



Brace Belden before a battle in Syria in November. Courtesy of Brace Belden

## On the front lines of Syria with the young American radicals fighting ISIS

By Seth Harp

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On the morning of his first battle, Brace Belden was underdressed for the cold and shaky from a bout of traveler's diarrhea. His Kurdish militia unit was camped out on the front line with ISIS, 30 miles from Raqqa, in Syria. Fighters stood around campfires of gas-soaked trash, boiling water for tea, their only comfort besides tobacco. "I've never been so dirty in my life," Belden recalls. When the time came to roll out, he loaded a clip into his Kalashnikov and climbed into a makeshift battlewagon, a patchwork of tank and truck parts armored with scrap metal and poured concrete. Belden took a selfie inside its rusty cabin and posted it online with the

caption "Wow this freakin taxi stinks."

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The rest of the militia piled into an assortment of minivans, garbage trucks and bulldozers, and rode south into territory ISIS had held for more than three years. Belden was manning a swivel-mounted machine gun, the parched landscape barely visible through the rising dust, when he spotted a car packed with explosives revving across the desert toward the Kurdish column. Before he could shoot, an American fighter jet lacerated the sky and an explosion erupted where the car had been, shaking the earth for miles around.

It was November 6th, 2016. The Kurdish militia known as the YPG – a Kurmanji acronym for People's Protection Units – had commenced a major offensive to liberate the city that serves as the global headquarters for ISIS. The YPG was backed by U.S. air power and fighting alongside a coalition of Arab and Assyrian militias. Also within their ranks, though scantily reported, was a group of about 75 hardcore leftists, anarchists and communists from Europe and America, Belden among them, fighting to defend a socialist enclave roughly the size of Massachusetts.

Belden, who is 27, started tweeting photos of the front shortly after arriving in Syria in October. The first widely shared image showed him crouched in his YPG uniform, wearing thick Buddy Holly glasses, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, a stray puppy in one hand and a sniper rifle in the other. "To misquote Celine," the post read, "when you're in, you're in." He has since amassed 19,000 followers under the handle PissPigGranddad, puzzling the Internet with a combination of leftist invective and

scurrilous bro humor. Tweets like "Heading to the Quandil Mountains to lecture the PKK about entitlement reform" are followed by "The dude with the lamb bailed so now we're fucked for dinner."

Belden had no military experience before joining the YPG. He lived in San Francisco, where he arranged flowers for a living. Before that, he was a self-described *lumpenproletariat*, a lowlife punk and petty criminal with a heroin habit who started reading Marx and Lenin seriously in rehab. Once sober, he got involved in leftist causes, marching for tenants' rights, blocking evictions, protesting police brutality. As he prepared for the Middle East, his girlfriend thought he was going to do humanitarian work. She was "not stoked," Belden says, to learn that he planned to fight alongside the YPG.

The first phase of the Raqqa offensive was a mission to take Tal Saman, a satellite village of 10,000 people 17 miles north of Raqqa proper. "We pushed up to Tal Saman till we had it surrounded on a half circle," Belden says, "then we just bombarded the shit out of it." Refugees poured out of the village, seeking protection behind Kurdish lines. "Hundreds of civilians coming across for days in a row," Belden says. At night, his unit stayed in whatever building they'd just taken, camped out on rooftops in the excruciating cold. "The first week we were out it was awful," Belden says. The stepmother of a fellow volunteer from the U.S. had gotten Belden's number. She kept texting to make sure they were eating enough.

The march on Raqqa slowed to a halt after two weeks, as the YPG consolidated its hold over a string of liberated villages. The YPG controls a region of 4 million people in northern Syria known as Rojava. Its tens of thousands of motivated fighters have been battling ISIS for five years. American as well as French warplanes have been covering their maneuvers with airstrikes for the past two,

forcing ISIS off the roads and highways and open desert, and back into the urban strongholds of Mosul and Raqqa. Now, the Kurds are kicking the door down in both cities.

