*"It's unfortunate that ideology has been so much more important than practice in determining who has received international support in Syria. This focus on ideology has meant that chillingly few anarchists or anti-authoritarians have objected as PYD and SDF spokespeople claim that there are no Syrian revolutionaries, that the protests they attack in Rojava are just provocations by Islamists or that there is nothing but al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Azaz corridor.*

*"By repeating this kind of divisive propaganda, supporters contribute to rifts between revolutionaries, reduce international support overall, and do nothing to actually help people on the ground. All it does is serve the short-term interests of the militias and political parties in Rojava, and it is increasingly unsure whether these groups will still be friendly to revolutionaries in years to come."*

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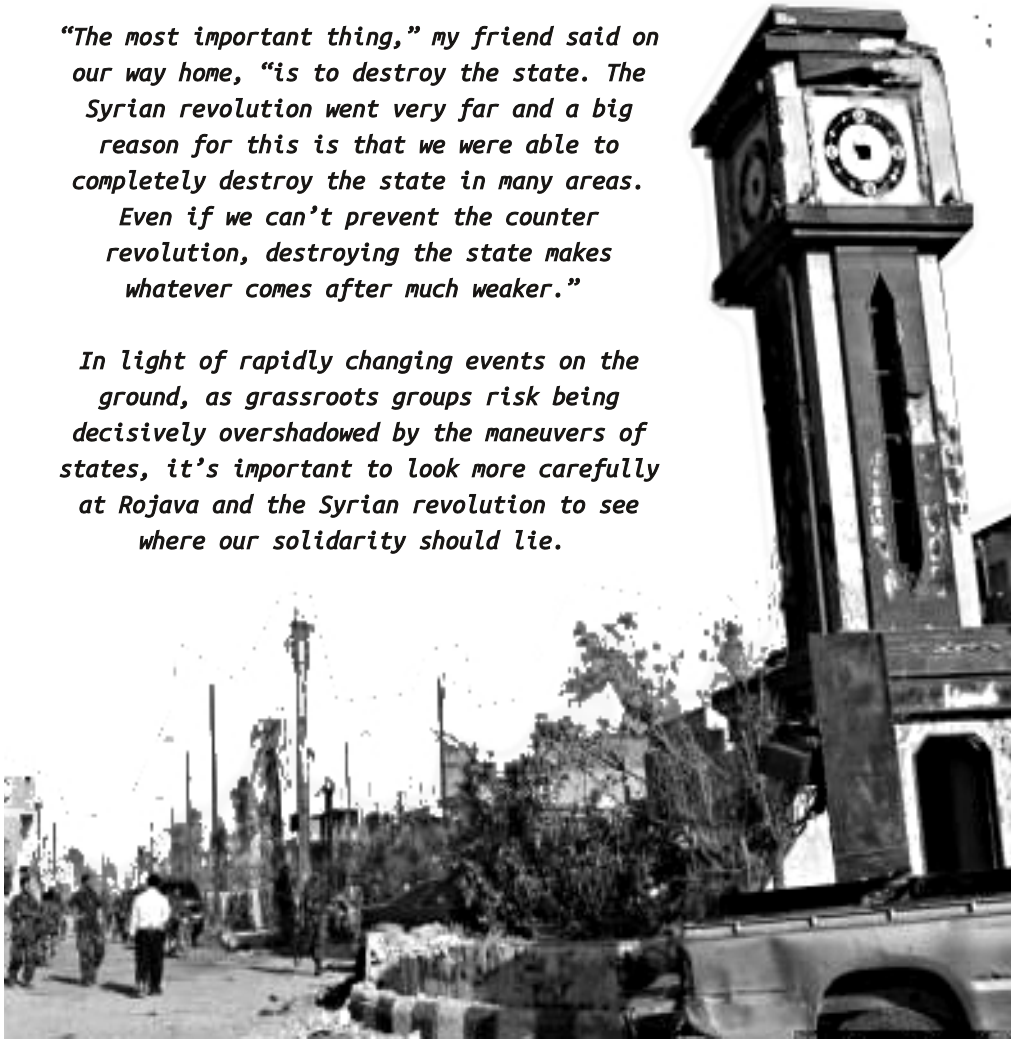
# *The Most Important Thing*

***"The most important thing," my friend said on our way home, "is to destroy the state. The Syrian revolution went very far and a big reason for this is that we were able to completely destroy the state in many areas. Even if we can't prevent the counter revolution, destroying the state makes whatever comes after much weaker."***

***In light of rapidly changing events on the ground, as grassroots groups risk being decisively overshadowed by the maneuvers of states, it's important to look more carefully at Rojava and the Syrian revolution to see where our solidarity should lie.***



## *Reflections on Solidarity and the Syrian Revolution*

# The Most Important Thing

## Reflections on Solidarity and the Syrian Revolution

"The most important thing," my friend said on our way home, "is to destroy the state. The Syrian revolution went very far and a big reason for this is that we were able to completely destroy the state in many areas. Even if we can't prevent the counter revolution, destroying the state makes whatever comes after much weaker."

