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Robert Evans
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NARRATOR: Anarchy gets a bad rap, mainly because the word sounds cool and gets used as a synonym for chaos, disorder and violence. A lot of people will laugh when you bring up the idea of anarchist leadership, or anarchist organizations. When you introduce yourself as an anarchist you often wind up needing to cover a fair amount of rhetorical ground just to convince people you're not a violent maniac or an adult with the brain of a teenage skateboard punk from a Disney Channel Original movie.

There are a lot of different ways to 'do' anarchy, but the general goal is always the same: the dismantling of unjust hierarchies. Murray Bookchin was an American. The ideas that wound up shaping the system in Rojava were originally conceived because they were the system he thought could best take hold in the United States. Bookchin saw massive, dense urban areas making laws for rural mountain-dwellers hundreds of miles away. He saw small-town voters forcing their beliefs on cosmopolitan city-dwellers via legislation. The goal of Libertarian Municipalism was to break down these unfair hierarchies.

Almost anywhere you live, if your goal is dismantling unfair hierarchies you'll eventually find yourself looking at the justice system. And prior to the revolution, North-East Syria had a famously bad one.

Every town was riddled with massive complexes for the mukhabarat, or secret police. The Assad regime maintained compliance through an infamous system of torture devised by a former SS officer. It was a pretty easy system to justify tearing down.

It's not always enough to just remove an injustice. No nation *needs* mukhabarat, but you do need people to investigate and adjudicate murders, domestic violence and other sorts of crimes we can *all* agree are crimes. How does a society based in Murray Bookchin's quasi-anarchist principles handle this? On Sunday, July 21st, Jake Hanrahan and I set out to learn.

We were both still a bit hung-over from the night before when Alaan, our driver, picked us up from the hotel. He lived nearby and was going to drive us into Qamishlo to pick up Khabat.

Alaan is a thin, wiry man, in his early forties. He has an impassive, semi-permanent poker face and he expresses the vast majority of his emotions through cigarettes. As a rule, only the very worst cigarettes on earth wind up in Syria. If it can't pass inspection in the E.U., it winds up in Alaan's pocket. His very favorite brand are Gauloises. He offers Jake and I each one, and we enjoy a cigarette breakfast as Alaan gets onto the highway.

Jake and Alaan take turns plugging in their phones and playing different Kurdish militant anthems, including the song of the YDGH- the Kurdish youth movement Jake was arrested for reporting on. For the anthem of a children's militia, it's extremely upbeat.

NARRATOR: You can tell a lot about this place by looking out the window on a morning drive. We are passed by an ambulance, lights flashing. We see construction teams working on the roads, which are-very notably- in better shape than the roads in Iraqi Kurdistan. We see oilfields in operation. Men and women with AK-

47s manning checkpoints and waiting for the bus alongside one another. And to my right, as we roll north to Qamishlo, we see mighty trenches being dug to build more and more tunnels.

Archways and billboards, covered with the faces and names of shehids, martyrs in the war against ISIS, line the entrance to every town we enter. They are always brightly colored, set on a background of bright green and revolutionary red.

Many women on the street wear headscarfs, and some wear the full niqab, which covers them from head to feet. But I also see many women with their heads uncovered. Girls walking to school with backs straight, and stacks of books held in the crook of their arms. Freedom of religion, and freedom from it, are both visible here.

Food is in clear ample supply. The markets we pass are bustling, at least as much as those we see in the KRG. There are numerous military checkpoints, which slow the speed of travel but are necessary to protect people from the ongoing threat of ISIS sleeper cells. These checkpoints are all manned by women and men of the Asayish; the military police. Several of the Asayish we pass have patches on their shoulders that say 'Saloc Jin Mabe', which means 'no life without our leader'. The patches feature a silhouetted portrait Abdullah Ocalan, Apo, the ideological founder of Rojava.

I find this somewhat unsettling, as the veneration of strong singular leaders is always- at best- a risky proposition. But I also can't help but notice that the Syrian regime and ISIS flags that had once been painted over the walls and shutters of buildings in the towns we pass through haven't simply been replaced by YPG flags. Instead, they've been covered up by art, paintings of flowers and clovers. The only 'political' symbols that are on display everywhere are pictures of the men and women who died to build this place.

NARRATOR: We pick up Khabat outside her home, and she takes us to a nearby food stand for breakfast.

We eat something that looks very much like a burrito, but with garlic sauce and falafel inside. It's delicious. While we eat, we

go over our schedule for the day. Before heading over here Jake had sent me an NPR article about a Judge, named Amina, who was working to build the legal code of this new autonomous region.