But the YPG is not your typical ethnic or sectarian faction. Its fighters are loyal to an imprisoned guerrilla leader who was once a communist but now espouses the same kind of secular, feminist, anarcho-libertarianism as Noam Chomsky or the activists of Occupy Wall Street. The Kurds are implementing these ideals in Rojava, and that has attracted a ragtag legion of leftist internationals, like Belden, who have come from nearly every continent to help the YPG beat ISIS and establish an anarchist collective amid the rubble of the war – a “stateless democracy” equally opposed to Islamic fundamentalism and capitalist modernity. They call it the Rojava Revolution, and they want you.

**Foreigners interested in joining the** YPG receive instructions by encrypted e-mail to fly to Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, a city controlled by a socialist opposition party sympathetic to the Rojava Revolution. Although volunteers are welcome, it’s not easy to reach the YPG. To the south is ISIS. To the west is the Free Syrian Army, a disorganized coalition of warlords and mercenaries dominated by Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front. To the north is Turkey, the archenemy of Kurdish independence, whose conservative, Islamist government is bombing the YPG. To the east is the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq – for years, its military force, the Peshmerga, permitted volunteers to cross into Syria. But last year, under pressure from Turkey, the KRG closed the only bridge over the Tigris, completing the total blockade on Rojava.



My assignment was to get inside Rojava and report on the Western leftists taking part in the fight. From Sulaymaniyah, I traveled to Kirkuk, Iraq, where I met with a Peshmerga general who ordered four of his men to smuggle me across the blockade disguised as a fellow fighter. We made it through a series of regional checkpoints and arrived at a hardscrabble guerrilla camp in the foothills of Mount Sinjar, a forbidden zone controlled by the Kurdistan Worker's Party, or PKK. I spent a cold night huddled in a grimy kitchen, befogged with eye-watering quantities of cigarette smoke, while young PKK militants lectured me on the crisis of late capitalism and the American media's sexual exploitation of women.

Of all the armed factions in the region, the PKK is the most crucial to understanding the Rojava Revolution. Beginning in 1978, the PKK waged a communist insurgency against the government of Turkey, and was designated a terrorist group by the U.S. in 1997. Two years later, Turkish security forces captured the party's founder, Abdullah Öcalan. Sentenced to life on an island prison, Öcalan underwent a political conversion. He gave up Marx and Lenin and started reading about anarchism, feminism and ecology, especially the works of Murray Bookchin, a libertarian socialist who used to rub shoulders with Bernie Sanders in Vermont.

In 2011, Öcalan wrote a pamphlet called "Democratic Confederatism," which outlines a sort of Athenian-style direct democracy based on voluntary participation in neighborhood councils, placing a special emphasis on the equality of women. The

47-page blueprint for a society without a formal government might never have mattered had the regime of Bashar al-Assad not pulled its forces from northern Syria in 2012, allowing local Kurdish militias – allied with the PKK and devoted to Öcalan – to take over. The Syrian Kurds, under the protection of the YPG, declared

Rojava's autonomy and adopted a constitution based on Öcalan's "Democratic Confederalism." For the first time since the Spanish Civil War, anarchists controlled a nation-size territory, and Rojava soon became a celebrated cause of the international left.

From Mount Sinjar, I rode toward the Raqqa front in a minivan full of fighters, including a pair of Yazidi girls, 16 and 18 years old, both in camouflage uniforms, one with an eye patch, the other cradling a sprained arm. In August 2014, ISIS massacred thousands of Yazidi Kurds in the Sinjar district of Iraq and dragged the women to the slave market at Raqqa. The survivors retreated to the top of Mount Sinjar, where they were held under siege until President Obama ordered the first American airstrikes against ISIS. That allowed the Yazidis to escape into Rojava. When I asked the pair in the van about their injuries, they looked at me like I was stupid. "Daesh," the older one said, using the Arabic acronym for ISIS.