My friend was an active participant in the first few years of the Syrian revolution, and we had just spent the evening at Leila al-Shami and Robin Yassin-Kassab's speaking tour for their book Burning Country: Stories of Syrians in Revolution and War. These two authors, based in the UK, spoke passionately about the various revolutionary projects that unfolded in Syria between 2011 and 2013 and that continue struggling to survive today, under the bombs and indifference of the world. A few days earlier, we'd also attended a talk by Paul Z Simons describing his experiences travelling to Rojava, the majority-Kurdish areas in what used to be northern Syria. Paul compared his motivations for travelling to Rojava to those of anarchists around the world who travelled to Spain in the 30s – describing Rojava1 as the most significant anarchist revolution since that time, he has been travelling North America trying to inspire direct support among western radicals.

These two tours both offered anarchist perspectives on Syria and yet their narratives were surprisingly different – on our walk to the bus station, we dug into those differences and tried to understand them. In spite of their scale and commitment, the anarchic practices carried out by the Syrian revolution (not in Rojava) have been largely ignored by anarchists in the west, while Rojava has been widely, and often uncritically, celebrated. In light of rapidly changing events on the ground, as grassroots groups risk being decisively overshadowed by the maneuvers of states, it's important to look more carefully at Rojava and the Syrian revolution to see where our solidarity should lie. This will help us support revolutionaries there in the years to come and also make sure that, in the present, anarchist support isn't fuelling forces that divide and undermine revolutionary energy.

My friend's comments about destroying the state remind me of the well-known quote by Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz that we heard again at the event: "We are

## Some resources:

— Documentary film made by Spanish anarchists, Ecos del Desgarro / Echos of Rupture, tells the story of the Syrian revolution from the beginning. https://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/syria-film-ecos-del-desgarro/

— Leila's blog: https://leilashami.wordpress.com/
— Robin's blog: https://qunfuz.com/
— Paul's Rojava dispatches start here: http://modernslavery.calpress.org/?p=875

— More essays about solidarity with the Syrian revolution at The Hamilton Institute: https://thehamiltoninstitute.noblogs.org/post/category/around-the-world/

-Local Co-ordinating Committees in Syria Facebook page (mostly in Arabic, some translations): https://www.facebook.com/LCCSy?_fb_noscript=1

— Yalla Souria, Live updates on the struggle from a revolutionary perspective: https://yallasouriya.wordpress.com/
— Posts by Budhour Hassan, an anarchist based in Jerusalem, on the Syrian Revolution: https://budourhassan.wordpress.com/tag/syrian-revolution/
— Michael Karadjis writes some very thorough essays debunking propaganda about the Syrian Revolution: https://mkaradjis.wordpress.com/
— A new blog started in December focussing on the 'democratic' revolution in Syria. Some posts support militarism and western intervention, but it's also got some great content: https://isqatannizam.wordpress.com/

— The sub-reddit Syrian Civil War provides detailed analysis of the military dimension of the conflict. It takes a bit of work to get caught up enough on the details to follow, but once you're there, it's a good resource, though it's very militaristic which is generally the opposite of revolutionary:
http://reddit.com/r/syriancivilwar ;
this user posts daily summaries of events from a generally pro-rebel perspective:
https://www.reddit.com/user/HeresWatReallyHappnd

— Syria Solidarity Collective Toronto: https://www.facebook.com/SSCToronto

no less than Paris Commune workers: they resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half." While the Paris Commune was able to destroy the state in a major city, it quickly became isolated and the state was able to march back and defeat the revolutionaries militarily. By the time of Omar's death in prison in 2013, the Syrian state had been destroyed in dozens of cities and towns — it was continuing to contract and was obviously not going to be able to retake major centres of the rebellion any time soon.

