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Kurdistan

The Kurdish Question, the PKK and the tasks of the radical Left

- Features -

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The West has suddenly begun supporting various Kurdish organisations in its fight against the Islamic State. So why is the largest Kurdish organisation of all, the PKK, still outlawed? This article discusses current developments in Kurdistan and gives a brief overview of the history of the Kurdish liberation movement and the PKK's illegal status in Germany. It argues for a radical left strategy focused on defeating the ban on the PKK.

“It wasn't the Americans who saved us. It was God and the PKK.”

August 2014: Terrorist militias under the leadership of the Islamic State (IS) storm a region in northern Iraq near the Syrian border inhabited by the Yazidis, a millennia-old monotheistic ethno-religious Kurdish minority. Divisions of the Peshmerga, the region's armed forces, flee from the advancing IS troops without firing a shot. The Yazidis beg the Peshmerga to at least leave them their weapons so as to give them a chance at defending themselves, but the Peshmerga refuse. Tens of thousands of Yazidis are forced to flee into the nearby mountains. Those who stay behind are subjected to brutal, genocidal acts: thousands killed, hundreds buried alive, and countless acts of rape, kidnapping and enslavement are perpetuated against Yazidi women. To add insult to injury, IS fighters ransack and destroy ancient Yazidi holy sites.

But even those who were able to flee faced the possibility of a looming humanitarian catastrophe. The fleeing Yazidis were surrounded by the IS and trapped in the mountains with little food or water under conditions of extreme heat. Abandoned by the rest of the world, it seemed as if they had little choice but to wait for death - that is, until unexpected reinforcements arrived: divisions of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (PYG) break through IS lines in northern Syria, while guerilla fighters from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) advance from the north and fighters from their Iranian sister organisation, the PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan), from the east. The Kurdish fighters manage to establish an escape corridor, through which tens of thousands pass into liberated Kurdish areas of northern Syria. It is only days after their escape that the US bombing campaign and accompanying Peshmerga offensive begins. Surviving Yazidis repeatedly insisted to western journalists that “it wasn't the Americans who saved us. It was God and the PKK.”

The northern Syrian Kurds came to the Yazidis' assistance despite having to defend themselves from the IS on their home territory as well. The north Syrian Kurds in question are forces under the command of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a sister organisation of the PKK. PYD forces joined the struggle against Bashar al-Assad at the outset of the Syrian revolution and expelled his troops from the northern parts of the country. Following this victory they declared themselves neutral in the ongoing civil war and restricted themselves to defending their territory. It was here on this territory that the Kurds began building a self-organised and democratic form of self-governance called “Rojava” that is stunningly unique in the world today.

In Rojava one finds a parliament with set quotas mandating the participation and inclusion of women in parliament and all levels of government, with similar rules for ethnic and religious minorities. To defend the region the Kurds established the non-partisan and non-sectarian defence units of the YPG, which also include large independent women's divisions - establishing an island of hope toward self-organisation and emancipation in the middle of the nightmare that is the Syrian civil war. This island of hope, however, was threatened from the onset: Turkey closed its borders in an attempt to starve the Kurdish self-government. Ankara also supported the Islamist terror group ISIS, the predecessor to the IS, which attacked the Kurdish regions from the south.

The IS acquired extensive caches of weapons from the fleeing Iraqi army after they overtook Mosul, a city of over one million in northern Iraq, including heavy weaponry originally purchased from the US. These weapons were immediately dispatched to Syria to be used in a major offensive against Kobanî, a centre of the Kurdish self-government, in July 2014. The YPG, militarily out-gunned and outmatched, prepared for a desperate fight-back. But, once again, assistance came from outside: people all across the Kurdish parts of Turkey donated money, food and medicine to support besieged Kobanî. Thousands set up camp along the border to destroy the border fence in a provocative act of civil disobedience and thereby broke through the Turkish blockade. The PKK sent hundreds of its guerilla fighters down from the mountains to join the struggle in Kobanî, and volunteers from all over Kurdistan as well as members of left-wing Turkish political parties joined them. This impressive show of solidarity was successful: the offensive of the IS was stopped, Kobanî has still not fallen, and the democratic experiment of Rojava could live on. But at the time of this writing, Kobanî is once again under threat: the IS began a renewed offensive against the city at the end of September. IS terrorists have managed to slip into the city and engage in house-to-house fighting with YPG units. After long delays, the US decided to “support” Kurdish forces by bombing IS positions.

The Kurdish liberation movement – a historical overview

The IS' offensive in Syria and Iraq has thrust the Kurdish question into the limelight of world politics for the first time in years, as well as highlighted the contradictions manifest in the West's attitude toward it. Western allies like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have at the very least tolerated (and perhaps even supported) the rise of the IS for quite some time, while historically the US, EU and thus Germany have treated the PKK – the single most effective and successful force currently fighting the IS - as a terrorist organisation.

The Kurdish people are the largest ethnic group without a state in the world. Their national interests went ignored by the major imperialist powers during the re-division of the Middle East after World War I, leaving up to 18 million Kurds living in Turkey, between five and seven million in Iran, five million Iraq and two million in Iran today.

