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Middle East

Why the Kurds Should Be Supported

- Features -

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This article, published in 1963 by the Israeli revolutionary socialist group Matzpen, was authored by one of its founders, the Palestinian Marxist Jabra Nicola. At the time the article was written, Iraq was in the midst of a sequence of violent upheavals and military coups that would ultimately result in the ascendance of Saddam Hussein.

Obviously much has changed in the Middle East over the subsequent 56 years, but the longstanding importance of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination puts in historical perspective Donald Trump's latest treacherous betrayal of the Syrian Kurdish forces. As Trump says, "the Kurds didn't help us at Normandy." The President might have added that the Kurds weren't with us in the Revolutionary War either — total no-shows at Bunker Hill and Valley Forge, weren't they? Absurdity is piled on top of perfidy.

At a moment when the immediate prospect in northern Syria is a brutal contest among counterrevolutionary forces — the Turkish and Syrian regimes, Russia and Iran, and the potentially resurgent horrific "Islamic State" — the importance of the Kurdish people's struggle remains, despite the tragic destruction they are now suffering along with the other communities they have fought to protect in the region.

— David Finkel

The bloodshed in Iraqi Kurdistan is still ongoing; the bloody and terrorist regime of the Ba'ath party has mobilised two-thirds of the Iraqi army — three out of five divisions — with half of its armoured force, along with heavy artillery and jet aircraft, in its dirty war against the Kurdish people fighting for its freedom.

This dirty war began back at the time of Qassem's rule in 1961.

The Kurdish people is one of the most ancient peoples in western Asia. For more than 5,000 years, it has inhabited a territory known as Kurdistan, at present divided between Turkey, Persia, Iraq, Soviet Armenia and Syria. As early as 1639, Kurdistan was partitioned between the Ottoman Empire and Persia; and after World War I, it was re-partitioned by the imperialists. At present there are two million Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan, two million in Iran, another two million in Turkey, more than half a million in Syria and close to 15,000 in the Soviet Union.

These partitions, as well as other intrigues of imperialism in western Asia, delayed the national development of the Kurdish people and prevented its independence. The Kurdish people's struggle for independence and national unification — the unification of Kurdistan — began at the end of the last [19th] century and culminated after the First World War. Since the beginning of the present [20th] century, the Kurdish people has risen about ten times against its enslavers. In 1919, it rose up under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmoud; and after a long struggle, English imperialism managed to suppress this uprising in blood and fire. Under the pressure of the Kurdish people's struggle, British imperialism was forced in 1922 to recognise the right of Kurdish people, and with the consent of the Iraqi government at that time, an independent Kurdish government was established, whose capital was Al Suleimania. But soon Great Britain reneged on its obligations, reconquered the Kurdish territory and overthrew the young state.

In 1929, the Kurdish people rose again, and then once more in 1931. This latter uprising continued until 1942, and in 1943 the Kurds again rose up in Iraq, led by Mullah Mustafa al-Barzani, but the uprising failed and Barzani had to flee with a large number of his supporters and members of his tribe to Iranian Kurdistan. There they took part in a new uprising, leading to the declaration of an independent Kurdish republic. But the Iranian government soon managed to

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suppress the uprising and put an end to the Kurdish Republic. Again Barzani had to flee with members of his tribe. The United States having refused to grant him asylum, he waged fierce battles with the Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi armies and succeeded to break through the encirclement and reach the Soviet Union. Of the two thousand fighters, only 650 arrived in the Soviet Union, where they remained until the July 14 [1958] revolution in Iraq.

This revolution in Iraq promised the Kurdish people equal rights. The Provisional Constitution promulgated following the revolution stated that the Iraqi Republic was “a partnership between the Arabs and the Kurds”. The freedom fighters led by Mustafa Barzani, exiled in the Soviet Union, returned to Iraq, and the Kurdish people showed willingness to assist in building the new regime.

When Qassem turned to the right, breaking with the forces of the Iraqi left, he also broke with the Kurds and pursued a policy of brutal national repression against the Kurdish people. From late 1960, the Iraqi government began supporting the landlords and the rest of the Kurdish reactionary forces in their war against the Kurdish peasants and progressive forces. Moreover, the government encouraged the reactionary press in Baghdad to raise the chauvinist slogan of Kurdish assimilation. Even the word “Kurdistan” was banned and the territory was called “Northern Iraq”. The Kurdish people have been denied the right to study in their national language and to elect their representatives to local and central government institutions.

The Kurdish masses are victims of poverty, exploitation, ignorance and disease; they are discriminated against in all areas of life: political, economic and cultural. Iraqi Kurdistan has only one primary school for every 3,500 residents and a high school for every 57,000. There are only 685 books in the Kurdish language in all Iraqi public libraries.

When the Kurdish people were forced to revolt against this oppression, the Qassem government sent the army against them, in the name of “the rule of law and order”.