The article was titled; 'Revenge Is For The Weak': Kurdish Courts In Northeastern Syria Take On ISIS

Cases'. The first part of that title is a quote from a Kurdish lawyer, explaining why their system explicitly bans things like torture, the death penalty and even life imprisonment. Amina is cited in it, claiming that even Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, if tried and convicted, would've only been eligible for a 20-year sentence.

Her hope is that he could be rehabilitated. This seems kind of insane to me, and to Jake. We told Khabat we were interested in talking to Judge Amina, and she did the rest.

We arrive at the courthouse around mid-day. It's actually more of a court-house / jail, although it looks-from the outside- more like a home with a large garden than any jail I've seen. When we enter the court, the first thing I see inside is a young man, sitting in a chair, his eyes covered by a black blindfold and his hands bound in front of him. He sits facing the wall.

It's later explained to me that the blindfolds are so that any released prisoners will not be able to tell where they've been. Judge Amina and her colleagues are at constant risk of being murdered just for doing their jobs. Not only are they targets for ISIS sleeper cells, but as the architect of Rojava's new justice system Judge Amina is a wanted criminal in regime-controlled Syria. Bashar al-Assad doesn't look kindly on revolutionaries building their own law codes in 'his' country.

NARRATOR: Khabat interpreted for all of our interviews. We've brought in voice actors to represent some of our sources but, for now, I'll let Khabat summarize Amina's answers. Fair warning: she's a fast talker.

KHABAT ABBAS: The difference between the new—or the system that we wanted to build and the regime's system, it's that the regime's system is a pyramid.

The bustling market streets of Derik hold many treasures- particularly cigarettes- but in the end we have to rely on a boy in our local hotel to buy us a case of beer. It's essentially the opposite of the way things work in America: two adults asking a child to buy them alcohol.

I pay about $15 for a dozen tall boys, and Jake and I go up to drink on the roof, him in moderation and me to mild excess. As I stumble, rather pissed, down the stairs towards our room, the hotel manager stops me. There has been a mistake, he explains. I have been overcharged for the beers. He gives me back like 4 or 5 dollars' worth of Syrian money. Since I didn't know the price of the beers to begin with I never would have noticed being overcharged.

It's a small thing, but it surprises me. I'm used to Iraq, where hotels and bars- understandably- try to get every dime possible out of Western clients. Rojava so far has been filled with little moments like this, shocking honesty and compassion from a place that's been wracked by war for a full third of my lifetime.

There's this odd sort of assumption we have in the West, spurred on by Hollywood, that war and violence must, by necessity, make someone hard. Cold. Ruthless. The truth is more nuanced. War can break a culture, harden the hearts of its people and turn them away from compassion. But war can also be the catalyst for something beautiful, a verdant bloom of compassion growing out from a field of blood.

NARRATOR: She just said, "It's a pyramid." She means the Syrian justice system is a top-down sort of thing. All power flows down from Assad.

KHABAT ABBAS: It's the state's laws that go to the population to be implemented. Our system, it's started from the society. It's emerged between the people.

NARRATOR: She's saying that the Rojavan justice system takes place primarily between the people and each other, rather than everyone following laws dictated from one guy at the top.

KHABAT ABBAS: So we are building from the bottom, to the up.

NARRATOR: Talking through Khabat, Jude Amina explained to us that she and her colleagues were working to replace the old, authoritarian vertical power structure they'd grown up under with a horizontal one. I don't think Judge Amina is an anarchist, but I suspect the justice system she helped build would've met with Murray Bookchin's approval. He believed that society needed to be altered in fundamental ways, but "taking power" was not the way to do it. Power is the fundamental problem. He wrote in his book 'Post-Scarcity Anarchism':

"Power to the people' can only be put into practice when the power exercised by social elites is dissolved into the people. Each individual can then take control of his daily life. If 'Power to the people'

means nothing more than power to the 'leaders' of the people, then the people remain an undifferentiated, manipulatable mass, as powerless after the revolution as they were before."

KHABAT ABBAS: So for example, if there is any sort of problem that's happened, problems like taking property or fighting problems between people-NARRATOR: You'll notice she's using the word "problems" instead of the word "crimes". I thought this was just sorta, a translation issue at first, but over time it became clear that this was not. In her view there are "crimes" and "problems". A crime, like an ISIS sleeper cell planning to murder a bunch of

people, needs to be addressed by a bunch of people with guns. But problems should not be solved by guns: they should be solved by communities.

At the neighborhood level, society is divided up into local communes representing a few dozens to a few hundred households each. These communes have a number of committees dedicated to different problems. A lot of problems that we'd tend to send police in to deal with, like domestic disturbances and the like, are instead handled by the 'Social Committee'. Only the most complex and ugly problems get escalated out of the community, and into the courts.