At the Burning Country event, Leila briefly told the story of the last years of Omar's life, focusing on his work elaborating a revolutionary practice of local councils and committees that began in Barzeh, Damascus, and spread throughout the country. Hundreds of these councils are still active today, following many of the anarchist principles developed by Omar in spite of the ever more difficult conditions. Alternatives to state structures, these autonomous forms of self governance transitioned from organizing protests to organizing collective self-defense to distributing food, providing electricity, and dealing with conflict. A comrad of Omar's who was present in the audience reminded us that Omar had been living abroad and returned to Syria to support the revolution and questioned why more people who escaped Assadist tyranny haven't also supported the revolution. She also spoke about her friend Razan Zeitouneh, a human rights lawyer and prisoner support activist who dedicated herself to forming and federating local committees that could co-ordinate protests and mutual aid, who was arrested and likely killed in the Damascus area by rebel group Jaish al-Islam.

One reason for the lack of international support for the Syrian revolution might be that it has largely been made invisible. The stories of Razan and Omar underline an important reason for this invisibility – many of the anarchists and most passionate activists were killed (usually by the regime )early on or were forced to flee the country. Rojava, on the other hand, had a different experience of the regime's violence, which contributed to increased visibility.

In his talk, Paul shared many personal stories of his travels through the liberated territories of Rojava, mostly in the Kobane area. These stories are compelling and inspiring, they demonstrate a clear commitment to building international understanding between anti-authoritarian rebels and deepening practices of solidarity. However, when it came to the broader context of struggle in the Syrian territory, he seemed not to understand that there could possibly be revolutionaries outside of Rojava. I don't raise this to criticise him personally – I think his work

in building international solidarity with Rojava is very valuable. However, he is far from alone in this attitude and I want to understand how someone so evidently committed to engaging with revolutionary currents in Syria could ignore the struggles being waged in the rest of the country.

When several people in the audience questionned the recent attacks by the SDF2 against territory controlled by other rebel groups north of Aleppo, Paul largely repeated the propaganda of the SDF, the Assad regime, and the Russian military (all of whom collaborated in these attacks): everyone there is al-Qaeda or ISIS, there is no one worth listening to. Paul insisted that these attacks were necessary to link the Efrin Canton to Kobane Canton (two provinces of Rojava) and assumed that only Assad supporters would have a problem with this.

Those following the (admittedly complex and confusing) politics of the Syrian civil war mostly agree that the space between the two Rojavan cantons is controlled in one area by ISIS and in another by a coalition of rebel groups, prominently including many branches of the Free Syrian Army that still support the liberatory goals of the revolution. They have held on here even while being defeated by counter-revolutionary attacks (by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Assad regime) elsewhere in the country because of the proximity to the Turkish border and their control of important crossing points. Although the SDF and the YPG3 claim they are only fighting al-Qaeda there, this is a transparent lie.4

Robin and Leila, while voicing a lot of support for Rojava and describing its democratic confederalism as a model for the rest of the Syrian terrirory, consider the goal of militarily linking the cantons to be disastrous. They said that the PYD's recent declaration of 'federalism' for Rojava seems like laying the groundwork for a state, which would of course need contiguous territory, and that it runs counter to democratic confederalism. A model of councils would spread by encouraging and supporting the formation of councils other regions, not by conquering those regions. This is especially true north of Aleppo around Azaz, where local revolutionary councils have been active for years. Leila and Robin described the PYD's recent declaration of 'federalism' in northern Syria to be essentially a coup against the grassroots revolutionaries in Rojava, who were never consulted.

They worry that the PYD has given up on democratic confederalism, because the recent Russian bombing so dramatically changed the balance of power against

7) Though as mentionned above, there have been steady steps over especially the last year to hand responsabilities to local councils.

8) Leila and Robin emphasized that there are many revolutionaries who are devoutly Muslim and could be described as Islamist, in that they want Islam to guide political life, but who do not seek to impose it on anyone else – they evoked demonstrations against Ahrar ash-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra when they have tried to impose religious garb or Islamic laws on people who do not accept them. The writings of Samer Yazbek, a revolutionary and an Alawi woman who does not wear religious garb as she travels through revolutionary areas, are very insightful on this. There is also a thread on Anarchist News compiling protests against the regime and against Jabhat al-Nusra in the Idlib area: http://anarchistnews.org/content/demonstrations-against-state-and-against-fascists-idlib-province-syria

9) They were primarily talking about the Syrian diaspora community here, though the general idea probably holds for anyone trying to understand and engage with this conflict.