We arrived at a YPG base on a hilltop just across the border in Syria. The militiamen were gathered around campfires, and it seemed no one was in command. True to its anarchist ideology, the YPG is loosely organized, without ranks; the universal gender-neutral honorific is *hevalê*, or friend. It elects its leaders directly, and even a general must wash his own clothes and take his turn cooking. It has an all-female fighting brigade, the Women's Protection Units, or YPJ, and command positions are jointly occupied by a man from the YPG and a woman from the YPJ. Its troops are lightly armed and go into battle without body armor or helmets or even boots, just sneakers and Kalashnikovs, wearing the black flowery headscarves

typical of Rojava, which the men took up wearing in solidarity with the women.

Despite its radical ideology and connection with the banned PKK, the YPG has forged an effective alliance with the U.S. military (though the Trump administration has signaled a willingness to dissolve it). As of now, there are more than 500 American commandos embedded with the YPG, advising the Kurds on tactics, calling in airstrikes and disarming explosives. On November 24th, the day I arrived in Syria, a Navy bomb-disposal technician was killed in a town called Ayn Issa, a place I knew by name. It was about 150 miles from Sinjar, nearly to Raqqa. I was headed there to meet up with Belden.

**All volunteers arriving in Rojava** attend a month-long training course at a place called the Academy, an oil facility with four concrete buildings, running water, intermittent electricity, a laundry line and a potato patch. I met a dozen recruits when I visited, mostly Germans and Italians, but also two Americans, an Englishman, a Finn, a Spanish Basque and a Tibetan citizen of Hong Kong. In the barracks, they slept five to a room on floor mats, their rucksacks and rifles stacked in the corners. At dawn they went for a run in uniform, carrying Kalashnikovs. The rest of the day, recruits attended classes in weapons training, anarcho-feminist ideology and rudimentary Kurmanji.

Those already trained, many of whom had already fought, sat around soaking up the few hours of winter sunshine, with little to do but smoke cigarettes and drink tea. One of these was Karim Franceschi, a bearded 27-year-old Italian who was among the first leftists in Rojava. In September 2014, ISIS controlled most of the border with Turkey. Only the city of Kobani held out, and ISIS sent its most hardened foreign fighters to take it. The YPG's heroic defense brought fame in the international press. In October 2014,



Franceschi and a cohort of Italian communists met with Kobani officials in exile with the idea of volunteering in some kind of medical capacity. "They were so desperate," Franceschi recalled. "They didn't give a shit about medicine. They wanted fighters. I couldn't say no."



Franceschi (third from left) has recruited a group of Western leftists to join the Rojava Revolution. Courtesy of Karim Franceschi

Franceschi was vague about his background, but wore a Mao pin, owned a fortune in Bitcoin and spoke seven languages, including Arabic and Kurmanji. With no military experience, he was sent to the front line, where Kurdish defenders were outnumbered perhaps five to one. "I felt scared as hell," he said. "I knew there were Chechen terrorists, crazy fighters from ISIS. At night, we heard them speaking on the radio, more in Russian than in Arabic." For the next three months, he never slept more than two hours at a stretch. "I was lucky," he said. "I survived long enough to learn how to fight." ISIS made the tactical error of pulverizing the city to ruins, which forced its fighters out of their stolen tanks to move on foot. "That's when the fight got real," Franceschi said.

More foreigners arrived, all leftists, and they formed a sniper unit



MORE FOREIGNERS ARRIVED, AN ITALIAN, AND THEY FORMED A SIMPLE UNIT.

"This was the first internationalist team," Franceschi said, showing me a photo of himself in Kobani alongside a Spanish anarchist, a British Kurd and Keith Broomfield, the first American known to have died in the ranks of the YPG. "A lot of comrades were martyred during that time," Franceschi said. "There was a lot of violence. But believe me, there was so much warmth. The conversation, the intimacy that you get knowing that you're fighting for something and that you're in the right. There were no ranks. You could go to your general, slap him behind his head and ask him for a cigarette. It was amazing. I had the time of my life, even though I lost my best friends there."

Franceschi was back in Syria for the Raqqa operation. It would be his third tour in as many years, but he was disappointed in the international turnout. During the Spanish Civil War, something like 60,000 foreigners fought for the anarchists and communists against the fascists. In the Syrian Civil War, Franceschi said, "the Western volunteers are basically a joke, while ISIS has tens of thousands from the Middle East, thousands from Europe. So what does that say about us?"

