to fight over there, also. Because this is not helpful. Because defending Damascus and the other areas should be the people over there in

Damascus and that area. They should defend themselves, and we are ready to help them. But Daesh is different. For Daesh now, we are with an international alliance. We have a kind of agreement with the international alliance and the Syrian Democratic Forces to liberate Raqqa because it's harming everyone. It's not only against Rojava, it's a threat for all of Syria. So, we should be fighting against them. But for the regime, as the Kurds and the components, now what we are saying is we are part of Syria. We are not going to divide Syria. That's right. And we have a project for all of Syria, which is democratic federalism for Syria. Decentralise Syria. And we are ready to discuss with everybody, including the people in Latakia. I'm not talking about the persons, because those persons don't mean anything according to the components over here – I mean, the Alawites, the Druzes and so on. The system is accepted by everybody. It's okay, we can live together, with them. Which is democratic, decentralised ... the name could be federalism or something different. We can live with them all together. A decentralised, secular system for all the people, all the components can express themselves in this Syria. So, this is the kind of Syria we want. Otherwise, if they don't accept it, Syria may be divided. I'm sorry to say that, but there is no other choice. So the only choice to keep Syria together is to have a decentralised, democratic, secular Syria. There is no other way. So, anybody who accepts this system, we are ready to live with them – including the Alawites, the Druzes, the Sunnis and so on. And this is our aim, we are trying to implement it in Syria. We are struggling for it.

JS: *You mentioned the liberation of Raqqa. When do you think this will actually happen, because everybody seems to be saying that the bulk of the forces that try and liberate Raqqa have to be Arabs. You can't have a Kurdish army, the YPG, call it an army if you like, a militia, taking the lead in liberating Raqqa. There have to be Arabs doing it. The effort to bring them together with the Syrian Democratic Forces is very slow, and patchy, and not terribly successful. So, when do you think the real effort can be made to liberate Raqqa?*

SMM: For Raqqa, I would like to clarify something which isn't often mentioned. Some sides believe that we are going to Raqqa because the United States want it, or some other forces want it, they want us to fight over there and to liberate Raqqa. It's not like that. Raqqa is very important for us in Rojava, because it's the centre for Daesh and it's close to the Jazira Canton in Rojava, it's close to Kobane, and all attacks and these

bombings, car bombings, the source was from Raqqa. Raqqa was central for everything. I mean, directed to Rojava, Jazira, Kobane and others. And we believe Daesh was created in part just to kill the Kurds, to attack the Kurds. So, we cannot stay comfortable in our home while beside us there is a city like Raqqa – the capital of Daesh. So, we have to do something. To do something – not occupying, or going there to put our hands on it. No, to change it. At least, there could be some friends staying there in Raqqa. So, Raqqa is important for us, as it's important for all Syria. It's important for all the international powers also to defeat Daesh. And because of that there is a kind of agreement for the Kurdish aims and for the international alliance. The military side, I mean how they will go, I don't know exactly. But it's not only tied to the Kurdish people, because as we have heard there are some stages. The first stage, they're going to surround Raqqa for a while, until they prepare people from inside Raqqa. I mean, the Raqqa inhabitants – from among the Kurdish people, from among the Arabs to the others who are living there, to prepare a force from inside Raqqa. And of course, the people outside Raqqa will be helping them. So, the first stage is just to besiege Raqqa and it's now maybe completed. And the other one depends on the international alliance and the other powers, how much really to prepare such a power that could liberate Raqqa with the help of the international alliance and the others. As I mentioned, Raqqa is not a purely Kurdish city. The majority is not Kurdish. But we would like what happens in Raqqa ... to establish the same model as what happened in Manbij. In Manbij, we can see now, there is a council. A civil council from all the components – mostly, they are Arabs, Turkmen, Circassians, and Kurdish people who were living in Raqqa. And there is a civil council who are deciding for them and taking care of the people themselves. So, there is no SDF, no YPG, no YPJ. We want the same situation for Raqqa. To make the Raqqa people decide for themselves what to do. And even to be able to protect themselves. Of course, this will be for our benefit and for Raqqa – when liberated – it will benefit all Syria, also