The 20th century history of the Kurds is a history of oppression and resistance. The century witnessed multiple uprisings for national independence, democratic freedoms and cultural self-determination. In fact, an independent Kurdish state with loyalties to the Soviet Union emerged in Iran after World War II. After being defeated by Persian troops, left-wing Kurdish groups continued their armed struggle – first against the dictatorship of the Shah, and later against the clerical regime of the mullahs. Iraq, however, remained the centre of the Kurdish resistance movement for many years. This movement consisted primarily of two different parties leading the struggle against Saddam Hussein and for an independent Kurdistan: the traditionalist and conservative Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP), and the ideologically somewhat more progressive Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). As history would have it, however, the Kurdish freedom fighters who would later come to be known as the Peshmerga quickly became the playthings of various foreign powers. For example, during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, Iraq supported the Iranian Kurds while Iran armed the Iraqi Kurds; at the same time, the US supported its then-ally Saddam Hussein in his bloody suppression of the (Iraqi) Kurdish uprising. It was in the small Kurdish city of Halabja that, for the first time since World War II, German poison gas was once again implicated in mass killings – German corporations had sold Saddam the chemicals used in the massacre.

This constellation shifted in 1990, at the outset of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. With the outbreak of the first Gulf War, Iraqi Kurds suddenly became potential allies of the US. The US established a no-fly zone across northern Iraq in the 1990s in return for their participation in the war, under the protection of which Kurdish fighters were able to expel Iraqi soldiers from the territory. The Kurds also fought on the side of the US in the second Gulf War in 2003, and were rewarded with an autonomous region following Saddam's fall. This region was under control of the KDP and PUK, but only encompassed part of the Kurdish-populated areas of Iraq. The PKK was also able to establish

guerilla bases for their struggle against the Turkish state here as well

Kurdish uprisings continued to occur in Turkey itself as well. Oppression of Kurds is particularly severe in Turkey, due primarily to the fact that their existence as a separate ethnic and cultural group clashes with the vision of a unitary ethnic Turkish state as projected by the founder of modern Turkey, Atatürk. Kurds were forbidden from speaking their own language, using Kurdish names or even writing the letters W and X, which exist in the Kurdish, but not Turkish, language. Following a series of large student- and labour-led movements in the 1970s, Turkey became host to a plethora of large, left-wing parties, including the PKK, founded in 1978 by a group of left-wing activists centred around Abdullah Öcalan. The party adopted a Marxist-Leninist political programme and oriented itself towards armed revolution with the aim of establishing an independent, socialist Kurdistan. The PKK was forced into exile with many other leftist groups in Turkey in 1980, after right-wing military officers enacted a coup and unleashed a wave of savage repression against the Turkish left.

The PKK found refuge in the Lebanese training camps of the Palestinian popular liberation front, PFLP, and fought with them against the Israeli invasion in 1982. The PKK began its own bloody guerilla war in the Turkish part of Kurdistan in 1984 and began establishing mass support amongst the Kurdish population. This mass support allowed the PKK to initiate its own “Kurdish intifada” in the early 1990s, culminating in a series of mass uprisings. Internationally, however, the PKK was often the subject of criticism from the left due to its authoritarian leadership style, which including the killing of internal opponents, and strong nationalist sentiments. Öcalan himself was kidnapped by Turkish secret services (most likely with the assistance of the Mossad) on 15 February 1999, and has been imprisoned on the island of İmralı ever since. In response to his arrest, tens of thousands of Kurds launched protests all over the world. In Switzerland the army had to be called up to protect UN buildings from Kurdish demonstrators. In Germany, Kurdish demonstrators organized a whole series of marches and occupations of public buildings. An attempt to occupy the Israeli embassy ended in the fatal shooting of four Kurdish protesters, for which no Mossad agents were ever prosecuted.

The PKK ban in Germany

By the time of Öcalan's arrest the PKK had already been banned in Germany for six years. In the early 1990s the PKK with its 15,000 members constituted one of the strongest left-wing groups in Germany and organised numerous demonstrations and political actions against the brutal oppression faced by Kurds in Turkey and the continuing sales of German weaponry to its NATO partner. PKK supporters engaged in militant actions like highway blockades, self-immolations and attacks on Turkish travel agencies and the offices of Turkish fascist groups based in Germany. The German state banned the PKK in 1993 with the intention of assisting Turkey against one of its strongest opponent; equally significant, however, was the wave of racist and anti-immigrant hysteria gripping Germany at the time. The campaign to ban the PKK, the so-called “Terror-Kurds”, was much more significant than the legal action taken against other left-wing groups by the German state, for it amounted to a de facto ban on political activity for one of Germany's largest immigrant communities. The US and EU soon followed, placing the PKK on their respective “terror lists”. To this day, simply displaying a PKK symbol at a political demonstration is enough to provoke German police to attack and disperse it. There have been 4,500 legal proceedings related to PKK activities since 2004 alone. Since 1996, over 100 PKK functionaries have been penalised, some sentenced to prison. As late as October of this year, the German Foreign Ministry described the PKK as being equally as dangerous as the Islamic state. In the same report, the ministry emphasised the continued mobilisational capacity of the PKK: according to the Foreign Ministry, the PKK has 14,000 members and a mobilisable periphery of roughly 50,000 additional Kurds and sympathisers. This strength was reflected in the demonstrations in the first half of October, which saw thousands of Kurds take to the streets, demanding solidarity with Kobanî, an end to the PKK ban and Öcalan's release.

