

LONG SHOT: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE KURDISH SNIPERS WHO BROKE ISIS

(AZAD CUDI)

October 12, 2020

This book appears, to the casual reader, to be propaganda designed to persuade a Great Power, the United States, to aid the Kurdish fight for independence. Like all good wartime propaganda, it grabs the reader's attention and tugs at his heartstrings. But it's double propaganda, cleverly done, because beneath the top layer of propaganda is another, artfully concealed. The goal of that second layer is to sell to Americans the Kurdish People's Party (PKK), a crypto-Maoist combination of political party and war machine. And it's the PKK, and more broadly the politics surrounding so-called Kurdistan, that I want to explore today.

I have no dog in this fight. I have no relatives or friends from anywhere close to the traditional lands of the Kurds; nor do I have any love for any of the traditional enemies of the Kurds, especially the Turks. It'd be just fine by me if Vladimir Putin defeated the Turks, reconquered Constantinople and crowned himself Emperor of Rome. Let's not forget that the Russians nearly conquered Constantinople in World War I; more's the pity they didn't. Without any axe to grind, I'm a pretty objective observer of the Kurds—although, it's important to note, like all Middle Eastern matters, the politics of the area are hugely complicated, and no doubt I have missed some subtleties. But I'm pretty sure I got the basics right.

What the Kurds call Kurdistan, though such a country has never existed, is a largely mountainous land comprising parts of northern Syria, southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, and northern Iraq. The Anglosphere has long admired the Kurds. Saladin was a Kurd, and back in the days of Sir Walter Scott, when he wrote *The Talisman*, the English were only too happy to believe in the nobility of the Muslim warriors who fought the papist Crusaders. More recently, the English encouraged the Kurds to rebel against their Turkish overlords during World War I, fomenting chaos to benefit the British Empire. And America has repeatedly encouraged the Kurds to the same end. That said, the Kurds are not our friends. Among other things, in modern times they eagerly cooperated with the Turks in the Armenian Genocide, and just because

the various tinpot dictators around them sometimes treat them badly doesn't mean we have anything in common with them. No doubt the desire to change this common-sense conclusion is what drove the publication of this book.

The Kurds today very often get positive press in English-speaking media. Of course, that suggests an ability to manipulate Western public opinion, which should perhaps have been a warning that all is not as it seems. After reading this book, I'm pretty sure that most of the exciting war stories in this book are primarily fiction, or exaggerations, in service of one overriding goal: to convince liberal Western readers that the cult-of-personality Communist ideology behind the PKK, created by one Abdullah Öcalan, whom his followers call Apo, is just like Western liberal democracy. To this end we are sold a story whose core premise is that PKK militias were the only important fighting force in the defeat of ISIS, which they did in order to become more like America, or more accurately, more like progressive America, say San Francisco. Needless to say, Donald Trump gets no credit for defeating ISIS, nor do the Russians, or anyone else, get credit for helping. The message of the supposed author of *Long Shot*, the pseudonymous Azad Cudi, is simple: given that the PKK's fighters laid down their lives for us; the least we can do is give them Kurdistan, along with sole control over it. They'll take good care of it. Promise.

So what is the PKK? If you listen to Cudi, it's more or less like the left-wing of the Democratic Party. In reality, the PKK was organized in 1978, as a stock Maoist party dedicated to violent revolution. (Öcalan was a big fan of Stalin, as well—why limit yourself to admiring just one genocidal dictator?) The PKK is the political end; it is backed by two separate militias, one for men and one for women (of which more later), the YPG and the YPJ. The PKK was born in violence, primarily directed at Turkey, so it is no surprise that both the European Union and the United States have listed the PKK as a terrorist organization for decades. For many years it has engaged in low-level shootings and bombings in and around Kurdistan, using, among other means, suicide bombers. It has also killed many other Kurds who refused to bow to the PKK, including women and children; as with all Communist groups, a prime elimination target of the PKK is competitors, other Kurds whom they see as threats to their seizing total power. (The classic historical example of this is

the Communist focus on eliminating left-wing competition during the Spanish Civil War, the focus of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*.)

Not happy with this, treason from their point of view, the Turks seized Öcalan in Nairobi in 1999, with the help of the CIA, and have imprisoned him ever since, although they don't seem to forbid him issuing an endless stream of writings and *diktats* to his followers. This curbed the PKK's killing spree, and during the past twenty years, Öcalan has changed his tune somewhat. He now pushes a modified, somewhat eccentric, political program, mostly hardcore leftwing with an admixture of libertarianism, and claims he has renounced violence and Communist revolution. Now, the PKK's propagandists uniformly push the party line—all they want is the creation of a "peaceful, egalitarian society," to be formed in "democratic Kurdistan." Maybe it's even true that's what they want, though I suspect their definition of such a democracy in practice is the same as all Communists—one man, one vote, once, under the guns of the PKK.