The sun was setting behind the pump jacks. We drifted over to the mess hall, a Spartan dining room hung with posters of foreign martyrs and portraits of Öcalan, who looks like a friendly version of Saddam Hussein. In one corner was a shelf of socialist literature. A trio of Italians were in the kitchen, shouting and brandishing knives over steaming pots and pans. The rest of the volunteers were seated at the table, tearing off pieces of flatbread to grab olives and slices of tomato from communal platters. The conversation was raucous, and a debate boiled over on the subject of toilet paper – specifically, the absence thereof in the Middle East, where pots of water are used instead.

"Some people here," Franceschi confided in a low tone, "still have

some people here, Francesco chimed in a low tone, still have this bourgeois thing for wet wipes."

"Bourgeois?" interjected a jocular Italian with a knife scar across one cheek. "Is bourgeois, clean your ass?" He raised a hand. "I don't want a revolution."

This was Dilsoz (a Kurdish war moniker; many leftists refused to give their real names because of laws against taking part in foreign conflicts). He was 29 years old. Occupation: thief. He grew up in a squat house outside Rome and, despite never finishing school and having limited English, could hold forth on Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony: "The dominant class transmit his beliefs, his values, to the proletarian class," he said, subtly swiping two cigarettes from my pack. "The poorest persons, now they argue like a capitalist, the same person that oppress him, that send his mother to the factory."



Zerdeşt, 20, hung out with elite liberals in Germany until he decided to "stop bullshitting." Seth Harp

With his scars and jailhouse tattoos, Dilsoz stood out among the other volunteers, most of whom were middle-class and educated, like Zerdeşt (also a war moniker), a blue-eyed boy of 20 whose father is a doctor in Bavaria. Back home, Zerdeşt hung out with a crowd of "bobos" – bourgeois bohemians, rich hipsters,

professional-class liberals – who talked up the Rojava Revolution but never did anything to support it. One day he told himself, "OK, now you have to stop bullshitting."

The platters of salty noodles and mysterious canned meat were

cleared, but no one was in a hurry to be excused. In the absence of beer or wine, the inevitable tea was served, the 10th of the day, and billows of tobacco smoke churned above the table.

I turned to a brainy-looking 31-year-old whose Kurdish alias was Agit. "Before coming here, I had a very good management job," he said with a German lisp. "I tried to have a normal life because my family and my girlfriend expected that for me, a capitalist life, but I hate that. Especially when I see that most of the people in the world are poor, and our wealth can only exist because they are poor."

Like Franceschi, he had come back to Rojava for the Raqqa operation. His first tour had coincided with an influx of a different class of volunteers: British and American veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, many of them evangelical Christians, who came to kill ISIS and were ignorant of the Kurds' revolutionary politics. They bickered among themselves and caused problems for the Kurds; a few of them did horrible things. Three separate times I was told of a British veteran known only as Tim, a crack shot, and by all accounts a cheerful guy, who enjoyed tasting the blood of the slain and was once seen gnawing on a severed foot.

"This whole thing is a magnet for idiots, psychopaths, sociopaths, plain assholes," Agit said. These days, things are more organized. There is a German operative at the safehouse in Sulaymaniyah who vets volunteers as they arrive, weeding out the lunatics and selecting for leftists, who tend to get along better and keep a lower profile.

The only U.S. military veteran at the Academy was a young Chicagoan with Ecuadorian roots who went by the alias Alan. He had served in the Marine Corps but was never deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, so when he got out of the service he made his way to Rojava. On one mission to liberate a village, he was shot in the arm and hand, he told me. The Kurds gave him an inappropriately low dose of ketamine and he lay on the battlefield conscious and

most of retaining and he lay on the battered conscious and tripping balls. "We respect a guy like Alan," Franceschi said.

As for the pacifist liberals back home in Europe and America, "They're not truly committed to anything," Franceschi said, pulling out his phone to read a Murray Bookchin quote. "'Today we are turning inward: We are looking for personal definition, personal improvement, personal achievement, personal enlightenment.' This is the left today in the world. Even those here, many anarchists, they come here and they want to be amazed and live the Kurdish ways. You're not here on a trip, man. It's not your personal voyage. There is a war. There is a revolution. And they need fighters."



Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters stand with their weapons in Tel Hamis in Hasaka countryside March 1st, 2015. Rodi Said/Reuters

**Hitching rides around Rojava**, I was appalled by the environmental degradation. The most educated people throw their garbage directly out the window, and flattened trash accumulates like leaf litter in the forest. They don't have a proper oil refinery, so caustic black exhaust wafts over the streets in visible strata. The only animals are dreadlocked bovinds grazing knee-deep in trash, wretched chickens molting in cages, and stray dogs, which I knew from many stories were not unaccustomed to the taste of human flesh. And yet, making your way through the foot traffic and hearing

ness. And yet, making your way through the foot traffic and beeping motorcycles of a bazaar, the sidewalks crowded with crates of fruits and vegetables, cellphone shops, money-changers and tractor mechanics, everything draped in a cat's cradle of electrical wires, there is a peculiar charm, an aura of intrigue that is heightened by the jangly Kurdish ballads on every radio.

On November 29th, I arrived in Ayn Issa, a crossroads town on the desert plain where the YPG coalition had its field headquarters for the Raqqa offensive. The people had all fled, and I found the unit I was looking for living in an abandoned house with a walled courtyard. Out stepped Belden, whose vaguely comical countenance I recognized from Twitter. He lit a cigarette and we sat in plastic chairs on the patio, where men and women from other units were constantly arriving to shake hands, kiss on both cheeks, hang out for a while, and leave.

Growing up in San Francisco, Belden never had money: "I was a troubled teen. I went to five different high schools. I always worked shitty jobs. I guess I should have gone to college – but a lot of good that did other guys." He protested the Iraq War at age 13 but later forgot about politics, and formed a band called Warkrime. "I was a punk for a long time, and that doesn't make you into the best dude," he said. Photos from this period show him hanging around grungy bars, smoking, drinking, mooning the camera, holding a gun to his head, sitting passed out on a couch. "Don't ever get addicted to drugs," he said. Eventually, he landed in jail. "I got picked up for possession," he explained, "and I had a previous warrant for assault after I got in this weird shoving match with a guy." He was released and later survived a heroin overdose but ended up with a \$2,000 bill for a five-minute ambulance ride, a debt he could never pay off on minimum wage. "I had to become a sober dude," he said, "a straight-edge."

Politically, though, rehab further radicalized him. "All I did was read

books on far-left theory," he said. "I started to understand intellectually what I already understood emotionally." In late 2012, he came across an article on the declaration of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, which led him to Öcalan's manifesto. Rojava has never been mainstream news, but over the past few years the fringes of the

Internet have produced a stream of glamorous war imagery: red stars on black flags, Molotov cocktails, Banksy-style murals on bullet-riddled walls, and sexy female fighters posing with Kalashnikovs atop piles of rubble. "Grab your laptop and come to Rojava now," said an early version of RojavaPlan.com, a recruiting website affiliated with the hacker collective Anonymous. "Burn down government institutions, form a commune and grow some potatoes between the rubble of the old world."

To Belden, it looked like a post-9/11 reprise of the Spanish Civil War. In place of the anarchists and communists of the Popular Front, you had the Syrian Kurds, with their nearly identical anti-capitalist ideology; and in place of Franco, the Catholic fascist dictator, you had ISIS, the ultimate religious conservatives. The motto of the Spanish Republic was *iNo Pasarán!* The motto of Rojava: *No State/No Caliphate*.

After four years of following from the sidelines, Belden started sending e-mails to the administrators of a blog called YPG International, asking how he could join. When they finally replied, "I kind of freaked out," he said. But once he arrived in Sulaymaniyah, everything was taken care of. "If you're a white twentysomething taking a cab from the airport by yourself," he said, "the cab drivers just know."

We got up to walk around the base, a cinderblock building with metal doors flung open to the elements, a dozen pairs of shoes on the threshold and an equal number of Kalashnikovs lying around.