The changing nature of the PKK

Ä–calan's arrest was followed by a phase of critical self-reflection and new perspectives within the Kurdish movement. The PKK, animated by the realisation that a state alone is no guarantee of democracy and freedom, abandoned demands for an independent state, advocating a form of “democratic confederalism” in its place. This confederalism would, in practice, mean an association of local democratic structures of self-organisation and self-governance within the existing states. Feminist and ecological demands began to receive more attention within the party. Ä–calan's recent political writing exhibit clear influences from both the Zapatistas as well as the North American anarchist Murray Bookchin. Within Turkey itself, the PKK contributed to building a broad alliance with various Turkish left parties, as well as the women's and LGBT movements. The alliance's presidential candidate, Selahattin Demirtas, received nearly 10% of the vote in the August 2014 election, uniting the Kurdish Left, the “old” Turkish Left and the new generation of activists from the Gezi Park movement.

Led by the PKK and its sister organisations, Kurdistan has witnessed the emergence of numerous grassroots movements for democracy, education, gender equality and social justice. These form the left-wing alternative within the Kurdish movement to the corrupt and pro-imperialist KDP and PUK. These two parties seek an independent state in northern Iraq and enjoy Western backing; in return, the West expects unrestricted access to oil fields in the area as well as political marginalisation of the PKK and its allies. There is strong evidence indicating that the leadership of the northern Iraqi Kurds intentionally withdrew its troops and abandoned the Yazidis to the IS in order to force the West's hand to intervene and provide weaponry to the Kurdish resistance. Whether the abandonment was intentional or not, the desired effect was achieved, as the Peshmerga have now begun to receive weapons from the West. What the conservative Kurdish groups did not expect, however, was the PKK's determined intervention on behalf of the Yazidis and the widespread support and sympathy this generated within the Kurdish population. Thousands of Yazidis joined the PKK and YPG and are now setting up their own self-defence units. These units desperately need modern weaponry but will not be receiving it from the West, for whom the PKK and YPG remain little more than “terrorists”.

In response to this unanswered need, a host of German radical left groups (Neue Antikapitalistische Organisation [NAO], Antifaschistische Revolutionäre Aktion Berlin [ARAB] and Perspektive Kurdistan) have launched the “Weapons for the YPG” campaign. They managed to collect over 40,000 in a matter of weeks. A similar initiative started by the Danish left-wing party Eenhedslisten sent over 7,000 to the PYD.

With civil disobedience against the PKK ban

The desperate need for weapons notwithstanding, it would be wrong for the radical left to support the West's arming of the Iraqi Kurdish organisations KPD and PUK. Western assistance to these Kurds is intended to stabilise and consolidate the influence of imperialist powers in the region – precisely the imperialist powers that enabled the rise of the IS in the first place. It is highly possible that the same weapons currently being used against the IS will soon be turned against the PKK. Rather than get caught up in a debate about the merits of Western support, the Western and the German left in particular should start a powerful campaign against the PKK ban. A repeal of the ban would constitute direct assistance to the most important leftist formation in the Middle East and thus a blow against imperialist interests. Given the nearly 800,000 Kurds currently living in Germany, there is no question that the left could mobilize around the issue successfully.

Moreover, a repeal of the PKK ban is politically feasible: even conservative media outlets are beginning to acknowledge the contradiction between the West's fight against IS on the one hand, and its suppression of the PKK on the other. The radical left should organise demonstrations against the ban and openly display the banned flags and symbols of the PKK. These would be concrete, visible signs of anti-imperialist solidarity with the progressive and democratic movements in the Middle East.

Glossary:

IS (Islamic State): reactionary Salafist organisation pursuing the establishment of a theocratic Islamic state in Syria and Iraq via military means. The group was known as ISIS until June 2014.

Yazidis: religious minority in northern Iraq, northern Syria and southeast Turkey. Most of the 800,000 adherents speak Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish).

KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party): Traditionalist and conservative Kurdish political party in Iraq, led by the Barzani clan.

Peshmerga: Armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government in semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan.

PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan): Kurdish guerilla organisation based in Iran, sister organisation of the PKK.

PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party): Left-wing underground Turkish organisation based in Turkey, listed as “terrorist organization” by the EU, USA, UK, Canada, Australia and others.

PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan): Social democratic Kurdish political party in Iraq, led by the Talabani clan.

PYD (Democratic Union Party): Kurdish political party in Syria, sister party of the PKK. In the course of the Syrian civil war, the PYD established a self-organised democratic system of governance in a semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan (“Rojava”).

YPG (People's Protection Units): Kurdish militia in Syria with political ties to the PKK and PYD.

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Translation by Loren Balhorn.