10) Robin entertainingly singled out Democracy Now as a "pro-fascist outlet" doing the opposite of of encouraging critical dialogue through their repeated interviews with "racist fool" and pro-Assad conspiracy theorist Seymour Hirsch

revolutionaries. Paul, however, claimed that the PYD, the single political party active on the level of the cantons (local affairs are run by the councils), is dissapearing. Perhaps this would be the famous "withering away" of the state and party following a successful revolution? But the claim still seems bizarre – to my friend and I, as well as to those we talked with at the Burning Country event, the PYD seems to have never been stronger and more present. It's true that it continues to support local councils and continues to pass responsabilities to popular committees, but with its sole control of militias, ability to negotiate with other states, and, as we'll see, control over police, it still plays a dominent role in shaping the future of the Rojava project.

However, Paul did also tell stories that showed the tension that exists between the PYD-led initiatives and the bottom-up commune-level initiatives. He contrasted the Assayish, a police force responsible to the PYD at the level of the canton, to the HPC, a grassroots armed group tied to specific neighbourhoods and towns that aims to secure areas behind the front. Paul sees the HPC as essential to the Rojavan strategy of preventing counter-revolution, which is very interesting considering how rarely anarchists talk seriously about what it would take to prevent counter-revolutions inside liberated territory. The more the HPC can take power away from the Assayish, the more the councils win out over the party. This was a big example Paul pointed to for the reduced importance of the PYD in daily life in Rojava – supporting the HPC and pushing the PYD to follow through with dissolving its police force is an important role international supporters can play to support the Rojava revolution long-term.

The tension between the PYD and the grassroots reveals however a broader difference between Rojava and the Syrian revolution. My friend says he nearly laughed out loud when Paul claimed that Rojava didn't take over the airport or post office in Qamishli because those are statist institutions and revoltionaries there didn't want to take on the trappings of states. My friend explains that it was never a question of the YPG capturing those regime positions or not, because none of the territory in the north-east was captured from the regime – it was a negotiated withdrawal by Assad's forces to allow the regime to fight more effectively in other parts of the country. Yes, there have been occasional clashes between Rojavan armed groups, especially the YPG and Assayish, and the regime (the post office in question was in fact recently captured following some skirmishes), but the huge majority of their territory was not taken by force.

Revolution could perhaps be defined as attempts to attack the state, to act on the national level, either to destroy the state or capture it. If we accept this definition, there are many inspiring movements in the world that frame their struggles as something other than revolutionary. Indigenous sovreignty movements in North and South America generally are not seeking to overthrow colonial governments, but are rather seeking autonomy and justice on their traditional territories and to develop a new balance of power with those states. Notably, this includes the Zapatistas. Rojava would fit into this tendency of territorially-oriented struggle that is not trying to produce a new state (and so isn't a traditional national liberation movement) or to capture the old (as the groups referred to as Houthis have in Yemen, for a recent example of a revolt based in a specific community aimed at the level of the state).

My friend continues though and points out that Assad's withdrawal means that Rojava didn't destroy the state in its territory. There are regime checkpoints, border crossings, offices, military bases and even intelligence agencies still based in Rojava with some level of consent from the PYD. Yes, there are workers in many parts rebel-occupied Syria who are still receiving their salaries from the regime, even if their offices have been destroyed and they haven't worked in years5. The destruction of the state in revolutionary areas of Aleppo, Latakia, Homs, Damascus (Ghouta), Idlib, and Dara'a has been nearly total – even when fascistic armed groups are in control, they depend on the popular assemblies and councils (of generally "democratic" politics6) who have stepped in to meet people's needs that had been provided by the state. Although the fight against the Syrian state has been horrific, it forced the revolution to go very far – in Rojava though, the Syrian state has continued to operate in a larval state, ready to regrow at any time, and the PYD stepped in to provide other state-like services, using a similar infrastructure7.

This recalls the experience of the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt. When the protestors began seriously dismantling the state, burning nearly every police station and ruling party office in the country, the military intervened to protect the protests, push out the government, and organize a transition. The military acted to preserve the state and, after a brief interlude with the Muslim Brotherhood (who literally assumed the levers of state power after participating in the revolution), is more or less openly in control of all its institutions that continue to act much as they did under the previous dictatorship.

# End Notes

1) For this text, I'm using phrases like "Rojava" and "Rojava project" rather than referring to "Kurds" or "Kurdish struggle" because of what I see as genuine attempts throughout Rojava to go beyond ethnic lines. That these attempts are sometimes undercut by belligerent actions by particular armed groups doesn't undermine the broadly inclusive work.