CR: *Do you see evidence of an emerging Russian, Turkish and, perhaps, Assad regime deal to carve up the area around Aleppo and northern Syria, allowing Turkey to keep a slice of territory or control a slice of territory between the two Kurdish controlled cantons in Afrin and to the east as well? Is there evidence of some kind of negotiations between Russia and Turkey, in particular, to ensure that there is no contiguous Kurdish-controlled area along Turkey's southern border?*

SMM: This Shahba area and the place you have mentioned are witnessing big fighting right now. It's very complicated. More than that, it doesn't depend on what Turkey is going to decide or only Russia to decide. It's very, very complicated because, already, we have people and groups fighting against Turkish occupation soldiers, I mean forces. The fighting is going on and Turkey is not able to do anything against them. They are using planes against them and they are talking about 90 tanks. It's very hard fighting going on, without Syrian Democratic Forces being involved. There are local groups fighting against them. Today, yesterday and the day before they were talking about some unidentified planes hitting Turkish soldiers. They are talking about the loss of 15 soldiers. So, I think it's not so easy. Yes, at the beginning when the Turkish invasion came of some size, they kept silent because actually it was a violation of international law – to go and occupy another country's land. It's not acceptable. But nobody said anything about it, so it means they have a kind of green light from somebody – by the Russians, or even the United States. But it doesn't mean they are going to be permanent. It's not acceptable to the people living over there. The Turkish invasion and occupation, it's not acceptable. And even the Syrians, maybe they kept silent. A kind of compromise – I mean those people, go take them from Aleppo and then they'll keep silent. I think it's a temporary thing. Because even if we look at the relations between the Russian and Turkish sides. Turkey is very, very complicated. You cannot forget what's happening among them, by letter, or saying 'I apologise for it' and finish it. It's deeper than that. They have many, many problems. Even for centuries, they've had problems. It cannot be solved in one moment. And even Syria, it's very complicated. And also we have Iranians, Hezbollah – it's more complicated. It's not so easy. I think it's a kind of problem for Turkey. I don't know what will happen. It's a problem for Turkey. They invaded, but how will they come out? Because they are not supported by the local people. Again, they are fighting against them. They are against international law. So, it's a problem for Turkey.

JS: *Let me turn now to the issue of your relations with Iraqi Kurds. Unfortunately, it's not always unity amongst Kurds. And one of the tragedies at the moment is the way the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the elite in Erbil, is basically putting Rojava under siege. Preventing humanitarian aid and other things crossing the border, crossing the river Tigris, into Rojava. How do you explain it? What is going on with the KRG relationship with Rojava? And how can you improve it? Or, how can it be improved – it doesn't rely on you alone, of course.*

SMM: It's an important point, our relations with our neighbours. But I would like to clarify something – you said the relationship with Rojava and the KRG. It's not the relationship with Rojava and the KRG. It's Rojava and the KDP – the Kurdistan Democratic Party. It's only one party. As the Kurdish people, as the Kurdish nation, we have relations with all the parties – even for south Kurdistan, east Kurdistan, for Rojava. We have good relations and we are one nation, as you know. And even for the future, we have very close visions for the future of the Kurdish people. The only thing that's different is the KDP. And they are controlling the border. They are making problems with Rojava. Of course, there are some parties which are affiliated to them in Rojava. Two parties, two small parties: one of them is the KDP Syria, the other is Yekiti. They are dealing with them, supported by them and, maybe, getting agitated by them. And they are staying in Istanbul. So, this is only the problem. It's not a problem between Rojava and the KRG for sure, because we have good relations with the others. It's only a problem between the KDP and Rojava, not only the PYD, because they are trying to present it in some ways as only a problem with the PYD and KRG. It's not like that, because they even don't accept the structure established over there. They don't accept to deal with the Syrians, deal with the Arabs living under this system, this structure over there. And this is not because of their own policies. I think it's because of their benefits and interests with Turkey. As you know, they have a kind of economic relations with Turkey, even including the oil trade. So this is proved by many sides. It is not only what we are saying. This interest is pushing them to deal in coordinating with the Turkish side. So, this is the problem really.