The Iraqi Communist Party, instead of raising the slogan of self-determination for the Kurdish people, supported the Kurdish people’s rights in very general and vague terms, but on the other hand regarded the slogan of separation and the establishment of an independent Kurdish state as an “imperialist plot”. In March 1962, an article appeared on the events in Iraqi Kurdistan in *The Problems of Peace and Socialism* – the journal of the World Communist Movement – stating:

The agents of CENTO [the pro-western Baghdad Pact] and oil companies have taken advantage of the situation and, relying on British forces in Kuwait, have fomented an armed rebellion against the Iraqi state under the slogans of “Defense of Barzani” and the establishment of a “Kurdish State”. [1] They want to carry out the old plan of isolating the northern regions and annexing them to Iran (that is, to CENTO) and, as the Communist Party has rightly argued, this activity, which is part of the general imperialist policy in the Middle East, has created a serious and dangerous situation in Iraq.

Thus, instead of supporting the Kurdish uprising, the Iraqi Communist Party contented itself with “calling on the Qassem government to resolve the crisis in northern Iraq peacefully” and “in a way that will strengthen the unity of the Iraqi people against the intrigue of imperialism and reaction.”

This opportunistic position of the Iraqi Communist Party was an integral part of its general policy, which was based on support for the Qassem’s regime and resolute opposition to Arab national unification. Accordingly, it saw the Kurdish uprising on the one hand as weakening Qassem’s rule, and on the other hand it viewed the separation of Kurdistan as weakening the Iraqi republic and pushing Iraq into Arab unification, because it would be very difficult for Iraq to remain economically and politically independent if it only kept the Arab part of its territory.

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Due to this opportunistic policy, we are witnessing the current tragic situation in the anti-imperialist liberation movement in western Asia, a clash between two anti-imperialist nationalist movements – the Arab and Kurdish movements, both of which are integral to the general revolution of the colonial peoples.

Recognising the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people and establishing an independent Kurdish state would not in any way be detrimental to the Arab liberation movement; on the contrary, it would help this movement as well as the [anti]colonial revolution in general. Indeed, an independent Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan could become a centre and lever for the entire Kurdish national movement in Iran and Turkey, both of which are members of CENTO; And this would be an immense revolutionary force against the main imperialist base in western Asia. On the other hand, it would help Arab national unification, which is at present one of the major problems of the Arab national liberation movement.

With the change in the political situation in Iraq following the Ba'athist coup, the Iraqi Communist Party does now support the Kurdish uprising and many of the communist Arab officers actively participate in battles together with the Kurds; but it still does not raise the slogan "right of self-determination up to separation" for the Kurdish people. And the Soviet Union supports in its press and speeches the Kurdish uprising, but on the other hand Soviet aid is still flowing to the Iraqi government and Aref's armies are fighting against the Kurdish people using Soviet weapons.

The Kurdish national liberation movement, like any other national liberation movement, is not without internal class contradictions, reflected in different political and ideological currents. The danger for the Arab national liberation movement and the colonial revolution in general does not, therefore, lie in secession of Iraqi Kurdistan and establishment of an independent Kurdish state, but in the strengthening of feudal and bourgeois forces in the Kurdish movement, which tend by their very class nature to link with imperialism. On the other hand, increasing the power of the masses and proletarian hegemony within the Kurdish liberation movement could be a major influence on the national and social liberation movement within Iraq as a whole.

Here in Israel there has recently begun to be heard from various circles a voice of support and identification with the Kurdish people's struggle in Iraq, but the rationale for this support is questionable and dangerous. Those circles, notwithstanding their political differences on other topics, view the Kurdish people's struggle as an anti-Arab factor that weakens the Arabs and they use it as a pretext for fostering anti-Arab chauvinist sentiment and intensifying anti-Arab propaganda. Even circles purporting to be against the existing regime in Israel and for cooperation between the peoples of the region, such as [Uri Avnery's] Ha'olam Hazeh, call for support for the Kurdish rebellion because it "opens a second front against our enemies" (the Arabs). They see the Kurdish movement as ally, being a non-Arab counterweight "within the region, most of whose inhabitants are Arabs".

We too side with the Kurdish uprising in Iraq and call for supporting it, but for entirely different reasons. We see no contradiction between the Arab and Kurdish national and social liberation movements, but on the contrary: we see both as mutually complementary, and both as an integral part of the colonial revolution. The Kurdish uprising in Iraq is not a rebellion against the Arab masses, who are also fighting for their freedom, but is directed against the forces that oppress the Arab and Kurds alike. Every success of the Kurdish people in its current struggle is, at the same time, a success of the forces fighting against the bloody and terrorist regime that rules Iraq today. Support for the Kurdish uprising cannot be founded on the current Israeli policy – of cooperation with imperialism against the liberation movement of the colonial peoples – but on cooperation with the colonial movement as a whole against imperialism. If we have to look for allies in the region, we cannot find an ally in one liberation movement against another. The true allies of the Israeli masses are all the liberation movements in the region, the entire colonial anti-imperialist movement.

The Kurdish liberation movement, the uprising of the Kurdish people, was a major factor in overthrowing the regime of Nuri al-Sa'id, followed by that of Qassem. The current Kurdish rebellion will also be one of the most important

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factors in overthrowing Aref's bloody regime. But the Kurdish liberation movement on its own cannot do so, and cannot bring liberation to the Kurdish people without close cooperation with all the anti-imperialist forces fighting against the current regime in Iraq.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baghdad_Pact.