KHABAT ABBAS: If they cannot, if they cannot solve it on their level, this committee, they are going to refer it to the court. Then they are going to be in our legal system. But it started from these committees.

NARRATOR: The local communes are democratic structures, and they include every member of the neighborhood. Committee members are elected by their neighbors and selected for their perceived level of wisdom and trustworthiness. A lot of older men and women, grandmothers and grandfathers, wind up in these positions.

Law and order in Rojava is complicated by the unavoidable reality of tribalism. This part of Syria is filled with a number of very powerful tribes, and there are often blood debts going back decades between one tribe and another. The complicated nature of tribal politics means that any murder could, potentially, spawn a brutal series of reprisal killings that leave numerous people dead. When a murder like this occurs in Rojava, the police do the job you'd expect and arrest the killer. But the social committee also springs into action, to try and stop the violence from spreading.

KHABBAT ABBAS: Someone killed another guy. So we arrested the killer. We kept him in the prison. At the same time we were working on the case, there was—this committee, they were starting

that's what you'd expect. Disagreement. Pain and confusion over the issue of whether to forgive the people who fought to dominate them. Just as there is deep confusion over the thorny question of gender equality.

Our evening ended with a dinner at prominent local restaurant, an all-women's co-operative that had been organized with help from the woman's economic development committee. Projects like this were increasingly common in Rojava; a compromise between the realities of capitalism and leftist political theory.

The food was incredible. I'm not, generally, a fan of eggplant, but the Syrians do something with it that makes it taste almost like meat. It was also incredible to see a large and prosperous business, in the chunk of the middle east we were in, owned, operated an entirely managed by a collective of nine women. After dinner, Khabat and I sit down with one of the co-owners and I ask just how this place got started.

KHABAT ABBAS: So it started—it was the idea of one woman named Roshi. She is a member of the municipal council in Derik.

NARRATOR: She's saying "municipal council", there. It's one of the bottom-up local governing organizations that manage most daily life in Rojava. It took a lot of convincing to get some of the older men on board with the idea that a woman-run business would work. But eventually the municipal council decided to back the project, and helped provide funding for it to get off the ground. After a few months, the co-op was successful enough to stand on its own.

ROBERT EVANS: With this kind of project, a co-operative like this run by women, that's all women—would this have seemed possible to her 10 years ago, before the revolution?

WOMAN: No.

NARRATOR: I, uh, didn't need a translator for that answer.

NARRATOR: We bid goodbye to Khabat for the night, and Jake and I set out on a vain quest to buy beers.

NARRATOR: Syria has been at war now for almost a decade. Everyone is tired of bloodshed and killing.

This exhaustion has driven Rojava's humanitarian policy towards ISIS prisoners at least as much as ideology. Naiveté is believing that more executions and incarceration and torture can solve a problem like ISIS. Khabat's feelings for this were fully crystallized in 2018, when she watched the very last stronghold of the Caliphate, a place called Baghouz, fall.

KHABAT ABBAS: I want there to—just because I lose many friends, my brother, I wanted to feel something—victory or whatever. No. There is no victory. All of us losing—all of us. There is no victory in this. No. It's—

ROBERT EVANS: Just because it happened we all lost.

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah, all of us. Look to this malnutrition—babies of ISIS.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Oh my god.

KHABAT ABBAS: They are just victims. I know, you know?

JAKE HANRANAHN: Are they alive? Oh, yeah, they are. Jeez.

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah, they are. Malnutrition—thousands of—look.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Oh my god, yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: So—why?

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah, that's bad.

KHABAT ABBAS: Why? If some insane people wanted to destroy this world, we're not going to for sure do it. All of us being sent—no, we have to repair. It's, again, someone destroying. You have to build. You have to build. We have this ideology, you know?

NARRATOR: Near the end of the day we crossed back into Derik, our home for one more night. On the way in we see some graffiti written on a wall. A Kurdish phrase that translates to, "We shall take revenge for the Martyrs of the Homeland."

It's a sign that, despite what Khabat and Judge Amina told us, not everyone here considers revenge to be for the weak. This is not a place of unanimous voices. And in truth, if it is truly democratic,

to communicate with this family of the guy who had been killed in order to repair, in order to fix the problem between both of them.

NARRATOR: What happens next is a series of negotiations between the family of the victim and the family of the killer. The committee members act as mediators, gradually working out a way for both families to remain in the area without gunning each other down. Judge Amina tells us about one particular set of negotiations that took six months. At the end of the process, the arrangement was sealed with a feast.

KHABBAT ABBAS: …they brought everyone to [INAUDIBLE]. They brought fruits, sweets, everything in order to celebrate this. There was the committee that worked around six to seven months on this case, a representative from the courts and for both families.