The courtyard was a wreckage of trash and debris, including the



THE COURTYARD WAS A WITCERAGE OF TRASH AND RUBBIS, INCLUDING THE shell of a burned car. On the rooftop, three tattered YPG pennants fluttered in the wind. Raqqa lay 30 miles to the south. From time to time, dull concussions thudded on the horizon.

"Did you meet the little Jewish nerd?" asked Belden, who is Jewish himself; he used to have a Star of David tattooed on the knuckle of his middle finger, but had a spade tattooed over it before coming to the Middle East. He took me inside to a carpeted room with sleeping mats and pillows lining the walls and introduced me to Lucas Chapman, a skinny American in Coke-bottle glasses warming his hands on a stove heater.

Chapman claims to remember nothing that happened before his 16th birthday. He hated high school in Dahlonega, Georgia, a town of 6,000 people just south of the Chattahoochee National Forest. "I just wanted to get the hell out," he said. He attended American University in Washington, D.C., where he majored in Jewish history and immersed himself in socialist theory. "As long as I can remember, I've been interested in leftism," he said. He worked part-time for a startup called Postmates, an Uber-like company of underemployed couriers. "On one of my last deliveries I brought some rich prick two MacBook Pros," Chapman said. "He was barefoot in his underwear, and he literally wrote in zero dollars and zero cents for a tip. How does anyone do that?"

After days like that, Chapman would go home, fire up a bowl and spend the evening studying Kurmanji and scrolling through RojavaPlan.com. He left for Sulaymaniyah in September 2016 and spent a sleepless first night at a designated hotel, sweat seeping from every pore, his mind racing. "What the hell am I doing here?" he thought. Noon the next day he was taken to a different room, where at least there was another American: Belden. That afternoon

they were driven to a camp in the Zagros Mountains, and that same night they hiked across the border, a six-hour march without water, suffering under heavy packs, tripping over rocks and brambles. The sun had not yet risen when Chapman first set foot in Syria. It was the morning of his 21st birthday.

A tall, scruffy Danish guy set down his Kalashnikov and joined us, introducing himself as Tommy Mørck. He was in his thirties and had *WHY?* tattooed across the four knuckles of one hand. He grew up in an unstable home and spent his twenties on the move, living in different countries, attending various universities, working unrelated jobs. "I never could find anything that could stick," he said. "Not people, not occupations, not places." He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and suffered from heavy depression until the day he realized that there was nothing wrong with his mind; it was the modern world that was sick. He gave up on the system, went on unemployment benefits and started working 50 hours a week for a Danish green party. Around that time, Syria came to Denmark in the form of thousands of refugees. "They were treated like animals," Mørck said. Within a year of discovering RojavaPlan.com, he was aboard a flight to Sulaymaniyah.



Members of Kurdish People Defence Units (YPG) flash victory sign after coming from Syrian town of

al-Raqqa, in Tel Abyad, Syria, June 23rd, 2015. Sedat Suna/Redux

**At the Academy, Mørck met** Belden and Chapman, and after training, all three of them were assigned to a heavy-weapons unit at Ayn Issa. Just two days later, the YPG coalition announced the start of the Raqqa offensive. "We were surprised," Mørck said. They had expected to spend months doing guard duty, sheltered from real danger. Instead, Mørck said, "we fired the first shots of the Raqqa operation." The three of them were put to manning machine guns, Belden riding inside the makeshift tank, Chapman and Mørck straddling the beds of Hilux gun trucks. ISIS didn't put up much of a fight. "Once they saw we were coming, they just ran," Mørck said. They could only see the enemy – "dudes walking around with huge beards," Chapman said – through binoculars. American commandos, snake-eating JSOC types without insignia, were milling around with the Kurds, and Mørck said he talked to uniformed American marines engaged in actual combat, lobbing mortars at ISIS. "But only until 6 o'clock," Mørck said, "because then the Kurds want to sleep, and mortars are really loud."