From what I can tell, there are many Kurdish political parties, which are organized not as parties of Kurdistan, which after all does not exist, but as parties in the countries that actually rule in that area. Thus, there is the Democratic Union Party (Syria); the Kurdish National Council (Syria); the People's Democratic Party (Turkey); the Kurdish Free Life Party (Iran); and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq, whose armed wing is the *Peshmerga* who received significant Western press coverage during the Iraq War). When Cudi, uses the term "Kurdish resistance movement," though, he means the PKK. He never once acknowledges that any other entity could represent the Kurdish people, and you won't learn that any Kurdish party but the PKK exists from reading this book.

However, what seems to bind almost all Kurdish political groups together, other than Kurdish affinity, is an extreme left-wing bent. The PKK is just the most extreme, or perhaps the most successful. Why this should be mystifies me. Most Kurds are Muslim, but religion seems to be of little importance to them, and many of the parties, or at least the leaders within them, not least Apo himself, are avowed atheists (as is Cudi). As to the PKK's ideology, Cudi only gives vague descriptions of it, although interestingly, aspects of the "education" process in militia camps, as he describes it, bear an odd resemblance to the hierarchical gnosticism of Scientology. The result of this education is the ideological

sloganeering of the most risible sort that is sprinkled throughout this book. “The reason the Middle East was beset by continual war and crisis, we argued, was because it lacked an example of a peaceful, stable, free and fair society.” “At the core of our philosophy was the conviction that all tribalism, injustice and inequality stemmed from an original act of oppression when man, the hunter-gatherer, abused his brute strength to violently subjugate his equal partner, woman.” “Completing [Öcalan’s] journey required private profit to be replaced with social profit. In practice, that meant embracing almost all forms of progressiveness, from organic agriculture to feminism to municipal decentralisation.” You can just picture this guy sitting in a Brooklyn Starbucks, trying to pick up women with his slick lines.

Cudi (assuming such a person really exists) is an Iranian Kurd, who fled Iran, deserting the army, in 2004. He snuck illegally into England, which instead of expelling him, welcomed him with open arms, and gave him “asylum” (from what is unclear), money and a job (after he first took an illegal job, in his first act of gratitude toward England). He lived in Leeds, in Yorkshire, where many Middle Eastern invaders live, and took the name “Darren,” while marveling at the cleanliness and organization of England compared to his homeland, which perhaps should give him a clue as to their relative merits. But he, in the manner of many such aliens, was dissatisfied and at loose ends—until another convert introduced him to the ideology of the PKK, which he adopted as his religion. Within a few years, he made his way to Turkey, eager to join the fight for PKK power, arriving in 2013. (All the borders in this area seem to be very porous, since Cudi and many others go back and forth over them.)

He fought in “Rojava,” a region in northern Syria carved out by various allied groups, including the Kurds, early in the current Syrian civil war. Rojava is the name the Kurds give it, wishfully claiming it is “autonomous and democratic,” although I’m pretty sure there haven’t been any elections, and each group in the area is only as autonomous as the range of its rifles. Bashar al-Assad doesn’t use the name, I’m certain, unless he spits while he does it, and no country recognizes such an entity, even if Cudi again doesn’t bother to mention that, or the many non-Kurds who live there. The wars in northern Syria, from my limited understanding of them, are primarily among groups seeking

to detach the area from Syria. The Kurds are only one of those; their major opposition, other than the Syrian government, is Sunni groups such as ISIS. Behind and around this are other contests such as the Turks desiring to harm the Syrians, but not benefit the Kurds, and the Russians wanting to support the Syrians. A kaleidoscopic array of militias with shifting loyalties and alliances has arisen as a result of the Syrian war, and there are other occasional players, such as the Israelis, along with the United States supporting various groups at various times. The battles in northern Syria are all attempts at control with the assumption the Syrians will not simply take back the land themselves. It's a gruesome mess, though as far as the Syrian war goes, my impression is that the least bad of the lot is Assad, but he has the worst propaganda operation.