NARRATOR: Having a big public party where the family of a murderer and his victim all hang out sounds weird. And it is weird. But it serves a purpose of making sure there is a large, public show of both sides squashing their beef. That way if either family attacks the other, the whole community will know that those people were violating their sworn word.

KHABAT ABBAS: …our attitude, it's to stop violence in the community, because otherwise it will be more violence that you cannot control it anymore. And we wanted to change the culture of the community and their attitude in dealing with such cases.

NARRATOR: In the Rojavan system, violence is seen as a community problem as well as an individual problem. Judge Amina didn't consider 'justice' to be achieved when a criminal was behind bars. She and the other architects of the system here thought it was equally important to try and heal communities wracked by violent crime.

KHABBAT ABBAS: …we wanted to [encourage] this idea of peaceful forgiveness and coexistence peacefully together.

NARRATOR: Rojava still has many of the same mechanisms of justice we're familiar with in the United States. They have criminal

courts and prisons. But the maximum sentence is twenty years. And the goal of incarceration is rehabilitation, not punishment.

KHABAT ABBAS: The prisons in Syria, it's—or in Rojava, it's not only about punishing only, yeah? Besides the punishing, there is an educational system in our prisons. In every prison you can find different committees [on different subjects]. So they are preparing seminars in different fields, and they are educating those prisoners.

NARRATOR: Judge Amina explained that the goal of Rojava's prisons was to, "prepare to integrate the prisoner back into society without a murderous mind." I had trouble disagreeing with this on a moral level. But all the prisoners I'd seen so far at the jail were suspected ISIS fighters. The vast majority of Rojava's prisons were occupied by captured ISIS men.

I lived through portions of the battle for Mosul. I talked to hundreds of people- Syrians and Iraqis- who suffered under ISIS. The idea that these people could be somehow fixed with job training seminars warred with my desire to see them quickly and violently punished. I had trouble believing that people in Rojava, who'd suffered much more from ISIS than I could ever imagine, would support deradicalization over punishment. I told Judge Amina this.

KHABBAT ABBAS: ...we do believe the revenge, it brings more revenge, and violence brings more violence.

NARRATOR: I asked Judge Amina about the prisoners we'd seen on the way in, handcuffed to chairs and blindfolded. She assured me that the blindfolds and handcuffs were removed once the new prisoners were processed.

It all sounded great. But of course, all I had to go on was me, sitting in a room talking to a woman.

Verifying how this entire justice system actually functioned would be a larger work than one reporter could carry out. I asked Judge Amina how she'd feel about international observers- from the U.N. or Amnesty International- coming in to observe and report on the justice system in Rojava. She said that she and her

JAKE HANRAHAN: You don't want to, like, kill them?

KHABAT ABBAS: No, never, not even hate. You know what? I don't even—when I go to the [Prison camp where ISIS is held] -usually I know all the girls there. So I go to the kitchen. I was like, I wanted to make a coffee. So I asked the ISIS wife—she was Canadian—I was like, how is your coffee? And she was like, what? Do you want to make coffee for me? And I said, yeah. And she was like, oh my god, since years, no one has asked me this question. And oh, for sure we were going to have a coffee, all women together, you know?

And then I served her. And she was like, wow, you are so sweet. You can touch people with your humanity. I cannot say, like, you devil, la la la, and also. What's the point? I don't have any—and even—I cried too much with her story. I could not stop crying—like, yeah, we have to help you. I'm like, no!

I helped many of them with the lawyers. There are international lawyers. And always I start—sometimes they give me numbers or names, so I pass it to the lawyers—like, help them. Because if we want to—

JAKE HANRAHAN: I couldn't do that, you know? It's—

KHABAT ABBAS: Because if we wanted to stop this, to not repeat it again—

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I guess.

KHABAT ABBAS: If we wanted to not repeat it again—the Sweden case—I remember there was this very famous Sweden ISIS—you know, very famous on Twitter and on—always making calls for Islam and things like that. And he had been killed, and his wife also. He had five orphans.

So for me, I played a basic role in order to push media, the Sweden media, to push the politicians to come and take those orphans. Why? Because for me, all of them have been malnutritioned, they were in suffering, and their father already had this. So if we didn't help them, after a few years, we were going to have five jihadis instead of one.

and when I get back home, I know who I'm going to turn in to the Iraqi police, and then they're going to get theirs, and then it'll be on the other foot. And it's like you could already see the cycle of violence starting up again. And it has with the Shia militias, who have just been very brutal. And it's just going to—there's going to be another Sunni uprising. There's going to be—

KHABAT ABBAS: Exactly. It's an endless cycle.