As the YPG forces entered Tal Saman, they found a warehouse with a car-bomb assembly line and a blood-stained man cage. They picked through rubble mixed with skulls and spines, and stripped expensive gear off ISIS carcasses. "Technically, I did a war crime, because I peed on a dead person," Belden said. "I didn't mean to." There were booby traps everywhere. Chapman was standing outside a house when the windows exploded with dirt and smoke. A Kurd stumbled out coughing, coated in dust, and immediately lit up a cigarette. Two more emerged carrying a fourth, whose foot had been blown off by a land mine hidden in an upstairs bedroom. By November 20th, Tal Saman was completely secured.

I visited Tal Saman 10 days after that, a drizzly morning in the little village of collapsed one-story houses and wrecked buildings

bristling with twisted rebar. Even the trees were shot up, shorn of upper branches, bark shredded. The actual front was a small metal bridge over an irrigation canal, south of town. A dirt road vanished into the fog on the other side, where the spurious caliphate lay. A throng of refugees was gathered at the foot of the bridge, Arab

families with truckloads of household goods, flocks of sodden sheep and goats, cattle and camels, motorcycles and tractors and cars. The people were wrapped in blankets and cloaks, wreathed in the steam and smoke of campfires. There were no fortifications, only a rangy squad of fierce-looking Kurds standing guard. Women in black burqas were beseeching them to let their families across.

A convoy of Land Cruisers and gun trucks pulled up, and a group of bearded British commandos got out and shook hands with the Kurds. One of them took out his phone and captured a photo of the refugees, provoking one of the women in black to throw up her hands and wail in misery.

"What's she saying?" the British commando asked his translator.

"She says, 'You take our picture, but you don't let us cross.'"

Garbled excitement came over the YPG radios. A Kurd with long hair hoisted a belt-fed machine gun and fired on the ISIS side of the road. Orange tracers floated forward into the mist, but I couldn't see what he was shooting at. The refugees barely reacted. ISIS had retreated but continued to dispatch car bombs, and lone infiltrators could penetrate far behind Kurdish lines. My local colleague said the commander wanted us to leave and ushered me into his Daewoo. We drove 15 miles over cratered roads back to Ayn Issa, where the bulk of the YPG force, including Belden and Chapman and Mørck, had pulled back to await the next phase of the offensive.

While fighting ISIS along a 300-mile front, the YPG is also battling

the Turkish Army on its western flank, especially around Manbij, the third-largest city in Rojava. The day I met up with Belden, a Turkish airstrike west of Manbij killed a 27-year-old American named Michael Israel, an anarchist from Lodi, California, who had recently posted a photo of himself on Facebook wearing a YPG uniform and stomping on a Confederate flag. At the time, he was the 20th foreign volunteer to die and the fifth American, but the first to be killed by Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States.

In the past, Turkish officials have vowed not to distinguish between foreigners and Kurds, whom they consider terrorists. I asked the Department of State if it had anything to say about Turkey killing an American citizen serving in an American-backed militia alongside American military personnel. A spokeswoman would not go on record other than to point to the Department of State's March 2016 travel warning, which said that private citizens who fight in Syria could face criminal charges. I asked the Department of Justice if it would prosecute American YPG volunteers. A spokesman said it would not comment on hypothetical cases. But "regardless of its legality," he added, joining the YPG "is a bad idea and we strongly discourage it."

Belden, Chapman and Mørck were more worried about surviving Raqqa than any potential criminal liability. Raqqa is 20 times larger than Tal Saman, with a population in the hundreds of thousands. ISIS has had four years to build and dig, and the ground is likely riddled with tunnels, the buildings booby-trapped to the last. "Mines," Belden said. "Mines everywhere."

There is also a question of manpower: The YPG claims 50,000 fighters, but armed forces are prone to inflate their numbers, and the front line seemed oddly depopulated, even at Ayn Issa. "There's, like, 40 of us," Belden joked. Was it possible the Kurds were still as desperate for able bodies as they'd been when Franceschi arrived in

desperate for aid, bodies as they a been which franceschi arrived in Kobani? I pushed Belden for a serious number. "A thousand people on this front is a generous estimate," Belden said. The others nodded. No one knows how many ISIS has; many have died in airstrikes but thousands remain, possibly tens of thousands, concentrated in Raqqa.