The book centers around the Battle of Kobani, a real battle, lasting four months from late 2014 to early 2015, in which Cudi says he took part. (Cudi notes that Kobani is fairly close to Haran, the home of Abraham, to hook the American reader into recognition.) But passages that result in reader skepticism show up in the very first chapter, which describes Cudi's last battle, before he was taken out of the line. Cudi was assigned to lead a small team to take an enemy-occupied hill, and gives a first-person, blow-by-blow account. In the second sentence of the book, we are told that a Kurdish saying is "the tree of freedom is watered with blood." Maybe, but much more likely a ghostwriter stole that from Thomas Jefferson, knowing that an American audience would lap up this apparent resonance with American history. Then we are told that the Kurds have inhabited this land for fifteen thousand years, which is a gross exaggeration, though to be sure they have been there a long time—or at least some people with some common ancestry have been there, and really, if the PKK is as egalitarian as they claim, why the emphasis on Kurdish nationalism?

But those are minor hiccups. It is the military inaccuracy that is truly jarring, throughout the book. Cudi was the sniper in this engagement. He says he used an M16. This is unlikely; the M16 is not accurate enough or long-distance enough to be a true sniper rifle, although in competent hands it can be quite accurate. The same platform (Eugene Stoner's AR platform) is sometimes used by designated marksman (technically not a "sniper," but no matter), but only in customized, accurized versions. Cudi says he used a "night scope"—and then alternates between calling it

that, and a “thermal,” which are very different things, and moreover, the vast majority of long-range military night scopes (and thermals) today are mounted separately from a day-vision scope, not combined units. Then he tells the reader that 550 meters “is close range for a sniper.” Not with the 5.56 cartridge he was using; at that distance, the bullet would have dropped five feet, and its kinetic energy would be quite low. Again, not technically impossible, but not typical, especially at night, and not desirable. Then he says “The stock punched my shoulder” when he shot. This cartridge and platform has essentially no felt recoil. After that he had a “jam,” whereupon he took out a cleaning rod and “pushed the bullet out.” Although there are malfunctions that involve bullets stuck in the barrel, they are extremely rare in factory-loaded ammunition. The usual jam involves removing a stuck or improperly-positioned cartridge from the chamber—but that does not require the cleaning rod, since the cartridge can easily be reached directly by reaching into the chamber, or extracted by simply yanking the charging handle. This apparently not having fixed the problem, Cudi says he took the gun apart during the middle of a battle. There are much better ways to address basic jams, and moreover, he incorrectly describes the assembly-reassembly procedure, suggesting he’s never really done it. Then, somehow, he realizes the magazine spring is defective, and “wasn’t pushing cartridges into the breech.” If that’s true, why did he push a bullet out of the barrel? None of this makes any sense—but it seems exciting to an American liberal who’s played *Call of Duty* and is eager to believe that the Kurds are helping establish a new government that Hillary Clinton would love, which is the story Cudi, or rather the PKK, is peddling here.

The rest of the book alternates Cudi’s claimed life story with sniper episodes from the Battle of Kobani. (We never get any picture or any detailed information about Cudi. He appears to have a real Facebook account, though.) Interspersed is bad history. When leaving Iran in 2004, having paid people-smugglers to get him to Europe, any place in Europe, his group was stopped near the Turkish border—by the PKK, who were collecting “donations” at gunpoint. This gangster behavior as his first contact with the PKK doesn’t seem to have concerned him. Cudi claims that ISIS was formed as a response to American prisoner-of-war camps in Iraq, “crucibles of torture and humiliation.” That’s a lie. ISIS was an offshoot formed from an earlier group, and its main driving

force was the invasion of Iraq, not minor mistreatment of prisoners. But it sounds good to liberal Americans. (I am quite certain that if they had to pick, anybody would pick being a prisoner of the Americans rather than, say, the Iranians or the Iraqis.) ISIS got its strength from success in that insurgency and by peddling a strict, but mainstream, if minority, version of Islam—the best discussion of this is Graeme Wood’s semi-famous 2015 article in the *Atlantic*. We, however, are given a mere caricature of ISIS, and Cudi seems completely unaware that his ideology is responsible for vastly more deaths than ISIS ever was.

Aside from innumerable sections that are either wrong or are dubiously true, Cudi also regularly lies by omission. Usually this is in service of the fantasy that the PKK defeated ISIS singlehandedly. Thus, a few times he mentions that American warplanes struck targets in Kobani, allegedly as directed by the YPG and to support their operations. But he never admits that without massive American air power and weapons (from what I can tell, nearly all light arms and ammunition supplied to the YPG in the Battle of Kobani were air-dropped to them by the United States) the YPG could never have accomplished anything at all, and would have been quickly wiped out. (It also appears that wounded fighters were evacuated to Turkey for care, which is pretty nice of the Turks.) In Cudi’s telling, once the Battle of Kobani was over, ISIS was essentially finished, and he and his comrades did it all, with their “old guns and a few hundred men and women,” though in another place he admits that other countries supported “their fight.” He unironically concludes “No wonder the whole world appreciated what we had done. They owed us.” And, bizarrely, he then turns around and blames America and Europe for sending *jihadis* to join ISIS. He doesn’t seem to realize that the best way of preventing that would be to deport migrants like Cudi as soon as they darkened Europe’s door.