2) The SDF, or Syrian Democratic Forces, is a coalitional military project attached to Rojava. The largest group by far is the YPG, the People's Defense Forces, which formed as the armed wing of the PYD, the largest (read, only) political party in Rojava). The SDF's mandate is to incorporate armed groups not part of the YPG and often not Kurdish into the military struggle for Rojava, part of the goal of making Rojava more than just a Kurdish project.

3) The armed branch of the PYD party that is guiding the Rojava project

4) Rather than get into a lot of detail here, I'll refer those interested in proof of this claim to Michael Karadjis' thorough article: The Kurdish PYD's alliance with Russia against Free Aleppo: Evidence and analysis of a disaster

https://mkaradjis.wordpress.com/2016/02/28/the-kurdish-pyds-alliance-with-russia-against-free-aleppo-evidence-and-analysis-of-a-disaster/

5) This may seem odd but it's a strategy of the regime's to avoid economic collapse, probably a larger threat than military defeat, and to maintain some level of authority – to avoid the destruction of the state, in short. Most oddly, this has included oil refinery workers in ISIS territory who then sell oil to the regime.

6) Democratic is a vague term claimed by almost every party in the conflict that isn't fighting for a salafist islamic state. There are over a hundred and fifty revolutionary councils operating throughout Syria. Most vote in temporary members who then either vote on issues or operate on consensus, though some are more similar to tribal structures and some have been taken over by authoritarian armed groups. Most all have some practice of assemblies, usually informal.

The preoccupation of anarchists with ideology and their uncritical support of Rojava has its parallel in the broader left's support for the Assad regime. The emphasis on dialogue includes confronting regime supporters, talking with them and pointing out the weakness in their narratives10. One reason why so many leftists have supported the Assad regime is an excessive focus on international politics, on the maneuvers of states, on ideology. Like the uprising in Ukraine and the NATO intervention in Libya, the Syrian revolution has refreshed the binary, anti-imperialist worldview, where the United States and its allies are trying to control the world, opposed by heroic anti-imperialist socialist states. There's a lot to be said about why this position is horrible: after 10 years of neo-liberal reforms, it wasn't a socialist country; the tens of thousands of political dissidents dead under torture; the shabby oedipal logic that the role of the dissident is to oppose the actions of their own country no matter what; the racist belief that Arabs and other Middle Eastern peoples are ignorant children, unable to see their own conditions and to take action without some foreign power lurking behind the scenes… One could go on.

Leila and Robin's project with Burning Country is to tell the story of the Syrian revolution from the beginning, on the level of actual people. One way to support the Syrian revolution is to fight against memory loss and silence: to learn and tell the story of a revolution that has gone further than any in recent history, that is rich in new theories and practices useful to people in revolt around the world. We can intervene within our circles and within anarchist spaces as well as within the wider left to encourage critical solidarity with revolutionaries throughout the Syrian territory. We can prepare ourselves to offer practical, material support to the struggle against authority in Syria in the years to come.

Following the withdrawal of Assad's forces, the PYD even assumed the role of restricting protest, targetting other Kurdish political formations (the probable assassination of Mashall Tammo is a prominent example) and attacking demonstrations in support of the Syrian revolution: this pattern started in 2012 and the YPG fired on demonstrators flying the revolutionary flag as recently as April 2016. Echoing the official PYD line, Paul claimed that these were responses to armed provocateurs from the FSA, affiliated with Salafist groups. This is again eerily similar to Assad's narrative for firing on similar demonstrations in areas he controls – they are all terrorists, armed gangs trying to destabilize our brave socialist nation…

(Again, Paul's tour and his Rojava dispatches are very useful and important, especially when he stays close to his own experience and described the practices and discussions he saw and participated in. However, repeating this kind of propaganda contributes to driving a wedge between revolutionaries and to strengthening authoritarian elements in the conflict – please hear this as comradely criticism in line with our shared desire to develop better practices of anarchist solidarity.)

We recall the words of an audience member at Leila and Robin's talk who said that the story of the Syrian revolution is always told from the middle – the dominant narrative starts from around 2013, the civil war and the rise of Salafist groups like ISIS and al-Nusra, and completely ignores the two years of revolutionary struggle by Syrians against the regime before that. This partially explains why many western radicals have been far more likely to support Rojava than the Syrian revolution. Rojava was able to spend those two years building a clear, coherent political project without any serious threats. Rojava's crucial military struggle was against ISIS in 2014, with significant international support. This after ISIS had already crushed all the non-Rojava rebel groups in eastern Syria, capturing areas with strong revolutionary presences like Deir el-Zor and Raqqa and leading to the rapid collapse of the FSA throughout the country.