CR: Leading on from that point, could you talk about the economic situation in Rojava? When I visited a year ago, I was quite shocked by the absence of economic activity, but also above all how difficult it is to get in and out of Rojava. Of course, the northern border with Turkey is sealed. But the Kurdistan Regional Government does not make it easy to enter or exit Rojava – either for people, or for humanitarian supplies. So, could you perhaps enlarge upon what is going on economically for the people of Rojava? And perhaps also say a little about the attempts to form a co-operative economy – for instance, in agriculture, but also in other enterprises?

SMM: Regarding economic life in Rojava, as you said, the same conditions which you have witnessed are continuing. There was a war and many places are destroyed and, of course, we are under siege, under the

embargo from the northern side and even the eastern side. And maybe you can find a lot of things, but they are very expensive as they are coming through Daesh areas via the black market. So, it's difficult really, but the people are used to it. Even recently, we have those displaced people from other areas, even Mosul, we have some camps over there. Aid and helping these people is a very, very small amount. It's not enough for anything. But our people are trying to manage, because there is no other way. They are preventing the aid coming in. What we have for the economy, what we have seen for our people is a kind of, let's say, a social economy. Helping each other, co-operatives between the people, especially from the agricultural side. Now we have councils for the economy established everywhere, and councils for the people, and for the cities also. We are encouraging these co-operatives because they are the only way to share things amongst the people. So they are deciding what to do, the people themselves. As you know, politically, we are depending upon this grassroots democracy, and for the economy it's the same. We are also implementing this grassroots democracy for the economy, for the decisions. We have some committees in the cantons, in Kobane, in Jazira Canton, and Aleppo, and they are making some decisions. I mean, for the economy, how to deal especially with this harvest in Afrin, in Kobane. We have a lot of agricultural production. We need to export them. We need others. So, the people – under this embargo – are trying to manage something for themselves. It's difficult, really. Maybe in the future we can solve it, or will find our friends helping us by opening some ways. Because, as you know, many cities, many villages were destroyed during this war. Maybe, 50 to 60 per cent of Kobane is destroyed. We cannot find the materials to build it. We need some gates, some ways to be open in order to help those people, even to find the opportunity for people to work, because now the people trying to escape from Rojava is mainly because of economic reasons, not safety and security. We can find hundreds of thousands of Arabs coming to the Kurdish areas, to Rojava, just because it is safe. And we find the other people just because of economic reasons, they are coming out. So, we need some advancement, some investment in this area to keep people inside and we would like our friends to be helpful on this side – to make some investments in Rojava.

JS: *Following on from that, your 'friends' – you speak diplomatically – what about the European Union governments, the government of the United States? Why aren't they putting more pressure on the KDP in Erbil to open that border and allow humanitarian aid to go in?*

SMM: We are trying to do that. We are asking everybody to mediate, to persuade them, or to make some pressure on Turkey. Because, if we are talking about Turkey, we are talking about more than 800 kilometres. Many gates could be opened and those people could get anything for rebuilding the cities, and even for investments in these areas. It could be. Why not? But, there is some Syrian politics not to do it. As I mentioned, there are political reasons for that. Of course, we are asking the Europeans, even the United Nations, the United States, and the others; not to get permission from Turkey to do something in Rojava; not to get permission from the Syrian regime to do something in Rojava. Why don't you deal directly with those people? They have their institutions. And you can see, they can come and see what we do. I think if they just dealt directly with us. I'm not talking about recognising Rojava as a different part. I am talking about to know Rojava as part of Syria, of the Syrian Revolution, of the future of Syria, or part of a democratic federal Syria. So, you can deal with us on this basis. Until now, nobody wants to deal with us, because maybe they have their benefits or interests with some other countries. Mainly, it's Turkey, or the Iranians, or the regime. They don't accept to do it.