ROBERT EVANS: And everyone in Mosul was like, in another 10 years, there'll be more fighting in the city.

KHABAT ABBAS: It's [INAUDIBLE].

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah. It's just going to take a little bit of time.

KHABAT ABBAS: This is what we don't want as an example.

ROBET EVANS: Yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: Because as Judge Amina said, violence attracts more violence. We don't want this.

Revenge, it's revenge. We don't want that. So when you forgive them, you give them a chance, let's see.

NARRATOR: Khabat spoke with deep passion about the importance of forgiveness, and her fervent belief that radicalization and terrorism should be treated as a social problem, the result of flaws in the culture, rather than as an individual problem- the result of the terrorist in question being a bad person. I'm sure to a lot of Americans, this sounds like naïve hippy-dippy nonsense. But Khabat is anything but naïve to the consequences of terror.

KHABAT ABBAS: Now my brother had been murdered by ISIS, you know? He was YPG.

ROBERT EVANS: I didn't know that.

KHABAT ABBAS: My brother.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: So I went to—I'm always meeting the ISIS. Never I have a hate against them. And I don't feel that, you know?

JAKE HANRAHAN: Really?

KHABAT ABBAS: Sometimes I feel pity for them, really. I feel like, oh my god, why would they destroy their life?

colleagues very much wanted the international community to come and observe.

This is consistent with other reporting I've seen on the courts in Rojava. And as with most things in this place, there's a deeply pragmatic explanation along with the idealistic one. Rojava is- quite literally-under a gun right now. International recognition, and the protection that legitimacy would provide, is a matter of life and death. If the U.N. came in and observed their justice system that would act as a sort of recognition that what's happening here is, in fact, a legitimate government.

To emphasize the openness of the court system, Judge Amina offered to take us on a tour of their facilities. It was absolutely not a polished affair. We hopped downstairs and she threw open the door to an interrogation in process and beckoned for me to walk in. The first thing I saw was a young man, handcuffed to a chair, sitting in front of a table with four people behind it, an even mix of men and women.

Three of the people are judges, and one is an observer from the village the arrested man came from.

This is the way terrorism charges are handled in Rojava. The judges were clearly in the middle of questioning the man when I barged in. We share a long, awkward glance, and then they greet me. The prisoner says nothing. On my way out of the room, my backpack flips off the light switch and plunges the entire room into darkness. Everyone is very cool about it. I feel like an idiot. But I don't feel like what I'm seeing is stage managed or set up to impress me.

Amina shows us everything we ask to see, including cells where prisoners wait. I will not say the facilities are plush and luxurious, but they aren't filthy, dank or torturous seeming either. I would say things are about as comfortable as you could expect them to be. The willingness to be observed is so consistent and pervasive that it is hard not to be convinced by it. I leave believing that what

we've seen today is, at least, a real attempt at building a fair justice system.

NARRATION: We start the drive back into Qamishlo. As we drink luke-warm instant coffee and watch the road go by, the three of us start to chat. Khabat tells us about one of Rojava's less reported problems: people firing guns into the air in celebration. It's a major issue in Syria, and across the middle east. Since it's also an issue in Texas, where I hail from, Khabat and I bond over this.

OBERT EVANS: Yeah, shooting into the air is a—

KHABAT ABBAS: Really? I cannot understand the mind of the men. I can't, totally—what's the point?

ROBERT EVANS: I mean, speaking as a man, I get why you'd want to. It does sound fun.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, it's like—yeah. I wouldn't do it, but I get it. I'd love to, man.

ROBERT EVANS: I know I want to. I'm not going to, but I know it would be fun.

JAKE HANRAHAN: I know. I know.

KHABAT ABBAS: Why? Why?

ROBERT EVANS: I like shooting at stuff.

JAKE HANRAHAN: There's something wrong with us. There's something wrong with us.

ROBERT EVANS: I've been doing that as—since I was a kid.

NARRATION: Jake and I admit that, as men, we're fundamentally driven to break things, mostly to see what it looks like.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Men, we have a destructive streak.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

JAKE HANRAHAN: All men have a bit of—like, you want to smash something sometimes. It's so weird.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, when we drove up here from Derik, we saw a couple of guys on a .50 cal shooting into a quarry. And it's like—

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah, just—

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, yeah—it's fun!

Achilles, he told us about a Syrian rebel commander he embedded with a few times at the start of the civil war. That guy eventually wound up joining ISIS, not because he was ideologically drawn to them, but because all of his sons died fighting the Syrian regime and ISIS was the only group who would give him more bullets and guns to keep fighting the regime.