Rojava was also building from an established ideology, similar to the PKK's, and had access to militias, the YPG and YPJ, that had existed (mostly in Turkey) for ten years before. During those same two years, revolutionaries elsewhere in Syria were literally fighting for survival, beseiged, outgunned, and largely abandonned by the world. Areas under rebel control were never able to meaningfully unify (rather, the tendency has been towards divisions over time) or to articulate a clear

ideology or political project. Most of the international left either listened to the ideology of Assad or to the ideology of Rojava but were unable to see or understand the practices of the Syrian revolution.

It's unfortunate that ideology has been so much more important than practice in determining who has received international support in Syria. This focus on ideology has meant that chillingly few anarchists or anti-authoritarians have objected as PYD and SDF spokespeople claim that there are no Syrian revolutionaries, that the protests they attack in Rojava are just provocations by Islamists or that there is nothing but al-Qaeda and ISIS in the Azaz corridor. By repeating this kind of divisive propaganda, supporters contribute to rifts between revolutionaries, reduce international support overall, and do nothing to actually help people on the ground. All it does is serve the short-term interests of the militias and political parties in Rojava, and it is increasingly unsure whether these groups will still be friendly to revolutionaries in years to come. It's no different than repeating the kinds of lazy anti-kurdish insults thrown around at demonstrations in Idlib or Aleppo – they're all PKK terrorists, they are anti-arab, and so on.

Why should anarchists make their support contingent on seeing explicitly anarchist ideology? Even looking briefly at the history of the Syrian revolution, it's clear there is no shortage of anarchic practice present everywhere in the country. Another friend who attended the event said that her desire as an anarchist is to make the identity of anarchist irrelevant – that we talk about anarchy now to name a thing that doesn't exist, but that in situations where those ideas take on a life of their own and far exceed our milieus, there's no purpose in clinging to that label. Throughout Syria, as the state retracted or was driven back, people autonomously organized themselves for defense, distribution and production of food, providing electricity and water, dealing with conflict, and creating ideas for how to live after the war, with the tendency being towards decentralization and autonomy. This in a state that was for over fifty years controlled by a dictatorship that prevented all forms of political association or speech. The absence of well-formed ideology makes these practices invisible to us.

As well, ideology can prevent us from seeing what is actually happening, as with the inconsistent positions of the PYD, SDF, and YPG around statehood and federalism and their break of solidarity with the Syrian revolution. This problem is far larger than Syria, with anarchists waiting for something explicitly anarchist to emerge before supporting it. I'm sure we can all think of other movements anarchists have hesitated or refused to engage in, in spite of their anarchic characteristics, because they didn't seem anarchist enough…

During his talk at the Burning Country event, Robin described the dense ideology people bring to the Syrian conflict as "a lack of desire to know or to challenge misconceptions. It's the belief that we already know, that there is no need to ask Syrians." He insisted that the real conflict in Syria is not imperialist/anti-imperialist, Sunni/Shia, or Arab/Kurd, but rather decentralization versus authoritarianism8. This struggle between centralized and popular control is playing out in every city and town in the country: in Rojava, in regime held areas, and in areas controlled by rebel militias.

He also made a distinction between culture and politics that parallels the disctinction between the people and statist formations: "When the grassroots do politics, it's culture", meaning a set of practices and ways of living that make centralized authority unnecessary. Revolutionary "politics" can thus be distinguished from revolutionary "culture". The central cultural practice of the Syrian revolution, he explained, is to question everything: the regime, the elite opposition in exile, the free army, islamist militias, the PYD, gender roles, tribal structures, democracy, everything. Unfortunately, this practice of critical questioning has not been taken up by anarchists and anti-authoritarians around the world when they set out to engage with the conflicts in Syria.

At the event, Leila and Robin echoed the argument made in Burning Country for critical solidarity, with Rojava and with all groups involved. They urged us to not confuse the actions of armed groups or political bodies with the struggles of grassroots revolutionaries, be they in Rojava, Damascus, Homs, or wherever. They said that a crucial role for international supporters right now is to participate in conversations across sectarian lines9, to resist the polarization playing out on the ground that is pushing Syria towards terrible solutions like partition. Robin said, "the solution to this is not more states, it's weaker states with more local autonomy". Critical solidarity is why Leila and Robin can strongly support democratic confederalism, offer solidarity to grassroots revolutionary in Rojava and throughout the Syrian territory, while still opposing the Azaz offensive by the SDF.