JS: *There have been some criticisms of the level of democracy within Rojava. People like Amnesty International have said that there has been some ethnic cleansing of Arab villages in the north of Syria, in Rojava particularly. I know that historically governments in Damascus, including particularly the regime of Hafez al-Assad, the father, tried to create an Arab belt along the northern border of Syria with Turkey, brought in Arabs. But that is a matter of history: those Arabs are there, they have human rights like everybody else. Is there any truth in the accusations that Amnesty makes of ethnic cleansing, of removing those Arab villagers?*

SMM: Actually, our principles are not like that. We believe in democracy, we believe in dialogue, we believe even that all the issues could be solved with a democracy, with a discussion. That's what we believe. We respect these institutions like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and so on. We respect them and their decisions. But the recent reports you have mentioned – it was in abnormal conditions, I mean it was a war in Tal Abyad. And in war conditions, usually the civilians escape the place of the war. At this time you can find some people, and this report depended on some witnesses who were in Turkey, and not in the area. We invited them to come in and see actual villages, especially after the war was finished.

And they didn't come in. Really, we want them to come. I'm not ignoring ... we have made some mistakes. There could be some mistakes. But you can help us to remedy these mistakes. I'm not saying everything is perfect, but it is our principle that we can solve everything with dialogue. And if there are any mistakes, they could be repaired. No problem. But this report, I think it was unfair because they depended on some witnesses who were not in the area. And it was wartime. Of course, you can't ask a civilian to stay in the battlefield, because fighting is going on. And it was the same for Kobane, the other areas. The civilians came out until the battle was finished, and then they came back. And now all the people they were talking about are back in their areas. In Manbij they say the same, they claimed the same happened in Manbij, and now you can see in Manbij, all the people are able to do what they want. And now, the problem is they don't allow the journalists to come in. Anybody who wants to investigate, who wants to research the situation about human rights, to ask about the situation, they don't allow them. So if you are sincere about the claims you're making about us, allow the journalists in to write about the reality. Allow the researchers to come in and research what is going on. They don't allow them. They just make claims that they are doing so and so. I think if they like you, you can come any time. But they have to find their way to Rojava, to visit, and make the report as what they can see, especially [gestures to audience] Mr. David Phillips [director, Columbia University, Institute for the Study of Human Rights]. You are invited to come in.

CR: *One of the difficulties which you face internationally is the historic association between you, the YPG, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and Abdullah Ocalan, of course. And this has allowed Turkey to utilise ferocious propaganda against you, against the YPG, that you – like the PKK – are what they call 'terrorists'. And the PKK is of course a listed organisation, both in the EU and the United States. What would you say about your situation vis à vis that of the Turkish Kurds today, and indeed the PKK. Very different political situations, but an historic connection that can't be denied.*

SMM: There are some realities on the ground, everybody knows it, which is Mr. Ocalan. Ocalan is the philosopher, the leader not only of the Kurdish people, but of the Middle East because of his ideas, his philosophy. There are many Arab organisations and institutions which are defending Mr. Ocalan's ideas and visions for the future. We are one of them. The PKK is,

maybe, partly, one of them. The PKK is a Kurdistan party. We have relations with all the Kurdistan parties, like the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), like Gorran, like Islamic parties – you can see many of them here. We have very good relations with everybody. And we have relations with the PKK, also. It doesn't mean we have organic relations. We are our party, the PYD, and the YPG and the others, we are in Rojava, we are taking care of our people in Rojava, and defending them politically, and what is needed we are doing in Rojava and our decision is made in Rojava. So, if we have some sympathy with some parties, some leaders, I think it's related to all the Kurds. And we don't see the PKK as a terrorist organisation – they are defenders, they are defending the rights of people in North Kurdistan. We believe in that. Nobody can harm this sympathy. As you know, especially since we are talking about Rojava, I am from Kobane and we have in Kobane, if you go to the graveyard in Kobane, you see the martyred people over there. You can see they are from Van, from Mahabad, from Sulaymaniyah, from Qamishli – all of them are there, martyrs from all parts. The blood of these martyrs makes the unification between all the Kurds. So, this is what we are trying to keep: just to be honest with our martyrs' blood. This is something different from having organic relations with the PKK. Everybody is just trying to do for the Kurds, defending their democratic rights anywhere. Turkey is trying to terrorise them. And the only way to do it is to connect them with the PKK. Already, they have put the PKK in the terrorist list without maybe the wishes of some parties. They have forced them to do it.

Transcribed by Sam Keely

Video at

<http://web.guengl.streamovations.be/index.php/event/stream/the-european-union-turkey-and-the-kurds>