Foreign fighters, the people who leave places like England or the United States to go fight for Daesh, these are very different sorts of people. And Khabat had no time for them.

KHABAT ABBAS: They are completely ideological. Not just ideological—

JAKE HANRAHAN: It takes a lot to [INAUDIBLE].

KHABAT ABBAS: They are lying. They are like—it's very clear, like, oh, poor me, I didn't do anything, I was just cooking there, la la la.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: But it's very obvious—like, no, for those, I'm sure this program, it's not going to work.

But for the Syrian, because you are—you have this social approach, culture approach, you know? And you respect them as human beings.

And all of them—and even—I met two ISIS. They were in the jail—Syrian, from [INAUDIBLE]. They said, when we have been in the frontlines with the ISIS, they lose part of—you know, handicaps. They are losing their legs.

NARRATOR: But for the normal Syrian civilians who got caught up in something bigger than themselves?

She believed those men and women deserved another chance at life. It's a powerfully different attitude than the one I encountered most often in the refugee camps around Mosul.

ROBERT EVANS: I remember when—near the end of the fighting in Mosul, I talked to a lot of people who had been run out of—they'd been tortured by ISIS or something, and we were talking to them in a refugee camp. And they'd say something along the lines of,

married. And it will be the house of the man. For me, it's—again, we are struggling on the civil side [INAUDIBLE], not just—to break all these outdated customs and traditions.

So I said, OK, I'm going to live by myself. I can have a house without getting married. And my mother, she was like, no, it's shame, and how people will going to speak about us, and all this. Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey. I said, I'm a fully independent woman. I don't need a man to have a house. I will have a house.

And I have it.

And then I can see the reaction of the females around—like, wow, lucky you. We want to—we wish we can do the same. And I'm sure. It's just you open—you pave the way for the next generation. Next year, after that, it will be super normal for the women in Qamishli to live by themselves.

NARRATOR: Whether or not you trust Khabat is up to you. I don't claim to be a perfect judge of character, or motivations. All I can say is that, by the end of our first full day in Rojava, Jake and I were-at least- completely convinced of her honesty. This doesn't mean we agreed, or understood, everything she believed. For one thing: Jake and I had both spent large chunks of our careers face-to-face with the bloody consequences of ISIS's ideology. The idea that the Rojavan legal system supported some kind of *forgiveness* for these people seemed almost obscene to us.

JAKE HANRAHAN: In my head, you know, as a Westerner, even I think they don't deserve that. They don't deserve to be re-educated or whatever you want to call it.

KHABAT ABBAS: Look, the Western—it's completely different. The ISIS—with the Western ones, specifically, that—I met them. They are not like the Syrian ones.

NARRATOR: She's talking about the difference between foreign ISIS fighters and local ones, here. And this is a meaningful distinction. In Syria, and in Iraq, a number of locals supported ISIS for a period of time because, quite frankly, they didn't have a whole lot of options. The night before, when we'd been drinking with

KHABAT ABBAS: It's fun! Come on, guys!

ROBERT EVANS: I'm not saying it's healthy. I'm just saying—

KHABAT ABBAS: [LAUGHS]

JAKE HANRAHAN: It's just fun.

ROBERT EVANS: It's something we do 'cause we're dumb.

KHABAT ABBAS: OK.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: No, I understand it's not just a culture problem. It's a gender problem. It's a gender—

ROBERT EVANS: No, that is a problem everywhere there are men.

KHABAT ABBAS: Oh my god.

JAKE HANRAHAN: When I was a kid, we used to take stones, and we'd have—

JAKE HANRAHAN: We'd have glass phone boxes.

KHABAT ABBAS: Huh.

JAKE HANRAHAN: And we'd just smash them. No idea why. Like 10 years old, like—it's so weird.

KHABAT ABBAS: Well, there are kids, also—they have this trait of destroying, you know?

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah. Men, some of us, we can't grow out of it, yeah—smashing.

KHABAT ABBAS: They're enjoying just destroying, smashing things instead of building things.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah, it's strange. Yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: Oh my god.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, you really have to—

KHABAT ABBAS: Because of that, now all the earth's getting destroyed because it's the men who are controlling the world.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah.

ROBERT EVANS: All the whats are destroyed?

KHABAT ABBAS: Destroying all the earth, all the world.

ROBERT EVANS: Oh, yes, absolutely we are. Absolutely, yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: [INAUDIBLE] like the kids, we are—smash everyone, kill a million, la la la.

NARRATOR: Throughout the Syrian Civil War, the fighters of the YPG have been praised as probably the most ethical, least war-crime-y armed force in the country. Khabat credited some of this on the fact that both genders were present on the battlefield.