Military howlers go on and on; I never served in the military, but even I can pick them out. Cudi claims he and four other PKK snipers collectively killed nearly 2,000 ISIS members in and around Kobani, which is extremely unlikely, since they would be the top snipers of all time, each killing in a few months far more enemies than, say, Chris Kyle did over several years. (It also would suggest ISIS fighters are irredeemably stupid, just hanging around to be shot down in a deadly game of Whack-A-Mole.) A 5.56 round is not “the deadliest of all since a tight,

narrow hole is hardest to clean.” The bullet often tumbles, and in any case, cleaning the hole is usually the least of your problems if you’re hit by a rifle bullet, since the damage in most cases isn’t just a nice little hole. I doubt very much one can assemble a Barrett .50-caliber rifle “from spare parts”; much less make “its scope ourselves from parts.” Although it’s pretty clear he couldn’t have had a thermal scope, elements of thermal usage, probably cribbed from YouTube, appear randomly. And so forth. Someone with military experience would doubtless note many more errors.

More broadly, it’s not clear to me how effective the YPG and the YPJ, the PKK’s militias, could be as a fighting force. “Inside our military wings, there were no ranks, only operational leaders, and no orders, only suggestions.” True, militias bound by ideology can be fairly effective at guerilla action, but really? Most of all, though, I was curious about the women fighting in the YPJ. One reason I read this book is that it is well known, because intensively publicized in the West, that some Kurdish groups treat, or claim to treat, women as equal to men in soldiering. Since I think, and have shown, that choosing to have women in combat is the supreme triumph of ideology over common sense, this seemed like a counter-example to my claims, one that I should examine to see if I was wrong.

I wasn’t. What I discovered, reading between the lines in this book and learning about Öcalan’s central concept of “Jineology,” is that the PKK has women fight because they are ideologically committed to the fiction that women can do anything as well or better than men. This includes fighting, so they must fight in order to show this. Any other conclusion, or to admit that having women fight is in any way a bad idea, would knock out a central pillar of Öcalan’s entire ideology. Jineology apparently starts from the laughable premise that peaceful, wonderful matriarchal societies from Neolithic times were ruined by mansplaining. “What Apo called ‘housewifisation’ was, he said, the oldest form of slavery and ‘the vilest counter-revolution ever carried out.’” Ha ha. Anyway, YPJ women fight because they must, if they are to show that they believe Apo’s ideology, which is not a smorgasbord, but one giant uncoated pill you must swallow to prove your belief. Yes, despite the huge drawbacks and problems resulting, occasionally women do have to fight in guerilla wars, or in defense of home and hearth. But, proving

my point, other Kurdish fighting groups, such as the *Peshmerga*, don't allow women in combat (with occasional rare exceptions, again for ideological and propaganda purposes). Nonetheless, Western media love this bogus story, just like they love to talk about Western women supposedly in combat, so the PKK skillfully pushes stories about YPJ fighters, knowing the stories will never be questioned and the PKK will be praised as a result.

Now Cudi is apparently back in England. Although he admits fighting for a terrorist group, his progressive bona fides will protect him from persecution. Only those who fight for right-wing causes are persecuted—the British don't even go after their citizens who fought for ISIS and now want to come “home,” but make sure you are unfailingly respectful towards Muhammad on social media, native Briton, or the Yorkshire police will be at your door quick-smart! And despite the defeat by Trump of ISIS as a whole, the Sunnis who fought for ISIS are still around; they've just migrated to other Sunni fighting groups, and are keeping up the low-level Syrian war, which fortunately Assad seems to be winning.

I have no doubt the fighters of the PKK are, very often, very brave. Men in the grip of an ideology often are. That does not mean we should support their goals, except in those instances where they align with us. There is no chance at all that Kurdistan would be a good idea. Maybe we should just let the Russians rule the area, overrunning it after they reconquer Constantinople. No doubt I'll get comments from Apo fan-boys claiming that I misunderstood this or that about this tangled set of little wars. Maybe I did. But I'm completely sure that you shouldn't be hoodwinked by the propaganda in this book. A PKK-run Kurdistan would just be another left-wing totalitarian bloodbath, like so many before. We can do without that.