"We're going to die there," Chapman said, cracking open a sunflower seed. It was late at night by this time. The tea had gone cold. The Kurds had rolled up in blankets against the wall, though the television in the corner was still flickering. I looked at Belden, who laughed and said, "We're definitely going to die."



Chapman, an American, arrived in Syria on his 21st birthday. Seth Harp

### **It's impossible to say**

**whether** the Rojava Revolution has succeeded as a model of civil society because the country is so thoroughly mobilized for war. There are soldiers and police everywhere, fires burning in the streets. The bullet-riddled buildings are drafty and cold, with only sporadic electricity. The Kurds' chief pleasure, though, aside from tea and tobacco, seems to be one another's company. Their food is monotonous – bread, tomatoes, beans, sometimes mutton – but every meal is eaten communally, with second portions, and the place of honor, forced on any guest present. I was there two weeks and barely spent any money. I shared in whatever people were eating and slept wherever they slept. They are desperate for imports, yet if I ever so much as took a dollar bill from my wallet the Kurds would ward it off like a talisman of evil. I saw no rich people, no corporations, no banks, no big houses, no fancy cars, no one



homeless or begging or starving. The people were of one class and improbably cheerful. They were united in support of the YPG and seemed to worship Öcalan, whose portrait hung in every building.

Not long after leaving Syria, I got a message from Mørck. Belden and Chapman had been transferred to another unit a little down the line. On December 13th, around two in the morning, Mørck awoke to the sound of shooting. He knew the sentries enjoyed popping off rounds as a practical joke, but this sounded like it was just outside. He grabbed his rifle and pushed open the door to the foyer, which reeked of gunsmoke. When he peered into the courtyard, a Kurd standing in the adjacent doorway hissed at him, waving him back: ISIS was inside the compound.

There was another spate of gunfire and Mørck backed away from the doors with his rifle raised. He was crouched against the wall with a broken window at his back. Should he cover the window or the doors? Either way, he would be exposed. His dilemma was solved by an explosion, an all-engulfing concussion that shook the concrete wall like a car crashing into it. Sediment rained down and a high-pitched tone pierced the billows of dirty smoke.

It was a suicide bomber. Body parts were flung over a 50-yard radius, scraps of gore spattered all over the courtyard. On the exterior wall, exactly opposite where Mørck had been crouching, a violent starburst of blood and carbon was painted. The ceramic tiles on the patio were shattered, as if a cannonball had fallen there. But the wall had held, thwarting the bomber and saving Mørck's life.



The scene of a suicide bomb at the house where Belden, Chapman and Mørck stayed. Courtesy of MØRCK

Throughout the winter, foreign volunteers have been dying at an alarming rate: an Englishman and a Canadian in December; and in January, at least two Americans, including Paolo Todd, a 33-year-old from Los Angeles I'd met at the Academy. When I last spoke to Belden and Chapman, they complained of boredom, but Mørck was still in the thick of it; he sent an e-mail describing a firefight with ISIS in which half the men of his unit were wounded, two of them mortally. "I was surprised by my reaction," he wrote, "watching a person I knew die and shooting at another human being, with the intent to kill, not out of anger or desperation, but out of necessity. I've been wondering whether or not I really had it in me. Now I know for certain that I do."

I also got an e-mail from Franceschi, who had formed a stand-alone unit of foreign leftists modeled on the International Brigades of the

Spanish Civil War. It's called the Antifascist International Militia and I

Spanish Civil War. It's called the Antifascist International Labor, and its central mission is to fight in Raqqa, a battle that he says will last through 2017 and be "a hundred times worse than Kobani and Manbij put together." More volunteers are needed, Franceschi says, and all of them will be trained by YPG. Recruits must meet only one

prerequisite: "If they want to join us, they must have an ideal that is not just killing or destroying. They can be anarchists, socialists, leftists, whatever. But they must feel like this revolution is their revolution. Because these are ideals that people are dying for."

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