KHABAT ABBAS: This is the thing that always prevents them to act like that—sometimes, you know?

When you are just around. Otherwise you can't control them.

NARRATION: As we re-enter Qamishlo, I take down notes on the things I see: A smiling boy in a hoodie, kneeling. A young woman in military garb, grinning and looking at a colleague nearby, in mid conversation. Brightly colored pictures of shehids hanging over a traffic circle. A wall painted with the international symbol for 'recycling'.

Jake and I wanted to spend a day in Raqqa, the former capital of the Islamic State, and go out on patrol with an SDF unit. Before we could do that, though, we'd have to collect the proper permissions. Alaan drives us to an Asayish base on the outskirts of Qamishlo. We park outside a phalanx of nondescript, one-story white office buildings, surrounded by a low wall dotted with guard posts.

The inside of the facility reminds me more of my old high school in Plano, Texas than anything else. This feeling is reinforced after we're ushered into a waiting room that is filled with a bunch of kids. Ok, not literally "kids", But eighteen and nineteen year-olds. They're all off-duty Asayish, taking a tea break before picking up their guns and going back on duty.

Two of them are women. One wears a veil, the other does not. The remaining five are men. Three of them have visible tattoos, including one of the women. Before heading here I'd been told it was unusual to see tattoos on people in this part of Syria. This is apparently less true for young people.

The officer in charge is slightly older than the rest, perhaps in his mid-20s. He is also the most heavily tattooed of the bunch. I can

that it's everyone more happier, more feel value as human beings. So which kind of brainwashing if it's not relevant to your mind and—or even your feelings? It's deeper than just brainwashing.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Yeah. People say it, though, you know. There's a lot of criticism. It's—

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah, it's the—

KHABAT ABBAS: Brainwashing, in a way, if it's on behalf of the community—and they see it by their own eyes, you know? You feel it. You see it. You live it.

My family, they don't know I'm going to the frontlines. But I'm going not because of anything. I like it there. I can find myself. Part of me is there. It's something—you cannot even express it, you know? No one sits with me. I'm fully independent. I'm not part of any institutions. I'm doing this because I find myself there.

NARRATOR: The more we talked about this, the more Khabat began to share about herself, and her own motivations for doing this work. There was an element of patriotism to it: the Rojavan revolution had made life better for people here, in her eyes, and she supported that. But Khabat was not anyone's zealot.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Have you lived in Qamishlo your whole life?

KHABAT ABBAS: No. My father, he is working in the oil fields, so he moved from different cities, you know? So we are seven siblings. Each one of us—I was born in Qamishli, but my other siblings, each one of them in a different city…We changed around seven houses. And now my parents, they are in Al-Hasakeh which is the city of the oil. Me, I'm in Qamishli by myself.

NARRATOR: The fact that Khabat lives alone is hugely significant. This is simply Not Done, even given the revolutionary spirit that has overtaken Rojava. Young women tend to live with their families, or communally, in co-operative farms or military units like the YPJ.

KHABAT ABBAS: Again, to just break these rules also of the community that's—for the woman, to have a house, she has to get

Whenever we pass there—and they are more strict than the normal [INAUDIBLE], to be honest. They take it to over-responsibility. And they are 50s, so they are doing their job—this generations of '80s, you know? So they are older. And me, always—my eyes tear up when I just saw them with this elderly—you know? And they have this klash, and they are super nice. Wow. It's true.

JAKE HANRAHAN: Do you think for some of them that's probably the first time in their lives, as women, they've been allowed to have some kind of authority? Yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. And they are integrating and adapting.

NARRATOR: Now, this all brings up the natural question: how much honesty can we trust Khabat to express about this place, her home?

When you're working as a journalist in a place like Iraq or Syria, your experience of the country is deeply colored by your fixer. Their opinions and their relationships, their biases and beliefs. Jake and I needed someone with good enough relationships with the SDF to get us access, but we were also worried about working with someone who was literally aligned with Powers That Be in the region. As a journalist, you never want to work with the Man, even if he happens to be a woman.

Between their obsession with Abdullah Ocalan and strident left-wing political views, the military forces of Rojava have been accused of 'brainwashing' their members. Patches saying "No Life Without Our Leader" did not exactly quash that worry from my mind. We were certainly concerned with the possibility that Khabat might be somewhere on this spectrum.

JAKE HANRAHAN: What do you think about people that—some people say, oh, they're just brainwashing everybody. What do you think about that?

KHABAT ABBAS: No. I mean, you are going to suggest something. You are going to implement it. And if it doesn't work, if it's out of your nature, it will be clear. The outcomes—it's proven

see a hawk on his arm, and words written across both his forearms. He wears a t-shirt that says "Black is the New Black". If he'd had boots instead of sneakers, he wouldn't have looked out of place at a punk show.

I ask him if he knows any local tattoo artists. The line-work on his ink is pretty good, and I decide then and there that I'd like to get a tattoo while I'm in country. He gives Khabat the phone number of his guy.

I wonder, fleetingly, if this same hook-up can find us weed. But then I remember I'm talking to a cop.

Instead I use the opportunity to ask this young, gender-mixed group about jineology and gender integration. I want to know how they feel about the changes that have recently been made. They are instantly awkward, giggling and blushing. It was as if I had asked a group of American men and women at work, "Why do you all treat each other like people?"

Shortly after that, we're called in to talk with the Asayish press officer to square away the details of our trip to Raqqa. When that's done, we pile back in the van to head home to Derik. Khabat asks me if I'm really serious about wanting to get a tattoo. I assure her I am; the only question is what it'll be.

On the way back, Jake and I talked with Khabat about our thoughts on the interview with Judge Amina.

One thing I was struck by was how much of the new structures in the Rojavan legal system boiled down to groups of people sitting down and talking to one another.

Khabat explains that this is a central facet of the revolution. From the beginning of this project, military units in the YPG and YPJ engaged in what they called "tekmil"; sessions where squads would gather together after actions and discuss what had gone well and what hadn't. The word "tekmil" just means "report", and tekmil sessions can be called by anyone in the civilian or military structures in Rojava.

Most often, tekmil is done at the end of a project.

I found a write-up by a foreign volunteer in Rojava, Philippe O'Keeffe. He explains that the ideological explanation for the system is rooted in a critique of capitalism:

"Capitalist modernity does not foster equality nor mutual trust. It divides us and forces a upon us a hyper competitive culture built upon internal and external deception and facades. In this system, criticism is not seen as a means by which we can improve ourselves and each other but rather as a means by which we can attack and destroy our competition, our enemies, our fellow humans."

O'Keeffe connects the Tekmil system to one of the foundations of the Rojavan revolution: Hevalti. The word "Heval" literally means friend, so Hevalti means "friendship".

"It is the idea that we work together, we help each other, we share everything from the tangible to the intangible not because we expect something in return but simply because we are comrades, that we are humans living, struggling and experiencing life together, that we are sharing the same purpose of trying to advance the collective wellbeing. It is the idea that we can trust and believe in each other and that we need not fear ulterior intention.

By establishing the culture of *Hevaltî* as the basis of revolutionary life we create the alternative environment and society conducive to constructive criticism and the means by which, together, we improve ourselves and the collective. This is critical to *Tekmîl* because it allows us to respectfully give criticisms and more importantly, accept, absorb and address the criticisms in an efficient manner, free of ego, fear, mistrust or conflict."

The Tekmil system was initially used just in the military and civil administration in Rojava. But over the years it has spread into the home lives for at least a few of the families most devoted to this revolution.

KHABBAT ABBAS: So each one of them has a rotation to cook, to clean the house, to do shopping. And they criticize them at the same level—the children, with the father, with the mom.

NARRATOR: This is part of a broader trend, and one of the things that interests me so much about Rojava. The fact that this place exists at all is due to the tenacity and skill of the militias that defended it from ISIS. The people of Rojava have responded to this reality, not by ceding control of their lives to the militias, but by adopting what Khabat calls a 'culture of self-defense'.

KHABAT ABBAS: We have this community—it's [not armed culture], but self-defense culture, we have it here. This is the way that we are going to protect ourself from any threat—whatever Americans want to do. Always we start by ourself, we're going to end up by ourself, because we have this culture of self-defense.

So what they are doing, they are organizing—you can see all this different military inside the cities, plus the frontlines and the army, plus that there is a society military thing somehow. There is the mamas, and that's like—you know, the elderly men and women—50s.

ROBERT EVANS: Yeah.

KHABAT ABBAS: Up 50s sometimes—like, grandmas, you know? You can see them. They get the training.

And they have their klashes during Eid, during this critical situation. Always they are studying because I know everyone in the neighborhood said, well, they were going to start to make these checkpoints.

NARRATOR: A 'klash' is a Kalashnikov, an AK-47. What Khabat is talking about here are local networks of men and women, mostly elderly folks, who've taken responsibility for armed self-defense of their communities onto themselves.

JAKE HANRAHAN: It's not just for show?

KHABAT ABBAS: No, no, no, no. It's super real.

JAKE HANRANAHN: Yeah?

KHABAT ABBAS: Believe me. Look, I mean—in the Eid—you haven't been in the—when the time, it's like—any celebration, anything, so there are—everyone just organizes, starting from the neighborhoods.